WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

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Abstract

As a global normative framework, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is a direct outcome of both transnational feminism and the post-Cold War era. In this global dialogue predominantly between women from the Global North and the Global South, the voices of women located outside this dichotomy have often been marginalized. A look at the WPS agenda literature reveals a reflection of this marginalization and indicates a significant epistemic gap in the post-Soviet space. Missing are the voices of women from the former Soviet Union as experts, along with their unique lived experiences in a region heavily affected by Russian imperialism. Even the most comprehensive and radical critiques of the WPS agenda overlook perspectives from this region and fail to build feminist solidarities beyond a strictly Global North/South analytical focus.

This thesis is an empirical exploration of uncharted territory in the WPS agenda as an academic field and a vibrant community for feminist dialogue between research, practice, and advocacy. As such, it is also about discerning the analytical lessons that can be drawn from this empirical investigation and how the distinct experiences of this region can enrich our understanding of certain concepts and theoretical debates in the WPS agenda literature. By analyzing the emergence, adoption, and implementation of WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, this thesis seeks to: 1) raise awareness of the unique dynamics of the post-Soviet space and its implications for the WPS agenda, 2) make visible and center the voices, agency and advocacy of women working on the WPS agenda in this region, and 3) challenge some of the fundamental concepts and debates at the heart of the WPS agenda.

Using a mixed methodology, including fieldwork interviews with 82 key informants, observations, and documentary analysis, this thesis proposes four main findings. First, the emergence and adoption of NAPs are heavily dependent on strategic feminist networks combining femocrats within the Government, UN Women, feminist civil society, and gender experts. Second, the nature of nearby conflict(s), as well as regional geopolitical insecurities, strongly influence the adoption and implementation of NAPs and how actors understand and use the WPS agenda. Third, the entire NAP process(es) is inseparable from broader processes of democratization, autocratization, nation-building, and Euro-Atlantic integration. Fourth, the post-Soviet space shows both region-specific dynamics and global trends in the implementation of the WPS agenda.

This thesis's contribution is to show the confrontation between the theoretical ideals of feminist International Relations theories and the empirical realities of an unexplored and often ignored terrain: the post-Soviet space. Through the complexity of the lived, situated experiences and processes behind NAPs in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, the thesis exposes the limits and shortcomings of some of the current theorization of the WPS agenda by revealing important blind spots in the WPS literature and challenging some of its core debates and concepts.

Все, что нам известно о войне, мы знаем с "мужского голоса." Мы все в плену "мужских" представлений и "мужских" ощущений войны. "Мужских" слов. А женщины молчат.

Everything we know about war, we know with "a man's voice." We are all captives of "men's" notions and "men's" sense of war. "Men's" words. Women are silent.

The Unwomanly Face of War, Svetlana Alexievich

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Table of Contents

Abstract....ii
Acknowledgments....iv
Table of Contents....vii
List of Tables....xii
List of Figures....xiii
List of Abbreviations....xiv

Chapter 1 : Introduction....1
1.1 Introduction – Research puzzle, questions, and objectives of the thesis....1
1.2 Tracing the contours of an impossible-to-define region: a few words on terminology....5
1.3 What is "WPS"? Introducing the object of study....9
1.4 Theoretical underpinnings of this thesis....14
1.4.1 Post-socialist feminism, transnational feminism, and East-West contentious debates....15
1.4.2 Feminist and critical constructivism approaches to international norms....37
1.4.3 Feminist institutionalism – alliances and strategies inside and outside institutions....47
1.4.4 Feminist security studies – taking women's voices, experiences, and lives seriously....53
1.4.5 Transformation, co-optation, pragmatism – on WPS tensions and failures....57

Chapter 2 : Methodological Approach....64
2.1 Feminist IR approaches to epistemology, ethics, and methodologies....65
2.1.1 Narratives, the everyday, and lived experiences as evidence....65
2.1.2 Curiosity, reflexivity, positionality....67
2.2 A multi-sited and mixed methodology....68
2.2.1 Case selection....69
2.2.2 Fieldwork....73
2.3 Triangulation of data: observations and desk review....88

Section I – WPS in Protracted Conflicts....92
Introduction to Section I and National Contexts....92

Chapter 3 : Moldova..**101**
3.1 'At first, it was like rocket science': the emergence of the first WPS NAP (2018-2021) in Moldova through small revolutions and compromises 101
3.1.1 Introducing Resolution 1325 in Moldova 101
3.1.2 Creating a national and international coalition for adopting the first NAP 104
3.1.3 'We built the foundation, now we need to build the house' Reflecting on the first NAP process 113
3.2 Making the first WPS NAP in Moldova a reality: challenges and lessons learned............................116
3.2.1 Resourcing and budgeting the NAP 116
3.2.2 Localizing and implementing the NAP 119
3.2.3 Monitoring and evaluating the NAP..124
3.3 'We were pretty sure that Moldova would come next': the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Transnistria, and post-2022 gendered (in)securities 130
3.3.1 Transnistria as a threat to Moldova's security 132
3.3.2 Transnistria as a "sleeping" conflict that could be revived at any time..............................134
3.3.3 Transnistria as an argument for adopting a NAP..136
3.4 Reflecting on successes and future challenges: the adoption of the second Moldovan WPS NAP (2023-2027) in times of multilayered crises..140
3.4.1 The adoption of the second Moldovan NAP 141
3.4.2 What are the future WPS challenges in Moldova?..145
3.4.3 WPS in the context of EU accession 148
3.4.4 Reflecting on progress made 151

Chapter 4 : Georgia..**155**
4.1 From the first to the third WPS NAP (2011-2022): How Georgia became a regional "WPS leader" 155
4.1.1 Introducing Resolution 1325 in Georgia in the aftermath of the 2008 war and the adoption of the first NAP (2012-2015)..155
4.1.2 The adoption of the second (2016-2017) and third (2018-2020) NAPs in Georgia............159
4.2 Truly a leader? Challenges and lessons learned of implementing WPS in Georgia...........................167
4.2.1 Resourcing and budgeting the NAPs..167
4.2.2 Localizing and implementing the NAPs..170
4.2.3 Monitoring and Evaluating the NAPs..176
4.2.4 Reflecting on the three NAP processes: Gaps, critiques, and challenges...........................177

4.3 'A frozen problem which you don't want to touch': the perception of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as gendered (in)securities....185
4.3.1 Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as threats to Georgia's security....186
4.3.2 Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as "sleeping" conflicts that could be revived at any time....189
4.3.3 Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as arguments for the NAPs....193
4.4 What comes next? The fourth Georgian WPS NAPS (2022-2024) in a new political environment...197
4.4.1 The adoption of the fourth Georgian NAP (2022-2024)....198
4.4.2 What are the future WPS challenges in Georgia?....202
4.4.3 WPS in the context of Euro-Atlantic accession, the Foreign Agent Law, and democratic backsliding....207
4.4.4 Reflecting on progress made in radically changing times – and what can others learn from the Georgian experience....213

Conclusion and Discussion of Section I....218

Section II – WPS in Active Conflicts....226
Introduction to Section II and National Contexts....226

Chapter 5 : Armenia....235
5.1 The emergence of the first WPS NAP (2019-2021) in a new era of democratization....235
5.1.1 (Re)introducing Resolution 1325 in Armenia after the 2018 Velvet Revolution....235
5.1.2 Adoption of the first NAP (2019-2021)....240
5.1.3 Insatisfaction, tensions, and refusal: Reflections on the first NAP and disagreements between Armenian feminists....244
5.2 Implementation of the first NAP before and after the Nagorno-Karabakh War....253
5.2.1 Resourcing and budgeting the NAP....253
5.2.2 Localizing and implementing the NAP....255
5.2.3 Monitoring and evaluating the NAP....260
5.3 'Living on a ticking time bomb': Grief, collective trauma and gendered emergencies....263
5.3.1 Responding to the immediate humanitarian needs after the 2020 war....265
5.3.2 'It's extremely difficult to talk about peace when they are coming to kill you': On the different meanings of peace – and the difficulty to talk about peace after 2020....270

5.4 The adoption of the second NAP (2022-2024), a foreign policy shift to the West, and the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh (2023) 276
5.4.1 The adoption of the second Armenian NAP 277
5.4.2 What are the future WPS challenges in Armenia? 282
5.4.3 From Russia to the West: WPS in the context of foreign policy transformations and the Russian invasion of Ukraine 286
5.4.4 Reflecting on progress made – and the fear that everyone anticipated 291

Chapter 6 : Ukraine 296
6.1 "The first country to adopt a NAP during a war": Ukrainian feminist stories of advocacy for the first WPS NAP (from 2012 to 2016) 296
6.1.1 (Re)introducing Resolution 1325 after the Maidan Revolution 296
6.1.2 The adoption of the first Ukrainian NAP (2016-2020) 301
6.2 WPS amid the Donbas war (2016 to 2021) 304
6.2.1 Resourcing, implementing, monitoring, and updating the first NAP 305
6.2.2 Adoption of the second Ukrainian NAP 319
6.2.3 Reflections on both NAP processes 322
6.3 The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) and its consequences 327
6.3.1 Feminist mobilization to a multi-layered humanitarian catastrophe 329
6.3.2 On the different meanings of peace – and the difficulty to talk about peacebuilding after 2022 335
6.3.3 The update of the second Ukrainian NAP 341
6.4 New WPS realities after the full-scale invasion 347
6.4.1 'If there is no country, there is no NAP' On the necessity of self-defense and the future WPS challenges in Ukraine 347
6.4.2 WPS in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration – On internal and external forces 352
6.4.3 Reflecting on progress made – and a decolonial shift 357

Conclusion and Discussion of Section II 363

Chapter 7 : Regional Discussion and Conclusion 372
7.1 Discussion of the four main findings and implications of the research 375
7.1.1 Main finding 1: The emergence and adoption of NAPs heavily rely on strategic feminist networks 375

7.1.2 Main finding 2: Nearby conflicts and regional geopolitical insecurities strongly influence NAP adoption and implementation, as well as how actors understand and use the WPS agenda380
7.1.3 Main finding 3: The entire NAP process is inseparable from broader political dynamics….385
7.1.4 Main finding 4: The region shows both unique and global trends 390
7.2 Limitations of the research and future avenues of reflections 394
7.3 Concluding remarks 397

Bibliography 398

Appendices 434
Appendix A – Consent form 434
Appendix B – Interview guide (Moldova)..437
Appendix C – Interview guide (Georgia) 439
Appendix D – Interview guide (Armenia)..441
Appendix E – Interview guide (Ukraine) 443
Appendix F – Certificate of ethics approval...445
Appendix G – Certificate of ethics approval (renewed) 446
Appendix H – List of NVivo nodes for data analysis 447

List of Tables

Table 1: NAPs on WPS in the post-Soviet space…………………………………………………………. 70

Table 2: Number of interviews (N=78) ………………………………………………………...…… 76

Table 3: Categories of individuals interviewed (N=82) ……………………………………………….. 82

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Moldova ………………………………………………………………………………. 94
Figure 2: Map of Georgia …………………………………………………………………………...... 97
Figure 3: Triangle of feminist actors working on the first Moldovan NAP …………………………... 111
Figure 4: Triangle of feminist actors in the Georgian NAPs …………………………………………... 164
Figure 5: Map of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after 2020 ………………………………………….. 229
Figure 6: Triangle of feminist actors working on the first Armenian NAP ……………………………. 243
Figure 7: Triangle of feminist actors working on the first Ukrainian NAP ……………………………. 301

List of Abbreviations

ABL	Administrative Boundary Line (Georgia)
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRSV	Conflict-related sexual violence
CSO	Civil society organization
CSW	The Commission on the Status of Women
EU	European Union
FSS	Feminist Security Studies
GBV	Gender-based violence
GID	Geneva International Discussions (Georgia)
GNWP	Global Network of Women Peacebuilders
IDP	Internally displaced person
IPRM	Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (Georgia)
IR	International Relations
LAP	Local Action Plan
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or questioning, Intersex, Asexual, & more
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Armenia)
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoSP	Ministry of Social Policy (Ukraine)
MIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
NK	Nagorno-Karabakh
NAP	National Action Plan
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO	Non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PDO	Public Defender Office (Georgia)
RAP	Regional Action Plan
UN	United Nations
UHCR	UN Refugee Agency
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNFPA	UN Population Fund
UNSCR1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
UN Women ECARO	UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction – Research puzzle, questions, and objectives of the thesis

While reading the title of this thesis, one might wonder ‘why the post-Soviet space’? This query could signal either a lack of interest in this region (*why* is it important to pay attention to it in the first place?) or a question about the terminology used (*what* does ‘post-Soviet’ mean nowadays, and to what extent can this region still be described as ‘post-Soviet’? Hasn’t the Soviet Union been over for more than 30 years now?)

While essential theoretical and conceptual debates on these questions have been happening among scholars working on/in this region for decades now, they undoubtedly accelerated after the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Applying post-colonial and decolonial frameworks to the post-Soviet region, scholars assert the need to urgently seize the “post-colonial moment” of Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an *imperial* war. This invasion revealed not only the deep Eurocentrism of IR theory and its neglect of the “Eastern European periphery” but also the blind spots in postcolonial studies, which have failed to acknowledge Russian imperialism and colonialism (Mälksoo 2022; see also Oksamytna 2023; Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023; Kassymbekova and Marat 2022).

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) academic community has not caught up with those debates. In fact, several scholars of feminist IR, feminist security studies, and WPS have

also reproduced harmful patterns of epistemic imperialism and injustice since 2022 (Hendl et al. 2024). As I have shown elsewhere, this "in-between" region – corresponding neither to the Global North nor to the Global South – has been erased from WPS discussions for quite a long time (Santoire 2023). While this has started to change slowly since the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine – which finally attracted some feminists' attention to this region – progress has been too slow.

As a feminist researcher interested in both WPS and the post-Soviet space, the erasure of this large and diverse region from the WPS agenda has long puzzled me. The more I read WPS literature, the more I noticed an absence: not only of the voices of women from the former Eastern bloc as experts but also of their unique experiences in a region still affected by the end of the Cold War and Russian imperialism. Even the most comprehensive and radical critics of the WPS agenda fail to include perspectives from this region, build feminist solidarities with women from the former Eastern bloc, and go beyond a strictly North/South axis of analysis. A closer look at the extensive body of post-socialist feminist literature reveals essential clues for understanding this curious erasure. The WPS agenda is a direct result of transnational feminism. In this global encounter structured between women from the Global North and Global South, the voices of post-socialist women have often been marginalized and sidelined to the periphery. This is evidenced, notably, by the longstanding contentious debates and misunderstandings between East-West feminists since the end of the Cold War (Cîrstocea 2022; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019; Koobak and Marling 2014; Grabowska 2012; Suchland 2011; Slavova 2006).

The initial motive for this thesis, and in fact, its central puzzle, is thus deceptively simple. In focusing on the experiences of feminists in the post-Soviet space, the thesis provides, first and foremost, an empirical exploration of this uncharted terrain in the WPS agenda as both an academic field and a transnational feminist space. In so doing, it also identifies the analytical lessons that can be drawn from this empirical exploration and how the unique experiences of this region can enrich our understanding of conceptual and theoretical debates in the WPS agenda literature. Through an analysis of the micro-dynamics of the adoption and implementation of WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, this thesis seeks to answer the four following research questions:

1) *How did WPS NAPs emerge across the post-Soviet space*?
2) *How do different state and non-state actors understand and use the WPS agenda in their respective national contexts?*
3) *How does the militarized environment – characterized by various wars and protracted conflicts – influence WPS NAP adoption and implementation?*
4) *What specificities can be observed in post-Soviet regional WPS politics, and what do they reveal about the WPS agenda as a global normative project?*

Through extensive fieldwork, participant and non-participant observations, and policy analysis, the thesis's objectives are three-fold. First, to raise awareness of the unique dynamics of the post-Soviet space and its implications for WPS. Second, to make visible and center the voices and agency of women working on WPS. Third, to challenge some of the core concepts, debates, and boundaries of the WPS agenda.

Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical approaches and concepts that I use for this thesis, as well as the theoretical debates that this thesis engages with, contributes to, and addresses. Chapter 2 presents the epistemological approach and methodological choices employed in this research. It further elaborates on my positionality and explains the country case selection and the data collection and analysis process.

Section I on 'WPS in protracted conflicts' includes Chapters 3 (Moldova) and 4 (Georgia). After first providing historical and political context for the readers, I will present the empirical findings for each country, precisely the genealogy of NAP emergence, adoption, and implementation. Each chapter contains narratives of women involved in WPS in different ways, demonstrating how their proximity to conflict and the protracted nature of the conflicts in their respective countries have impacted WPS politics, especially since 2022. While both countries' experiences with WPS are discussed in parallel, I will finish Section I by examining the similarities and differences between them in a small discussion.

Section II on 'WPS in active conflicts' will follow a similar pattern, including Chapters 5 (Armenia) and 6 (Ukraine). After first providing some historical and political context for the readers, I will present the genealogy of NAP emergence, adoption, and implementation. Each chapter contains narratives of women involved in WPS in different ways, demonstrating how existential threats and a state of immediate crisis in their respective countries have impacted WPS politics and feminist organizing. While both countries' experiences with WPS are discussed in parallel, I will also finish Section II by comparing both countries in a small discussion.

Chapter 7 will revisit the research questions, summarize the main empirical findings in a regional discussion, and discuss the implications of the findings along with potential avenues for future research.

Before presenting the theoretical framework, I will first clarify the terminology used in this research and give a detailed overview of its object of study, the WPS agenda. Doing so will help to contextualize and add nuance to the seemingly simple motivation behind my thesis.

1.2 Tracing the contours of an impossible-to-define region: a few words on terminology

> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, questions of boundaries have intensified: Who can claim a European cultural heritage? Is Central Europe separate from Eastern Europe? What is Eastern Europe? Is Russia European or Asian? Which empire(s) (for example, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Soviet, Ottoman, Mongol) are the referent for claiming a postcolonial standpoint? (Suchland 2011, 856)

'Global East,' (Müller 2020) 'semi-periphery,' (Blagojević 2009) an 'epistemic void' in the global coloniality, (Tlostanova 2015; 2012; 2010) or more broadly, the 'Second World,' 'post-socialist,' 'post-communist,' 'Central and Eastern Europe,' 'Eurasia,' and 'non-region': many terms have been used to sketch the contours of the multiple regions located on the great Eurasian continent. Without consensus, it appears impossible to define this space. What these terms have in common is not only an attempt to define the liminality of these regions at the periphery of and within Europe and beyond (what is even *Europe*?), but also a communist past (or socialist or state-socialist past; that, too, is not a matter of consensus).

Generally, the countries that these terms refer to broadly today are all those that emerged from the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and communist countries outside of it, namely the Soviet satellite states of Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Albania (until the Albanian-Soviet split in the 1960s) that were within the socialist sphere of influence[1] and that we refer to as the "Eastern Bloc" or as behind the "Iron Curtain." However, what makes things more confusing is that many of the terms above *also* include the countries that emerged from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, even though they were not aligned with the Soviet Union or the West.[2] The post-Yugoslav space is also one of liminality and 'not-quite-European,' left out of global coloniality as it is not quite the Global North nor the Global South (Müller 2020 cited in Stavrevska et al. 2023, 4; see also Buchowski 2006; Todorova 1997).

Terms got messier after the end of the Cold War because "the dissolution of the bipolar world order not only gave rise to a multipolar geopolitical figuration but also shifted the guiding axis from that of the Eastern and Western blocs to that of the Global North and the Global South. The Second World exchanged its status as a political-economic entity for that of a culturally and ethnically demarcated space as Eastern Europe and the Balkans, whose positionality is difficult to conceive and tends to be carved in/out of a cartography of absences." Moreover, "as political entities, these countries came to be classified in a temporal mode of past or future as post-socialist or transitional democracies. In the context

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[1] I am aware that there were also Soviet-aligned countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

[2] Even though Yugoslavia was no longer aligned with the Soviet Union after the 1948 Yugoslav-Soviet split and was part of the non-aligned movement, it is sometimes perceived in popular culture as part of the 'Eastern Bloc.'

of a developmentalism converted into a discourse of globalization, the space once referred to as the Second World was consigned to a linear temporality of catching up, as though Western liberal democracy and the market economy were simply replacing state socialism." (Kulawik and Kravchenko 2020, 2-3)

As there is still no consensus on how to name and define the contours of this broad "non-region," we are, therefore, in a theoretical and conceptual dead-end, and this thesis does not pretend to resolve these difficulties. I will try to employ terms as precisely as possible. Some terms like 'post-socialist' and 'post-communist' will be used interchangeably when the Balkans are included; when they are not, I will use the terms former 'Eastern Bloc' and 'Second World'[3] to refer to the area that the former Soviet Union and its allies occupied.

Despite being somewhat *passé* and heavily contested because of its pejorative connotations (especially since 2022) (Daniszewski 2024; Eggart 2022; Erizanu 2021), I choose to stick with the term 'post-Soviet' for three reasons. First, other terms in the literature mentioned above are too broad to accurately represent the countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union: they are all equally imperfect, problematic, and conceptually fuzzy. Since my thesis concerns specifically the former Soviet Union, I will use the term post-Soviet 'space' or 'region' – but avoid altogether calling my countries of focus 'former Soviet *republics*' or 'post-Soviet *countries*' as they have complex national identities that go

[3] On the three-worlds metageography of the Cold War ('First World' as the Global North, 'Second World' as the former Eastern Bloc, and 'Third World' as the Global South and/or the non-aligned countries): while these terms are "problematic because of [their] pejorative connotation, implying the idea of progressive modernization within a hierarchy, with the Global North being the 'superior' stage of development," (Santoire 2023, 3) its symptoms remain (Suchland 2011, 838).

beyond their Soviet past.[4] Second, by using ‘post-Soviet,’ I want to highlight the specific *legacies* and trauma of the Soviet era in my case studies and their lasting impact on WPS politics and landscape in the region today. Third, I believe that the debates and discussions around this term are actually productive and contribute to feminist energy and intellectual reflections. During my fieldwork, on a terrasse, with coffee, my research participants and I often actively discussed the meaning of this term in contemporary regional politics, which became even more relevant after the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine (which happened a few months prior to my fieldwork). While some women disliked/were uncomfortable with the term ‘post-Soviet’ due to its negative connotations and links to a painful history, some were indifferent. Others recognized the conceptual advantages of using it, such as denoting a shared history and language among women peacebuilders in the region, as well as highlighting the ongoing devastating impacts of Russian imperialism.

My choice to use the term post-Soviet ‘space’ or ‘region’ here should not be understood as an excessive generalization of the experiences of the former Soviet Union in its entirety, and I recognize the heterogeneity and various sub-regions constituting this space today. Moreover, regarding the broad terms of ‘Western feminism,’ ‘post-socialist feminism,’ or ‘CEE feminism,’ I follow the approach of Koobak and Marling (2014, 331) recognizing that despite being “not static and that they function in equally ambiguous, porous and often contradictory ways, we need to use them because we need to make sense of what we are doing using a common language.” There is no such thing as “Eastern European feminism”

[4] My choice of ‘post-Soviet’ also does not refer to the *people* living in these countries.

or "CEE feminism" as a homogenous whole, and I am aware of the immense plural diversity of voices and experiences of women.

1.3 What is "WPS"? Introducing the object of study

WPS historiography is contested and inherently plural, making it impossible to tell its story in a linear, singular narrative. "Available in radical and conservative variants," what constitutes today the WPS agenda is a *multitude* of things, realities, principles, values, norms, hopes, and dreams. These elements form a complex, intermingled ecosystem, sometimes parallel and incompatible with each other (Kirby and Shepherd 2024, 3).

Here is how the usual story goes. On October 31st, 2000, a defining moment in global feminist history was made between the four walls of the United Nations Security Council, the UN organ responsible for international peace and security issues. After years of "knocking on doors," advocacy and lobbying by transnational feminist networks, groups, and activists, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325), which recognized, for the first time, the disproportionate and differentiated impacts of armed conflicts on women and girls. This accomplishment was made possible by decades of collaborative global feminist efforts at the UN World Conferences on Women. In particular, the Fourth Conference in Beijing in 1995 established the Beijing Platform for Action, which served as a crucial foundation for UNSCR1325. Additionally, other significant normative frameworks, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), have played a key role in fostering UNSCR1325 (Anderlini 2019; Tickner and True 2018; Tryggestad 2009; Hill et al. 2003).

Built around three initial pillars – participation, protection, and prevention (and later relief & recovery) – UNSCR1325 requested Member States to increase the meaningful participation and representation of women in international peace and security decision-making, from peace negotiations and conflict prevention to peacekeeping operations. It also urged them to protect women from gender-based harms such as conflict-related sexual violence and prevent conflicts from occurring. Since 2000, the Security Council has adopted nine other resolutions[5] – tackling different topics such as rape as a weapon of war, humanitarian aid, gender-responsive disaster response, or counter-terrorism – constituting what is known as the "WPS agenda" (Coomaraswamy 2015). Today, in addition to the classical pillars, numerous themes and cross-cutting issues have been added to the agenda, such as climate change, migration, men and masculinities, sexual and reproductive health and rights, transitional justice, women's human rights defenders, and disarmament, to name a few (Kirby and Shepherd 2020). UNSCR1325 is usually celebrated by feminists around the world as a landmark achievement because "women brought the human face of war into the Security Council and other spaces where the fate of humanity was decided, but where human beings, most affected, rarely had any presence." (Anderlini 2019, 51)

Notwithstanding the crucial mobilization of feminists, the adoption of UNSCR1325 also happened in a particular historical context, following the mass atrocities of the 1990s "new wars" – particularly those committed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia (Žarkov 1997). The adoption of UNSCR1325 was heavily influenced and shaped by geopolitical and

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[5] S/RES/1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, 2242, 2467, 2493.

ideological shifts in the post-Cold War world, the decline of superpower rivalry and communism, the rise of American hegemony and liberal order (Harrington 2011; Joachim 2003), and an increase in the Council's attention to human-related security issues, such as children and armed conflicts, HIV/AIDS and gender (Basu 2016a, 260-61).

While the WPS agenda is my object of study, National Action Plans (NAPs) are the manifestations – or operationalization – of it. Therefore, they hold a particular place of focus in my research. Indeed, one of the main ways[6] to implement the WPS agenda is through NAPs, where states show their commitment to the agenda through, among others, sustained political will, an allocated budget, a specific time frame, key measurable objectives articulated around pillars and topics, clear indicators, an inclusive design process, and finally, mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the plan (Jacevic 2019). As of August 2024, 109 UN Member States have adopted at least one NAP, although a third of existing NAPs are currently outdated (Peace Women 2024). As such, NAPs are "blueprints" of State priorities but adopting them requires a lot of time and resources and, ideally, extensive consultations with various stakeholders and beneficiaries. At the same time, they are also crucial advocacy tools for NGOs/CSOs and women activists.

[6] While the Security Council is the institutional "home" of the agenda, and Member States are the main actors, there are other ways to implement the WPS agenda: by other UN entities, civil society organizations (CSOs), international financial institutions, and local and regional actors. There are several Regional Action Plans (RAPs), including the European Union (EU), the African Union, The Economic Community of West African States, the League of Arab States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to name a few, and its most controversial, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Peace Women 2024). Moreover, several initiatives to localize the WPS agenda through Local Action Plans (LAPs) exist, such as within a specific municipal, local, provincial, or ministerial structure, for example (Myrttinen 2022; Myrttinen et al. 2020a, 68; Jacevic 2019, 15; Coomaraswamy 2015, 243; Global Network of Women Peacebuilders 2013).

In coexistence with other global gender normative frameworks, the WPS agenda – and its NAPs – represents today a fertile object of study for understanding gender issues related to international peace and security at the intersection of academia, advocacy, and practice. The agenda's institutionalization takes multiple forms, notably through UNSC resolutions and yearly Open Debates, offices (e.g., the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict), mandates of UN agencies, and the establishment of dedicated funds like the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) (Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd 2020b).

Since 2000, there has been "a vibrant dialogue bridging academia, advocacy, and policymaking." (Kirby and Shepherd 2020, 3) Two decades of WPS scholarship have led to a plethora of critiques of the WPS agenda, the great majority of them relating to a deficient and ineffective implementation on the ground; in short, to a gap between rhetoric and actions due to a lack of funding, political will, robust accountability mechanisms, and civil society participation (Coomaraswamy 2015). A continuous critique is its growing militarization, perpetuating a narrow and state-centric vision of liberal peacebuilding that fails to tackle structural inequalities (Kaptan 2020; Coomaraswamy 2015). This often leads to a bureaucratic approach failing to create meaningful local ownership and tangible impacts on the ground (Basini and Ryan 2016). Several scholars have stated that the current state of the WPS agenda has perpetuated the domination of the Global North on the Global South through various policy and discursive mechanisms, something that is particularly visible in the orientation of NAPs across the world. Western NAPs are mostly outward-oriented (i.e., using their NAPs as foreign policy tools or development aid), giving the impression that WPS issues are only relevant for conflict-affected countries "out there" but

rarely for domestic matters (Haastrup and Hagen 2020; Greener 2020; Parashar 2019; Aroussi 2017; Basu and Shepherd 2017; Basu 2016b; Shepherd 2016a). On the other side, NAPs from the Global South are most often inward-oriented, meaning that they are almost exclusively concerned with their respective domestic contexts and that they "are usually developed with support from donor agencies and intergovernmental organizations." (Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd 2020a, 8) This dichotomy of the Global North as norms "creators" and "implementers" and the Global South as norms "receivers" perpetuates imperial, colonial, and racist dynamics, leading us "to see the Global South as always in need of repair, as fragile, as failing." (Haastrup and Hagen 2020, 147)

Other scholars highlight the neglect of the "prevention" pillar (Basu and Confortini 2017; Basu and Shepherd 2017) and the co-optation[7] of the agenda by militarized actors such as NATO, which is perceived by antimilitarist feminists to be inherently contradictory to the original project of the UNSCR1325 (Cockburn 2012). Many have noted the fixation on conflict-related sexual violence, which perpetuates narrow understandings of women as sole victims of conflicts instead of agents with diverse roles and identities (Goetz 2020; Meger 2016; Shepherd 2011). On that latter point, many scholars have employed discursive approaches to show how WPS Resolutions are part of a liberal peacebuilding framework and that NAPs (re)produce sexualized, racial, classed hierarchies of who is a "WPS participant" and who is not, as well as binary archetypes of women as either "victims" or pacifist "peacebuilders." (Martin de Almagro 2018b; see also Björkdahl and Selimovic

[7] On the securitization and the weaponization of feminism for the war on terror, see Parashar (2019), Ní Aoláin (2016), Pratt (2013), and Shepherd (2006).

2015; Shepherd 2016b; 2011; Gibbings 2011; Puechguirbal 2010; Carpenter 2006) This tendency not only gives an essentialized image of conflict-affected women but also makes certain experiences invisible, such as the ones of LGBTQIA+ people in conflict zones (Hagen 2016) and of men and boys victims of sexual violence (Carpenter 2006b).

This section provided only a rapid overview of academic debates in the past twenty years and the most recurring criticisms. Most recently, Kirby and Shepherd (2024) argued that the WPS agenda is structured around six core tensions: what gender entails, the tensions between agency and vulnerability, hegemony versus multiplicity, the inclusive or "reformist" approach *contra* an abolitionist/radical approach, hierarchies between pillars and WPS issues, and finally, to go back to its name, there is a fundamental friction between peace and security. Earlier, Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd (2020b, 12) showed that there are also two types of contradiction central to WPS: boundaries (what *is* even WPS? What is a WPS issue and what is not?) and implementation (what constitutes *effective* WPS implementation? Which pillars should be prioritized and operationalized?) To this day, there is no consensus on these questions in the WPS agenda, and there is probably no need to achieve such consensus, as WPS is constantly evolving and changing.

1.4 Theoretical underpinnings of this thesis

In the five following sections, I will introduce the theoretical concepts that I will use in this thesis, as well as the theoretical debates and intellectual lineage that this thesis engages with, contributes to, and addresses. While it is not possible to give an exhaustive

account of each body of the five different literatures that I draw from – given their substantive history, debates, and volume – I provide an overview and explain the elements I have selected that help me analyze the various empirical layers of this thesis. In many ways, all five literatures speak to each other. My framework – in reality, my theoretical *patchwork* – essentially consists of the following foundations: 1) feminist post-socialist literature, 2) feminist and critical constructivist approaches to norms in IR, 3) feminist institutionalism, especially its concepts of 'velvet triangles' and feminist strategies inside/outside institutions, 4) feminist security studies, and finally, 5) I situate myself vis-à-vis the "co-optation" versus "transformation" debates in the WPS literature.

1.4.1 Post-socialist feminism, transnational feminism, and East-West contentious debates

In its simplest terms, anchoring this research in feminist post-socialist literature contextualizes and historicizes the very puzzle of this thesis. It sheds light on why – in the first place – this geographical space has received so little interest in the WPS literature, both theoretically and empirically. Beyond this, I argue that turning toward the post-Soviet space is essential for WPS scholarship as it allows us to have a more sophisticated and fluid understanding of conflicts than those currently in the WPS literature, as there are many protracted conflicts and *de facto* states in this region. Second, turning toward this region gives us critical empirical grounds to challenge and nuance the binary "militarist" vs. "antimilitarist" and "co-optation" vs. "transformation" debates found in the WPS literature, which are often circular and incompatible in the post-Soviet space. Third, situating this thesis in post-socialist feminist literature helps overcome the WPS literature's blindness to

Russian imperialism and grasp the post-Soviet region's subordination to Russia. These dynamics are entirely invisible when one keeps a strictly North/South analysis. This is especially helpful to make sense of the "postcolonial" turn among post-socialist feminists and scholars following the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and how it led to trauma revival in the region. Finally, the insights offered by East-West feminist discussions and post-socialist feminist theories on (gendered) transitions after the collapse of communism are crucial for understanding how WPS politics are deeply connected to broader geopolitical processes such as regime change (democratization and autocratization), independence movements, and the emergence of feminist civil society since the Soviet Union's dissolution. Before elaborating on each point, I will introduce key concepts of feminist post-socialist literature relevant to this thesis (e.g., "lagging behind" and "catching up with the West," challenging encounters between East-West feminists) and demonstrate this region's absence in the WPS literature.

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As I have shown elsewhere through extensive bibliometric data, the WPS literature has worryingly overlooked this region during more than twenty years of knowledge production, leaving a large epistemic gap. In 2021, when I conducted this study, the results were shocking but not surprising. After mapping academic publications on the WPS agenda since 2000, I found that only six articles[8] focused specifically on a country in the post-

[8] Those articles were: Yarosh (2020); O′Sullivan (2019a); Siilivask (2017); Walsh (2015); Nikoghosyan (2018); Albu (2020). I omitted Benigni (2016) and Lukatela (2016) as they were published in a professional rather than in an academic journal. See my article directly for further details on the methodology used (Santoire 2023).

Soviet region out of more than 250 publications compiled (Santoire 2023). While WPS scholars have started to pay attention to the post-Soviet space since 2022, this attention is still largely insufficient, with only a few exceptions worth mentioning (Santoire 2024; O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023b; Myrttinen 2022; Wright 2022; Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022). But what explains this gap and erasure?

As I argued previously, the literature on WPS is structured around a Global North/South[9] dynamic and rarely explores spaces "in-between" this axis, leaving the post-Soviet space in limbo. For example, there are countless examples in the WPS literature where countries, themes, or NAPs are classified by region. In this broad portrait, countries of the post-Soviet space are always clumped into a big "Europe" category (Central Asia, and sometimes the South Caucasus, are classified under "Asia") without rarely – if ever – making the distinction *within* Europe (e.g., Kirby and Shepherd 2024's latest book presents plenty of examples for this claim; see also Krulišová and O′Sullivan 2022). When countries from the post-Soviet space are mentioned, one can find weak geopolitical framing or non-factual information, suggesting a lack of knowledge of the issues underlying this region (Santoire 2023, 6–7). A striking example among many is when Hamilton, Pagot, and Shepherd

[9] I want to emphasize from the outset that the dissertation does not provide a historical account or an in-depth discussion of the Global North and the Global South. This discussion would have been quite interesting, given recent developments and postcolonial theories emerging from Central and Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central and North Asia. I want to clarify that the goal of this thesis is not to undermine or cease investigating the Global South, a term which, I recognize, carries historical weight and significance. What I argue – in this thesis and previous work – is that focusing solely on the North/South axis is limiting and essentializing because it leads us to perceive the Global South as poor, weak, fragile, and failing. I also do not argue that we need to revert to an East versus West axis. If I did, I would inevitably reproduce the very thing I am trying to challenge, which is that regional blocks are inherently problematic. In today's world, I – along with many authors from these regions – argue that only looking at things through a North/South lens obscures many nuances and regions of the world that do not fit neatly within this axis.

(2021, 17) refer to Russia as a "*party*" in "*territorial* conflicts" in Ukraine and Georgia; the Russian-Georgian war is referred to as "the 2008 *violence*" instead of mentioning Russia's imperialist invasion and occupation of Georgia and Ukraine. These years of observations and frustrations constitute the very intellectual starting point of my thesis and the motive behind it. Let's explore the underlying reasons behind this erasure.

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Following the end of the Cold War and the shift away from bipolarity to multipolarity, the East/West divide was reorganized into a North/South dynamic instead (Kulawik and Kravchenko 2020). Since then, "the post-Soviet space has been politically and geographically ambiguous" as it corresponds "neither [to the] Global North nor the Global South." (Santoire 2023, 1) However, this invisibility is not confined to WPS literature and, on the contrary, refers to a more profound historical invisibility, hence the need to look at East-West encounters in transnational feminist theory, practice, and spaces.

Feminist post-socialist literature flourished at the end of the Cold War. While it is not possible to provide an exhaustive overview of the parameters of this intellectual endeavor, we can identify several common aims. Feminist perspectives on/from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) argue that the post-Soviet and the post-Yugoslav spaces have long been erased from transnational feminist theory (Suchland 2011), creating what Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak (2019) called a "post-socialist missing other." As such, feminist post-socialist literature largely emerged *in reaction* to this erasure in transnational feminism, and this criticism constitutes one – if not *the* – central aspect of this literature.

Post-socialist feminists have criticized Western feminists' limited experiences and epistemologies – assumed to be universal – and have drawn parallels between their plights and those of Third World feminists (Slavova 2006; Santoire 2023, 7). Post-socialist feminist literature has also shown extensively that transnational feminism[10] is primarily a dialogue between Global North and Global South feminists, and "in their commitment to deconstructing the First World/Third World divide, transnational feminist theory has almost nothing to say about the so-called Second World or the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe." (Nachescu 2018, 189, my emphasis; see also Grabowska 2012) Failing to consider the voices and experiences of post-socialist women leads to incomplete feminist theories and excludes them from important transnational dialogues and spaces.

Consequently, exchanges between Western and post-socialist feminists created significant tensions. For example, the Beijing Conference in 1995 was "the venue that presented post-state-socialist feminists with their first opportunity to enter the global feminist forum"; however, "[their] introduction to global women's activism [was] bittersweet," notably because they had "the feeling that they had already 'missed the boat' of transnational feminism" (Grabowska 2012, 401 cited in Santoire 2023, 8). This feeling of invisibility pushed feminists from the former Eastern bloc to produce the 'Statement from the Non-Region,' claiming that they had been intentionally shut off from the global dialogue of

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[10] On transnational feminism, which is usually associated with third-wave feminism, Suchland (2011, 849) notes: "Feminists engaged the concept of the transnational to address the essentialism of the politics of location. In some cases, the global turn to the politics of location relies on romanticized and rigid understandings of the local and the global. Differences between local and global, Western and non-Western, exist, but they are not symmetrical or essential categories. More than a synonym for globalization or a descriptive concept for a historical juncture, the term 'transnational' is a feminist mode of analysis that challenges the categories of place and difference that global sisterhood has relied on." (see Mohanty 1984)

transnational feminism[11] (Suchland 2011, 837 cited in Santoire 2023, 8; Cerwonka 2008). Back then, "the former Second World, from a Western feminist perspective, was constructed as a backward and conservative space where Eastern European women had yet to learn the benefits of (liberal) feminism because they were still 'lagging' behind." (Slavova 2006, 248 cited in Santoire 2023, 8; see also Bajramović Jusufbegović 2018)

But what truly explains such a discrepancy? Various possibilities have been proposed in post-socialist feminist literature. Different timing and chronology of feminist "waves," divergent intellectual traditions, and visions toward feminist issues (e.g., a prioritization of class oppression over patriarchal oppression) may account for this invisibility in transnational feminism, among others. However, there are also significant intellectual and chronological differences between feminists in the Global North and the Global South. In my sense, however, Suchland (2011) proposes the most convincing explanation as it combines chronological differences with racial, metageographical, and political differences. First, she says that the construction of the global is embedded "in a *racialized* understanding of difference," thus producing "a double essentialism – of both third-world and second-world women" (Suchland 2011, 839, my emphasis). Second, "area studies knowledge production and Cold War ideological production have framed the second world as *uncritical* of, and the third world as *critical* of, the West." As such, "postsocialism gets lost because it is largely presumed to be a process of democratization or Europeanization and thus uncritically positioned vis-à-vis the first world" (Suchland 2011, 839, my

[11] The Statement was authored by Polish, Russian, and Bulgarian feminists Urzsula Nowakowska, Wanda Nowicka, Anastasia Posadskaya, Vera Dakova, and Elena Kotchina (Cîrstocea 2022, 36).

emphasis). Finally, "stereotypes and assumptions about Eastern European women during the Cold War were perpetuated in the post-Cold War context when the hegemonic Western formula for advancing democratic rights was not unequivocally embraced in the former second world," leading Western feminists to not "read the former second world as a difference" vis-à-vis the West (Suchland 2011, 839 cited in Santoire 2023, 9). Continually, women from the former Eastern bloc and the Balkans are essentialized and perceived as different (from the Global North) but not different "enough" (compared to the Global South) – often white, but not *really* getting the privileges associated with whiteness.[12]

Unsurprisingly, many feminists from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have applied postcolonial and decolonial lenses to their regions, highlighting their distinct gendered experiences at the intersection of multiple oppressions (e.g., Tlostanova 2015; 2012; Koobak and Marling 2014; Velickovic 2012; Majewska 2011; see also Todorova 1997). Others explored the Soviet Union's underlying colonial, racist, and imperial practices, notably its forced Russification (e.g., Kassymbekova and Marat 2022; Gradskova 2020; Annus 2017; Tlostanova 2010; Kandiyoti 2007). However, "although the East, as demi-Other of the West, resembles the South's postcolonial condition, it is not included in the South's fight for emancipation. Just as it is not quite North, it neither is quite South" notes Müller (2020, 739 cited in Santoire 2023, 8). Consequently, post-socialist and postcolonial feminists from the Global South have had – and continue to have difficult dialogues –

[12] Kalmar famously introduced the idea of "white but not quite," suggesting that Central, South, and Eastern Europeans do not have the full political and economic privileges of whiteness, especially when examining the structural inequalities within Europe and the treatment of CEE and Balkans migrants in Western Europe, as a form of racialization (Kalmar 2023; 2022; Lewicki 2023; Sojka 2019; Nachescu 2018; Boatcă 2010).

notably because of divergent timelines, different visions of socialism (a historical trauma for post-socialist feminists, but an aspiration for postcolonial feminists based on anti-Western, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist sentiments) and distinct experiences of race/racism. Contemporary ideas associated with the post-socialist space today, like the 'return to Europe,' 'catching up with the West,' or 'transition' to Europeanisation, are often out of sync with postcolonial feminists from the Global South who are critical of capitalist Western modernity and liberal democracy, making solidarities between the two groups difficult and unattuned to each other's experiences (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019). While I do not pretend to solve those issues or even remotely scratch the surface of these complex debates (see Bonfiglioli and Ghodsee 2020; Bonfiglioli 2016), I acknowledge them as an essential background informing my thesis and one of the diverse reasons impacting the invisibility of the post-Soviet space in the WPS literature. This invisibility leaves us with a partial portrait of the various dynamics at play within the WPS agenda. The existing WPS literature remains analytically limited to a Global North/South axis, which fails to capture the complexity and "messiness" of the world today. As WPS scholars, turning to this region provides us with better tools to analyze the political forces shaping the WPS agenda today, forces that often extend beyond a strict North/South axis.

Before introducing my four arguments, I have tried to explain why, prima facie, the post-Soviet space is absent from the literature on the WPS agenda. By situating ourselves in post-socialist feminist literature, it is evident why this is the case. Historically, this space has been erased from transnational feminism, which is primarily structured around a dialogue between Global North and Global South feminists. This is the core matter of the

post-socialist feminist literature. In major feminist transnational events such as the UN World Conferences on Women, post-socialist feminists have participated but have not felt included by their fellow feminists. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, the former Eastern Bloc and its associated East-West binarity have been replaced by a North-South axis. This has had an effect not only on the social sciences in general but also on feminist scholarship. This gap has crystallized over time, and as an "in-between" and liminal space that is neither quite North nor South, different but not "different enough," feminist solidarities and alliances have been challenging to build. As a result, tensions, misunderstandings, and problematic attitudes towards post-socialist feminists occurred (and still occur).[13] In simplified terms, I believe that this historical mismatch and exclusion have been directly transposed into WPS literature since the WPS agenda as an object of study is itself a product of transnational feminism. My adoption of the post-socialist feminist literature is thus a reaction to the limited perspectives in the WPS literature.

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Not only does situating this thesis in feminist post-socialist literature contextualize the research puzzle and help analyze its resulting data, but I also argue that turning toward the post-Soviet space is interesting analytically for WPS scholarship for four reasons. First, it allows us to have a more sophisticated understanding of conflicts. The WPS literature relies on and reproduces Westphalian-centric conceptions of the State, its historiography, boundaries, and sovereignty (Manchanda 2020; Santoire 2023, 2). While this is starting to

[13] For a good overview of uneasy encounters between Western and Eastern feminists, characterized by debates in the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, notably the 'Drakulić–Funk–Ghodsee' debates, see Hinterhuber and Fuchs (2021) and Cîrstocea (2022a).

change as the diversity of WPS literature has grown exponentially (Kirby and Shepherd 2024), "until relatively recently, the conflicts coming within the scope of the WPS agenda have been narrowly defined along conventional armed conflict classifications. The narrow lens has left untouched a number of conflict-afflicted geographies and contexts where women have been excluded from conflict resolution and where the harms they experience are rendered almost entirely invisible to the WPS agenda" (Ní Aoláin 2016 cited in Ní Aoláin and Valji 2019, 58).

Not only is the WPS literature "blind" to protracted conflicts in the post-Soviet region, but the WPS community of practice also fails to see them as "real" conflicts, thus demonstrating once again the enmeshing between academic research and practice. A telling example is that the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security's 'WPS Conflict Tracker' (n.d.) does not even *list* the numerous protracted conflicts in the post-socialist region, except for Ukraine and Kosovo. As such, long-term conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, and more recently, ethnic cleansing of the entire Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh (2023) and Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan deadly border clashes (2022) do not "count" as conflicts[14] for these WPS scholars and practitioners.

Because of the different East-West feminist timelines mentioned in the previous section, "the diverse effects of the collapse of Soviet hegemony highlight that many areas of

[14] I want to highlight that many other conflicts and sites of insecurity are excluded from this tracker. Who defines what is a conflict, and how? My argument here is that, although useful in many ways, quantitative tools like these risk reproducing narrow and conventional understandings of conflicts.

concern within the Second World were not registers of debate at the level of international women's rights." (Suchland 2011, 844) For example, border disputes following the dissolution of the USSR and its resulting wars (e.g., Transnistria, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, and secessionist conflicts inside Russia), political and economic struggles around the boundaries of newly-founded nation-states, mass poverty following the drastic change to a neoliberal capitalist economy, the consolidation of authoritarian regimes (e.g., in Central Asia) or the democratization and Europeanization elsewhere (e.g., Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia), have not raised interest among transnational feminists.

In parallel, as McLeod (2011) argued in the former Yugoslavia, the lines between 'conflict' and 'post-conflict' are highly contested and blurred temporally and spatially. In the case of Serbia, she shows that how "people understand and position these lines reflect[s] a particular representation of conflict and post-conflict." But beyond that, it also has *practical* implications because "it affects how political actors – including international institutions, NGOs and government bodies – present policy responses, apply for funding, or, in the case of international institutions, their operational mandates" (ibid. 595). In her case, despite being in an unresolved conflict with Kosovo, Serbia's adoption of a NAP as a *post-conflict* country that has dealt with its atrocious past gave the country a positive, European image (see the following section for the constitutive dimension of norms).

As such, while postcolonial scholars have rightly criticized the WPS agenda and the flagrant racial, imperialist, and colonialist dimensions that it (re)produces (Basu 2016; Haastrup and Hagen 2020; Martín de Almagro 2018b; Parashar 2019), these critiques do

not quite apply (or apply differently) in the post-Soviet (or post-socialist) space. In this space, where the borders resulting from the collapse of communism are messy, where questions of sovereignty are thorny, and where imperial dynamics completely transcend a strictly North/South analysis, these conflicts are perhaps not "deadly" enough to be seen as conflicts by WPS and transnational feminist scholars, thus mimicking the narrow understandings of conflicts in mainstream IR theory (Smith 2004). Persistent binaries and the reproduction of conventional understandings of conflicts in the WPS literature obscure unique regional dynamics and historical relationships vis-à-vis militarism, nationalism, and Russian imperialism and colonialism (Santoire 2023, 12). Consequently, learning from hands-on experiences from scholars of this region would enrich the WPS literature and expand its current conceptualizations of conflicts.

Second, the WPS literature presents several heated debates and tensions, but a particularly circular one is about whether the agenda is "transformational" and "antimilitarist" or "co-opted" and "militarist." As feminist security studies have shown, antimilitarist feminists "tend to emphasize three interrelated forms of violence and destruction perpetrated by militaries: physical, structural, and environmental. Rather than accept at face value the assumption that militaries exist to protect the borders of states and the citizens within them, antimilitarist feminists see militaries as part of a system which threatens us all." (Duncanson 2017, 40) While this might be true in many parts of the world, women's experiences with militaries and militarism in the post-Soviet space are not so black and white. First of all, these assumptions about borders or militaries as inherently "bad" often rely on the premise that countries' borders are *already* safe and that their sovereignty is

guaranteed and *respected*. As numerous examples of conflicts can tell, this is often not the case in the post-Soviet space. In the context of mass violence and occupation, borders and militaries can, in fact, be sources of security for vulnerable populations (Madárová, Grzebalska, and O'Sullivan 2023).

Antimilitarist feminist approaches would say that women's participation in the military – anywhere – should not be considered progress as it only "adds" women to existing patriarchal and harmful institutions (Duncanson 2017). Not only is this deterministic and rigid (Duncanson and Woodward 2016), but it is more complicated in the countries that this research focuses on, where nationalism (in reaction to Russian imperialism and occupation), militarism, and feminism are often intimately intertwined.[15] Feminist IR scholars have historically shown the uneasy mix between feminism/feminists, militarism, and nationalism, "as a result, feminism is often assumed to be at odds with these political projects." (Olivius and Hedström 2019, 1) Yet, as these authors show in the case of Myanmar, this is not a universal truth, and it may not apply to all contexts, especially *non*-Western contexts; in some cases, militarized nationalism can be a fertile ground for feminist mobilization, solidarity, and organizing. This is also the case in my own research, where multiple feminisms co-exist together in the context of multidimensional collective trauma, protracted conflicts, armed resistance, and (hyper)nationalism in the face of Russian imperialism and repeated aggression. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan's dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, where feminists have to navigate through painful compromises, highly

[15] On the complex interplay between feminism, nationalism, and militarism in societies divided by conflicts see Kamenou (2020) for Cyprus, Olivius and Hedström (2019) for Myanmar and McLeod (2011) for Serbia.

patriarchal, militarist, and nationalist discourses, and creative maneuvers to avoid local pushback, Walsh (2015, 150) notes how “both the discourse on Women, Peace and Security, and the practical agenda which accompanies it, consistently underrate the levels of social fragmentation and political instability in post-conflict and transitional contexts.”

To be clear here, my intention is not to dismay the numerous contributions that antimilitarist feminists have made to feminist scholarship and advocacy. Nor is it to imply that post-socialist feminists cannot be antimilitarists. Feminists in the post-Soviet space are, in fact, very critical vis-à-vis militarism, but their criticisms do not come from a privileged position; they come from *lived* experiences of occupation, trauma, and survival (Potapova 2023). For example, as we will see in Chapter 6, Ukrainian feminists are well aware of the gendered insecurities and consequences coming out of widespread weapons circulation but know that the only things that can protect them from the Russian army currently are weapons (Tsymbalyuk and Zamuruieva 2022; Tsymbalyuk et al. 2022).

As explained by O′Sullivan and Krulišová (2023a, 8), “[Christine] Sylvester (2010, 609) reminds us that ‘feminism has positioned itself outside war, above it, and in ethical belligerence to it.’” However, they note: “For people finding themselves inside this war, such position is unimaginable and hurtful […] the ‘privileged pacifists,’ theorizing about war waged by and on the people they never met from the comfort of their university offices, must recognize that by speaking over people who fight for their lives right now, they risk reproducing the malestream epistemic violence and Western exceptionalism they fight against. Until that happens, Western feminist security studies will remain detached from

the ground and from the very feminist idea of improving people's lives" (ibid. 10). As such, turning ourselves to the post-Soviet space (and more broadly, post-socialist and "in-between" contexts) has the potential to expand our understandings of conflicts and, most importantly, nuance binary WPS debates based on *lived* experiences.

Third—as it became clear by now—because the WPS literature has overlooked this region, it also overlooked the prevalent role of Russian imperialism and all its manifestations. Indeed, feminist IR literature have historically focused on American imperialism (Duncanson 2017, 39), making it difficult to "see" other forms of imperialism, notably Russian imperialism. This is important as the data coming out of my fieldwork demonstrates several legacies of past and ongoing Russian imperialism. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 "served as a reminder of the collective trauma of Russian imperialism" from Central and Eastern Europe (Míla O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023b, 1) to the Baltic states, South Caucasus and Central and North Asia.

While the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has now put CEE "on the mental map" of WPS and feminist security scholars, this was not done without problems (O′Sullivan and Krulišová 2023a, 7). Since 2022, post-socialist feminists have gathered and produced important knowledge on decolonial feminism in the region (see, for example, the 'Transnational Feminist Solidarity with Ukrainian Feminists' Special Issue from the Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies, 2022). They denounced several instances of 'Westplaining' and "harmful projections of knowledge considered as universally valid" that do not work in the region (O′Sullivan and Krulišová 2023a, 2–3) (see Sonevytsky 2022 on

epistemic imperialism and Kazharski 2022 on Westplaining). Again, here, we see a clear manifestation of the continuation of the absence of post-socialist perspectives from transnational feminism (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019; Nachescu 2018; Koobak and Marling 2014; Grabowska 2012), with concrete consequences.

Turning to the post-socialist feminist literature in this thesis helps us grasp what Estonian security studies scholar called the 'post-colonial moment' of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Mälksoo 2022), where academics and activists from the region have extensively criticized Western-dominant and Russo-centric perspectives on the invasion in mainstream IR and feminist IR. This, they argue, led to the erasure of Ukrainians' (but also CEE scholars) agency and expertise on their own reality, incapacity to view the Russian invasion as imperial aggression, harmful colonial patterns of knowledge production,[16] and denying their right to resist Russian imperialism (Hendl et al. 2024). This is not new: post-socialist feminists have long voiced the epistemic injustices they are facing, such as unequal relationships, power imbalance in knowledge production, language barriers, and lack of resources and visibility (Cerwonka 2008; Busheikin 1997; see also Trubina et al. 2020).

Unfortunately, it is not only mainstream IR (Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023; Oksamytna 2023) that has reproduced Russo-centric narratives on the invasion. Czech, Ukrainian, and Kazakh feminist scholars argued that "Western and global South feminist debates on

[16] On knowledge production, Stavrevska et al. (2023, 609–10) note how "knowledge production is fundamentally about the question of who gets to speak (who is invited, heard, taken seriously, published, read, cited) and who does not (is not invited, not heard, dismissed as biased or emotional, considered a supplier of empirical data and not a knowledge-producer, not translated, not published, not read, not cited)."

Ukraine have often displayed similar patterns of epistemic marginalization, power hierarchies, and colonial projections as manifested in mainstream IR" (Hendl et al. 2024, 14). Notably, "they have often responded to the war of aggression and militarism without knowing, regarding and respecting the local contexts, specific histories, voices, and agencies of those directly affected by the Russian invasion." (ibid. 15−16) One of the most apparent manifestations of this is the so-called 'Feminist Resistance Against War Manifesto' (2022) signed by hundreds of antimilitarist feminist scholars and activists from the West and the Global South (especially Latin America, Southern Europe, and the BRICS countries), including well-known scholars like Nancy Fraser, Jules Falquet, Silvia Federici, and Shahrzad Mojab. Not only is this manifesto problematic because it puts equal blame on Russia and NATO for the invasion and employs geopolitically vague language, but it is also incompatible with Ukrainian feminists' demands to self-defense. Additionally, the manifesto was not signed by a single Ukrainian, and no Ukrainian feminists were consulted during the process. This controversy produced 'The Right to Resist,' a counter-manifesto led by Ukrainian feminists and also signed by hundreds of feminists across the Eurasian continent – directly affected by Russian imperialism – and beyond (The Feminist Initiative Group 2022) Other examples include panels on Ukraine without Ukrainians and academics with no expertise on the region writing on the invasion as it is "trendy" now to do so (Madárová, Grzebalska, and O'Sullivan 2023; O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023a).

These incidents point to the continuing contentious debates between Global North, post-socialist, and Global South feminists pointed out earlier. As such, since 2022, "in disregarding the material reality of Ukrainians and their demands under a Russian military

invasion and projecting their own conceptual frameworks and agendas into debates on Ukraine *as if they knew better than Ukrainian women*, Western and global South feminists have perpetuated grave epistemic injustice and imperialism." (Hendl et al. 2024, 18; my emphasis) In addition to epistemic inequality and erasure, "amidst a military invasion, involving sexualized violence, mass killings and fighting for survival, Ukrainian feminists also had to exert energy and labor to defend themselves against international feminist communities, their misconceptions and lack of solidarity and support toward their liberation struggle against gendered imperial oppression." (Hendl et al. 2024, 20) This is clearly visible in my interviews with Ukrainian women where they precisely denounce this phenomenon of being "forced" to make peace and speak with Russian women.

The erasure of these gendered experiences has severe consequences in knowledge production but also in policymaking. These academic endeavors to denounce epistemic imperialism and injustice presented in this section are essential, but they often remain excessively *theoretical*, making it difficult to see the concrete consequences of these inequalities in real life. As a consultant, I have observed that myself. For example, it is common practice for international organizations to hire someone with no work experience or knowledge of the region in which they operate as they prioritize years of bureaucratic and technical work experience and knowledge of the UN system instead. It is also common to find international organizations and NGOs that offer toolkits or training developed elsewhere (e.g., in Africa) but have little applicability in the context of CEE. By grounding ourselves in post-socialist feminist literature, which critiques the limited perspective of Western feminist theories and highlights their blind spots, we can better understand the

connection between theory and real-world observations. True to a feminist security studies approach – that I also draw from – it is the knowledge and *lived* experiences of conflict-affected women that are put forward rather than abstract theoretical concepts.

Finally, the insights offered by post-socialist feminist literature on (gendered) transitions after the collapse of communism are valuable for situating WPS politics in the region and how NAP processes are deeply connected to broader geopolitical processes and shifts. Crucially, it helps us understand some of the dynamics coming out of my fieldwork, notably how NGO development in the post-Soviet space went hand in hand with democratization and nation-building (Cîrstocea 2022).

While the Soviet Union had some positive impacts on women, especially in terms of political and labor rights, "formal legal equality did not translate into real equality in gender relations in the private or public spheres as women, laboring under the double burden, continued to be responsible for nearly all domestic chores in addition to working outside the home." (Ishkanian 2003, 478) After the collapse of communism, the rapid transition to a market economy and the radical transformations of post-Soviet societies that followed profoundly disadvantaged women, particularly poor, rural, and uneducated women (Ishkanian 2003; see also Kuehnast and Nechemias 2004; Funk and Mueller 1993). Apart from the Baltic states, widespread unemployment, poverty, drastic deterioration of living standards, loss of social benefits, mass privatization, increased gender inequalities, and decreasing presence of women in new political institutions were noticeable across the former Soviet Union (Ishkanian 2003, 483). Still, at the same time, the civil society

landscape saw rapid growth and an increase in women's participation in the civic sector and the creation of women's NGOs (ibid. 488), especially after the 1995 Beijing Conference, where women from the region networked with international donors and learned the importance of "talking gender" (ibid. 490) (see also Cîrstocea 2022a).

The 1990s were associated with a harsh transition to neoliberal capitalism, with gendered consequences. In this new landscape, "international donors and European and US government agencies increasingly viewed women's organizations as promising recipients of aid and as crucial building blocks in strengthening civil society during the period of postsocialist transformations." (Irvine 2021, 164) Gender equality was used by international development aid, private donors, and Western women's organizations to shape the former socialist countries into Western liberal democracy ideals. However, international donors often promoted "a one-size-fits-all, neoliberal approach based on universal human rights and view gender equality as a means for democracy promotion." (Kluczewska and Luciani, forthcoming, 2)

The proliferation of women NGOs in the post-Soviet space in the 1990s and foreign funding for democratization assistance has been extensively studied. The early consensus in the literature was quite pessimistic: those involvements in the region are Western neoliberal "imports," often leaving grassroots women's movements weakened and dependent on Western donors and Western models of feminist organizations – ultimately reproducing Western imperialism (Hrycak 2006; Ghodsee 2004). Others have argued that these critiques lack nuance and empirical evidence across the region. These critiques also

harshly blamed women's NGOs that strategically work with Western donors for their own goals and their survival under structural limitations and challenges, ultimately denying their political agency. Additionally, they oversimplify the issues and power imbalances at stake and overgeneralize that all Western funding is “bad” and all NGOs are “co-opted.” (Funk 2006; see also Hinterhuber and Fuchs 2021; Graff 2021) In seeking to strike a more balanced note, and summarize those debates, Irvine (2021, 169) shows that “funding practices have professionalized gender equality organizations and advocates in ways that may divert them from their mission and weaken their ability to build and strengthen gender equality movements.” However, “while many scholars and activists have pointed to the fragmenting and even demobilizing effects of NGOization, others point to the need for capacity building that NGOization can help address and the crucial support that project grants provide.” My empirical findings also support a nuanced approach to this. Although I only provide here a *very* brief summary of those debates and do not take a side, I do take notes from each perspective to understand certain dynamics that NGOs/CSOs representatives I have interviewed shared with me (e.g., donor dependency, overburden associated with donors’ requirements, elite NGOs ‘monopolizing’ WPS spaces, Government’s distrust of NGOs *but* also strategic choices and opportunities).

This contextualization of civil society development in the post-socialist feminist literature also helps us situate WPS NAP emergence, adoption, and implementation in broader geopolitical processes, from democratization (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia before 2023) and autocratization (today’s Georgia) to significant shifts in foreign policy (Armenia). I have argued previously that “since several countries in the region are in the process of

democratization and EU accession," the adoption of WPS NAPs is a political strategy "by which states can prove their commitment vis-à-vis these organizations, especially since some countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are actively seeking to distance themselves from Moscow." (Santoire 2023, 13)

Having a NAP is helpful for Governments to show that they are not only "feminists" but also *Europeans*; here again, the idea of delay and "lagging behind" the West is crucial for the present thesis and to explain many of the findings in the following empirical chapters. As CEE scholars argue, "looking up to the Western states has to be seen as part of the 'belonging' issue this 'non-region' experiences" (O′Sullivan and Krulišová 2023b, 11) and despite being EU Member States or EU ascension countries, "the countries of the former Soviet Bloc still occupy a marginal position in the European Union and are often treated, in their relationship with Western countries, as unequal, lesser partners." (Nachescu 2018, 189) My findings show that NAP processes cannot be dissociated from larger political transformations in which they are part of.

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To conclude this section, grounding this thesis in post-socialist feminist literature, which emerged in reaction to the erasure of post-socialist women from transnational feminist debates and spaces, serves several purposes. First, it gives us historical grounding and contextualization of the research puzzle to understand why this "non-region" has been so absent from feminists' sight. I showed how the erasure of the post-Soviet space from the WPS agenda – a direct product of transnational feminism – is simply a *continuation* of the

history of fraught East-West (but also East-South) feminist contentious debates. Looking closer at this region allows us to understand the historical and political processes that have shaped and continue to shape the WPS landscape to this day. Second, several clues in this literature provide analytical tools and concepts to grasp certain dynamics that are unique to this region, such as the idea of "lagging behind the West" or the specific effects of Russian imperialism and protracted conflicts. Third, it allows the combination of applying theoretical discussions to empirical evidence and how these patterns of silences, erasures, and tensions play out in real life, especially since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While engaging with this literature for several years now, I also note how the debates presented in this section have historically focused on and have been theorized by Western (predominantly American and German), CEE (predominantly Czech, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian), and Balkans feminists, but other sub-regions within the larger post-socialist region, like the South Caucasus or Central Asia, are less present in those feminist conversations (see Sultanalieva 2023, 26). Therefore, my case studies shed light on those debates in less explored areas, like Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.

1.4.2 Feminist and critical constructivism approaches to international norms

The extensive literature on norms – from the constructivist school of IR – emerged at the end of the Cold War. Its aim was, and still is, to understand how certain ideas and values emerge and why, how they diffuse across the world, and how they are subsequently adopted or rejected by states (Zimmermann 2014, 99−100). Trying to define *what* is a norm remains a difficult task to this day, and navigating through this vast literature is daunting. Norms are usually broadly defined as "a set of intersubjective understandings and

collective expectations regarding the proper behavior of states and other actors in a given context or identity." (Björkdahl 2002, 15) There is currently a multitude of existing norms in international politics, but norms are usually classified as having constitutive, regulative, and/or constraining purposes (Winston 2018, 3). They encompass international treaties and conventions, claims of social movements, normative frameworks, and hegemonic ideas or frames in the global community (van Eerdewijk and Roggeband 2014, 43).

Since the end of the Cold War, the norm diffusion literature produced an astounding number of terms, concepts, and theories to explain how norms travel. The most dominant ones are the "norm life-cycle" or "cascade" model (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), the "boomerang" effect used by transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998), the "spiral model," (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999) and the "world polity" approaches (Thomas and Boli 1999; Meyer et al. 1997), to name only a few. While the contributions of these theoretical approaches have been relevant for explaining how *ideational* factors can influence state behavior (contrarily to rationalist approaches in IR, which focus on material and economic forces primarily), facilitated by 'norm entrepreneurs,' they were later criticized as being too rigid. Many scholars challenged this first-generation of norms research by pointing out its many problems, which I summarize below.

First, their conceptualization of norms' content as *fixed* and their movement as a *linear* and *top-down* (i.e., unidirectional from the global to the local) process is undoubtedly limited. Second, their approaches are typically very structural and deterministic, providing little room for actors' *agency*, except for the 'norms entrepreneurs', therefore undervaluing the

agency of local actors as nothing more than passive recipients of global norms (Björkdahl and Gusic 2015). With time, this first-generation of norms research gave way to more critical constructivist approaches, again producing a plethora of new terms, such as norms localization (Acharya 2004), translation (Zwingel 2012), vernacularization (Levitt and Merry 2009), and contestation (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018; Wiener 2018; 2009). Critical approaches to norm diffusion claim that global norms and their diffusion are everything but static and linear, advocating instead for a more situated, dynamic, and relational approach to norms where actors have greater agency. Most importantly, they reject the simplistic metaphor that norms "travel" in a top-down, causal mechanic and affirm that norms are continually transformed, negotiated, and contested by their actors.

However, these approaches, too, were criticized, notably by feminists. One main problem with all these norm diffusion approaches is that they still perceive norms as independent *things* and do not sufficiently question their core meaning. As such, they assume that norms' content remains static and unchallenged as they spread from the global to the local level in a mechanical way, neglecting outcomes at the receiving end. This understanding of norms as stable entities does not fit with empirical observations that the *same* norm may be differently understood and perceived across different national contexts and individuals (Martin de Almagro 2018a; see also Joachim and Schneiker 2012). In reality, norms themselves also change and acquire new meanings while in use (True and Wiener 2019; Lorentzen 2017; Wiener 2009).

While feminist and constructivist approaches share many theoretical elements (Locher and Prügl 2001), they generally disagree on ontology and epistemology. Feminists in norms research note how both constructivist and critical constructivist approaches "are marked by a crucial tension between a static view of norm content and a dynamic picture of norm adoption and implementation." (Krook and True 2010, 103) Feminists view norms *themselves* as fundamentally political, contested, and dynamic. Norms are *processes* instead of stable things; they are constantly changing, shaped, and reshaped by institutions, actors, and contexts. True (2011, 76) summarizes well the four major problems that feminist IR has with norm diffusion theories. First, "norms are not fixed rules, but are plural and dynamic in their content and in the degree to which they are internalized." Second, "norms are not power-neutral—implementing them may create new patterns of domination and marginalization and feminists are skeptical that the process of internalizing norms will effectively bring about normative change." Third, "norms do not stand above power but result *from* global power relations and thus can reproduce them." Finally, in constructivist literature, norms are perceived as inherently good and "given." Feminists are suspicious of this assumption because "even seemingly progressive international normative change involves a process of normalization wherein certain ideas and practices are taken for granted and thereby *depoliticized*." In fact, "normalizing a certain idea, even the idea of gender equality, can render it static and unable to see new forms of violence and oppression [emerging]." (True 2011, 74) Let's now turn back to our object of study.

The WPS agenda is a global normative framework. The adoption of Resolution 1325 by the UN Security Council is considered historic by feminists for numerous reasons. Not

only because it was adopted by one of the most "masculine" and militarized organs of the UN, where "hard" security matters are discussed by the P5 members, but also because of its ability to shake up traditional analyses of security by bringing the focus on *human* security, specifically women. Although the WPS agenda's boundaries are dynamic and constantly evolving, most of the WPS literature agrees on the normative character of its resolutions as it "is the most significant international normative framework addressing the gender-specific impacts of conflict on women and girls." (True 2016, 307) Here, normative framework[17] is understood as "ideas of varying degrees of abstraction and specification with respect to fundamental values, organizing principles or standardized procedures that resonate across many states and global actors, having gained support in multiple forums including official policies, laws, treaties or agreements." (Krook and True 2010, 103–4) National Action Plans (NAPs) are the most important mechanism of norm diffusion as they "mark a key phase in the policy diffusion process from international to national jurisdictions," (True 2016, 311) and numerous factors explain their global diffusion.

Today, what is certain is that it is difficult to conceive the WPS agenda as *a* coherent and homogeneous whole. Two decades of feminist research demonstrate how the WPS agenda's growing complexity requires a more holistic conceptualization. While some scholars nowadays currently challenge the very idea of WPS as a norm and speak of a

[17] An example of another gender equality norm is The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, unlike CEDAW, which contains a complaint mechanism if State parties do not comply with their obligations, the WPS agenda is more a form of "soft law." That is, it relies entirely on the political will of UN Member States and does not contain formal, legal accountability mechanisms. Other normative frameworks include the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Istanbul Convention, or, more recently, the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda.

policy "ecosystem"[18] instead (Kirby and Shepherd 2020), I still borrow from the norms literature because it is helpful in conceptualizing how the normative boundaries of WPS shift across time, context, and space. I engage with feminist and critical constructivist approaches to norms in order to understand the logics of contestation, resistance, and strategic use of the WPS agenda. I retain precisely four key aspects for this thesis: 1) norm "cluster," 2) the elusive nature of norms, 3) the constitutive dimension of norms, and 4) the constant multidirectional process of norms.

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First, like previous authors, I conceptualize the WPS agenda as a norm "cluster" or "bundle" (True and Wiener 2019; Winston 2018) because it is not possible to speak of WPS as *a* single norm (Kirby and Shepherd 2020). It is, instead, a broad framework with various interrelated normative components and elements.[19] Building on Wiener's (2018; 2009) work on contestation, Winston (2018, 5) shows that norms have both stable and flexible components. This is apparent, for example, when "states variously interact with norms as they are (stable) or change them, either purposefully or accidentally (flexible)." She notes that "this duality presents a problem for norms researchers studying the diffusion and

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[18] As I will explain in section 1.4.5 later, I partly draw on and partly reject Shepherd and Kirby's conceptualization of WPS as an "ecosystem" (Kirby and Shepherd 2024; 2020). While it is helpful to see WPS as a large enterprise with ambiguous boundaries traced by profound contradictions and tensions – which are not entirely captured by norms diffusion literature – their proposition to "abandon" WPS altogether remains too academic and does not ring well to the empirical reality on the ground. Their proposed "ecosystem" language also does not have much resonance in IR literature.

[19] Normative elements *within* the WPS norm include, among others: prohibition of conflict-related sexual violence, women's meaningful participation in international and national peace and security decision-making (including peace processes and peacekeeping), gendered protection mechanisms, and accountability for perpetrators of violence, for example (Kirby and Shepherd 2024, 37–40; True and Wiener 2019, 558–59).

evolution of norms throughout the international system, as it complicates the relationship between actor (norm adopter), process (diffusion mechanism), and object (the norm itself).” Moreover, she explains, despite being fuzzy, norm clusters do have boundaries. Still, those boundaries are intersubjectively decided, therefore, malleable “based on processes of innovation, discourses, and learning.” (Winston 2018, 10) Both Winston’s norm “cluster” and normative “tripartite” structure (problem, value, and expected behavior) are helpful for a holistic conceptualization of the WPS agenda as a broad and complex normative framework. By approaching the agenda as a norm cluster with both stable and fluid elements, it is easier to deal with its plural meanings, as it contains not one but many problems, values, and expected behaviors. It also helps making sense of the multiple interpretations of WPS, which we will see later in the empirical chapters.

Second, because my approach sees norms as fundamentally dynamic and flexible, I adopt Krook and True’s (2012, 105) conceptualization. For them, “norms diffuse precisely *because* – rather than despite the fact that – they may encompass different meanings, fit in with a variety of contexts, and be subject to framing by diverse actors.” Thus, norms like WPS are vague, and their meanings are elusive, contested, and constantly (re)negotiated by actors over time. This can, of course, lead to significant transformations of the norm by deepening or stretching it (e.g., ‘norm robustness,’ an expanded range of WPS-related issues) or “to lose control” over their meanings by reversing or emptying them (Krook and True 2010, 109) (e.g., instrumentalization for other purposes or ‘norm spoiling’ like anti-feminist pushback by hostile actors). Thus, in addition to their dynamic movement, their content is differently understood, (re)defined, and (re)negotiated across various settings

and levels of analysis (van Eerdewijk and Roggeband 2014, 50–51). As explained by Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2018, 51), contestation is the "new focus of IR norm research" because even fundamental human rights norms (e.g., the ban on torture) that once seemed to make consensus among states are now contested. The ongoing contestation and renegotiation of meanings over norms reinforce that norms should be seen as evolving rather than fixed in a linear process (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Roggeband, van Eerdewijk, and van der Vleuten (2014, 242–43) stress that this perspective requires a reevaluation of actors' roles. Unlike classical constructivists who view them as passive recipients of global norms, these actors actively seek to redefine and cocreate these norms. This is important to comprehend how actors implementing the WPS agenda transform it by strategically adopting it (or not) according to their needs, and how the attitudes of the same actor towards WPS can fluctuate over time, from endorsement to resistance.

Third, my research is mainly concerned with norms' constitutive (rather than the regulative or constraining[20]) dimension. Constitutive norms "define the identity of actors and can also establish new actors, interests, and practices." (Aharoni 2014, 4) In the same vein, Almagro (2018a, 5) explains how mainstream constructivist norm diffusion theories constantly neglect the "*performative* dimension running through this 'automatic' process of norm propagation, in which identities and ideas are co-constituted." States may adopt norms to define their identities and interests, but they may also do so due to domestic and international pressure, such as fear of a negative reputation (Joachim and Schneiker 2012,

[20] Several scholars have noted that the WPS agenda framework is not a regulative norm like a treaty or convention can be, as it does not significantly constrain state behavior (e.g., see Kirby and Shepherd 2020).

532). Recent research (O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023b; Jacevic 2019; Basu 2016a; McLeod 2011) points to the existence of this phenomenon wherein States adopt NAPs to "fit in" (e.g., because the neighbors adopted one), align with their foreign policy strategy and interests (e.g., to demonstrate commitment and meet requirements for NATO and/or EU ascension), or "perform" an identity (e.g., to look progressive, European and feminist).

True and Wiener's (2019, 566) study identifies a type of reactive contestation where "several state parties mentioned acts of violence against women and girls perpetrated by other states, foregrounding the significant ongoing intra and interstate conflicts involving Israel and the Palestinians, Russia and Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Ukraine and Russia." This indicates that a state can use the agenda to strategically shape a conflict or situation in which it is involved to its advantage (e.g., for status or bargaining power) and to distinguish itself from competitive states, as "identities and [geostrategic] interests are performatively constituted" (see also Hamilton, Pagot, and Shepherd 2021, 2). Singh (2017, 226), for her part, shows that in the case of Sri Lanka, the WPS agenda has not "resonated" yet in state institutions nor led to policy change because the norms underlying the agenda are incongruous with the militarized "state-centric discourse on national interest and security." This echoes Lorentzen's (2017) opposite findings on Rwanda's policy production as a meaning-making activity in line with the country's post-genocide national identity construction. Both dynamics are relevant to my thesis as I seek to observe how state actors or other actors choose to strategically engage (or not) with WPS in line with their interests and narratives. It also shows that WPS – as a norm bundle with fluid boundaries – is fundamentally malleable and depends on what actors make of it.

Fourth, one weakness of conventional constructivist research on norms is also the direction of the "travel" that it assumes, with norms traveling from the global to the local (in a linear way) but rarely the other way around (multidirectional) where the local "talks" back to the global (e.g., Björkdahl and Gusic 2015). Looking at norms in this second way helps to see the diffusion of norms as a more pluralistic, multidimensional, and contentious process (van Eerdewijk and Roggeband 2014, 52). I argue that not only is examining the implementation of the WPS agenda in rarely studied areas such as the post-Soviet space important, but it can also shed light on how regional – an often-overlooked level of analysis by the norms diffusion literature (van der Vleuten and van Eerdewijk 2014) – engagements with WPS can, in turn, shape the global agenda. Emphasizing the multidirectional movement of norms is essential to my research because it recognizes that there is variation in norms' interpretation *within* the domestic level as well. This is crucial because different understandings of the norm can influence its implementation on the ground (Joachim and Schneiker 2012, 528; see also Martin de Almagro 2018a).

To summarize this section on norms, the concepts and theoretical approaches of several feminist authors presented in this section will be helpful to the conceptualization of the WPS agenda as a norm "cluster" with multiple normative components, which allows me to underline its fluid, malleable, and dynamic character. They also allow me to focus on the constitutive aspect of norms that can shape identities, interests, and practices. Finally, the conception of norms as processes with multidirectional movements allows me to observe the different engagements with WPS at various levels of analysis.

1.4.3 Feminist institutionalism – alliances and strategies inside and outside institutions

Since the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the Fourth UN World Conferences on Women, femocrats, gender experts, and feminist activists have formed a unique apparatus of international governance, leading to significant progress in advancing women's rights and placing women's issues at the forefront of the international agenda (Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2012; see also True and Mintrom 2001). To do so, feminists around the world have employed creative strategies within and outside of institutions, including legal and normative approaches, gender mainstreaming, transnational women's networks, and new tools and institutions like the UN Development Fund for Women (now UN Women). Another feminist strategy is the agenda-setting and discursive framing that feminist actors employ to make their demands appealing to policymakers, depending on their situated context, political opportunity, and mobilization structures (Joachim 2007 cited in Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2012, 10; see also Joachim 2003).

'Velvet triangles' or feminist triangles are one of those strategies. Velvet triangles are a well-known concept coming out of feminist institutionalist[21] and feminist governance literature. Deriving from the 'iron triangle' concept,[22] velvet triangles are strategic alliances between feminists and/or women from different sectors working in concert to advance

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[21] Feminist institutionalists have put forward the simple idea that institutions are not gender-neutral and that their processes, logics, rules, structures, and social interactions shape and are shaped by gender relations, making institutions, by nature, inherently gendered (Guido, Walsh, and Banaszak 2023; Krook and Mackay 2011; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010).

[22] Iron triangles refer to the policy-making alliances and forces in American politics: Congress (i.e., politicians, congressional members, and committees), interest groups (i.e., lobbyists, non-state actors), and federal bureaucracy (i.e., bureaucrats, public servants) (Adams 1980).

feminist goals and/or women's interests (Holli 2008). Vargas and Wieringa (1998) first introduced the notion of 'triangles of empowerment,' referring to the interplay between women civil society, women politicians, and women civil servants, called 'femocrats.' Worth noting is how the identity of femocrats has been differently theorized in this literature: while some scholars define them as bureaucrats with a feminist agenda, others see them as *any* women inside the State system or, more broadly, any bureaucratic actor working for feminist and/or women's issues (Mazur and McBride 2023, 65).

Woodward (2015; 2003) then famously applied 'velvet triangles.' to the context of the European Union precisely, organizing the triangle around three groups of actors, namely femocrats (politicians and civil servants), women civil society (NGOs/CSOs, women's movements), and experts (like academics and consultants). The "image of velvet, with its fluffy and soft tufts, also metaphorically [provided] the idea of flexibility and openness." (Woodward 2015, 10) As such, the three corners of the triangle interact together through informal connections and friendly, personal relationships facilitated by career mobility and travels. Not only are velvet triangles particularly useful in the context of this thesis to explain feminist coalitions around WPS advocacy, but feminist triangles also highlight the interchangeable roles that women constituting the triangle have. As demonstrated in my cases, the women I interviewed have moved from one corner of the triangle to another throughout their careers or sometimes occupy several roles simultaneously.

In the triangles, each corner brings a different strength: "femocrats and feminist politicians are endowed, as insiders, with a particular procedural knowledge concerning the rules and

procedures of the institutions they are part of," and "whereas NGOs and the women's movement have testimonial knowledge based on their experience working with grassroots movements and local actors," for their part "academics and experts possess technocratic and critical knowledge." (van Eerdewijk and Roggeband 2014, 57) Obviously, interactions between the different feminist actors in the velvet triangle may give rise to conflicting interests and ideas about feminist successes and goals (Vargas and Wieringa 1998 cited in van Eerdewijk and Roggeband 2014, 57). For example, a usual dilemma is how some feminists see the state as a crucial target for action and advocacy, aiming to bring about change from *within*. In contrast, other feminists prefer to operate *outside* the state apparatus, arguing that feminists should focus on working outside powerful institutions and be wary of feminist cooptation by state actors (Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2012, 4; see also Sandler 2015; Mazur and McBride 2023; Banaszak 2010).

Linking these concepts back to the discussion on norms too, femocrats "working within institutions play an important role as they contribute to the production and diffusion of norms" like the WPS agenda (Guerrina and Wright 2016, 297). Feminist triangles "require cooperation between actors who represent different sets of interests but who are ultimately committed to promoting equality and gender mainstreaming in a policy setting," (Guerrina and Wright 2016, 298) and these alliances are especially crucial when trying to enact change in rigid masculine institutions, such as those in the defense and security sectors (Jenichen, Joachim, and Schneiker 2019).

Velvet triangles are rarely used in WPS literature, and feminist institutionalism is seldom in dialogue with WPS literature (see Thomson 2019; O′Sullivan and Krulišová 2020), despite the empirical observations that institutions and femocrats *matter* in WPS politics. Feminist alliances and strategies also clearly reflect this research's object of study and how it came into existence. Through sustained transnational feminist energy and advocacy, women activists from civil society and international organizations, along with diplomatic allies such as Namibia, Bangladesh, Jamaica, and Canada, made the adoption of Resolution 1325 in October 2000 a reality. In a rare example of velvet triangles being applied to WPS politics, Azizah et al. (2021, 68) illustrate the role of feminist alliances in advocating for NAP adoption in Indonesia. In this process, femocrats worked to include WPS issues in policy discussions through their bureaucratic roles. At the same time, women NGOs/CSOs held femocrats accountable for their actions, and gender experts presented empirical findings to ensure that policies are evidence-based and context-sensible. Plenty of empirical evidence suggests that those alliances have been instrumental elsewhere.

It is important to mention that the literature on feminist triangles and partnerships has been extensively criticized and discussed in the last decade due to its inherent tensions. For example, are there such things as "women's demands" or "issues" (i.e., risk of essentialization)? Do actors in the triangles have to be *feminists* or simply women*?* Are triangles stable, or do they change depending on advocacy issues? Do triangles travel (for example, do they also apply in contexts where women's access to decision-making is limited or where there are few femocrats)? (Holli 2008) Moreover, the quality of democracy, various crises, and illiberal democratic forces may be crucial factors

influencing the power and agency of femocrats (Mazur and McBride 2023, 71; see also O′Sullivan and Krulišová 2020; Bashevkin 1998). While my intention here is not to provide an exhaustive overview of the feminist institutionalist literature and its debates, I draw on concepts of feminist triangles and feminist strategies on two key dimensions.

First, I use them to explain the strong strategic alliances of feminists formed in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia for NAP adoption and implementation and their *absence* in the context of Armenia as a potential explanation for a more diffuse, scattered WPS landscape. Femocrats I have interviewed inside institutions have fought hard for WPS adoption and implementation, navigating through complex institutional barriers and sexist norms. They have also seized opportunities to incorporate feminist ideas into the State system through limited agency and creative "political maneuvers" (see O′Sullivan and Krulišová 2023b). As noted by Guido, Walsh, and Banaszak (2023, 47), we still know little about feminist governance strategies and alliances within authoritarian countries and/or those experiencing regime transitions, and I add, in countries in between war and peace. Second, as Woodward (2015, 11) notes, "if the original concept of velvet might suggest openness, in fact there [is] a luxuriousness to it as well [as] the networks became more established, they also became exclusive, with old ties of friendship perhaps also working exclusively and excluding those coming from other national backgrounds or minority experiences." This dynamic is well observed in my cases, where certain groups of elite women NGOs often dominate the WPS discourse and advocacy. As such, the concept of feminist triangles helps me make sense of the "professionalization" and "elitization" of gender and WPS expertise – what some theorists also call the "NGO-isation" of feminism (Lang 2013).

The feminist institutionalist literature has examined the role of international organizations in feminist global governance (Guido, Walsh, and Ann Banaszak 2023, 41). However, scholars studying feminist triangles, with an original focus on EU governance, may have overlooked the role of international organizations such as UN Women. Oscillating between watershed technocratic liberal feminism and advancing the radical feminist goals of gender equality (Dersnah 2019; 2016), UN Women is a classic example of feminist governance which, since its creation in 2010 (previously the UN Development Fund for Women), has succeeded "in formulating and implementing policies to achieve gender equality, including the creation of norms and promotion of gender equality both within states and the UN system, its engagement with feminist civil society actors, its success in monitoring gender equality data, policies and processes, and its ability to frame issues from a gender perspective." (Den Boer and Haack 2023, 286) I demonstrate in this thesis the importance of UN Women staff as crucial actors in WPS politics. Women working in international organizations could be characterized as either femocrats or independent experts and consultants, often both in my case. Despite femocrats enabling "the creation of spaces for women and institutions to ensure that gender equality is pursued," the work of this UN agency still "takes place *within* existing hierarchical, non-feminist institutions," (Den Boer and Haack 2023, 295; see also Sandler 2015) leading to numerous tensions, contradictions, struggles, painful dilemmas and feminist criticisms, as we shall see in this thesis.

To conclude this section, several concepts in the feminist institutionalist and feminist governance literature are helpful for this research, notably 'velvet triangles' and feminist strategies inside and outside institutions (e.g., alliance-building, framing, agenda-setting).

Situating my thesis in this literature is relevant to explaining several dynamics that I observed in my cases. First, they help to make sense of the WPS landscape in each country and how the presence or absence of velvet triangles influences WPS adoption and implementation in the context of "no war, no peace," democratization or autocratization. Second, velvet triangles are helpful for observing certain elite dynamics taking place in WPS landscapes, namely the professionalization of gender and WPS expertise, which leads to both opportunities and exclusions.

1.4.4 Feminist security studies – taking women's voices, experiences, and lives seriously

> In contrast to an ontology that depicts states as individualistic, autonomous actors, typical of conventional social science perspectives on international relations and liberal thinking more generally, feminist ontologies are grounded in social relations that are constituted by historically unequal political, economic, and social structures. Whereas conventional IR theory usually starts its analyses at the structural level, seeing a world of states, feminists employ a bottom-up strategy, starting from the lives of individuals and their relationships. (Tickner and True 2018, 229)

Feminist ontologies and epistemologies fundamentally differ from those of conventional IR and have, for a long time, challenged the very contours of the discipline and its core concepts (Tickner 1997; Enloe 1996; Tickner 1992; Peterson 1992; Enloe 1990; Cohn 1987). Feminist security studies (FSS) are located at the intersection of multiple margins. They are a subfield of security studies and, in turn, a subfield of IR. Coinciding with the proliferation of feminist IR in the late 1980s, FSS scholars have pushed for a more holistic ontological conceptualization of security centered around *gendered* experiences of war, conflicts, and insecurities, thus challenging statist and militarist approaches to security. Despite the presence of numerous theoretical debates in this field,

most FSS theorists prioritize the security of individuals over state security. They have a more comprehensive view of what security means for all genders (Basu 2011; Cohn 2011; Wibben 2011; Shepherd 2009; Sjoberg 2009b; 2009a). Often, this shift to security centered on human lives pays attention to locations previously ignored in mainstream IR and security studies, like the everyday or the body, drawing on women's experiences of war, patriarchy, oppression, and marginalization (Wilcox 2015; Sylvester 2013; Zalewski 1995).

FSS scholars have made essential contributions in showing not only how violence happens on a continuum of scale – from the global to the local and the private – but also in showing how peace and conflict are not binary states; they, too, exist on a continuum. FSS scholars are usually critical of the term 'post-conflict' because it "is a discourse with contested temporal and spatial aspects," (McLeod 2011, 595; Singh 2017) and violence can continue beyond a war's officially end (after a peace accord or ceasefire) through daily insecurities, militarization or intimate partner violence. FSS is cautious of other dichotomies, like combatants/non-combatants, as it may hide gendered social dynamics during and after war. For example, there may be blurry distinctions between soldiers and civilians, or it can impact who is celebrated as a national hero after war and who can receive benefits from it (McLeod 2011, 596; see also True and Tanyag 2018; Enloe 2013; Shepherd 2009).

While insecurities might be more "obvious" in the case of Ukraine because of active war, these theoretical insights coming from FSS are essential to my analysis considering the 'in-betweenness' of the countries that I am researching. All countries that I am researching, except for Ukraine, have protracted conflicts on their territory – Transnistria (Moldova),

Abkhazia, Tskhinvali/South Ossetia (Georgia), and Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan until 2020) – often referred to as "frozen" by the *de facto* states' community of scholars (e.g., Dembinska 2021; Hoch and Kopeček 2020; Dembinska and Campana 2017; Broers 2013; Caspersen 2012). Although most of them are characterized by low-intensity violence (in a state of neither war nor peace and "frozen" at the diplomatic level), that does not mean that women – and other vulnerable communities – *feel* safe in their day-to-day lives (Fal-Dutra Santos 2019). Insights from FSS literature are pertinent for my research as decades of empirical evidence have shown how wars disproportionately and distinctively affect women, from horrific gender-based violence to forced displacement, everyday insecurities, and poverty – all issues directly and indirectly related to WPS and the way NAPs are thought and formulated.

Although my thesis does not necessarily focus on women's narratives and daily lives, this ontological shift in the understanding of security (but also more broadly of power and violence) as holistic, multidimensional, and multilevel (True and Tanyag 2018; True 2015; Enloe 1996) informs my analysis and feminist positioning in many ways. For example, FSS pays attention to the discrepancies between the normative principles of certain policies "on paper" and the different daily realities experienced by conflict-affected women. Also, it pays attention to how "in most instances, simply bringing more women to the peace table or involving them in post-conflict reconstruction and recovery fails to bring about transformative change for women." (Singh 2020, 509; see also Dharmapuri 2011). It, therefore, emphasizes the *meaningful* participation of women in decision-making rather

than on simple representation of them in security careers. These considerations are central to approaching my research object and its underlying assumptions on peace and security.

FSS also significantly informs my epistemological and methodological choices, which we will see in the following chapter. Lessons learned from FSS help us understand how the women I interviewed understand, embody, and "live" WPS within their respective contexts. My research puts them front and center as situated *knowers* and *referents* of security. FSS has shown that gender is necessary, "conceptually, for understanding the concepts of war and security," "empirically, for analyzing causes and predicting outcomes in the field of security," and "to finding solutions to insecurity in global politics." (Sjoberg 2016, 51) As such, any analyses of "active" wars (Ukraine and Armenia) or "frozen" conflicts (Moldova and Georgia) are incomplete without a gender lens.

Building on this, and to summarize this section, key insights from feminist security studies inform my thesis ontologically (*who* is secure, *what* is security), epistemologically, and methodologically (what *knowledge* about security is valued and interrogated, *which* methods are selected to reflect this knowledge) and theoretically (by challenging the fundamental premises of traditional security studies in IR). FSS provides valuable guidance for understanding the complex, tense, and conflicting narratives emerging from my interviews. Although my research is not specifically about war memories or its traumatic gendered experiences, these necessarily color the way in which WPS policies are thought about, developed, and implemented in polarized, insecure, and militarized contexts.

1.4.5 Transformation, co-optation, pragmatism – on WPS tensions and failures

When one spends time in WPS spaces, particularly academic ones, one can feel an immediate sense of discouragement, negativity, and pessimism. In the WPS literature, there is a clear consensus that the WPS agenda has moved away from its original activist roots, namely transnational, anti-imperialist, antimilitarist feminist advocacy (Holvikivi 2023). By cementing the WPS resolutions into its institutional home – the Security Council – the WPS agenda has been diluted and stripped of its origins, co-opted, and militarized, or so the story goes. Various scholars have noted how WPS NAPs often perpetuate various hegemonic power relations and hierarchies (Henry 2021; Haastrup and Hagen 2020; Parashar 2019; Martin de Almagro 2018b; Basu 2016b; Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015), follow an 'add-women-and-stir' superficial approach (Dharmapuri 2011), and reproduce gendered stereotypes of women as either peacebuilders 'that can do it all' or victims in need of masculine protection (Martin de Almagro 2018b; Shepherd 2011; Puechguirbal 2010). In sum, WPS, as a collective project, has failed to address the root causes of global insecurity and cannot tackle the structural problems that the world currently faces. Those failures and disconnections between expectations and reality are illustrated well in the 400-page long Global Study on the Implementation of 1325 mandated by the UN Secretary-General for the 15th anniversary (Coomaraswamy 2015).

As such, the general view is that while the WPS agenda has transformative potential, its implementation, nearly 25 years after the historic adoption of Resolution 1325, is not only lagging behind but also regressing, noted the UN Secretary-General António Guterres during the Security Council's annual open debate on WPS in October 2023, where I was

present (United Nations 2023). Amidst deadly conflicts, unfolding genocides, authoritarian rise, and anti-gender pushback, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, a well-known feminist legal scholar, has stated that the WPS agenda is facing a crisis of *legitimacy* and relevance (The Just Security Podcast 2024). Other authors even go as far as saying that we should "forget" the idea of WPS altogether and focus on feminist peace instead (Kirby and Shepherd 2024).

While I do not disagree with these claims, I also aim to challenge and nuance them seriously. When we turn to practice and look at how conflict-affected women implement the WPS agenda around the world, we see a different picture. Many do not have the "luxury" of thinking about the WPS agenda as a "concept" or abstract academic debate. For many women, the WPS agenda is filled with frustrations and failures, certainly, but it is an essential *tool* in their daily work because it is a way for them to frame and name their experiences: they are busy doing, embodying, and making the Resolution 1325 a reality.

While there are multiple stories of the origins of Resolution 1325 (Kirby and Shepherd 2024), memories of women who were directly involved in the making of this Resolution indicate that pragmatism reflects the very origin of the WPS agenda (Anderlini 2019). While lobbying and drafting for the adoption of Resolution 1325, the NGO Working Group on WPS made strategic decisions to include and not include some things in the draft resolution to make sure it passed in the Security Council and "compromises were intrinsic to its inceptions, without which the resolution would not have passed." (Wright and Achilleos-Sarll 2024, 5)

Indeed, "politics among states has required compromise on some of the feminist revolutions required to transform global politics." For example, the most notable one "is between a feminist, rights-based approach that advocates for women's equal participation in peace and security and opposes military solutions" and "an instrumental approach that sees gender equality as a means to the ends of security, stability, and military effectiveness." However, a "pragmatic approach accepts that *both* rights-based and instrumental WPS approaches have the potential to recognize gender-specific experiences and impacts of conflict, as well as the need to prevent conflict in ways that enhance women's agency." (Davies and True 2019, 4, my emphasis; see also Holvikivi 2023 and von Hlatky 2023)

In this thesis, I take notes from both transformative and instrumental approaches but adopt a *pragmatic* position that recognizes the structural limitations that feminists and institutions are facing today. My pragmatic approach to WPS (in both its theory and practice) sees it as a constant dynamic, normative "work in progress" and as "a middle path for the ambitions of WPS against the harsh political realities" (Davies and True 2019, 3-4) to echo the previous discussion on norms. I argue that we should not only accept but also *embrace* the fact that the WPS agenda will never be a "radical" feminist project. It is easy to theorize about WPS from comfortable offices in Global North universities, but do we really have the luxury of scraping it all together? WPS is the most comprehensive international framework on the matter, and we should acknowledge and embrace the fact that it will likely never be as transformative as it was envisioned to be. Claims of WPS "failing" are often detached from reality and do not consider the visible and tangible impacts that WPS has brought on the ground. My empirical data shows that we must employ a pragmatic

approach toward WPS and move away from a tautological interpretation of it. An "all or nothing" approach among WPS academics often disregards the genuine, systemic challenges on the ground that women activists or femocrats face.

Indeed, there is a harmful perception that WPS academic research is "progressive" compared to WPS practice, which is "regressive" or diluting the agenda (Davies and True 2019, 11). On this topic, feminist scholar and practitioner Anne-Marie Goetz notes how "feminist activists and femocrats [are acutely aware] of the painful tradeoffs between rights-based and instrumental policy justifications, between idealism and pragmatism, and a commitment to critical and strategic engagement with mainstream institutions." (Goetz 2020, xxi) She adds, "what pains femocrats is how rarely academic analysts can see how carefully femocrats deploy instrumental arguments, how strategically they pick their fights and select opportunities to make advances." (Goetz 2020, xxv)

Women NGOs/CSOs might choose to use other frameworks and find limited potential in WPS (Basu 2016b), but they may also choose to use it strategically. Beyond binary debates, reality is often much more complex. For example, Reiling (2017) proposes the notion of "pragmatic skepticism," in which local women's NGOs (in Ivory Coast) challenge essentialist discourses around WPS (about womanhood, victimhood, and peacefulness) but at the same time *re-appropriate* them for their own needs, like funds, projects, and visibility. When looking at the micro-dynamics of WPS implementation, "local adaptation may not always reflect the full intent of WPS resolutions, but it provides an opening that was not there before and would not be there if we pushed for a 'perfect' version of what

the normative agenda should look like in that local context. Thus, from a feminist pragmatist perspective, incremental progress may be more generative of durable solutions to intractable problems than revolution." (Davies and True 2019, 4–5) Ambiguous feelings and tensions toward WPS does not mean that we should "cancel" the agenda altogether; instead, we must double our efforts to be pragmatic, creative, and strategic with our choices and compromises. To do that, and avoid producing "armchair theory out of touch with reality," (Hendl et al. 2024, 17) WPS academics must prioritize fieldwork.

Indeed, to analyze power dynamics and the reproduction of global hierarchies, WPS scholars have heavily relied on poststructuralist and discursive approaches (Thomson 2019, 5), but as mentioned Basini and Ryan (2016, 391), "examining discourse alone [tells] us little about how the NAPs actually function on the ground." While poststructuralist and discursive approaches are not a problem in itself, relying only on text and language does not allow us to have a sophisticated understanding of *how* WPS norms are understood and implemented on the ground. My review of the WPS literature and my personal observations/experiences in WPS academic spaces over the years reveal that there is a need for greater empirical *fieldwork* research in this domain, but also more pragmatic readings of WPS attuned to complex, unexplored contexts. While I respect the radical, antimilitarist critics of the WPS agenda, given the mounting geopolitical pressures and antifeminist pushback worldwide, I argue that there is a need to move away from prescriptive and tautological conceptions of WPS (e.g., "WPS *must* be this way, otherwise it is *failing* and not transformative"). Moreover, WPS debates on "transformation" vs. "co-optation" are often circular (i.e., do not lead to any solutions, are deterministic, cynical, and do not allow

change to happen) and rarely address what a "full" or "transformative" implementation of the agenda would look like (O′Sullivan 2019b; Duncanson and Woodward 2016). This is not universal. My findings show that what is considered transformational is highly contextual, and what may seem to be a "militarist" appropriation of WPS in a given context may be "revolutionary" in another one. Echoing the discussion on norms, "different actors may also hold slightly different conceptions of the norm, and that between multiple actors, frames, diffusion mechanisms, and periods of time, the eventual norm adopted may not resemble the norm as any of these other actors *understood* it." (Winston 2018, 12)

I started this section by demonstrating how the WPS agenda was in a state of collective crisis of legitimacy, so much so that well-known scholars Kirby and Shepherd (2024) have suggested abandoning the idea of a coherent normative WPS agenda together. While I disagree with them on this for the reasons laid out in this section, I follow their position on failures. A quote worth quoting out long is especially telling:

> For practitioners and activists invested in WPS, the interest taken by scholars, as either a topic of expertise or an object of critique, is too often detached from the urgent use to which Resolution 1325 is put by women activists during and after conflict. Whether NAPs match the Resolutions in all particulars and whether some actors promote essentialist ideas of femininity is, on this account, less important than the maneuvers, tactics, and compromises that create new realities. Academic feminism […] faces its own 'implementation gap,' unable to forge solidarities with women's groups that articulate their struggles in different terms, and which adapt the tools at hand, including Resolution 1325, under conditions not of their choosing. The negativity, abstraction, and insularity of academic feminism is then seen as failing feminist politics as such. (Kirby and Shepherd 2024, 12)

It is on these remarks that I build my thesis. In this section, I have attempted to demonstrate how the WPS framework can, at the same time, create positive opportunities for women while also reinforcing harmful systems of power. Both realities coexist simultaneously as

there is no consensus on how to “correctly do” WPS. These tensions should be productive of knowledge and feminist energy as they are inherent and constitutive of the WPS agenda (Davies and True 2019). Echoing Hudson (2019, 858), “as feminist researchers, the aim is not to resolve unease, but to hold on to it, be honest about it, and work with it.”

Chapter 2: Methodological Approach

The current thesis focuses on the implementation of the WPS agenda in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Using the cases of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia as "one" regional case study, the interpretative approach (Shwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) of this thesis relies on a mixed methodology, including fieldwork interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and desk review analysis (i.e., official policy documents and secondary/grey literature).

Before starting, some precision is necessary. It is essential to mention that I recognize that the WPS agenda goes well beyond its solely institutional and written dimensions. As mentioned by Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd (2020, 3), beyond the formal and textual aspect of the agenda "lies a universe of struggles, documented and undocumented, to incubate and sustain feminist peace, waged by social movements, NGOs, progressive political blocs, historians, artists, and citizens, in locations from parliaments to households." However, I choose to adopt a tighter definition of WPS focusing on NAPs, in contrast to a broader and more "open" definition of WPS as portrayed in the quote above, employed by the proponents of narratives approaches (e.g., Shepherd 2021; Wibben 2011). This is so because I wish to analyze how the WPS agenda – *as a global UN normative framework* – is understood and implemented at a regional level. I recognize that NAPs are not the only tool for engaging with and/or implementing WPS (e.g., see Tiewa 2019 on China). However, adopting a NAP is often the primary way to demonstrate a serious commitment to the WPS agenda and implement it concretely by "working to cement it [into] policy and

practices." (Thomson 2019, 8) As I show in this thesis, NAPs are advocacy tools around which feminists successfully and strategically mobilize.

The present methodology section begins with a brief statement on my positionality and feminist research ethics. Next, I discuss my choice of case studies and the relevance of a regional analytical approach. Third, I detail my fieldwork experience, and finally, I explain how I use other methodologies to triangulate with my fieldwork data.

2.1 Feminist IR approaches to epistemology, ethics, and methodologies

2.1.1 Narratives, the everyday, and lived experiences as evidence

As we have seen in the previous chapter, feminist IR and security studies have fundamentally challenged the discipline's ontological and epistemological premises, notably by interrogating its key concepts, theories, and subjects. Feminists have also long challenged conventional research methodologies in mainstream IR and political science, especially their detached, neocolonial, and extractive character. While there is no one way to conduct feminist research, feminist scholars have shaken up the researcher-researched power dynamics and highlighted the importance of responsibility, reciprocity, transparency, and friendships, depending on the research setting (Jacoby 2006, 166).

Feminist IR methodologies have borrowed from mainstream IR and other disciplines to answer feminist IR research questions (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006). While it is true that feminist scholars often prefer qualitative methods as they have "opened a field of

opportunities for researching phenomena that have hitherto been marginalized in traditional social science and mainstream IR, such as feelings, perceptions, fears, and emotions, the real core of human existence," (Jacoby 2006, 155) we cannot reduce feminist research to one specific stance, epistemology or method.

A feminist perspective on research ethics and methodology simply refers to "any set of research practices that reflect on the power of epistemology, boundaries, relationships, and the multiple dimensions of the researcher's location." (Ackerly and True 2010, 2) Feminist researchers are attentive to power hierarchies in knowledge production. For this reason, "to change the extractive and objectifying nature of academic research, the majority of feminist scholars attempt to make their relations with the participants more trusting, mutually beneficial and equal, thus rejecting the position of an 'objective researcher' and giving primacy to the participants in meaning-making." (Mamadshoeva 2019, parag. 5)

Feminist IR research is also often driven by normative goals. It is self-reflective, plural, contingent, and relational (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006, 6). In short, feminist IR seeks to *transform* the world, not simply explain it. In this endeavor, feminist researchers in IR have been careful not only to listen to diverse voices and narratives but also to pay attention to what was said, *how* it was said, who has a voice, and *whose* voices are heard (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016, 6; see also Shepherd 2021; Wibben 2011). As shown by a long history of feminist IR research since the "founding mothers" of the field (Enloe 1990; Tickner 1992), "there is a long-standing feminist tradition of approaching individual experience and everyday lives as valid sources of knowledge and analytical entry points

for understanding conflict dynamics." (Al-Kadi and Vale 2020; Cockburn 2013; Enloe 1990; Sylvester 2013 cited in Cárdenas 2022, 2)

Following broader feminist IR scholarship, WPS researchers and scholarship "includes conflict-affected women as *knowers* who can identify and give meaning to problems of conflict and peace and whose everyday practices prefigure solutions." (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015; George 2016 cited in Tickner and True 2018, 230) Standpoint and *situated* knowledge are thus keywords here. My thesis follows this approach by taking women's situated voices seriously and centering them.

2.1.2 Curiosity, reflexivity, positionality

My research process is inspired by Cynthia Enloe's "feminist curiosity" (Enloe 2004). This means, among other things, that I refuse "gender-blindness" and that I remain critical and attentive to the dissemination of interconnected power relations, taken-for-granted words, hierarchies, margins, *and* silences (Enloe 1996).

My research process is inherently self-reflective and non-linear, involving constant back and forth between fieldwork, data, and theory. Feminist epistemologies, more broadly, recognize that "knowledge (truth) is *produced*, not simply found." (Ackerly and True 2010, 27; see also Hesse-Biber 2007). These principles are transversal to my research.

As for positionality, Hudson (2019, 3) notes that “it is striking to consider how WPS scholarship is dominated by white women from Australia, the United States, and Western Europe, many of whom have not experienced the armed conflict that is so often the subject of their research.” On this remark, I am aware of perpetuating this research trend in WPS literature as I am a Western white woman with material and institutional privilege who has never lived through a war. This constant reflection on my positionality guided my entire research process, which is cautious and strives to center women’s voices while employing sound feminist practices (through citation of scholars from the region, for example).

While I cannot claim that my research has been participatory (e.g., co-constructing the research object and design with the participants), every effort will be made to disseminate research results in an impactful, and accessible way (e.g., infographics, briefs, workshops) by consulting the women (especially from NGOs/CSOs) who participated in my research on how my study could be used in a way that is beneficial to them. This is important for me because, during my PhD, my primary concern was to bridge the gap between academia and practice. I have, therefore, always carried out my projects in such a way that the results can be used by stakeholders or applied for policy or advocacy purposes. This is also in line with the feminist pragmatic approach laid out in the previous chapter.

2.2 A multi-sited and mixed methodology

This section explains my case selection and the choices behind the methods used. It details the fieldwork process (where? when?) and interviews (how? who?) and elaborates

on how I analyzed data (what?) Finally, I explain how other sources of data (participant and non-participant observations, desk review) have informed my analysis.

2.2.1 Case selection

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and, more broadly, the post-Soviet space, is largely invisible in the discipline of IR, in part because its history and (still) geographic and political ambiguity challenge the (macro-)dichotomies around which IR theory is often articulated, such as North/South, core/periphery and West/non-West. The “liminality” of the region inevitably reverberates into other fields/sub-fields, such as feminist security studies, a field (of white women) that pays intense attention to the Global South (Santoire 2024; 2023; O’Sullivan and Krulišová 2023b; Alejandro 2021; Mälksoo 2021). The Balkans – although too being at the “periphery of Europe” and “not-quite-European” (Stavrevska et al. 2023; Buchowski 2006; Todorova 1997) – have received significant attention from WPS scholars (e.g. Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015; Irvine 2013; McLeod 2011) following the gendered mass atrocities committed in the 1990s in Yugoslavia, which paved the way for the adoption of Resolution 1325. In contrast, countries of the former Soviet Union, despite having numerous ongoing conflicts, have received little attention.

My choice of case study is relatively simple. My feminist curiosity about the invisibility mentioned above led me to want to focus on NAP adoption and implementation in the post-Soviet space because it is almost entirely absent from the WPS literature (Santoire 2023).

Currently, almost all countries of the former Soviet Union have adopted a NAP, except Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. The table below shows the existing NAPs.

Table 1: NAPs on WPS in the post-Soviet space

	NAP	**Period**
Estonia	Yes (3)	2010–2014; 2015–2019; 2020–2025
Latvia	Yes (1)	2020–2025
Lithuania	Yes (2)	2011–no expiration date; 2020–2024
Belarus	No	–
Ukraine	Yes (2)	2016–2020; 2021–2025
Moldova	Yes (2)	2018–2021; 2023–2027
Georgia	Yes (4)	2012–2015; 2016–2017; 2018–2020; 2022–2024
Armenia	Yes (2)	2019–2021; 2022–2024
Azerbaijan	No	–
Russia	No	–
Kazakhstan	Yes (1)	2022–2025
Kyrgyzstan	Yes (4)	2013–2014; 2016–2017; 2018–2020; 2022–2024
Tajikistan	Yes (2)	2014–2018; 2019–2022
Uzbekistan	Yes (1)	2022–2025
Turkmenistan	No	–

Considering the number of current NAPs, my research cannot focus on all of them. Here is how I made the selection. First, I excluded the Baltic countries because they are EU and NATO members with high levels of democracy and human development. Although Baltic countries can still be considered as part of the peripheries of Europe (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019; Koobak and Marling 2014), the content of their NAPs is

closely aligned with those Western organizations/alliances. Second, I excluded Central Asian NAPs because, despite sharing some similarities, their realities are significantly different than those in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. For example, their content is more similar to the NAPs of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, for instance, by focusing on counterterrorism, Afghan refugees, and ethnic and border conflicts. Moreover, Freedom House (2024)[23] classifies Central Asian countries as consolidated authoritarian regimes, significantly affecting freedom of speech, association, and civil liberties, making fieldwork challenging. This selection leaves me with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia.

This selection choice is very interesting analytically. While all four countries are unique, they also share many similarities. This case selection compares two "leader" WPS countries – Ukraine and Georgia (prior to 2023) – where the NAP process is advanced (i.e., has more than one version), is cemented into various ministries and political institutions (i.e., whole-of-government approach, decentralization, and NAP localization at the oblast level for Ukraine and municipalities level for Georgia) and has strong ownership by civil society with two "newer" WPS countries – Moldova and Armenia – where the NAP adoption and implementation has been a bit more challenging, less "ambitious" and focused on the defense and security sector. In my thesis, I will also cross-compare my cases on other points of analysis. For instance, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia all have UN

[23] Freedom House is a non-profit organization defending democracy worldwide. It ranks countries' democracy status, regime type, and internet freedom through quantitative and qualitative data and indicators.

Women country offices and a high level of civil society participation (two separate but related things) in the NAP process from start to finish, which is not the case in Armenia.

The four cases are relevant to observing the regional dynamic in NAP emergence, adoption, and implementation because it has been noted that these countries regularly cooperate and learn from each other's policy experience, notably from the Georgian experience prior to 2023 (i.e., the most advanced NAP in the region, with four versions to this day) (Myrttinen et al. 2020a, 52). Moreover, to different degrees, all four countries are conflict-affected. Moldova and Georgia have low-intensity protracted conflicts on their territory, while Ukraine and Armenia have had (or currently have) recent experiences of war.

Finally, all four countries have undergone profound domestic and foreign policy shifts in the past years, turning and aligning themselves toward Europe and the "Western world." Until recently, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia were aligned with and striving toward the European Union, following a democratization path, leading to all three countries gaining EU candidate status in 2022. Historically, Armenia has been closely aligned with Russia, but the 2018 Velvet Revolution and the 2020 second Nagorno-Karabakh war changed the country's history and foreign policy, leading to the announcement in the Spring of 2024 that it seeks to join the EU eventually. At the time of writing, while Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia are currently making significant progress in democratization, Georgia is showing critical signs of democratic backsliding and autocratization in recent years, exemplified by the adoption of the foreign agent law in 2024.

2.2.2 Fieldwork

Fieldwork[24] is an umbrella term covering diverse methods – it is "prolonged, immersive, and empirical." (Daigle 2018: 117) Daigle (2018: 119-120) explains that fieldwork is a useful research method for feminist security studies as it "necessarily begins from lived experiences" and "offers a critical potential that can be used to disrupt researchers' own assumptions and orthodoxies." In this section, I detail the process of my fieldwork interviews, which provide my primary source of data.

Where and when? I conducted five months of fieldwork over two summers. During the summer of 2022, I spent four months conducting fieldwork in Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, in addition to traveling to neighboring countries for conferences and informal visits. During the summer of 2023, I spent a month as a visiting research fellow at the Centre for Eurasian and Russian Studies (CEURUS) at the University of Tartu in Estonia. While there, I dedicated specific time to conducting virtual interviews with Ukrainians and participated in academic events and exchanges with scholars in the region. In addition, I conducted an additional month of fieldwork, traveling back to Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia for follow-up conversations with key informants and doing more interviews.

During my fieldwork in Moldova between July 2022 (4 weeks) and July 2023 (10 days), I interviewed 18 individuals (17 women and one man). I interviewed them in person in the

[24] In this thesis, I choose the term 'fieldwork' instead of 'ethnography.' Following the 'ethnographic turn' in IR, fieldwork and ethnography are frequently considered synonymous in the discipline. However, ethnography—originating from anthropology—entails months, and even years, of deep engagement in the research setting, which I do not claim to have done.

cities of Chișinău, Tiraspol (Transnistria), and Comrat (Gagauzia) and, for logistical reasons, on Zoom with women temporarily living abroad.

In Georgia, I interviewed 23 women between August 2022 (7 weeks) and July 2023 (2 weeks). I interviewed them in person in the cities of Tbilisi and Gori and, for security and logistical reasons, on Zoom with women currently located in Zugdidi, Gali, and Sukhumi (Abkhazia). I also made personal visits to Shida Kartli, Kakheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and Kazbegi municipalities (regions).

During my fieldwork in Georgia, the largest escalation in conflict since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war happened at the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan, with Azeri forces bombing cities and occupying villages inside Armenia proper. These escalations made my first fieldwork in Armenia particularly tense, almost leading to its cancellation. After waiting to see if the situation would stabilize, I decided to go regardless. There, I interviewed 20 women between September 2022 (5 weeks) and August 2023 (10 days). I interviewed those women in person in Yerevan, the capital, and, for logistical reasons, on Zoom with Armenian women in the diaspora. I also made personal visits to Shirak, Ararat, Vayots Dzor, and the bordering marzes (regions) of Gegharkunik and Syunik.

In 2022, Russia's brutal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine turned my fieldwork plans upside down. Fieldwork in Ukraine was not possible due to the systematic danger and unpredictability of shellings, large-scale missile and drone strikes against civilian infrastructure, restricted mobility, and displacement of my interviewees. Nonetheless, I was

able to interview 21 Ukrainians (19 women and two men) between June and August 2023. The majority (19) of those interviews were held on Zoom with Ukrainians located in various cities of Ukraine or displaced abroad. I conducted two in-person interviews in Istanbul during a regional event where I was doing participant observations. Moreover, I made pre-interview initial contact and/or had post-interview follow-up conversations with eight Ukrainian women at in-person events in Canada, the United States, Turkey, Austria, Belgium, and Armenia. Due to a personal visit to Ukraine in 2017 and my collaboration with civil society leaders in Ukraine, I have built regular contacts and friendships with Ukrainian women over the years. My personal connections allowed me easier access to networks in Ukraine than I would have otherwise had and effectively compensated for the challenges of not being able to conduct in-person fieldwork.

In total, I conducted 78 semi-structured interviews with 82 individuals. The vast majority of those interviews were one-on-one, but four of them were conducted with two women at the same time, at their request. Table 2 below details the countdown of my "formal" interviews[25] according to location.

[25] I consider formal interviews to be those in which my interviewees and I sat down, I explained the purpose of the study, they signed a consent form, and I asked semi-structured questions. It is difficult to accurately count the number of pre-interviews and informal conversations. For pre-interviews, I count three conducted in 2021. For informal/follow-up conversations, I approximately count 17 between 2022 and 2024.

Table 2: Number of interviews (N=78)

	In-person	Online
Moldova[26]	14	2
Georgia[27]	17	6
Armenia[28]	13	5
Ukraine	2	19
Total	46	32

While virtual interviews are not the same as experiencing face-to-face interviews (e.g., subtilities in body language, the warmth of sharing a cup of coffee, the atmosphere, hugging or shaking hands), I found them at least substantially as relevant as in-person ones. Overall, my fieldwork felt extremely safe and pleasant. My knowledge, connections, and past travels in the region helped me navigate the cultural nuances.

How? Before starting my fieldwork, I identified people to interview through word-of-mouth referrals, social media platforms (like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook), by participating in webinars, workshops, and conferences, and by reviewing documents published by NGOs/CSOs or UN agencies in the region. I reached out to all of them using email as my preferred method or through social media platforms. I also used the snowball method and was referred to new interviewees by my research participants, so I contacted

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[26] Includes Transnistria. I went to Tiraspol once to conduct an in-person interview, as it is relatively safe there.

[27] Includes Abkhazia. I was able to interview Abkhaz and Georgian women currently based in Abkhazia online as well as displaced Georgian women from Abkhazia in person, in Tbilisi. Going to Abkhazia is not impossible, but risky and complicated. Given the extreme political repressions, I was not able to talk to anyone from Tskhinvali/South Ossetia.

[28] Includes Nagorno-Karabakh. I interviewed a displaced woman from that region in Yerevan. Going to Nagorno-Karabakh, at the time of my fieldwork, was nearly impossible since the 2020 war.

them directly using their personal phone numbers or messaged them on WhatsApp. The recruitment process overall went well in all countries, although the positive response rate was proportionately lower in Armenia. Once I was in contact with the participants, I suggested meeting dates based on their availability preferences. I had to be constantly flexible[29] and adapt to the realities of working in a tumultuous region.

I conducted interviews in cafes, restaurants, offices and on Zoom. Two interviews happened at the participants' private house to accommodate their situation. Other than the Ukrainian interviews (on Zoom), I gave the participants the option to meet virtually for four reasons. First, as a matter of preference (e.g., if more practical to them). Second, for safety issues (e.g., I interviewed participants where I could not physically travel where they were located because of safety or travel restrictions). Third, for availability issues (e.g., if the person being interviewed or I was traveling or unavailable for in-person interviews when I would be physically in their countries, such as women in the diaspora or temporarily living elsewhere). Fourth, to manage COVID-related risks.

Interviews typically lasted an hour and fifteen minutes, with the shortest one being forty minutes and the longest one being two hours. Participants were first approached in English

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[29] Daigle (2018, 120) notes: "Modes of research that take lived experience as their starting point and depend on interpersonal methods are, by nature, unpredictable and to some degree uncontrollable […] Informants contest and subvert the questions they are asked and the research process itself; *findings disrupt our hypotheses* and research designs; *meetings and interviews are abruptly cancelled* or unfold in unforeseen ways; some important sources turn out to be unavailable, or even nonexistent, while others appear unexpectedly; *chance encounters wind up opening new doors or revealing new information*. Particularly in sometimes volatile or unfamiliar places, fieldwork forces us as researchers to embrace open-endedness, *unpredictability*, *and indeterminacy* – of our research trajectories, but also of our empirical cases and *theories*, our conclusions, our knowledges." (my emphasis) The passages in italics particularly resonated with my experience.

but were given their choice of language of preference. Most (69) of my interviews were conducted in English by myself.[30] Two were in French (by me), two in Georgian, two in Armenian and three in Ukrainian, with paid interpreters. I chose them because of their sensitivity to the context and knowledge of WPS and UN "lingo" and acronyms in the given language; they accompanied me to the interview in person or on Zoom, performing simultaneous translation. Communications with my interviewees were in English and sometimes in Russian,[31] at the person's request. I used Facebook, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and emails to communicate with my participants.

I obtained all informed, written consent from participants before the beginning of the interview. I first asked them to read the consent form attentively, ask questions if necessary, and sign the document indicating the date and desire for anonymity. For interviews on Zoom, we proceeded the same way, but they sent me the signed consent form by email. For interviews with interpreters, for participants who were comfortable enough to read and understand English, we followed the same protocol. For those who were not, the interpreters orally translated consent forms into Georgian, Armenian, and Ukrainian, and then the interviewee signed the consent form. In cases where the interview was both virtual and translated, I obtained audio-recorded verbal consent. With the permission of all my participants, I recorded interviews to ease the process of interview retranscription.

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[30] It is interesting to note that although English posed a language barrier for some interviewees, many were "relieved" to know that I was not a native English speaker. Despite my outsider positionality, I noticed this put less pressure on those who felt insecure about their level of English.

[31] Varying based on individuals' location and age, several participants had Russian as their mother language.

Participants were not compensated to participate in my study, but I offered to pay for beverages and meals while meeting in public spaces. Because of the region's culture of hospitality, not everyone accepted my offer. Some proposed to pay for me, and others even brought little gifts to “thank me” for being in their country for fieldwork.

Who? I recruited, reached out to, and interviewed a diverse group of actors based on two selection criteria. First, I sought to identify[32] people who are currently or had previously been involved in advancing the WPS agenda in their respective countries, whether directly or indirectly on WPS. When I mention working “directly,” I am referring to individuals who have contributed to their country’s NAP/s by engaging in activities such as advocacy, drafting, providing input during consultations, participating in NAP implementation and localization, and/or monitoring and evaluating their country's WPS commitments. “Direct” work also refers to individuals who have professionalized their expertise around WPS issues specifically and for whom WPS issues constitute their sole or main area of work. There are cases where I interviewed women who have not been working on WPS for years but were directly involved in the NAP process at the beginning of WPS advocacy in their country, for example. Interviewing women who were directly involved in various capacities and stages of their country’s WPS “herstory” was highly valuable as I gained insights from diverse perspectives and time periods.

[32] I obtained information about my interviewees’ direct or indirect work on WPS through word-of-mouth referrals, investigating their social media platforms (mostly LinkedIn), participating in WPS regional events, or reviewing relevant documents online where their name was mentioned (e.g., as author and expert). I approached them based on that information, which I then validated with them.

By “indirect” work, I refer to individuals I interviewed whose main subject of expertise and work is not necessarily WPS but who have been involved indirectly with WPS because of their position or area of expertise. For example, well-known feminist experts working on women’s rights in general, women’s political participation, women’s economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive rights, human trafficking, labor’s rights, intersectional identity issues (youth, disability or LGBTQIA+ rights), representatives of an ethnic minority working on advancing human rights in their community, or legal experts working on different normative frameworks beyond WPS (e.g., CEDAW, Istanbul Convention, Sustainable Development Goals). For individuals falling into this category, WPS is only one of the things among others in their portfolio. While the issues mentioned above are not “classical” WPS topics, they all intersect and impact peace and security. Interviewing individuals who are working indirectly on WPS was also relevant as they sometimes provided a refreshing and unique angle to my questions in comparison to women entirely immersed in the WPS bubbles.

The second inclusion criteria for recruitment was simply to have sufficient knowledge of the WPS agenda. This was again based on my research of their profile/portfolio online, which I then validated with them when recruited. While most had a sophisticated knowledge of WPS, there were rare cases where people misrepresented or overestimated their knowledge of WPS in their social media. This does not mean, however, that the interviews were less relevant than others. In those cases, I tried to investigate their current work, making links with the NAP or WPS, gaining broader insights from other important things in my research (e.g., their perception of the conflict, their life story as a conflict-

affected woman or their understanding of the relevance of such frameworks in their national and regional contexts). I classify my research participants into four categories:

1. **Governmental officials and employees** working in key ministries or state structures/agencies that are involved in WPS.
2. **Representatives of international organizations** (e.g., UN agencies – notably UN Women, UNDP, and UNFPA), regional bodies (e.g., OSCE, EU), or international NGOs (e.g., Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, Kvinna till Kvinna).
3. **Local NGOs/CSOs**—mostly working in the capital city—are involved directly or indirectly with the WPS agenda, whether through advocacy, research, drafting, implementing, localizing, monitoring, and evaluating NAPs at the national and local levels.
4. **Independent experts**. This category is quite large and corresponds to many women that I interviewed, and I cannot fit into one of the categories above. This includes, for example, independent consultants, academics, women peacebuilders or women human rights defenders (HRDs) activists, or trained mediators.

In the 'velvet' or feminist triangles language that I detailed in the previous chapter, Category 1 corresponds to femocrats, Category 3 corresponds to feminist civil society, and Categories 2 and 4 correspond to gender experts. The table below classifies my participants according to those categories.

Table 3: Categories of individuals interviewed (N=82)

	(Current or former) Representatives of Government or state agencies	Representatives of international organizations or NGOs	Representatives of local NGOs/CSOs	Independent experts
Moldova	6	3	5	4
Georgia	6	5	6	6
Armenia	2	3	8	7
Ukraine	4	3	7	7
Total	18	14	26	24

Despite my best efforts, it is crucial to mention that this classification is fluid and imperfect. Categories are far from mutually exclusive. In fact, many of the women I interviewed professionalized their expertise on gender and WPS, allowing them to move from one category to another constantly, illustrating the concept of the velvet triangles well. For example, some of them were former members of Parliament or working in key Ministries (femocrats) but were now working with UN Women (or vice versa) when I interviewed them. Or, again, some were directors of an NGO/CSO or an academic but were also, at the same time, a consultant for an international organization or NGO. In many cases, the women interviewed had experiences in all those categories throughout their careers, in addition to having higher education degrees such as master's and PhD. The second category (international organizations/NGOs) in itself is not necessarily representative as a whole because many of the individuals in the fourth category (independent experts) were,

for example, academic researchers *and* UN consultants. I thus classified my research participants above more or less based on their current position at the moment of the interview or according to the reason behind my interviewing them (e.g., interviewing a femocrat *because* of her former role in the Government at a crucial time of the NAP or interviewing a person who was working at UN Women at the time of NAP evaluation).

Although I did not ask the age of my research participants, I can safely estimate that more than half (45+) of my interviewees were middle-aged women (between 40 and 65 years old), around 25 were women below 40 (between 26 and 40 years old), and approximately seven were above 65. Young women (i.e., late twenties and early thirties) were clearly a minority in my sample of participants. I noticed that they were the ones I more easily connected with and developed friendships[33] with afterward.

I chose not to categorize my interviewees here based on their origins,[34] citizenship status, or current location because I wanted to avoid creating a hierarchy of who is more "conflict-affected." All the women I interviewed had been affected by conflict in one way or another. For example, some women were or became displaced at the time of the interview, others had relatives in occupied, conflict-affected, frontline, or bordering regions. Some women

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[33] Feminist researchers have often criticized and challenged the so-called "neutrality" and "objectivity" of researchers and the rigid boundaries between them and their research participants, a stance generally found in traditional political science. Some even have argued how transformative and productive affect and friendship can be in conducting feminist research (Anctil Avoine 2022).

[34] Nevertheless, and despite my attention to the diversity of identities, the majority of women I interviewed belonged to the dominant ethnic group (i.e., Moldovan, Ukrainian, Georgian, Armenian), also reflecting the country's WPS landscape.

were originally from (or displaced from) conflict-affected areas (i.e., Transnistria, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, or oblasts in Eastern Ukraine), and others have experienced one or multiple wars themselves.

For many of the women interviewed, these were often the very reasons that led them to work on WPS, as this framework resonated with their realities, the experiences of their loved ones, or the context in which they were in. While some had a professional "revelation" for WPS, others started working in this field inadvertently and by chance because they were working on related topics or with people or organizations who were involved in this field. For others, such as femocrats, long-time peacebuilders, or public servants, the WPS agenda is just one of many tools to bolster their grievances and concerns.

While there were no risks specifically associated with my research, participants could be negatively judged or perceived if they spoke against their organization and/or shared controversial views on their organization or their respective Government (e.g., that their organization is not doing enough for the implementation of the WPS agenda). Some interviewees were situated in contexts deemed more authoritarian and/or risky than others, given their position or citizenship status. To mitigate these factors, participants were asked in the consent form whether they wished to remain fully anonymous (both their name and organization are anonymous), partially anonymous (only their name is anonymous), or non-anonymous. All data from the interviews were, by default,[35] completely confidential

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[9] Anonymizing research participants to protect their identity or safety is often a default in qualitative and ethnographic research. While these considerations are imperative, naming people, with their informed consent, can also be a form of transparency and empowerment (Reyes 2018). Feminist researchers like Daigle

and anonymized unless a participant explicitly wished to have their name and/or organization explicitly mentioned. In the latter case, I double-checked with them in the summer of 2024 to confirm if they were still comfortable with me directly quoting them. Many things can change in two years, so I sent them the exact quotes I would be using in my text and asked again if they were sure about being named.

The resulting publications of the research, including the present thesis, will use vague titles (e.g., NGO representative, Government official) in direct quotes and will change the information that could potentially identify the participants for those who wished to remain anonymous (unless the participant wants to be explicitly mentioned, as stated above). Each interview was identified by a number, and identifier numbers mentioned in the text (i.e., not a direct quote) will not be associated with names or organizations, including those who wish to be named. Despite all these privacy measures, given the very small size of WPS "bubbles" in the selected countries, it is possible that individuals or their organizations could potentially be *indirectly* identified based on their insight/information shared. This possibility was acknowledged in the consent form.

What? Once participants had approved the consent form, I started the interviews by asking them introductory questions (e.g., what does Resolution 1325 mean to you? How/when did you start working on WPS?). I then asked them semi-directed questions (see the

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(2018, 121) have noted the dilemmas of anonymization in small circles of NGOs/CSOs or femocrats where everyone knows each other and "policies and events have been shaped by personalities and relationships at every stage." In my case, including the names of women who explicitly requested to be named is an important aspect of feminist research. It recognizes and *values* their voice, agency, and expertise, while also taking into consideration the political context in which they are located.

Appendices for the list of interview guides for each country). I was careful to listen closely and adapt my questions to their experiences, work history, position, and answers. Depending on the person in front of me, in some interviews, I insisted on certain questions more than others. During the interviews, the participants were given the freedom to answer each question as briefly or extensively as they wished. They also had the option to decline to answer one or more questions if they felt uncomfortable or feared negative perceptions based on their responses. I tried to be as attentive as possible throughout the interview, paying close attention to silences, contradictions/incoherence, the general atmosphere, or any changes in mood or emotions.

The questions asked during the interviews were generally not "too" sensitive. I tried to be as alert as possible and avoided getting into uncomfortable or personal topics unless the participants brought that up themselves. As the research topic revolves around peace, war, and security, some interviewees shared personal memories from their private lives, particularly regarding war. In Armenia and Ukraine, I paid extra attention, especially when asking questions about peace and potential conflict resolution due to the proximity and freshness of the war. After interviewing approximately 15 individuals per country, the data collection eventually reached a "tipping" point of saturation (e.g., repetitive information).

To save numerous hours of work, I transcribed all my interviews using the AI-based transcription software Trint. However, due to imperfections in the software, such as difficulty with non-native English accents and background noises, I had to listen to all the interviews again, verify the accuracy of the transcribed texts, and read all the transcripts.

All data collected from my fieldwork (interview transcripts and notes from observations or informal conversations) were then analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In the fall of 2023, I read over all the transcripts for the second time to familiarize myself with the empirical material. I tried to discern the major patterns and salient themes or words in order to turn them into nodes on NVivo. Following this thorough reading, I then reread all the transcripts again while coding them on NVivo (see Appendices for the list of nodes). Finally, I went over each node in depth to structure and start writing each chapter. While writing, I used Grammarly, an AI-powered tool that corrects grammar, punctuation, and spelling typos and offers suggestions for better delivery and clarity.

To conclude this section, these fieldwork interviews allowed me to get the pulse of the national and regional commitment to WPS. Most importantly, the interviews helped me achieve three crucial things. First, they allowed me to compare the normative framework on paper (the official NAPs and other policy documents) with the reality on the ground (the actual implementation of its normative content). Unsurprisingly, discrepancies often existed between written commitments and actual implementation, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters. Second, my interviews with diverse women involved in WPS advocacy in different capacities and at different times of the process allowed me to retrace[36] the "WPS herstory" in each country through a timeline of WPS advocacy. Third, typical of feminist approaches to qualitative research, my interviews gave me access to the lived realities, perceptions, and feelings of these women who "live" and "embody" the WPS

[36] Although I do not share the positivist underpinnings of process-tracing methods (i.e., trying to establish causal mechanisms across time), I do borrow from this approach to retrace WPS "herstory."

agenda, centering their voices and experiences as evidence. In this way, I was able to understand how they understood the WPS agenda, articulated it in their everyday work, and situated it in their current national and regional context.

In feminist research, interviews are important because "choosing the interview [as a method] requires taking experience seriously as an element of knowledge, something that quantitative aggregated data does not encompass," and they allow one to understand "the feelings, fears, and hopes of the participants in terms of how they feel larger structures and discourses such as war and peace in their daily lives." (Jacoby 2006, 161) Sometimes, my interviewees brought up contradicting information or simply things I politically disagreed with, given my own positionality and different life experiences; in those cases, without judgment, I carefully listened with empathy and respect. Yet again, feminist scholarship is helpful in reminding us that "experience should be understood, *not as truth*, but simply as a telling of one's story, a narrative that represents the choices and priorities of the particular individual or group." (Jacoby 2006, 162; see also Daigle 2018; Dauphinée 2010)

2.3 Triangulation of data: observations and desk review

In addition to the fieldwork interviews detailed above, I attended several events, workshops, and webinars on WPS in the region. These were helpful in completing and nuancing my interviews, observing how regional solidarity and peer learning shape common understandings (or lack thereof) of WPS NAPs in the post-Soviet space, and identifying regional patterns in WPS implementation and processes.

I conducted participant and non-participant observations[37] at various events. At some virtual ones (approximately ten), I was there as a listener (non-participant). This includes events from the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the Georgetown Institute on Women, Peace and Security, UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO), Women's Fund Armenia, Feminist Peace Collective (a feminist Azeri collective), and the Regional Women's Peace Dialogue Platform for UNSCR 1325.[38]

In other cases, during in-person events with the GNWP, UN Women ECARO, and the OSCE in Moldova, Turkey, and Austria (from 2022 to 2024), I not only actively participated in discussions but also took notes and prepared a conference brief for the organization (GNWP). Many women I interviewed took part in those events, allowing me to reconnect with them or interview Ukrainian women in-person. I made personal notes but did not quote anyone in my research; these events informed my analysis and reflections as a feminist researcher and consultant.

Finally, I also conducted a desk review analysis (secondary sources) of existing policy and governmental documents and other literature produced by international organizations and NGOs/CSOs in the region. This included a close reading of the NAPs themselves, all

[37] I define 'participant' observations as events that I attended where I actively participated in discussions, presented myself as a researcher to the participants, engaged with them, took notes, and assisted the NGO (GNWP) with note-taking and drafting an outcome blog. In contrast, I define 'non-participant' observations primarily as events I attended on Zoom where I simply observed without much interaction, did not present myself to the participants, and listened quietly; these were mostly public events and lacked a personal element. However, they were useful for triangulating data and identifying interesting individuals to interview. I see both participant and non-participant observations as complementary to my interview data.

[38] The Regional Women's Peace Dialogue Platform for Resolution 1325 is a civil society platform which brings together women peacebuilders from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

accessible in English, as well as other official documents available in English, such as diplomatic speeches, evaluation reports, and governmental web pages. Often, these documents themselves were not particularly interesting or revealing about the WPS situation in practice. They used formal diplomatic language and did not necessarily reflect the reality as told by the women I interviewed. The analysis of these documents allowed me to compare the WPS normative content "on paper" with the experience and perceptions of the WPS normative content "on the ground" gained during interviews.

The type of documents that I reviewed the most were policy briefs and research reports produced by UN Women country offices, UN Women ECARO, international NGOs working in the region (GNWP and Kvinna till Kvinna), and local NGOs/CSOs. Local NGOs/CSOs, in addition to their extensive work on the ground, produce empirical research documenting their WPS advocacy. Reviewing those documents was very helpful in filling in the gaps where I noticed a lack of empirical information for a particular year or topic in my interviews. It also allowed me to verify and double-check information from my interviews, as sometimes they were contradictory.[39] Other documents reviewed were, for example, infographics, web pages, op-eds, and academic articles.

I used search engines like Google and Google Scholar, as well as the search engines of the UN, NGOs/CSOs, and other organizations' websites mentioned above to locate relevant documentation. Some internal documents were also given to me on paper during my

[39] Research participants are human, which means that their re-construction of events and memory may not always be 100% accurate.

fieldwork interviews. I did not follow a systematic approach to select those documents for two reasons. First, desk review was not my primary research method and only served to complete, double-check, and nuance my findings (primary data). Secondly, conducting a systematic desk review of all WPS documents in the region would be challenging due to many documents being inaccessible to the public and/or not available in English. There is also a clear imbalance among countries. There is a significant amount of documentation available on Ukraine and Georgia, but that is not the case for Moldova and Armenia. Additionally, I am able to approximatively locate and read relevant WPS documents in Romanian and Ukrainian, but I am unable to do so in Georgian and Armenian.

In line with other authors, I adopt a "discourse as practice" stance, meaning that I pay serious attention to how discourses shape gender, peace, and security policies (Gentry 2016; Joachim and Schneiker 2012; Puechguirbal 2010; Shepherd 2008; Hansen 2006). My approach is thus necessarily sensitive to poststructuralism, where "discourse is not simply [understood] as language, but rather [as] a system of significations and representations that fixes certain interpretations of the world, reproducing power relations." (Shepherd 2008, 20–23 cited in de Almagro 2018a, 9). Like post-structural feminists, I "recognize that discourse, as written, spoken, or visual text, reveals constructions of power, legitimacy, and status." (Gentry 2016, 20) Paying attention to discourse is also essential to observe how the NAPs are framed because "processes of framing [are] central to norm production, negotiation, and change. All actors engaged in these processes use frames to negotiate meaning" (van Eerdewijk and Roggeband 2014, 48). The four following chapters detail my fieldwork, organized into two sections: protracted and active conflicts.

Section I – WPS in Protracted Conflicts

Introduction to Section I and National Contexts

Section I of this thesis focuses on the Moldovan and Georgian case studies analyzed separately and together. The two countries are interesting to contrast in the same section as both have long-term, protracted conflicts on their territories, where de facto states operate isolated and unrecognized by the international community, and where Russian troops are illegally stationed. In Chapters 3 (Moldova) and 4 (Georgia), I analyze the emergence, adoption, and implementation of their respective NAPs for WPS in the context of protracted conflict and military occupation. I examine how conflicts, such as Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia in Georgia, impact the understanding of gendered (in)security and the application of the WPS framework. First, let's introduce our two case studies of Section I by providing a bit of historical and political context in which both countries are situated.

The Republic of Moldova (hereafter Moldova) is a small, landlocked country with a population of around 3 million. It is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country consisting primarily of Moldovans, Romanians, Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauzians, and Bulgarians. Moldova is usually considered a middle-income country by global standards, but one of the poorest countries in Europe (World Bank 2023). Although Moldova has succeeded in significantly improving its Human Development Index and reducing poverty in the last two decades, it still "faces several challenges in its path towards sustainable

development, which include a volatile political establishment, a polarized society, low levels of labor productivity, high levels of structural unemployment, and demographic challenges." (Palihovici 2021, 10).

Since it declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has faced many difficulties, including the outbreak of a short-term military conflict with the Transnistrian region, which saw Moldovan forces confront Russian-backed separatists. The Transnistrian region (left bank of the river Dniester/Nistru) – a largely Russian-speaking area squeezed in between the right bank of the river Dniester/Nistru and Ukraine – has been *de facto* independent since the ceasefire of 1992 (Figure 1). To this day, the conflict has still not been resolved despite an ongoing, though repeatedly interrupted, settlement process. Many scholars have referred to it – along with other conflicts in the former Soviet Union[40] – as diplomatically "frozen." Today, Transnistria enjoys no international recognition, not even from Russia – its "patron" state on which it depends economically, militarily, and politically – making it legally isolated from the rest of the world.

[40] Abkhazia, South Ossetia and until recently, Nagorno-Karabakh.

Figure 1: Map of Moldova

Source: (*BBC News* 2012b)

Despite the "frozenness" of the Transnistrian conflict and the normalization of relations[41] between Chișinău and Tiraspol (the *de facto* capital of Transnistria) over time, there is no resolution in sight (Ceban 2023; Solovyov 2023) , and this conflict still represents a source of insecurity for Moldova and Moldovans. Among these is that Transnistria hosts 1,500 Russian illegally stationed troops, a dangerous Soviet-era arms depot, and is run by a kleptocratic regime that drives criminal phenomenon and several human rights abuses such as human trafficking. According to many experts, Russia "has used [this conflict] as a proxy to force Moldova into its orbit, whether through control over its biggest electricity plants in Dubăsari and Cuciurgan, as well as its gas pipelines; through recurring election fraud in favor of pro-Russian candidates; or through constant military pressure and organized crime." (Iaviță 2022) Although Moldova has no anti-occupation law like Ukraine and Georgia do, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recently

[41] For example, there are regular exchanges and travels between both sides and Transnistrians come to the right bank to access medical services.

recognized this territory as militarily occupied by Russia (Necșuțu 2022). It is worth mentioning that during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, another territory – Gagauzia – declared its independence from Moldova but later reintegrated into the country in 1995. Today, though it forms an autonomous territorial unit, tensions with Chișinău remain, and it is often deemed a pro-Russian region.

Moldova is a unitary Parliamentary Republic. Although its neutrality is enshrined in the Constitution, the country has strategic defence and security partnerships with the United States, NATO, and Romania (Albu 2023). Since Maia Sandu's election, there has been an apparent shift in foreign policy, with the country trying to distance itself from Moscow's grip and seek closer ties to the West.

If Moldovan women's representation has significantly increased in the past decades, reaching 40% in Parliament in 2021 – thanks to political quotas – there are still significant barriers impacting Moldovan women's lives today (Bodrug-Lungu 2021, 8). Although Moldova has joined all international legal frameworks regarding women's human rights and several laws, public policies, and legal frameworks about gender equality are in place, Moldovan women face various issues. These range from discrimination in the labour market, deeply rooted social stereotypes, economic inequalities, lack of representation in high-level decision-making processes, and alarming levels of domestic violence, gender-based violence and human trafficking (OSCE 2019; La Strada Moldova 2019). In a report detailing the progress made for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, it is identified that specific groups of women face distinct challenges in Moldovan society, such

as Roma women, elderly women (especially those living in rural areas), women living with HIV, women in detention, queer and migrant women (Government of the Republic of Moldova and Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection 2020).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated all inequalities present in the country, in addition to causing “a triple crisis of refugee response, economic shock, and insecure access to energy and all within an already fragile security context.” (UN Women Moldova 2023a, 3) Although Moldovan’s civil society, international organizations, and the Government have put forward tremendous collective efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, “the refugee influx has placed border, migration, and asylum management capacities as well as other public services of the country under significant strain, exceeding the local coping capacities.” (ibid.)

Turning to the South Caucasus, Georgia is a small and ancient country located between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Surrounded by the Caucasus mountains and the Black Sea, it has a population of about 3.5 million. It is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country consisting primarily of Georgians, Azeris, Armenians, Russians, Abkhazians, Ossetians, and Kists (Chechens), as well as other smaller ethnic and linguistic groups.

Since 1991, when it gained independence from the Soviet Union, the country has faced multiple challenges in its post-Soviet era, such as several economic and political crises and instability, a civil war (1991-1993), wars in Abkhazia (1992-1993; 1998), the South

Ossetian war (1991-1992), the Adjara revolution (2004) and the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 (also called the 5-day war or the August war) in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Since the early 1990s, the Government of Georgia has lost effective control of both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, two Russian-backed separatist regions operating as unrecognized states by the international community (Figure 2). While movement between Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia was still possible until the early 2000s, the region has been completely cut off from the world since the 2008 war, and only the International Committee of the Red Cross can cross the administrative boundary line (ABL). There are illegally stationed Russian troops on both breakaway territories, and freedom of movement is heavily restricted.

Figure 2: Map of Georgia

Source: (*BBC News* 2012a)

Both wars led to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians being displaced, leading to violation of human rights and suffering on both sides of the divide. Today, the majority of

internally displaced persons (IDPs) – around 300,000 – in Georgia are located in Kvemo Kartli, Shida Kartli, Imereti, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti and on the outskirts of the capital, Tbilisi. IDPs – which are far from a homogenous group – represent one of the most vulnerable fringes of the population, still to this day (Lomsadze 2022). Both IDPs and those living alongside the administrative boundary lines (ABLs; also called the occupation lines) face several challenges and discrimination in Georgia, ranging from lack of access to education, adequate infrastructure, transport, material, food, water, and human security, and specific socio-rehabilitation services (UN Women Georgia 2021). Women IDPs live at the intersection of different oppressions, such as poverty, trauma, and marginalization.

The Geneva International Discussions (GID) and the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM) are the only two formal multilateral mediation processes dealing with security- and humanitarian-related issues of the Russo-Georgian war. They were created in 2008 following the six-point agreement of 12 August 2008, right after the war, and 2009, respectively, bringing together Georgia, Russia, the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, and the United States. The UN, OSCE, and EU co-chair them (UN Women Georgia 2020). IPRM meetings still take place monthly in the village of Ergneti at the border for Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, but the ones for Abkhazia, in Gali, were interrupted by the *de facto* authorities in 2018 and have not resumed yet. IPRM meetings tackle conflict management and the ‘day-to-day’ situation on the ground to prevent incidents and they inform the GID. The GID sessions address higher-level conflict resolution matters; they are still ongoing today, held four times a year in Geneva, but often referred to as stagnant, as they have not led to tangible results so far (European Union

Monitoring Mission in Georgia 2018). This is why many experts today qualify those conflicts (like others in the former Soviet Union) as "frozen" – at least diplomatically – but their lingering effects on people's everyday lives continue.

Beyond these conflicts, Georgia has been on a path to democratization since the 2000s. After the 2003 Rose Revolution – which ousted then-President Eduard Shevardnadze in favor of the new President and controversial political figure Mikheil Saakashvili – the country saw a series of drastic reforms in law enforcement, judicial, security, and financial sectors and market liberalization, largely supported by Western countries. It also signaled Georgia's turn to the West and intention to enter the EU and NATO one day.

Georgia is nowadays considered a middle-income country by global standards. Despite the reforms mentioned above, Georgia's economic growth has been uneven, especially between urban and rural areas. Although poverty levels are declining over time, in 2020, one-fifth of the population still lived below absolute poverty lines; as elsewhere around the world, the causes, experiences and consequences of poverty are highly gendered (UN Women Georgia 2022b). Today, "women make up the majority of Georgia's economically inactive population, have lower-paid jobs and are underrepresented in the formal employment sector." (UN Women Georgia 2022a, 1).

Georgia's political landscape—a unitary Parliamentary Republic—is complex and suffers from intense polarization between political parties. Despite gender quotas, women members of Parliament represent 19% of MPs, well behind the regional (31%) and global

(27%) average (UN Women Georgia 2024, 13). Indeed, despite Georgia establishing strong legal frameworks and significantly improving its international ranking on gender equality issues, patriarchal and conservative gender norms remain widespread, often fueled by the Georgian Orthodox Church. In the past decade, there has been an alarming rise of ultra-nationalist and anti-gender rhetoric and movements, leading to a shrinking democratic space for queer, feminist, and human rights defenders (Jibladze, Bakhturidze, and Chabukiani 2020). Despite being a beacon of democracy in the region for a long time, experts talk nowadays of clear democratic backsliding (Sabanadze 2023).

In this challenging environment, Georgian women today face structural difficulties impacting their lives, especially rural women, women with disabilities, ethnic minorities, queer women, IDPs, and women living near the ABLs, where several human rights violations take place at the hands of illegally stationed Russian troops. A lack of economic opportunities, access to quality medical services, freedom of movement, education, clean water, high prevalence of various forms of gender-based violence, criminality, and gender imbalance in land and property rights figure among the everyday security problems that Georgian women experience (Gamakharia 2023; 2021a). Child marriages and adolescent pregnancies/childbirths still occur in today's Georgia, mostly in regions populated by Azerbaijani ethnic minorities (UN Women Georgia 2024).

The next two chapters detail the *process* of NAP emergence, adoption, and implementation in Moldova and Georgia, rather than focusing on their *content*. They also explore the different perspectives of various actors involved in WPS advocacy and work.

Chapter 3 : Moldova

3.1 ‘At first, it was like rocket science’: the emergence of the first WPS NAP (2018-2021) in Moldova through small revolutions and compromises

3.1.1 Introducing Resolution 1325 in Moldova

> The beginning was very strange because we didn’t know how to start the process. It was like rocket science, something new; what is this? What is the Resolution 1325? And how can we apply it here? At the same time, we realized that it’s from the UN, so we should do something. (Elena Țarălungă, Head of Public Policy Coordination and European Integration Section, Ministry of Defense, Chișinău, July 14, 2022)

Although it is always difficult to go back in time to identify a precise moment when an idea or project started to emerge in people’s minds, we can attribute the introduction of Resolution 1325 in Moldova to a combination of different factors happening in a complicated political landscape. The WPS process in Moldova was a gradual process involving several national and international players, officially launched in 2016[42] under the Government of Pavel Filip. As neighboring countries[43] in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans had already adopted a WPS NAP or were in the process of adopting one, some Moldovan feminists in the Government, specific sectors (i.e., defense and security), and civil society (i.e., women NGOs/CSOs) started to see the need to introduce it in Moldova.

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[42] It is difficult to identify a precise moment when the NAP process was kickstarted as there are several perspectives on the subject. Evidence points to earlier engagements and discussions on WPS as Moldova committed to adopting a WPS NAP as early as 2014, within the framework of the Individual Partnership Action Plan between NATO and Moldova (Albu 2019, 300).

[43] Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia (2010), Georgia (2012), North Macedonia (2013), Romania, Kosovo (2014), Ukraine (2016) and Montenegro (2017) (Peace Women 2024).

Recalling the beginnings of the WPS process in Moldova, most of the respondents I interviewed identified WPS as a totally new topic for the country at the time. Back then, expertise on WPS was extremely scarce, close to non-existent, and relied only on specific individuals. On the one hand, NGOs and civil society's expertise was structured around either security topics or gender topics, but both were rarely discussed together. The connection between gender *and* security, for the most part, was not there yet.

On the other hand, Governmental authorities had a poor understanding of it (i.e., what WPS is for and why it is needed for Moldova), leading to "passive" norms resistance. Some of my interviewees identified Soviet legacies and societal stereotypes toward women as one of the reasons why there was resistance to WPS topics and, more broadly, women in the defence and security sector. A woman notes (Interview 6) that if the Soviet Union indeed provided formal equal rights related to employment and that society still has a collective memory that women can be anywhere, rigid patriarchal attitude and social norms regarding gender roles remain widespread (UN Women Moldova 2018). Those gender rigidities are especially acute regarding which jobs are appropriate or not for women. Reflecting on Soviet legacy and today's sexist mentality in Moldova, women tell me:

> We are a very patriarchal society, it [women in the defense and security sector] is a very difficult topic to discuss. Ten years ago, this issue… It was very difficult to integrate. We don't understand, still now, how important this issue is. (Gender expert, Chișinău, July 11, 2022)

> This topic [WPS and, more broadly, gender equality] is really, really challenging and very, very sensitive for all the security and defence sector. *Our mentality and our past* have influenced a lot of our way of thinking related to women in this specific sector, which is male-dominated. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 14, 2022)

In this unfavorable environment for introducing the WPS agenda, the challenge was to kickstart the discussion, engage different stakeholders, identify allies, and convince the Government to start drafting a NAP. But where to start?

The beginnings of the NAP were slow and paved with frustrations: feminist NGOs/CSOs were testing the waters of broader civil society, bringing attention to the importance of Resolution 1325, and feminists inside institutions faced many challenges and resistance while trying to do internal lobbying. Resistance was either coming from patriarchal gender stereotypes, a lack of understanding of what WPS is, or both. So, feminists had to be prepared with good arguments. While asked about its relevance to the Moldovan context, my interviewees mentioned several reasons:

> The WPS agenda represents *emancipation, not just of women, but also of State structures*. It represents good political will… To take responsibility for the fact that we need not only equality between women and men, but also *responsibility toward our international commitments*. (Cristina Lesnic, former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and former Chief Negotiator on the Transnistrian settlement process, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

What stands out in this quote is the notion of *possibility* offered by the agenda, a versatile tool that could be used to accomplish many things in the country. The women I interviewed mentioned different reasons why Resolution 1325 is important for Moldova. First, some mentioned that Moldova is a patriarchal country with several issues related to gender-based violence (e.g., domestic violence, human trafficking) and sexist stereotypes, things that the Resolution can help tackle and help slowly change people's mentality. Second, others mentioned how the Resolution could help improve human security overall, as Moldova is a poor and conflict-affected country that is vulnerable to external influence and internal

provocations. In reference to the conflict with Transnistria – which we will discuss more in section 3.3 – several mentioned how women's meaningful participation is essential for conflict resolution, which, again, is something that the Resolution can bring light to. Finally, others identified the agenda as relevant for EU accession, democratization, and modernization of state structures. While referring to a study on the societal perception of women in the defence and security sector in Moldova, one interviewee raises a dilemma:

> On the one hand, respondents [didn't] accept women in military service and army, more or less in the police, but they understood that women in security means to fight corruption and [have] more integrity. (Gender expert, Chișinău, July 11, 2022)

So here, women can help fight corruption and increase good governance mechanisms and the quality of public services in the country. Greater representation and participation of women in the defense and security sector, as well as in political institutions, is something that the Resolution can help encourage. At that time, some Moldovan feminists made the links between all the problems in their country, and they knew that the agenda could help them and serve as a strategic tool to make those connections and have a broader understanding of security. But institutions barely understood this yet (e.g., the link between violence against women and *national* security, for example) and were still resistant to it. It is the cooperation between several national and international actors that made the NAP come to life, which we are exploring in the next section.

3.1.2 Creating a national and international coalition for adopting the first NAP

> The NAP was the first public document in Moldova with a very strong collaboration between partners, donors, civil society, and central authorities. So here we came together, and we created this first NAP. (NGO representative, Chișinău, July 13, 2022)

The consultative process for the development of the first Moldovan NAP was highly collaborative and lasted almost two years. It took the form of complex assessments, consultation with regional experts, intersectoral discussions, multiple high-level technical and working groups between a multitude of national and international actors, and back-and-forth drafting and editing.

This process was, in large part, facilitated by Inclusive Security,[44] a Washington, D.C.-based NGO. According to several women I discussed with, this NGO crucially impacted the first NAP process by providing step-by-step guidance in close cooperation with the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Chișinău-based organization Information and Documentation Center on NATO (hereafter NATO Center, an autonomous organization within the framework of the Individual Partnership Plan between NATO and Moldova and the NATO Science for Peace and Security Program).

This project lasted from 2016 until the adoption of the first NAP in 2018, with the goal of assisting the Moldovan Government and civil society in creating an interinstitutional strategy to lead the NAP process, from self-assessment and identification of priorities for the NAP to regional exchanges (with experts from Georgia, Ukraine, the Western Balkans, Turkey, the Baltic States and Spain), society-wide consultations and providing expertise and training to governmental agencies to elaborate a NAP framework, ministry-level plans and a monitoring and evaluation plan. Other important stakeholders involved in this project

[44] There are indications in my data showing that the idea of introducing WPS in Moldova was brewing in the minds of a few women, but resources and expertise were lacking to make it a reality. It is this Inclusive Security-led and financed project which formally pushed the first NAP process.

were the OSCE, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), UN Women Moldova, the Military Academy of Armed Forces Alexandru cel Bun, and major donors like the Swedish Embassy (Interview 3, 5). After this project, the drafting of the NAP was formally launched in May 2017 following a Government order (Albu 2019, 301). Let's explore the three groups of participants in this first NAP process.

The first actor is civil society, which first pushed for the WPS agenda from the bottom up by providing grassroots expertise on gender-related issues and a deep understanding of the Moldovan context. NGOs/CSOs and coalitions, for example, the Platform for Gender Equality (*Platforma pentru Egalitate de Gen*), the Gender Center (*Gender-Centru*), the Foreign Policy Association (*Asociaţia pentru Politica Externă*), La Strada Moldova, the Women's Law Centre (*Centrul de Drept al Femeilor*), the Institutum Virtutes Civilis, and the NATO Center, among others, were the most vocal national organizations involved in the NAP process and served as grassroots lobbyists for the importance of Resolution 1325 and later, its implementation. Certain general human rights organizations in Transnistria[45] were also involved, like Interaction (Общественная организация Взаимодействие) and Resonance (Центр "Резонанс"). Among Moldovan civil society are found well-known gender experts – highly educated and internationally connected – that I call "WPS superstars," who not only were involved in previous gender legislation in Moldova in the

[45] General means here that their expertise is not WPS nor gender specifically. Their expertise is usually framed in "non-politically" sensitive ways (e.g., "family violence," women's health and kid's safety) to avoid raising suspicion by local authorities. NGOs in Transnistria – especially those touching upon the issues of human rights – are heavily scrutinized by the *de facto* authorities as they are suspicious about everything related to security or peace. Those few organizations involved in the NAP process had to travel to Chișinău to participate (Interviews 2 and 11) (see also the civil society mapping on both banks by Santos et al. 2023).

past decades (e.g., laws and national strategies on gender equality and gender-based violence) but then later "professionalized" their expertise into WPS issues.

The second actor is the Governmental authorities themselves, most notably the Ministry of Defense (MoD), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Bureau for Reintegration, the Security and Intelligence Service and other agencies involved in security matters. Crucially, inside those structures are women's organizations, the *Asociația Națională a Femeilor din Sistemul Afacerilor Interne* (Internal Affairs, formed in 2015), the *Asociația Femeilor din Poliție* (Police, formed in 2017), and the *Asociaţia Femeilor din Armata Naţională* (Armed Forces, formed in 2019), created to represent and address the needs and realities of women public servants (Interviews 8, 12, 67). At the institutional level, the NAP process was facilitated by femocrats—highly educated women in well-positioned positions—who advocated for the WPS agenda within their institutions.

The third actor is the UN Women Moldova country office (hereafter UN Women). As mentioned by every single person I interviewed, UN Women's overarching role was essential to create and merge expertise, conduct high-level advocacy, deliver capacity-building training, support international study visits, hire consultants, and form alliances and networks with different stakeholders at different levels of governance (UN Women ECA 2021). Briefly, UN Women is the "glue" holding everything together in all things WPS in Moldova – and among the initiators of the first NAP with feminist civil society.

Later came other important international organizations involved in the region, most notably the Global Network for Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), a New York-based NGO working in close collaboration with local partners across Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia, encouraging WPS localization activities, which we will discuss in greater detail in the next section. Importantly, international organizations like UN Women Moldova and Inclusive Security helped to "back" WPS initiatives and push and merge the expertise at the national level, appropriate to the Moldovan context, in cooperation with Moldovan feminists (femocrats, civil society, and gender experts).

As I was discussing the beginnings of the NAP process with some of the women who were directly involved in it, they highlighted several challenges they encountered. First, a challenge was to achieve a joint agreement with all governmental institutions and stakeholders involved, not only about the relevance of the WPS agenda but also whether a NAP was needed or not for Moldova, and if yes, what would be the best strategy to adopt: having a standalone document or integrating WPS issues as a section of a larger document, the Gender equality national strategy (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6). A first step to kicking off the NAP process was thus to do a comprehensive gender and needs assessment about the current situation of women in defence and security structures as part of larger national strategies, like the one on Gender equality. UN Women Moldova commissioned one of the experts I interviewed to do that assessment:

> In this context, during the elaboration of national strategy, a small group of the MoD with the support of Inclusive Security decided to evaluate the concrete situation [regarding] WPS, and we had a divided institutional opinion: to have a separate NAP on WPS or to integrate it to the National Strategy on Gender equality? It was a very complicated debate. (Gender expert, Chișinău, July 11, 2022)

Other internal assessments within specific Ministries also took place, for example, in the MoD (Interview 4, 5). Although this complicated dilemma involved policy coherence/complementarity and budget questions, the first option turned out to be the best one. However, to avoid policy duplication, the WPS NAP would have to focus specifically on topics not already covered by other national strategies, notably women's participation in the defence and security sector.

The second challenge was to create and merge expertise related to WPS in a way that was relevant and appropriate to the Moldovan context. Because the subject was entirely new to Moldova, one of the issues was the absence of literature and material available in Romanian and/or adapted to Moldova's context. The elaboration of training manuals and translation of WPS issues and language into Romanian (Interviews 3, 7) were important at the beginning of the NAP process, inspired by Georgian training manuals, notably (Albu 2017). Indeed, before the Inclusive Security-led project, "gender-based organizations did not have any expertise or experience working on WPS," specifically as gender-orientated and security-orientated organizations did not work together (Interviews 3 and 4).

So, not only was there still insufficient understanding of what WPS is among actors, but there was also resistance to it by the government because having a new standalone NAP would require time, political will, and budget, which are always scarce resources. But there is more: someone *above* ministries would have to take charge of this document. To determine who would be the leading agency coordinating the NAP was a third challenge identified by several women I interviewed, for which they "found a solution after many

lobbied to have the Bureau of Reintegration coordinate the NAP because the Head of the Bureau of Reintegration is the Vice Prime Minister, that means it has the authority to coordinate and give orders to other ministries," in addition to compiling data from the Ministries and reporting on progress (Interview 3; Guvernul Republicii Moldova 2018). Once the leading agency was identified, the Bureau of Reintegration headed by the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, things flowed more easily. While in Chișinău, I interviewed her personally, Cristina Lesnic. She shared with me her experience:

> Because it was a very new request [WPS agenda], it was very difficult to convince someone to take the action plan at the government level because it involves a budget, gender equality and the fight against discrimination, and it was very difficult to convince anyone. That's why I moved from the Ministry of the Interior to another position, that of Deputy Prime Minister, and there, I took the decision to take this plan and promote it in the Government and have the first action plan. (Cristina Lesnic, former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and former Chief Negotiator on the Transnistrian settlement process, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

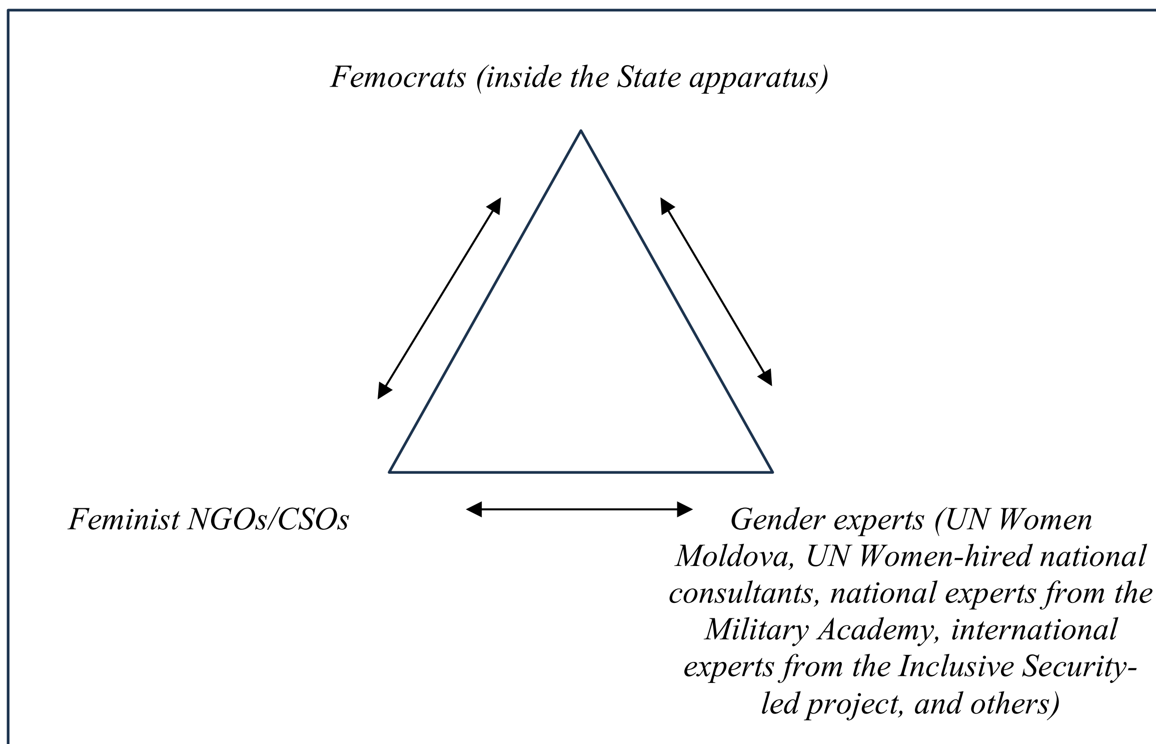
Several of my research participants mentioned to me how crucial her role has been in the NAP process, notably by pushing for the first NAP formal approval and taking the document "into her own hands":

> When Madam Lesnic came to this Reintegration office, we saw a huge progress. We had a very good coordination; she was very interested in the topic. She was interested in talking with people, asking questions, [identifying] gaps, and it was part of the progress. So, we didn't feel such an attitude and interest before this lady came to the Reintegration office. She organized different meetings with civil society and with our working groups […] She systematized and prioritized different institutions. So, it was a really great time. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 14, 2022)

Thus, the first NAP was made possible by a combination of the three groups of actors presented above: the leadership of highly positioned and motivated Moldovan feminists inside (femocrats inside the State apparatus) and outside the Government (Moldovan

feminist NGOs/CSOs), facilitated by gender experts inside (UN Women Moldova country office, UN Women-hired national consultants, experts from the Military Academy) and outside the country (from the Inclusive Security-led project and other international partners like DCAF) (Figure 3). After intense lobbying and a lengthy consultation and drafting process that lasted two years, the first NAP was officially adopted on March 21st, 2018.

Figure 3: Triangle of feminist actors working on the first Moldovan NAP



The first NAP's main direction was about women's representation and participation in the defense and security sector.[46] The 16-page document identifies eight barriers to women's

[46] Women are underrepresented in this sector, especially in decision-making roles. As of 2021, women represented 20% of individuals in the National Army. In 2020, women represented 2% of the personnel deployed in international operations and 22% of the General Police Inspectorate's staff (UN Women ECA 2021, 1). Women are also significantly underrepresented in both Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacy in the Transnistrian settlement processes (Fal-Dutra Santos et al. 2023, 33).

participation in the defense and security sector, which arose from consultations with the aforementioned experts. These eight barriers include gender stereotypes about women's participation in the defense and security sector, work-life balance challenges for women public servants, the sector's failure to prevent discrimination and gender-based violence, inadequate infrastructure for women public servants, and gender-blind hiring processes and needs assessment. Each identified barrier has an associated objective and actions, progress indicator, proposed solution, baseline, and desirable target. A quick look at them, however, tells us that they remain more or less difficult to measure, vague, and/or superficial (e.g., reducing gender stereotypes in the sector is measured by the percentage of respondents who believe that participation in the sector is appropriate for both genders). Actions mainly include awareness campaigns, personnel and human resources training, training manuals, development and implementation of protection mechanisms, and more inclusive internal recruitment procedures (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2018).

Overall, one of the critical actors in the formulation of those barriers in the first NAP was the women's associations inside ministries (MIA and police) and women public servants themselves, which played a crucial part in explaining women’s needs and barriers and helping remove those barriers, for example, with legislation change for women to access certain positions and better mechanisms to identify, report and prevent sexual harassment. Another aim of the first NAP was also to “change minds” regarding stereotypes and “convince society and institutions that women, girls, and boys have the same rights, and that performance should be evaluated according to their skills and results.” (Interview 1)

3.1.3 'We built the foundation, now we need to build the house' Reflecting on the first NAP process

Most of my respondents expressed their overall satisfaction with the coordination and cooperation between diverse actors while developing the NAP, which contributed to confidence-building between civil society and governmental structures. However, reflecting on the process today, a few of my respondents raised critiques and concerns.

First, about the underrepresentation of certain groups (Interviews 2, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13) in the NAP process, notably women living in Transnistria and Gagauzia, rural women, Roma women, women living with HIV, LGBTQIA+ communities and people with disabilities. Although some representatives of organizations covering those issues were consulted in the NAP process, they were not involved enough, and their voices and needs were not sufficiently taken into account, according to them. This is the result of a lack of information on this Resolution and its importance, as well as a lack of reach to those communities. One woman I interviewed, located in Gagauzia (Interview 10), mentions that "a lot of activities were organized on the national level, and that's why we still need events in territories, in the field," while also highlighting that there are very few CSOs with gender expertise in Gagauzia (two only: in Ceadîr-Lunga and Comrat). Moreover, women I interviewed in Gagauzia and Transnistria (Interviews 10 and 2) mentioned that they sometimes did not feel welcome or comfortable because of language barriers (i.e., their first language is Russian) and because Moldovan women were at times perceiving them as separatists and pro-Russian. For example, the woman I interviewed in Tiraspol barely felt concerned about

this Resolution, as international frameworks are challenging to implement in unrecognized states like Transnistria. She mentioned to me several times how it does not reflect ordinary citizens' reality and basic needs, a critique that can also be applied to the right bank:

> All these things are so complicated for normal people who are working on resolving ongoing problems. You and me, we are scientists, but people, if they don't have kindergartens or kitchens, they don't think about these big processes, *they think about how to feed their children in daily life.* (Oxana Alistratova, Director of the NGO Interaction, Tiraspol, July 7, 2022)

Second, a few of my respondents (Interview 7, 12, 13, 63) believed that there would be no NAP if it were not for the role of UN Women and other international actors, as the advocacy from civil society alone was insufficient. Without UN Women's credibility, authority, and advocacy during the process, WPS activities would be sporadic and unsustainable. A consequence of this "dependence" on foreign donors' assistance was the limited vision it brought, according to one feminist expert I talked to:

> The first NAP was elaborated by representatives of institutions and some representatives of civil society, which came with their narrow, I would say, understanding of WPS as a concept. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

This quote above was not a popular view among my interviewees, but it is interesting because it takes us to the notion of compromise and bargaining. The notion of compromise is a resonant theme when discussing the emergence of the first NAP and earlier advocacy. Several of my respondents mentioned that just the fact that Moldova managed to adopt a NAP was a big success in itself, considering the context of the country and all the challenges feminists had to face while promoting this agenda. One way of getting this document adopted was, therefore, to be pragmatic and make compromises on its content,

with some of the feminists involved having to lower their expectations and settle for a first document that was more modest than they would have hoped (i.e., a narrower focus).

For example, the aims and scope of the first NAP – almost entirely focused on defence and security issues – were narrow. Several respondents mentioned that it was better, in their views, to focus on something narrow for the first NAP and then to "build off that" for an improved second NAP, thus using the first NAP as a learning opportunity and gaining experience for the future. Respondents shared with me:

> Women's voices are becoming stronger today. And I think the success of the document is that *we have now the experience*. We've laid the foundations, the groundwork, and now we need to build the house. (Cristina Lesnic, former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and former Chief Negotiator on the Transnistrian settlement process, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)
>
> When our NAP was adopted, it was a novelty for the Republic of Moldova. And in my perspective, *of course, we couldn't integrate everything* although we were trying to incorporate all the four pillars of Resolution 1325. But mostly, the activities included in the National Action Plan were referring to supporting gender equality in peace and defence institutions […] But I think, from another point of view, that it is actually good because considering that Moldova started quite recently to speak about the WPS agenda, it was very important to educate the institutions responsible for peace and security, about what gender equality is, why it is important to be integrated, why women have to be represented at each level of the processes. And after this, we educate society at large about what WPS means. (Elena Ratoi, gender expert, Chișinău, July 20, 2022)

When asked about the narrow scope of the first NAP and, most strikingly, the non-mention of sensitive issues like the conflict with Transnistria, one of my respondents told me that it was a strategic compromise with the Government because:

> You cannot talk of a broader agenda with people who think that 'gender' equals 'LGBT' […] So, *there was a very clear rationale for why it was as it was*. And other elements linked to localization and human security, and so on, these were just *not possible and not realistic* to have [in the first NAP]. (Representative of an international organization, Chișinău, July 21, 2022)

Without those compromises and strategic omissions, there would have been more resistance, and perhaps the first NAP would have never been adopted. This is a great example of how feminists in every corner of the triangle are pragmatic in advancing WPS issues. As a few of my respondents told me, feminists involved in the first NAP chose a strategic and partial approach to "set the ground" slowly – a "mid-term exercise" (Interview 7) – and then grow from there in the second NAP to include broader topics. The following section reviews the challenges and critiques of the first Moldovan NAP implementation.

3.2 Making the first WPS NAP in Moldova a reality: challenges and lessons learned

> I can say that Moldova, in general, is very good when it comes to gender equality legislation, we have very good legislation regarding women's rights and human rights. The issue is the implementation of this legislation, but when it comes to paperwork, everything looks very good. (Elena Ratoi, gender expert, Chișinău, July 20, 2022)

3.2.1 Resourcing and budgeting the NAP

While NAPs have proliferated around the world over the last twenty years, a constant concern raised by WPS experts is their systematic underfunding. In short, words often do not match actions. Numerous studies have demonstrated that insufficient or non-existent financial resources have a negative impact on the implementation of NAPs (GNWP 2017). According to the UN's Secretary-General commissioned Global Study on Resolution 1325, "despite the wealth of evidence highlighting the benefits that investing in women can bring in terms of conflict prevention, crisis response, and peace, the failure to allocate sufficient resources and funds has been perhaps the most serious and persistent obstacle to the implementation of the WPS agenda." (Coomaraswamy 2015, 372) Moldova, in this case, is not different from the rest of the world.

Moldova's first NAP is not state-funded. None of the objectives or specific actions are budgeted; the document states that they will be achieved "within the limits of approved budget allocations." (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2018). The NAP thus relies entirely on external – direct or indirect – funding from international organizations and donors (significant donors include UN Women Moldova, UNDP, and the Swedish and American Embassies). Moldova receives budgetary support from the EU for specific topics, such as police reform and human rights, which are indirectly related to WPS. Some of those allocated budgetary funds can indirectly finance certain NAP activities if they are tuned together (but not explicitly dedicated to the NAP in the first place) through joint programs and actions. For example, the police was one of the most successful sectors in WPS implementation because they already had the funds from the EU to increase women's participation and mainstream gender equality in police forces (Interview 8 and 12).

One of my respondents (Interview 69), who is a public servant, mentioned that, based on her observations working across the region, it is common for countries like Moldova and others from the former Soviet Union – as they are countries still "facing big economic challenges with small budgets" – to develop public policies with no pre-established budget and resources only coming in when they have to implement the task. This strategy, she mentions, may work in the short term but not in the long term, especially when you aim for societal changes, institutional culture change, or long-term prevention of conflict. For a lot of feminists that I have spoken to, the absence of money allocated to the NAP leaves a bitter taste: it sends the message that the NAP is not a priority.

On the one hand, they are limited by international commitments to develop a NAP, but on the other hand, they face budget constraints. She argues this reflects poor budget management linked to economic development issues overall. In addition, she adds, the lack of funds dedicated to the NAP is also the result of a poor institutional understanding of the importance of this agenda, thus making it not a priority for the Government compared to more perceived pressing issues, and then impacting how policy documents are developed:

> It [WPS and NAPs] is not always sufficiently understood. So, when we are speaking about the need for budgeting financial resources for this, this means that we have to have a Minister of Finance involved who understands how important this investment is [in the long-term]. (Liliana Palihovici, former Member of Parliament, Chișinău, July 11, 2023)

Although this was not a popular view, some of my respondents (Interviews 2, 8, 13, 63) perceived the NAP as "donor-driven," which means that the push and the quality of implementation depend on Western donors. This results in poor ownership of the plan at the national (Governmental) level and a certain dependency on foreign actors.

> The WPS agenda was, I would say, pushed more by the donor community and [was] not necessarily an issue that was raised by the institutions as being a deficiency that they discovered, you know, so the institutions themselves, they do not perceive the gender criteria or the WPS as a necessity. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

The quote above reflects this donor-driven argument of the NAP *not* emerging because of needs and ambitions "organically" identified in the Government. While this may be accurate at times, this type of argument risks the tendency to erase the agency and impact of local actors heavily involved in the NAP process and implementation, such as the alliance of Moldovan NGOs/CSOs, gender experts, and femocrats inside the Government

(including women public servants raising awareness on their own needs). The following section will explore how the NAP was implemented despite underfunding.

3.2.2 Localizing and implementing the NAP

An almost unanimous observation from my interviews is that the implementation of the first plan, which runs from 2018 to 2021, has been full of challenges that have seriously disrupted the implementation process and the efforts to evaluate the plan and pave the way for the second. These challenges included the COVID pandemic,[47] which cancelled, impeded or transformed some of its activities into an online format. Therefore, the preparation of the second plan, which was supposed to start in 2022, was delayed. Then, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine amplified and multiplied existing challenges in the country, creating several complex layers of crises, including, but not limited to, hybrid military attacks against the Moldovan government, significant risks of internal destabilization in the country, and a massive wave of refugees from Ukraine, making the resources and attention to the plan even more limited. The results of the implementation of the first plan, the women I interviewed told me, are, therefore, very modest and mitigated.

I will focus here on two dimensions of the implementation of the first NAP: internal ministerial implementation and localization activities. Indeed, an essential part of implementing the NAP was for concerned Ministries – notably the MoD, the Intelligence

[47] As elsewhere around the world, the effects of the pandemic in Moldova have been particularly gendered. Feminists have noted a rise in domestic violence, unpaid care labour, social isolation and financial insecurities (UN Women Moldova 2022b; Platforma pentru Egalitate de Gen 2021; Palihovici 2021; UN Women Moldova 2020). Moreover, mobility restrictions have made it doubly challenging for women living in Transnistria to access healthcare services (GNWP 2020, 4).

Service, the MIA, and its departments like the Customs Services and Carabineers – to tailor individual action plans at the Ministry level to address identified barriers (Interview 3).

Two public servants I discussed with gave me insights into how implementation is going inside their Ministry. They mention that despite developing, revising, and modifying certain legislative and normative documents, the most challenging part was implementing and operationalizing the NAP inside their respective ministries because of a persisting lack of understanding and political will. Through sustained training with various staff and the development of guidelines at different levels of the Ministry, they tried to change the mentality of their peers, but there was still patriarchal resistance inside. One of them tells me, trying to convince men inside her Ministry of the importance of WPS, she and other colleagues gathered statistics and data from all over the country to show that:

> Women are raped, women are discriminated, beaten, not respected, so on and so forth… and they [her male colleagues] said 'it's okay, it's not a problem, she should do what her husband is saying,' so they really have this specific mentality. *Not all of them, but a big mass of people has this mentality.* (Government representative, Chișinău, July 14, 2022)

> So, I think more, was like that… not resistance. But, for example, until the NAP on WPS, we had a strategy for Gender equality, [and one] to prevent gender-based violence, violence in the family. But in that document, the woman was more like a victim. [In the NAP on] WPS, we're putting women in equal positions as men in the decision-making. *So, not every man is ready to work [with] or to receive orders from women*. It's quite difficult. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 28, 2022)

Then, although the document was first concentrated at the national level[48], localization of the NAP gradually and informally became part of the implementation process. Localization

[48] In Moldova, there is a strong separation between the national and local level. "Local" here refers to administrative-territorial units below the national level, so districts, cities and villages.

was first coined by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP 2013, 1) in the early 2010s. It is defined as a "people-based, bottom-up approach to policymaking and implementation, which emphasize local ownership and participation […] [engaging] local authorities, traditional leaders and grassroots women's groups in implementing the resolutions in local communities." Overseen by GNWP and in collaboration with Gender-Centru, other Moldovan NGOs/CSOs, and donors like the Austrian Development Agency, localization usually takes the form of traveling to different regions of the country, organizing workshops about the Resolution, conducting training and capacity-building activities for civil society and local authorities (e.g., mayors, local, district and municipal councils), social workers and civil servants (e.g., police) for them to use the NAP to address their specific local challenges (Interview 4). WPS localization activities were recorded in Orhei, Cahul, Ungheni, Bălți, and Comrat, for example (Interview 4; Medepalli 2018; Fal-Dutra Santos 2018; GNWP 2018).

Localization can also refer to consultations for gender and needs assessments, which help local authorities identify the differentiated needs of their population and better address them. Collaboration between local (especially mayors) and central authorities has been crucial since the 2022 waves of refugees in different host communities (UN Women Moldova 2023; 2022; UN Women ECA 2022):

> The agenda has given us a better understanding, in the process of localization, *of evolving needs at the local level* and whether there are problems that are known or problems that may, in some areas, be very different [than in other regions]. We've realized that mayors don't know the Resolution. Today, we continue to give them trainings so that they understand all four pillars of the Resolution. (Cristina Lesnic, former Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and former Chief Negotiator on the Transnistrian settlement process, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

Still, challenges and resistance remain at the local level in certain areas. A woman I interviewed in Comrat (Gagauzia) shared that more efforts should be made at the national level to "bring" the agenda to Gagauzia since many women are unaware of Chișinău-based initiatives. At the same time, she identifies the weight of local patriarchal structures – headed by "strong Gagauzian families" – and a lack of resources:

> A lot of women in Moldova don't know about this plan, about the NAP, about the values of this plan and opportunities for women […] This NAP is very useful for this work on the negotiations level, to collaborate between these regions and in Gagauzia, I know a lot of women, they say 'very useful tool. We discussed it.' *But we don't have enough special events to promote it, to develop it, to maybe do the implementation of this NAP here in Gagauzia*. (Antonina Volkova, Chairwoman of the CSO VESTA, Comrat, July 26, 2022)

An observation from my two fieldwork trips in Moldova is that the responsibility of implementing the NAP often falls on the shoulders of NGOs/CSOs (Interview 3), who already have limited resources and must constantly compete for grants, something not atypical to post-Soviet civil society. This has two effects that are not unique to the country, which we will explore in the following chapters. First, NGOs/CSOs are overworked and underpaid, and their crucial contributions are undervalued. Second, because of the "professionalization" of WPS, it is often the same elite and/or older NGOs/CSOs receiving funding and "dominating" WPS dialogues (see also Fal-Dutra Santos et al. 2023, 15).

Moreover, the responsibility of the NAP often falls on the shoulders of women inside the Government, too. A public servant I interviewed said (Interview 12) that she would like to see more men involved in implementing the plan, as it is often assumed that because it is about "women's issues," women necessarily need to take the lead.

Change is not made overnight. The implementation of the first NAP in Moldova has been complex. The MoD and MIA were the two central Ministries at the institutional level. But despite the efforts by femocrats to mainstream this document inside their respective Ministries, a lack of deep understanding of it and patriarchal resistance remains.

Not all objectives and activities of the first NAP were realized, given the challenges mentioned above and the lack of budget. Moldova also has other active NAPs (see footnote 46), for example, on gender equality and gender-based violence. In implementation, respondents told me that activities were sometimes combined and overlapped given the restricted time, resources, and capacities (see an example here: Ministry of Defense of Republic of Moldova 2019). This overlap in national strategies is notably reflected in the way the evaluation of the WPS NAP has been monitored and evaluated.

Overall, the implementation was unequal across sectors and the country, with less concrete results than hoped. Its realization would have been very difficult without the external support of international donors, notably UN agencies (Interviews 6, 7, 63). Nonetheless, although the results of the first NAP were mitigated, we will see in the last section of this chapter that there are several successes to celebrate. One of them is the mere existence of this document and all the possibilities that it brought to Moldova and the discussions it helped initiate. The following section will focus on the final evaluation of the first NAP, its critiques, and lessons learned in preparation for the second NAP.

3.2.3 Monitoring and evaluating the NAP

The monitoring and evaluation of the first NAP was conducted in concert with diverse actors from the Government, civil society, and UN Women. Moldova evaluated its WPS NAP alone and simultaneously with other national strategies[49] in its national report for Beijing+25 in preparation for CSW64 in 2020. Both evaluations (mid-term and final) are based on various sectoral reports and broad public consultations and drafted by a UN Women national consultant. Despite that, my participants often shared with me that they would have liked to have more robust indicators, better monitoring mechanisms, and a more transparent process altogether (as many women were unaware of the UN Women final evaluation), as well as the highlighting of lessons learned for the second NAP. The evaluation of the first NAP has revealed that most of the objectives were partially achieved (Albu 2021). The following paragraphs will focus on my participants' assessments of the main lessons and critiques emerging from the analysis of the first NAP.

First, the lack of ownership combined with a high political turnover makes it hard to cement hard-won changes in those institutions, as those changes primarily rely on specific persons in specific positions. This means that when those persons leave, the progress is lost and does not last in time. Human resources are always a challenge because "you invest a lot of

[49] The National Gender Equality Strategy (2017-2021), the National Strategy on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2018-2023), the National Strategy for Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2018-2023), the National Action Plan on the implementation of the UNSCR1325 on Women in Peace and Security (2018-2022), the National Program on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (2018-2022), the National Employment Strategy (2017-2021), and the National Action Plan on Human Rights (2018-2023) (Government of the Republic of Moldova and Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection 2020, 5–7).

money and time into that person, and then she is leaving the system. It's also like that in other countries. Because they are not paid enough for what they are doing" (Interview 67), a public servant tells me. Another expert also mentions this institutional culture as common to countries from the former Soviet Union (Interview 63). Thus, the lack of institutional memory, poor ownership, and high turnover affect the continuity of changes over time.

When I asked my participants whether the different political administrations mattered in the NAP process, most of my participants said that it did not matter because NAP adoption and implementation mostly depend on political will and specific individuals' leadership:

> The success of such documents and such a strategy is *primarily based on dedicated people who want to contribute to the change.* The involvement of both a dedicated specialist and a leader who wants to make changes is very important. If we did not have this core of dedicated specialists and leaders, I can say that we would not have developed such a document by now. (Elena Țarălungă, Head of Public Policy Coordination and European Integration Section, Ministry of Defense, Chișinău, July 14, 2022)

> Everything is personal, everything is individual. If you have *the right person in the right position*, you can advance this topic. (Elena Ratoi, gender expert, Chișinău, July 20, 2022)

> I would not put anything [to do] with [Igor] Dodon or Maia Sandu administration because it's very much around *individuals*. (Representative of an international organization, Chișinău, July 21, 2022)

Another expert involved in the NAP process recalls that initial lobbying depended a lot on personal relationships and informal talks between civil society and women in institutions. (Interview 3), which makes progress overall "fragile":

> Everything that is related to WPS agenda, its promotion and advocacy campaign, are very much concentrated *on specific people, their interests and, I would say, emotions*, and not necessarily a value which is inserted, you know, in the mind and hearts of the people. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

What is interesting is that I also received a complementary answer to this. Liliana Palihovici, a well-known Moldovan politician, a national expert on gender issues, and a former Member of Parliament (from 2009 to 2017) whom I interviewed in Chișinău shares with me how nonetheless important the political atmosphere in which the WPS process takes place is. A few years before the adoption of the first NAP and the formal kick-off of the NAP process with Inclusive Security, Resolution 1325 was not seen as a priority by anyone as there were other pressing issues (e.g., women's economic empowerment, women's emigration, childcare and maternity leave) on Moldovan feminists' plate, including her own. When she was first trying to establish a women's caucus inside the Parliament, "at that moment, Moldova was passing through a very complicated political period when the country was ruled by coalitions formed by four parties that were fighting each other constantly […] And when you have such condition, it is very complicated to move issues that are very sensitive for a society with a high level of misogyny in it." Referring back to the WPS agenda and the political landscape at the time, she tells me:

> When Moldova started to develop the first WPS NAP team, this work was totally focused on the level of the Government because Moldova was ruled in a coalition. We had also a competition between Parliament and the Government […] So, at that moment, *the Government was developing some policy documents like this one with no communication with the Parliament.* (Liliana Palihovici, former Member of the Parliament of Moldova, Chișinău, July 11, 2023)

She explains that this is a problem because it has subsequently hindered healthy communication between the Government and Parliament on issues relating to WPS, including its funding, considering that the Parliament approves the national budget. So, the fate of policy documents like the WPS NAP is not necessarily dependent on the political

party in place but rather on specific individuals' leadership and interest in advancing the issue. However, the political atmosphere in which these documents exist is still relevant.

Second, despite the high focus on the defense and security sector in the first NAP, several participants (Interviews 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 12, 63, 67) expressed their disappointment. Still to this day, the number of women in this sector is insufficient, especially as peacekeepers in international peacekeeping missions[50] and also at the border patrol with Transnistria (in the buffer zone). Despite their disappointment, most were nuanced in their observations. There is evidence of slow culture change in those institutions compared to before the first NAP, but gender stereotypes in the sector remain high, and men still hold the highest decision-making positions. Moreover, there are still several barriers in place for women in the defense and security sector and the advancement of their career: lack of adequate infrastructure and uniform fit to women's bodies, insufficient salary, harassment, and challenges in work-life arrangements (Interview 5). The following quote illustrates very well the mitigated results of the first NAP as both success and failure:

> For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs adopted a regulation to combat sexual harassment in the workplace. The document has a lot of gaps, and actually… it's difficult to be used, to really combat sexual harassment in the workplace. Of course, there is such a document, there is such an instrument [now], *but women still feel reticent to report cases of sexual harassment because they fear being blamed, they fear being harassed again by their colleagues, or they just don't understand what sexual harassment is* […] Or, for example, the Minister of Defense made a very big step in the field of integration of gender equality inside the institution. But there are [still] a lot of patriarchal perspectives. (Gender expert, Chișinău, July 20, 2022)

[50] For example, between 2007 and 2019, only ten Moldovan women serving in the Armed Forces took part in UN peacekeeping missions (Government of the Republic of Moldova and the MHLSP 2020, 48), for example, in Georgia (UNOMIG), Liberia (UNMIL), Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), South Sudan (UNMISS) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) (internal document given to me during an interview).

Third, almost everyone I interviewed criticized the lack of a proper budget dedicated to the NAP, which brings several problems. Not only does an absence of a budget send the message that the document is not a priority for the Government, but it also impedes its sustainable implementation and creates a "project-based" logic depending on Western funds, leading to making the work of these organizations very precarious or creating the conditions for a lack of ownership by the Government. A constellation of foreign stakeholders can create challenges, according to a WPS expert (Interview 13), because it can lead to duplication of work and chaotic, incoherent, and uneven understandings of the agenda between all the donors involved: "When you have different donors working on different issues, and then you have a national agenda, with activities that are not very clear and structured or having very concrete inputs… It's hard to have successes, you know, and to make progress in mainstreaming the WPS agenda. It's very diverse. It's very spread out."

Fourth, the majority of women I interviewed were not so severe in their critiques of the first NAP as they knew all the compromises it took to get there. While some were disappointed because they expected more, they nuanced and balanced their disappointment with successes and emphasized the importance of pragmatism. However, there were a few more "radical" voices. All these realities coexist.

Some (Interviews 2, 13) were clearly more pessimistic about its actual impact on the country. Although they agreed that it was a vital tool at the global level, they doubted its real influence in Moldova because of the way it has been approached and implemented so far, which, according to them, followed more of a liberal feminist approach. Their concerns

were consistent with commonly expressed critiques of WPS in the literature. They feared that WPS was becoming a mere "buzzword" with weak impacts; they critiqued its narrow, stato-centric vision of security and active avoidance of sensitive issues, thus not addressing the root causes of problems; and mostly, they failed to see how the WPS NAP would transform the lives of ordinary people. On the latter, they noted how the aim to change mentality was not an efficient approach if material needs are not met:

> You know well that Moldova is not the richest country, and we do have a lot of vulnerable groups. And when you go to vulnerable groups and try to tell them that 'you need to change your perception about how you see women and their role in society,' they will tell you, 'I don't care who is leading a man or a woman, I just want to have food on my table and to feed my kids.' And 'if the man is the symbol of power and he's the one who will ensure this for me, then I will vote for this person.' This is how things are working. *So, you really need to have a welfare society to be able to say that 'now we are changing mentalities,' otherwise the mentality will not change*." (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

Finally, Transnistria is a significant limitation to the first NAP – in all its dimensions, from content to implementation. As mentioned previously, the conflict with Transnistria is not mentioned at all. Based on my interviews, the resulting consensus of the first NAP is twofold. First, it was too politically sensitive to try and include the conflict inside the NAP. So, as a result, several mentioned how there were not enough women negotiators and mediators in dialogue with Transnistria. Second, the Government does not have access – politically, economically, or territorially – to the left bank of the Dniester/Nistru since it has been ruled by a *de facto* Government since 1992. Also, the scrutiny under which Transnistrian women are subjected by *de facto* authorities when they cross to the right side of the Dniester/Nistru impedes fluid collaboration between women on both sides and makes localization in Transnistria impossible. Although a cooperation group of gender experts from both sides has been created by the OSCE (Interview 10) and later UN Women

(Interview 3), cooperation between NGOs/CSOs remains limited and usually focuses on specific issues like human trafficking. But even then, cooperation is difficult because Transnistria has its own law on human trafficking, which does not follow international norms on the principle (Interviews 2 and 11). The following section tackles the topic of Transnistria and how my respondents perceive it.

3.3 'We were pretty sure that Moldova would come next': the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Transnistria, and post-2022 gendered (in)securities

> The conflict in Transnistria was like, until the war in Ukraine, a sleeping one. Which would be like a sleeping bear in winter. But now we have the risk that the bear could wake up. And that risk is growing. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 28, 2022)

On February 24th, 2022, despite many warning signs already present, Russia shocked the world by launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Sharing a 1,000 km border with Ukraine, Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița immediately declared a state of emergency after a unanimous vote in Parliament and adopted special measures, ranging from border regulations to protection of Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers (Government of the Republic of Moldova 2022). In the days and months that followed, hundreds of thousands of refugees (Ukrainians and third-country nationals) – mainly from the Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson oblasts – crossed into Moldova, either to stay permanently or to transit elsewhere (UN Women Moldova 2022a; UNHCR Operational Data Portal 2024). Before the invasion, Moldova had a population of 2.5 million, where resources and infrastructure were already limited. Today, it has received close to a million refugees – out

of which around 113,000 have stayed – making it the country hosting the highest number of refugees per capita (UNHCR Operational Data Portal 2024).

Not only did these exceptional circumstances shake the whole country, but they also amplified the war anxiety among Moldovans because "society remembers very well what happened in 1992 with Transnistria." (Interview 69) If "for almost 30 years, nothing happened, and the things were how they went" (Interview 6), now things felt different. With a war next door and a fragile situation in Transnistria, many Moldovans feared the conflict could erupt again, as those conflicts are never truly "frozen" (Santos 2019).

In Spring 2022, a series of mysterious explosions happened in Transnistria. When I conducted my fieldwork in Chișinău in July 2022, there were daily bomb threats targeting critical infrastructure like public and private institutions, Parliament, Government buildings, and the international airport (see Popoviciu and Calmis 2022). Although they were all false alarms and part of a larger strategy of Russian blackmailing, internal destabilization, online mis/disinformation, and hybrid warfare, they contributed to raising the fear that Moldovans could maybe "come next." With the Ukrainian border about 50 km away from the capital, bombings, particularly in the Odesa region, are felt and feared among Moldovans (Interview 8). There was clearly a generalized feeling of agitation, uncertainty, and an unclear future. This section is organized around three themes arising from my interviews. I asked specific questions about the Transnistrian conflict in relation to WPS and its impact on the NAP. Answers revealed much deeper issues regarding the perception of this space and its effects on Moldovans' understanding of peace and security.

3.3.1 Transnistria as a threat to Moldova's security

A recurrent theme in almost all of my interviews with Moldovan women is that Transnistria is a threat to Moldovan security, from traditionally understood security to human security. Several elements were frequently mentioned. First, the complex issues related to human trafficking and Transnistria as a "black hole" where international laws and norms of victim protection do not apply due to Transnistria's unrecognized status. Another element mentioned on that matter was the difficulty in collaborating with *de facto* authorities to prevent human trafficking, although collaboration between Moldovan and Transnistrian NGOs/CSOs on that issue exists. Transnistria is thus perceived as a space allowing the flourishing of criminal activities, which have consequences at the intersection of gender, age, and citizenship through and within Moldova. Two public servants tell me:

> Transnistria is a source of human trafficking, irregular migration, discrimination, domestic violence, and illegal phenomena. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

> I think that this conflict, having this frozen conflict, and having this war on the border in Ukraine, I think that... *It's unpredictable*. Also, human trafficking is now changing. So, if previously we had more sexual exploitation, now it's more about migration and labour exploitation. And now, every year is changing, all this situation and having these refugees, and half of them are kids, because men are not coming now in Moldova [because of male conscription in Ukraine]. So, half of the people coming are kids, I think that the situation will be heavier. More difficult. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 22, 2022)

Second, the human rights violations by *de facto* authorities were frequently mentioned as having direct and indirect impacts on Moldova, as seen, for example, through flows of internal migration and Moldova's difficulty in protecting its citizens in Transnistria. Transnistria (and Gagauzia alike) is perceived, by the women I interviewed, as more patriarchal and with more of a "Soviet mentality" than the rest of Moldova. While talking

about women's human rights, one of my respondents (Interview 1) who regularly goes to Tiraspol describes it as "two different worlds, but in the same country" in terms of access to basic facilities, water, medical services, and civil liberties:

> I think that the biggest challenge is the instability of this frozen conflict in Transnistria because I am just worrying about women's rights in this specific region, Transnistria, but also in Gagauzia. In Gagauzia, it's not as difficult, but still. *It's not developed like in other parts of Moldova.* But Transnistria is a specific enclave *where women's rights are not fully realized* and where women do not feel secure. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 27, 2022)

> The conflict has truly influenced a lot the situation of women, especially the situation of women from the left side [Transnistria] who are more limited in options for education and jobs because the opportunities for employment there are even less than on the right bank. So, women, in many, many cases, are somehow forced to pay a double payment for a service. For instance, they are obliged to have life and health insurance from the left bank, but they do not receive quality services there. So, they are buying health insurance from the right bank in order to have the opportunity to come here and benefit from medical services. And this is just an example. There are so many other examples. (Liliana Palihovici, former Member of the Parliament of Moldova, Chișinău, July 11, 2023)

Third, the Russian army on Moldovan soil, along with the Soviet-era ammunition depot in Cobasna/Kolbasna, was also identified as a threat to Moldova's security and its population:

> [In] this enclave, they, [the Russians] have an army, illegally stationed, and this is a source of insecurity for Moldova [...] It's a depot of the Soviet Union that stayed there, and they didn't transport all the ammunition. This is the greatest danger for Moldova. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

> All our security policies are influenced by having Transnistrian conflict, by having Russian troops on our territory as being one of the main threats to our security. *Of course, the WPS agenda is part of our general national security vision*. (Elena Marzâc, former Director of the Information and Documentation Center on NATO in Moldova, Chișinău, July 11, 2022)

As such, the quotes collected and presented in this section suggest that Transnistria is understood as an insecure space but also as a threat to Moldova's security because of the flows of criminal activities: sex trafficking, labour exploitation, illegal arms circulation,

and various violations of human rights, all of which have gendered dimensions. One idea that emerges from these interviews is the notion of *instability* and *non-accessibility*. This, in turn, influences how WPS policies are thought through and implemented. Another element that comes through loud and clear is how impossible it is to discuss WPS without first addressing the limits and challenges posed by national and regional insecurity. The following section delves deeper into those anxieties.

3.3.2 Transnistria as a "sleeping" conflict that could be revived at any time

In my interviews, Transnistria is described as a "sleeping" conflict. Although the situation has been protracted for more than 30 years and has a low intensity of violence, the slightest thing could reignite the conflict again. One of these is the neighboring war in Ukraine, which is identified as a "catalyzer" and a source of growing insecurity by many of the women I interviewed. As such, the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 serves as an insecurity "multiplier," for example, through massive flows of irregular migration and impacts on Transnistrian-Moldovan-Ukrainian relations:

> The population of Moldova has increased by 4% [compared to] before the refugees. This crisis will influence the dynamics and the behaviour of Transnistria. I saw Zelensky's report that if they are going to have provocations from Transnistria, they are going to respond with the same force. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

> So, we have a lot of problems, manipulations and provocations there. When you have some actions, every time, you need to take into consideration Transnistria. (NGO representative, Chișinău, July 13, 2022)

> Of course, everyone was very, very frightened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And initially in the first days of the war, *we were pretty sure that Moldova would come next and that we would be invaded really soon*. But it didn't happen. Luckily for us, yes. (Elena Ratoi, gender expert, Chișinău, July 20, 2022)

> It [the conflict with Transnistria] was very old and not, maybe, perceived as a real one […] Because it's frozen. You know, all these conflicts [in the post-Soviet region] are… how to say, *they are not so visible as long as there are no fires and explosions*. But the effects they have on people, and the effects they have on the countries are very profound. They're felt. (Representative of an international organization, Chișinău, July 21, 2022)

> Because of the Ukrainian war now, many are talking about this situation. Because for 30 years we have had this situation, and it's somehow… many were like keeping silent. 'Okay. Let's live with this.' But having this situation for Europe, or for all international community, it's like a bomb […] And in this situation, I think that Europe and all the world will give a lot of money to help Ukraine and to keep this situation on the borders [of Europe]. But in this situation, we have this like, you know, *a ball that is growing, growing, growing, growing here in Transnistria*. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 22, 2022)

In the excerpts above, we again find the notion of instability. A drastically contrasting view that I heard, however, is that the conflict does not have any impact for some because a lot of time has passed since 1992; the status quo is ingrained in the collective imaginary of people, especially young people, who did not go through the war themselves and thus forget about it. Another interesting idea is that the conflict in Transnistria is often not perceived or understood as being as "serious" as the other conflicts in the region, for example, in Ukraine. This is not a common understanding of the conflict among those I interviewed, but it is there, nonetheless. The respondents below mention how it is an artificial conflict created by Russia, which became part of people's lives:

> People don't feel the conflict in Moldova […] This conflict is quite an artificial one; it was created in 1992 by the FSB […] I don't think the people are connecting WPS issues with the region. (Vadim Vieru, lawyer and Program Director at the Asociația Promo-LEX Chișinău, July 5, 2023)

> I don't think people in general, yes, we know there's a conflict there, but it's not quite a conflict because over there, in Transnistria, we don't have... it's not like what's happening in Ukraine. It's a region where the authorities [are] separated from ours, so it's not really a conflict. Yes, there is a... how can I put it, a risk of conflict. Really, there's no conflict because there are people who have relatives, family, brothers, and sisters who live there. Maybe there are risks […] It's a risk but not really a conflict. It's a risk for security, regional security, the economy, that's all. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 10, 2023)

It is possible to think that, because of its protracted nature, some people have learned to live with it as the status quo. It is also possible that the conflict has had concrete effects on others in Moldova, as discussed in the previous section. As contradictory as those views might seem, there is no need to search for "truths," as both realities are legitimate. For some—especially those with relatives there—it represents a source of militarization, fear, and instability; for others, it is a conflict "frozen" in time with no real implications for many ordinary citizens' daily lives who have almost forgotten about its existence.

Nonetheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reignited anxieties for the majority; it represents an additional insecurity for Moldovans, as it could inflame tensions and flare up the conflict in Transnistria after decades of relative 'calmness,' either through internal destabilization, human displacement or the recruitment of Transnistrian soldiers. The fear of a Transnistria front attacking Ukraine was mentioned to me, though it is unlikely due to their limited defense capabilities (Interview 11). The above excerpts use several metaphors (e.g., a sleeping bear, a growing ball, a bomb) to show that Transnistria is a source of anxiety for the women I interviewed. There was a consensus among my interviewees that this source of insecurity impacted NAP adoption and implementation. The following section shows the strategic use of this conflict as an argument for Moldova to adopt a NAP.

3.3.3 Transnistria as an argument for adopting a NAP

The interviews I conducted in Moldova show tension in Transnistria's role in the NAP. At first glance, Transnistria is not explicitly mentioned in the Moldovan NAP, unlike other NAPs in the region (Ukraine, Georgia, or Armenia), but it is the "elephant in the

room." I asked my interviewees why. On the one hand, the protracted conflict with this separatist region is often mentioned as a "reason" for adopting and implementing a NAP, as NAPs are globally understood to be especially important for conflict-affected countries. When asked about the relevance of WPS for Moldova, representatives of NGOs immediately answered:

> Of course, because Moldova was part of the Soviet Union, and we have this "frozen" conflict. *Frozen, but not so frozen…* We have somehow conflict here, and actually, we have a lot of problems and challenges here; we have Transnistria, we have Gagauzia […]. So, *in our region, WPS is very important.* (NGO representative, Chișinău, July 13, 2022)

> Definitely, it was one of the arguments why we needed a NAP. Because we have a conflict in Transnistria and because we don't have women in negotiations, [as] negotiators. So, one of the objectives of this NAP was to identify and train women negotiators, taking in mind that women are more peaceful; they are coming with a more peaceful and community-based approach to peace negotiations (Elena Marzâc, former Director of the Information and Documentation Center on NATO in Moldova, Chișinău, July 11, 2022)

On the other hand, including Transnistria in the NAP would also have its limitations. Several participants mentioned that it would be "pointless" to include Transnistria in the NAP (although the NAP technically is about the Republic of Moldova as a whole, which includes *de jure* Transnistria) as Moldovan authorities do not have access nor influence in Transnistria; its implementation would therefore be impossible. Leaving this issue outside of the NAP was a compromise to make for the first Moldovan NAP to be adopted:

> There have been such discussions about whether to integrate or not in the national program, some topics related to the Transnistrian region. And it was decided that for the time being, it's better to focus the attention on the so-called Moldovan part or on the right bank of the river Dniester *because we don't have control over what happens there*. (Elena Ratoi, gender expert, Chișinău, July 20, 2022)

> *It was too sensitive.* To work in Transnistria, you have to have a special mandate. For this Government to endorse a document which implies work in Transnistria, means that they know from now on that they will do nothing. So. *What would be for them the idea to include*

> *something they know they cannot work with, cannot implement, cannot influence or have control over?* (Representative of an international organization, Chișinău, July 21, 2022)

> We don't have any control there. *And as long as we have this frozen conflict there, we will not be able to implement, I think, successfully* […] We [authorities] are not in the right to send them some emails or anything because if we would cooperate with them, it would mean that we would recognize them and give them legitimacy. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 22, 2022)

In discussing these compromises and the strategic omission of Transnistria from the first NAP, most of my interviewees mentioned finding it essential, however, to include this in Moldova's future NAPs, even more so considering the new anxieties that have emerged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. When asked whether WPS could be a helpful instrument for the negotiation processes with Transnistria, the answers were nuanced: yes, but it will be difficult. Some of my respondents are more pessimistic on the matter, mentioning that Moldovan authorities[51] do not make the link between WPS and Transnistria or when they do, they avoid it because it is too politically sensitive:

> I do not think that this situation in Transnistria is perceived or is taken from the prism of the NAP on 1325. It's like, it's perceived in Moldova in a more general context related to war and conflict, you know, in this region on the left bank. It's quite a complex issue, but it's, again, *taken from a perspective of typical security issues* and the influence of the Russian Federation on this region. So, it's not taken from the security or peace [perspective], as we experts understand it. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 27, 2022)

> It's about, you know, how seriously in general institutions are taking this issue […] I think the NAP took the wrong direction because we didn't talk about important issues *because they were very sensitive in Moldova.* But then again, you really need to have, you know, very committed officials who would be brave enough to insist and put in this document issues that are relevant to Moldovan society. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

[51] The discussion excludes the position of Transnistrian authorities here because several signs point that it would align with Russia's position on WPS: that it is a Western agenda "threatening" traditional values.

To summarize this section, most of my respondents identified Transnistria, when asked about it, as a space of insecurity, fear, and instability, in short, a dormant conflict that could be reignited at any time. Out of this anxiety – which is explicitly linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and fears of internal destabilization in Moldova by Russia – emerge gendered insecurities such as several human rights violations, the difficulty of collaborating with women from the left bank, worry for relatives in Transnistria, and a source of human trafficking and criminality, which affects women in particular ways. When discussing those issues with my participants, the reintegration of the left bank is often mentioned as the long-term goal, and rarely is the independence of Transnistria mentioned as a possibility, too. Transnistrian women feel little concerned by this agenda, which is hardly applicable to their context in an unrecognized state, and remain highly vigilant, as *de facto* authorities severely repress civil society activities.

Finally, it is interesting to observe how Transnistria has been used as an argument to justify the adoption of a NAP. Still, in the end, it couldn't be part of the first NAP because the issue was too politically sensitive, and the Moldovan authorities do not have access to this region. The next section looks at what happens next: preparing for the second Moldovan NAP under exceptional circumstances and looking to the future.

3.4 Reflecting on successes and future challenges: the adoption of the second Moldovan WPS NAP (2023-2027) in times of multilayered crises

At the time of my first fieldwork, there was a febrility pending in the air regarding the second NAP. The document was already written and under the intellectual property of UN Women, but still waiting to be approved by the Government. When I was there in July 2022, the instability following the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine was a big concern looming over people's heads, often named as a reason for the delay in adopting the second NAP, along with the COVID pandemic. While some of my respondents were pessimistic about the second NAP, others had faith that it would reflect the country's new realities.

After a long wait, the second NAP was finally adopted in March 2023 for the period of 2023 to 2027. Although the costs for each activity are more detailed than the previous NAP, there is still no budget associated with it other than "within the limits of the allocated means." The second NAP still largely relies on foreign donors or is integrated with the existing budget of the responsible Ministries. In comparison to the first NAP, the second one is longer, more detailed, and includes an overview of women's rights in Moldova. It builds on lessons learned from the first NAP and has 12 objectives. For each objective, it has an associated action, indicator, cost, and desirable target. The NAP claims to be in line with EU gender equality strategies, EU-Moldova Association Agenda, as well as the CEDAW, and the Istanbul Convention.[52] The second NAP includes a situation analysis

[52] The Istanbul Convention, officially known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, aims to combat gender-based violence across Europe through national legislation and policies.

that outlines the security risks and humanitarian dimensions associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as the human rights violations and threats posed by the unresolved conflict with Transnistria. Although there is still a focus on women's participation in the defense and security sector, the scope is broader than the first one as it also includes the importance of women in decision-making, conflict resolution, refugee crisis management, and humanitarian response, notably (Government of Moldova 2023).

This last section of the chapter will proceed as follows. First, we will dive deeper into the challenges encountered during the development and adoption of the second Moldovan NAP, occurring in a radically different context than the first one. Second, looking to the future, I'll present the challenges ahead for the second NAP, according to the participants in my research. Thirdly, we will explore the question of the NAP in Moldova in the context of the European Union's ascension and a foreign policy shift to the West. Finally, looking back at the process, we will discuss the achievements of the WPS agenda so far in Moldova, in the words of the women I interviewed.

3.4.1 The adoption of the second Moldovan NAP

The second NAP was adopted in a very different context than the first one. It was also developed in a collaborative partnership between UN Women, Government agencies, civil society, and gender experts, based on lessons learned from the first one. Like the first NAP, finding a lead agency in the Government willing to take charge of the second NAP was challenging. However, a significant difference between the first NAP and the second

one is that the latter is now under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) umbrella, while the first one was under the Bureau of Reintegration. Women I interviewed who were involved in the second NAP process told me that one of the reasons for this is that there was less political will and capacity in the Bureau of Reintegration now since Cristina Lesnic is not there anymore. Moreover, the MIA was headed by a woman at the time – Ana Revenco – who was very interested in taking the lead on WPS topics (though she was replaced in July 2023, as I was completing my second fieldwork in Moldova). One of my respondents, Liliana Palihovici, a former Member of the Parliament, reflects:

> Moldova now has the second National Action Plan. It was developed in a more participative way than the previous one. Some of the activities that were included in the previous one and that were not implemented due to the lack of the budget were transferred to this one. And this plan is more focused with more concrete activities than the previous one. *From my point of view, this shows that authorities involved in the process of developing this plan have a broader understanding of the implications of women in security processes*. At the same time, they accepted more comments and suggestions from the civil society organizations working on this dimension. (July 11, 2023)

However, she adds that changing the lead agency to the Ministry of Internal Affairs is a step back and has several limitations. One is that a Ministry cannot give orders to other Ministries; that is why the Bureau of Reintegration—which is above Ministries—was chosen in the first place. This shows the limits of relying only on an individual's leadership.

Another difference between both NAPs is that the second occurred in a "whole new security architecture" (Interview 7). The Russian invasion of Ukraine, as mentioned previously, has direct and indirect consequences in Moldova, like cyberattacks, blackmailing, and massive waves of refugees seriously disrupting the process (follow-up chat in July 2023). Unsurprisingly, given the issues outlined earlier in this chapter, the end

of the first NAP and the preparation of the second NAP have been pushed aside and considered by the authorities not to be a priority, given the crisis context. At the time of my first fieldwork in 2022, participants were telling me:

> I think the current government doesn't have time for certain activities, because it's in several crises, and that, I understand. There's the migrant crisis, *and everyone is tired*. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 6, 2022)

> It's [now] something that 'you will think about tomorrow when we will not have crises to face. *Or when our situation will be better, then we will think about it*.' (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

Here, my respondents are talking about the "exhaustion" of State capacities due to the multilayered crises they are facing. The waves of refugees coming from Ukraine were putting enormous financial and logistic pressure on public services, infrastructure, and housing. Not only was there a need for immediate humanitarian and psychological support for refugees, but the fear of provocations from/in Transnistria has been mounting since February 2022. The Government had to deal with that, in addition to hybrid warfare, Russia's energy bullying as winter arrived, growing inflation, and internal political crisis.[53]

And yet, despite these crises, Moldovan feminists are creative and know that a feminist approach is essential, especially in those difficult times. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the devasting gendered consequences on women add additional "proofs" to justify once again the crucial importance of Resolution 1325 and adopting a second, more

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[53] From the summer until the fall of 2023, anti-government protests were organized in Chișinău by Israeli-Moldovan pro-Russian oligarch Illan Șor. Involved in multiple fraud schemes and after threats of plotting a coup, the Moldovan Constitutional Court banned its political party, the Șor party (RFE/RL Moldova 2023).

comprehensive NAP. For the ones who were still skeptical about its importance, now there is a "live" demonstration of what war does and how Moldova is also concerned (Interviews 6, 7, 8), as people can see directly how women and men are differently affected by war, starting with the fact that 92% of refugees are women and children (UN Women Moldova 2023c). So, "it is a perfect time for pushing something to be done," tells me a public servant that I spoke with (Interview 8) in Chișinău.

> When we have this conflict, and women come to Moldova [from Ukraine], we understand the applicability of WPS now. (NGO representative, Chișinău, July 13, 2022)

> I have to mention now that maybe the society and also the public authorities *are much more aware of this plan when we have a war at the border* and when last year, we had a huge number of women that moved from Ukraine to Moldova and faced a lot of challenges and problems. So, they understood that 'okay, this plan, this Resolution, first of all, is about us too… and we always have to invest in somehow, to protect, or to be prepared for different situations.' (Liliana Palihovici, former MP, Chișinău, July 11, 2023)

As such, there is a tension: the crisis makes the NAP not a priority, but at the same time, it raises awareness of its crucial necessity. Another major difference between the first and second NAP is the explicit inclusion of Transnistria in the plan under the broad human security umbrella, along with a wider approach to security and indications of the development of early-warnings mechanisms. As discussed earlier, this was more difficult to include during the first NAP as Transnistria was a politically sensitive subject. Including mentions of the conflict in the second NAP was possible, however, in part because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its resulting consequences in Moldova: massive waves of Ukrainian refugees, humanitarian crisis, and possible transit and/or migration of women refugees' victims of conflict-related sexual violence, gender-based violence, and human trafficking, which demanded a broader approach to security. Mentions of Transnistria

identify the risks and human rights violations by the *de facto* authorities and the need for Moldova to protect its own citizens in Transnistria. With the second NAP and the Russian invasion also came the creation of an informal women's advisory board, initiated by UN Women, with seven women from each side of the Dniester/Nistru, to promote women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict negotiations and support the implementation of the WPS agenda (follow-up chat in July 2023). The following section will address the future challenges of the second Moldovan NAP.

3.4.2 What are the future WPS challenges in Moldova?

When asked about the future challenges they thought were the greatest regarding WPS in Moldova, my participants named several. Having a well-written NAP does not guarantee good implementation, reminds me a gender expert, in a café where we met in Chișinău for a follow-up chat since our last meeting in the summer of 2022. Like others, when asked about future challenges, many of my respondents mentioned that a successful implementation of the second NAP – with more concrete results than the first one – is a hope and a future challenge for the second NAP, which was still too young to evaluate.

First, one of the challenges identified is the sustainability of the process and the gains altogether. A respondent (Interview 3) told me about the importance of increasing training because a lot of the NAP, as previously mentioned, relies on specific individuals – either femocrats or male allies – within institutions who push for the NAP. Thus, training more people would be important for the sustainability of the document in the long term,

considering the high political turnover. In the same interview, it was mentioned how feminists suggested integrating gender advisors or WPS "focal points" in each Ministry, a good practice coming from Ukraine, which has not been realized so far in Moldova.

Second, several highlighted (Interview 3, 4, 12, 63, 69) the importance of better indicators and more robust monitoring mechanisms to measure successes and failures and conduct more efficient, transparent reports.

> I think the biggest challenge is to implement at least, let's say, 70% of the activities from the NAP. To implement and achieve indicators set in the next action plan. I am very afraid that if UN Women does not advocate for the implementation, it will not be a priority for the Government because if they are not implementing it, usually nobody will blame them for this. (Vadim Vieru, lawyer and Program Director at the Asociația Promo-LEX Chișinău, July 5, 2023)

Again, UN Women here serves as a "watchdog" on this process and has a big role in ensuring accountability and sustainability. Third, smoother and more effective intersectoral cooperation between ministries, institutions, donors, international organizations, and civil society was identified as a future challenge, notably to avoid duplication and chaotic implementation (Interviews 10, 13).

Fourth, a greater presence and participation of women in institutions, politics, security, and defence has been identified as essential to ensure that Moldovans face future challenges effectively (Interview 9) while having a broader understanding of security needs. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine directly impacted the Transnistrian conflict settlement

process, notably its format and stakeholders involved (5+2),[54] several women expressed the need for greater women's involvement in dialogue and negotiations with Transnistria.

Fifth, the Russian threat and the instability and insecurity brought by the Russian invasion of Ukraine were themes constantly brought up when asked about what they thought were the biggest WPS challenges in the future for Moldova. Coming out of this theme, another thing constantly brought up was the necessity – a lesson learned from the first NAP – to develop early-warning mechanisms for conflict prevention and humanitarian crises. Several of my respondents highlighted how profoundly unprepared[55] Moldova was when the waves of refugees from Ukraine arrived in the country, despite the multiple warning signs present. Overall, the political instability in the region and in "fragile" areas of Moldova – Transnistria, Gagauzia, and bordering regions – all amplified by the full-scale invasion, showed the need for those mechanisms and the long-term prevention of conflicts, in which women should play a central role. For some, even my question about the future WPS challenges in Moldova seemed too much to think about, given the circumstances, highlighting a profound feeling of uncertainty for the future. A public servant from a key Ministry involved in WPS could not answer my question:

[54] Moldova and Transnistria as conflict parties; Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE as mediators; and the EU and the United States as observers.

[55] In reference to the Government itself. Moldovan civil society, however, has been at the forefront of refugee response since the beginning, including women-led and women's rights organizations, which led to the creation of a 'Gender task force' network for integrating gender perspectives into refugee response and humanitarian relief, under the refugee coordination structure (UN Women Moldova 2023d; 2023b).

> It's very hard. It's very hard because. Because of this situation today. I don't have anything to say... *Instability and all these are changing day-by-day situations*. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 22, 2022)

Finally, material security is a theme often emerging from this question: the feminization of poverty, the gendered economic impacts of immigration/emigration, the worrying inflation, dependence on Russia for energy, and the growing needs of refugees – jobs, housing, education for children – and their peaceful coexistence with local communities and integration into Moldovan society was mentioned as a future challenge (Interviews 1, 4, 10). The NAP and its localization can help as a tool to monitor the situation on the ground and understand the needs and challenges of Ukrainian refugees in their host communities. Although those questions may seem unrelated to the WPS agenda – at least directly – decades of feminist research in social sciences clearly show the links between gender, class, and poverty, and Moldova is no different (UN Women Moldova 2022b). A feminist perspective is important in a wide range of issues: who is the head of the household, who migrates and why, who holds the burden of care and unpaid labour, and who works where and why are all gendered questions. Women I interviewed (Interviews 2 and 13) asked me, approximately in those words: "how can women care about peace and security decisions or such documents (i.e. the NAP) if they do not have anything to put on their tables?"

3.4.3 WPS in the context of EU accession

There has been an apparent shift in Moldovan foreign policy since the election of Maia Sandu as President in December 2020. An important part of this turn to the West is closer cooperation with the EU and the EU membership process. Despite prior cooperation

through the Eastern Partnership (EaP)[56] and an association agreement between Moldova and the EU since 2016, the process went further when Moldova applied for an accelerated EU membership in March 2022, with the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and hybrid attacks directed at Moldova in the background. When I conducted my first fieldwork in Moldova in July 2022, there was general excitement and pride over its recently granted candidate status in June by the European Council, with a list of conditions to open accession negotiations (e.g., concerning the rule of law, justice, economic and financial reforms, and respect for human rights). Finally, in December 2023, the accession negotiations were officially open with Moldova (European Council 2023).

Not only did this subject come up repeatedly in my interviews, but many Moldovan feminists I spoke to saw this process as directly linked to the WPS agenda:

> And that [the adoption and implementation of a NAP] was because *we wanted to, as a country, we wanted to show that we are going in the right way to the European vision*, and we have to realize our engagement. And somehow, the Resolution pushes for the domain of empowering women, of increasing the number of women in masculinized domains. (Government representative, Chișinău, July 28, 2022)

> We are the candidate in the EU, and our authorities try to do their best to force this moment […] That's why they are motivated [laugh]! (Antonina Volkova, Chairwoman of the CSO VESTA, Comrat, July 26, 2022)

> In the strategies of the EU is gender equality. Ensuring gender equality is one of the important values. So, Moldova should follow this same approach and should share the same values [because] *if we want to join this union, we have to share the values of the union*. So here, I think now that the authorities will pay much more attention to the gender equality issues, including the WPS agenda. And we'll come to the point where they will say, 'okay,

[56] The EaP countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – is a partnership between the European Union and those six countries, with the main aim of "strengthen[ing] and deepen[ing] political and economic relations." (European Commission 2023)

> let's start to budget funds for this.' (Liliana Palihovici, former Member of the Parliament of Moldova, Chișinău, July 11, 2023)

The above excerpts address the issue of alignment with EU values and the WPS agenda as a symbol of democratization, but also a way to show Moldova's capacity to join Western alliances against an unpredictable and dangerous Russia. In discussing with each of the women I interviewed – including state representatives – and asking them how they felt the Government perceived this agenda, many mentioned that adopting a NAP was part of the EU process and indicative of Moldova's turn to the West. Responses were nuanced and mixed and did not reflect the position/sector where they are located (e.g., whether in Government or civil society). While some expressed that, based on their experience, the Government was not interested nor fully understanding it and has demonstrated in many ways how it was not a priority for them (Interviews 1, 9), others mentioned that the Government understands its importance and see it positively, but the problem is its implementation (Interviews 6,10, 67). Some had more critiques of it and said that the Government does not understand it, doesn't make the connections, and wouldn't have done it without the pressure of international organizations and/or donors (Interviews 2, 13, 63). Others were hopeful, saying that this is an international commitment that their country has to abide by; it is not fully understood yet, but it is slowly getting to it (Interviews 3, 69).

The quotes above also point to authorities' potential instrumentalization of WPS for EU membership. But not only is the protracted nature of the conflict with Transnistria and all the problems it brings to Moldova seen as a direct limitation to Moldova's implementation of the NAP (like previously discussed), it is also identified as an obstacle to EU accession:

> This [conflict with Transnistria] *has undermined our prospects for EU accession for years*. The same for Georgia, and the same for Ukraine, having this internal frozen conflict. (Representative of an international organization, Chișinău, July 21, 2022)

Only time will tell whether this will impact Moldova's accession to the EU or whether a Cyprus-style scenario is possible (i.e., here, only the right side of the Dniester/Nistru joining the EU).

3.4.4 Reflecting on progress made

> I think that the approval of the first NAP represented a huge success for the Republic of Moldova, and I'm proud that I could contribute to its development. (Elena Țarălungă, Head of Public Policy Coordination and European Integration Section, Ministry of Defense, Chișinău, July 14, 2022)

The very last section of this chapter reflects on the progress made so far since the beginning of the NAP process in Moldova. A clear takeaway from my interviews in Moldova is that the first NAP laid the ground for the following NAP. Many of my participants used images and metaphors like the 'foundation and the house' or the creation of a 'fertile soil' to explain that the NAP process, since 2016, has been paved by multiple challenges and compromises. Ultimately, despite its weaknesses, it carved a space for further opportunities and discussions, which used to be impossible previously. While talking about the recent ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Parliament,[57] two of my interviewees made the link with WPS:

[57] The Parliament ratified the Convention in January 2022 and entered into force in May of the same year (Council of Europe 2022).

> Until now, any discussion [about gender was rejected] because it was [perceived to be] about LGBTQIA+ issues. But for me, *Resolution 1325 opened this kind of opportunity* to discuss *and put on the agenda of the State different issues that were once neglected* or that usually did not have enough resources. […] It's a different perception [between] 2015 and 2022. For me, *it's an indicator of the development of a society*. And thanks to this, Moldova demonstrated its role *in the way of democratization* of its institutions and its society itself. (Gender expert, Chișinău, July 11, 2022)

> More services for victims of domestic violence were developed. Due to work done, Moldova managed to ratify the Istanbul Convention. So, I am happy that now there are additional discussions for creating a special agency responsible for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention [The National Agency for the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence]. I consider that the work started in the implementation of this [WPS] action plan created like *fertile soil for other important changes*. (Liliana Palihovici, former MP, Chișinău, July 11, 2023)

The above quote shows how, for many women taking part in this process, WPS was a vehicle to start discussions and slowly change the mindset in some institutions. Still, the road remains long for broader systemic and societal mindset change. This fertile soil also creates a framework for women to be part of the defence and security sector, a sector that remains male-dominated to this day but was, before the first NAP, an entirely closed one to women. It showed that women's representation and visibility in diverse positions – previously forbidden to women – is not only possible but also desirable. When I asked a woman public servant what this Resolution meant to her, she answered me with a smile:

> How I understand the resolution in my daily work… to be heard and to have the right to evolve! To be involved in some activities and to have the right to make decisions […] The Resolution is a push for the authorities to not forget about equal rights for women […] I think the Resolution gave us the courage to do something, to not be afraid if they [men] say, 'shut up woman.' [Now we can say] '*Oh, I'm sorry, but we have a document*.' (Government representative, Chișinău, July 28, 2022)

A man I interviewed, in turn, reflects on incremental changes he noticed:

> It is a very important Resolution for us. I remember in 2015 when we started. [There were a] lot of stereotypes about the participation of women in peacekeeping missions and the role of women in law enforcement bodies. So, at that time, it was like a kind of taboo, despite the fact that a lot of women participated in different missions and were part of the army and police. And at that time, starting in 2015, because of this Resolution and the NAP, *personally, I observed a big change, a big change in the attitude of men* in relation to the participation of women. (Vadim Vieru, lawyer and Program Director at the Asociația Promo-LEX Chișinău, July 5, 2023)

As such, having a NAP has proven to be a push and a tool – of advocacy but also courage – for women to speak up against injustice and to hold their Government accountable to their commitments. It also helped women know what measures are in place for them to recognize and denounce harassment; women know more than before where to go if they are harassed in their workplace, thanks to legislation change and the tireless work of femocrats and women's associations inside Ministries. Beyond women's visibility in the sector, a WPS expert I spoke with remains skeptical about the actual impacts of the plan:

> An increase in the number can be a success. But I think that the WPS agenda is not about the numbers; it's about the quality of the implementation and about the opportunities that women have […] *There are small successes, but they're not sustainable.* I don't think that this NAP was successful, and it's not because, you know, people did not work a lot or did not put their effort to do their best. It's not about that *because there were a lot of people who worked enormously in promoting this agenda*. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 29, 2022)

Nonetheless, it is clear from the majority of women that I interviewed that the NAP itself has a lot of potential. It is a framework that helps identify and address diverse security needs that were neglected or completely overlooked before in Moldova. It is a polyvalent tool that helps apply a gender lens to ongoing security, conflict, and refugee crises. Something is clear: it is not only about the NAP's content but also about the process *itself*. Although imperfect, it led to broader connections, greater openness of certain institutions (like the MoD), and better cooperation between the Government and civil society. It is

difficult to assess whether the government truly believes in the importance of this document or sees it as just one tool among others to align itself with the West and the EU. It is likely a combination of both.

The rest of the story is to be written by Moldovan feminists.

Chapter 4 Georgia

4.1 From the first to the third WPS NAP (2011-2022): How Georgia became a regional "WPS leader"

4.1.1 Introducing Resolution 1325 in Georgia in the aftermath of the 2008 war and the adoption of the first NAP (2012-2015)

> In Georgia, before 2011, there was nothing happening when it came to WPS. CSOs started talking about WPS in 2002. They were pushing this repeatedly, and the Government didn't care. And then, the August war happened. So, this was kind of a point where the Georgian Government started thinking about like the security, and they connected it with women and, you know, the influx of so many IDPs and all that. *So, it was like a turning point for Georgia*. (Natía Kostava, Program Officer for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia, Global Network for Women Peacebuilders, Tbilisi, September 1, 2022)

> We had these very fast reforms after the Rose Revolution. The same was in 2012[58] […] So, this was to move forward in the right direction, to make very fast progress. So, this was the political will that said, 'Yes, let's make gender equality law.' *Let's do and let's make this NAP, make everything that developed and progressive countries are making*. And that was because this was to make us leaders and to make our example a good case for other countries in the region. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 12, 2022)

Georgia was the first country in the region[59] to adopt a NAP in 2011. The 2008 war and the swift pro-democratic reforms following the 2003 Rose Revolution created a window of opportunity for WPS advocacy (Interviews 14, 22, 27, 71).

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[58] 2012 was an important year in Georgian politics: the first peaceful political transition since independence. The Parliamentary elections marked the end of the Saakashvili era when Bidzina Ivanishvili—a notorious oligarch and billionaire businessman, believed by many to be the most powerful man in Georgia still to this day—and his newly formed opposition party, Georgian Dream, were elected as the majority.

[59] Although Georgians often mention that they were the first in the post-Soviet region, it is important to mention that Estonia was technically the first to do so, adopting a NAP in 2010.

However, Georgian feminists' advocacy for Resolution 1325 started way before 2011, dating back to 2002, but their calls to action were largely ignored by the Government and not seen as a priority at the time. Georgian feminists were determined, nonetheless. They began by testing the waters, identifying allies in institutions, mapping out needs and spheres of opportunity, and sending out letters and information to decision-makers. The first attempt to convince the Government to adopt a NAP occurred in 2002, under a coalition of 11 women's NGOs/CSOs supported by UN Women (at the time known as UNIFEM) within the *Women's Council for Peace* project (WIC 2011, 25–26). The following years were followed by in-depth women-to-women diplomacy across the country and the South Caucasus, thus forging informal yet solid peacebuilding networks between Georgian, Abkhaz, Ossetian, Armenian, Chechen, and Azeri women.

Attempts by women's organizations to draft a NAP after the conference *UNSCR 1325 – Step forward* in Tbilisi in 2006 were unsuccessful. However, some of their efforts and recommendations were included in the 2007-2009 action plan for the implementation of the Gender Equality Policy and the 2007 National Strategy for IDPs (ibid., 28-29). "Only after the 2008 war did the Government show more interest in this topic [a NAP specifically on WPS]," recalls a woman peacebuilder.

Indeed, the war helped draw attention to the gendered dimensions of armed conflicts, which were acutely visible right after the war in 2008, when new waves of IDPs needed immediate assistance. After the 2008 war, Georgian women took the lead in providing first-line humanitarian relief to the conflict-affected populations. Organizations such as UNICEF

and other UN agencies made important surveys and assessments following the war, showing the dire needs of the population, which added strength to what NGOs/CSOs on the ground were already saying. Reflecting on their experience with earlier advocacy, two women involved at the time tell me similar narratives:

> The adoption of all documents concerning women's rights and gender issues depends on who is the responsible person, who are the stakeholders, and who is [lobbying for it] inside the Parliament. And after, when Rusudan Kervalishvili became the head of the Council, we worked so much, and she had an interest and *became our lobbyist inside*. (Elene Rusetskaia, Chairperson of the Women's Information Center, Tbilisi, July 20, 2023)

> There was a Vice Speaker of Parliament [Rusudan Kervalishvili] who was very much sensitized about [WPS] issues. After 2008, *she personally went to the IDP camps and talked with women*. She was convinced of the necessity of having a WPS NAP, *and she became a big lobby for this in Parliament*. Originally, it was coming not from the Government but from Parliament. Now it is [the contrary]. (Iulia Kharashvili Chairperson of the IDP Women Association Consent, Tbilisi, September 15, 2022)

Thus, the process for the WPS NAP formally kicked off in 2010, first within the framework of the 2011-2013 Gender Equality NAP and then specifically on WPS in March 2011 (WIC 2011, 30–31; Interview 15). A woman working in the Parliament who was part of the process in the very beginnings, whom I interviewed, recalls that the first NAP process lasted almost a year. She remembers that there were consultation meetings held in Tbilisi, Gori, Tskneti, Karaleti, Skra, Tsintskaro, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Khobi, and Anaklia, all of this being supported by UN agencies (primarily UN Women Georgia Country Office; hereafter UN Women) and EU funds (like the EU Delegation to Georgia). The NAP process was inclusive and participatory; it took the form of working groups inside the Parliament (under the Gender Equality Council) with diverse stakeholders such as Governmental bodies, ministries, CSOs, and international, national, and local NGOs/CSOs:

> We didn't start working on the NAP for WPS [right away]. So, the first document that we touched was the Gender Equality Law. This is how it started at the beginning. And I am not saying that if there were not a Gender Equality Law, there would not be an action plan on WPS. We don't know this, but still, this is how it started and continued. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 12, 2022)

The NAP on WPS was thus building on a succession of other institutional mechanisms, laws, and national action plans adopted in Georgia, like the establishment of the National Gender Equality Council in Parliament (2004), the Law on Domestic Violence (2006), the Law on Combating Human Trafficking and the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (2006), the National Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons (2007) and the Law on Gender Equality (2010). Georgian feminists took an incremental approach to building their expertise and experience with gender legislation, which helped to create wide networks and a supportive environment for WPS advocacy until the Parliament officially adopted the first WPS National Action Plan in December 2011. This plan covered the period from 2012 to 2015. The first WPS NAP process was described as a "synergy of local and international efforts of women activists, strengthened by the goodwill of State actors." (Kharashvili 2017, 19) The first NAP was a 9-page long document that included a matrix with five priority areas organized around the traditional WPS pillars. Each priority had an associated goal, objective, activity, and indicator. The NAP covered a wide range of issues but mainly focused on women's participation in peace and security decision-making (e.g., through training of military units and peacekeeping forces), protection from gender-based violence, and the consideration of special needs IDPs and conflict-affected women. However, the document's language was unclear, lacked a budget, and had questionable quantitative indicators (Parliament of Georgia 2012)

Several women I interviewed told me that the first NAP had many shortcomings, like an absence of budget and simple activities and objectives, notably because of a lack of experience, ownership, and understanding from the Government. This is a recurring critique across my case studies. However, "it gave a framework that was really important for the conflict-affected women, especially after the 2008 war, to push forward this agenda and to make their experiences more recognizable in terms of protection and participation," says a representative of an international organization (Interview 14). The following section describes how Georgian feminists took the momentum of the first NAP to push further.

4.1.2 The adoption of the second (2016-2017) and third (2018-2020) NAPs in Georgia

> The first NAP was drafted, you know, very quickly like, 'We have to do it!' The second NAP was also, you know… it took more time, but still… 'Let's do it!' And I thought this NAP [the third one] was when we really took the time. On the way, to forming a community, people who can work on it, know about it, and really understand its value. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 15, 2022)

While the first NAP had several weaknesses, each following NAP was improved on different dimensions such as broader civil society consultations, number of targeted beneficiaries, and quality of implementation. Although one woman (Interview 24) had a divergent opinion on this, there was a clear narrative coming out of my interviews. The women I interviewed who were part of the NAP processes told me that the first NAP was like a learning experiment – echoing what happened in Moldova – with very simple activities and general objectives.

The second NAP (covering the period from 2016 to 2017) was still modest and had limited impact on the ground. It was adopted in July 2016 and implemented in a shorter period

than the first. The second NAP was about the same length as the first one, and its main priorities and focus areas were essentially the same as the first one. However, greater attention was given to increased civil society participation and the social and economic empowerment of IDPs and conflict-affected women. It also followed the recommendations and lessons learned resulting from the first NAP. One of the key recommendations was to strengthen NAPs targets and indicators for better monitoring and evaluation, as well as to assign more clearly the lead ministries and agencies responsible for the implementation of activities. The structure was the same, but the lead and cooperating agencies were more clearly specified. Indeed, "since 2012 to 2015 the Gender Equality Council Chaired by the Vice-Speaker of the Parliament was coordinating and overseeing the NAP 1325. After establishing the position of the Assistant to the Prime Minister on Human Rights and Gender Equality Issues, the coordination of the NAP implementation has shifted to the Prime Minister's Office, while the monitoring and oversight function remains with the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia" (Parliament of Georgia 2016, 3). Each goal had an associated output, indicator, baseline, and target – but without a budget.

One of my interviewees (Interview 22), who at the time worked for a major NGO in Georgia, told me that another substantial change occurred during the second NAP, which would eventually impact the following course of events. Indeed, the amendments to the Gender Equality Law in 2016 led to the creation of Gender Equality Councils in all 64 municipality Parliaments (called *Sakrebulos*). Although those councils are not always directly related to WPS issues, this decentralization process drew more attention to the importance of localizing the WPS agenda, which we will discuss later.

Many women mentioned to me that although the two first NAPs were partially implemented, nonetheless, “it was important to have it because when you have a normative document, it is easier for you to work with.” (Interview 27) This again echoes the incremental change that we see happening across cases.

Based on lessons learned from the first two NAPs, there was a significant noticeable improvement in the third NAP, which covered the period from 2018 to 2020. The third NAP process took about one year to develop and was adopted in April 2018. The third NAP was significantly longer and had a more elaborate foreword, indicating what has been improved from the past NAPs, following the recommendations of the PDO and NGOs/CSOs’ monitoring reports, for example. Even though the main priorities and focus areas (organized around the main WPS pillars) are essentially the same as the previous ones, there was a considerable amelioration, for example, by including the specific needs of women with disabilities, the localization of the NAP at the grassroots level in coordination with municipalities (including wider public consultation and fieldwork in rural areas and the administrative boundary lines during the drafting), and the importance of working with youth and men for NAP implementation. Activities were more precise than the previous NAPs, but there was still no budget (Parliament of Georgia 2018).

Several women mentioned that the process of the third NAP was more substantial and broader in scope and reach than the first two. The leadership was also different because it had a higher mechanism for reporting, monitoring, and evaluating implementation. Indeed, in 2017, the Inter-Agency Commission on Gender Equality, Violence against Women and

Domestic Violence Issues – Chaired by the Prime Minister's Advisor on Gender Equality and Human Rights – was formed with the technical and financial support of UN Women (Interview 14). The Inter-Agency Commission (a complex structure with several working groups, experts, and ministerial gender focal points) and the Human Rights Secretariat (in the Administration of Georgia) have a coordinating role in the NAP and are an essential contact point for the Parliament and the PDO in matters related to human rights and WPS.

An expert who was directly involved in drafting the third NAP (Interview 16), working and liaising with both the Government and UN Women, told me about the process as she recalls it. The process started with needs assessments and making field trips in conflict-affected communities in collaboration with NGOs/CSOs. This was also accompanied by capacity-building and advocacy within relevant ministries in coordination with the Parliament's Gender Equality Council and the Prime Minister's Advisor on Gender Equality and Human Rights (Sopo Japaridze, at that time). While drafting the NAP, workshops, seminars, and training were held across the country, and WPS point persons from involved ministries were taken on field trips to meet with locals. While the ambitions for the third NAP were high at the beginning, implementation results were then clearly mitigated, with the COVID-19 pandemic impacting, delaying, or canceling activities.

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While reflecting on the NAP processes in Georgia, it is important to mention who were the main actors behind them. First, while several NGOs/CSOs participated across the country, three organizations had a significant role in all NAPs: the IDP Women Association

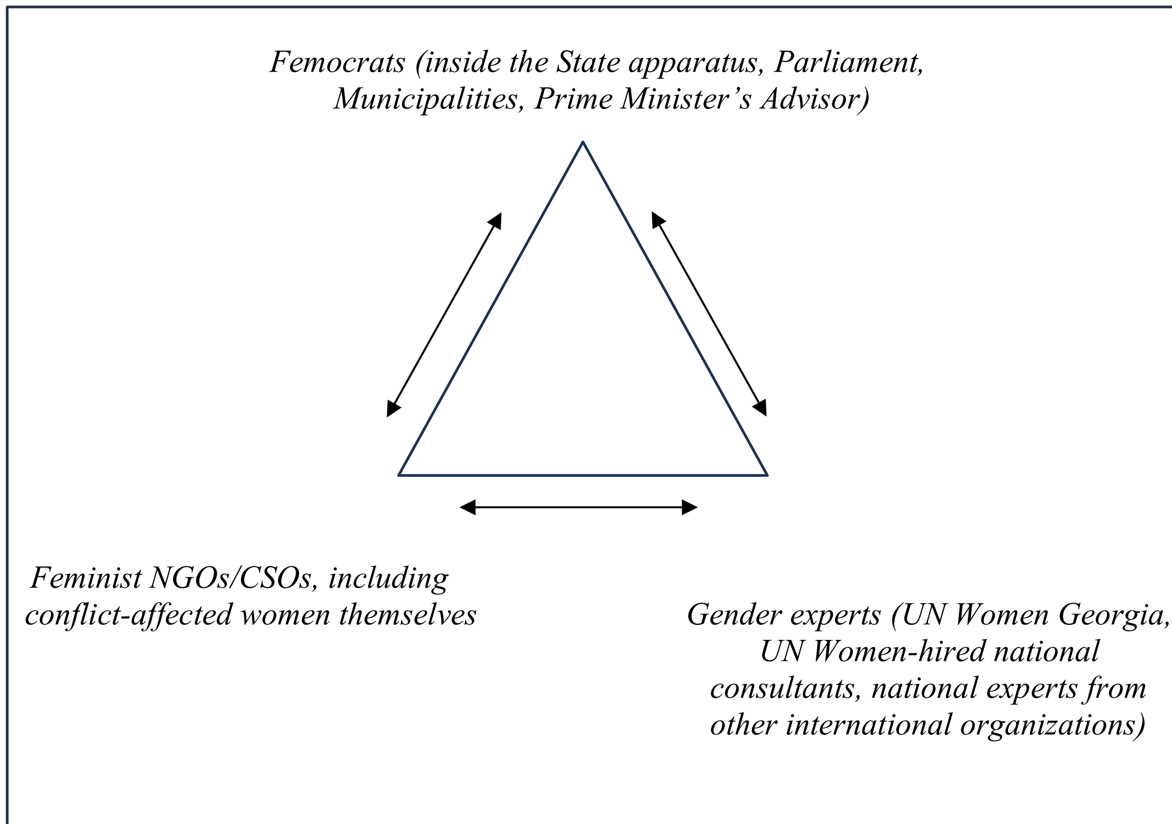
‘Consent’ (იძულებით გადაადგილებულ ქალთა ასოციაცია ‘თანხმობა’), the Women Fund (previously Cultural-Humanitarian Fund) Sukhumi (კულტურულ-ჰუმანიტარული ფონდი ‘სოხუმი’) and the Women’s Information Center (WIC) (ქალთა საინფორმაციო ცენტრი), the first two being founded by IDP women themselves. Today, they are the key reference and figures regarding WPS matters in Georgia. They have decades of experience and gained expertise and authority over time. Another active Georgian NGO worth mentioning is the TASO Foundation.

Second, UN Women had a central role in all NAPs (we will discuss the fourth and most recent NAP in the last section of this chapter). Like in Moldova, they provided essential technical and financial resources, helping the coordination of it all and “gluing” everyone’s expertise together. However, the expertise and knowledge of WPS in Georgia were already there extensively, unlike in Moldova. It is primarily Georgian women NGOs/CSOs that pushed and did WPS advocacy with decision-makers first, with the “backing” of UN Women. One representative of the Government tells me that “what was good for us [was] that UN Women forced all of us to sit and write the NAP together.” (Interview 19)

Third, in the Government, the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Office of the State Ministry on Reconciliation and Civic Equality, the State Security Services, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, and the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs are usually the main actors involved in the NAPs given the issues associated with their mandate. Other Ministries like the Environment & Agriculture, Economy, Culture & Sport, and Education

are also involved but figure less often as lead agencies in the NAPs. In the Parliament, the Gender Equality Council is an essential point of contact for Georgian feminists, and this is where the political will for the first NAP initially came from, as we saw in the previous section. Just as in Moldova, the Georgian experience highlights the importance of feminist alliances outside and inside the Government, especially with femocrats (e.g., ministerial gender focal points, women personally involved/interested in the topic, or male allies) who can push and advocate for WPS inside their respective State bodies. From the second NAP, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Gender Equality and Human Rights was crucial. (Figure 4 below presents the feminist triangle in Georgia prior to 2023).

Figure 4: Triangle of feminist actors in the Georgian NAPs



In all NAPs, IDPs, and conflict-affected women are the main focus and beneficiaries. Similar to Moldova, Georgia has several other national strategies and action plans on related issues (e.g., gender equality, domestic violence, and human trafficking), so the content of the WPS NAPs is more specific and narrower in scope to avoid policy duplication, focusing on women in conflict prevention, management and resolution, and the defense and security sector. Unfortunately, in all four NAPs, women in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia were not involved nor consulted in the NAP processes, given the non-access and ineffective control of the Georgian Government in those territories. Interviews with three women located in Abkhazia right now (two Abkhaz in Sukhumi and one Georgian in Gali) confirmed this to me. Their absence was criticized and identified by several women I interviewed as the significant failure of WPS NAPs in Georgia, which we will see in the following sections. The only connection is that some Georgian NGOs/CSOs have *informal* links with women NGOs/CSOs in Abkhazia (especially in Gali) and individual activists in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. Those connections are not only challenging but also dangerous. Civil society is heavily restricted in Abkhazia, so women who do take part in such exchanges with Georgian women must keep a "low profile" as it may raise suspicion and lead to pressure and harassment from de facto authorities, tells me a Georgian woman located in Abkhazia (Interview 38). The situation of civil society is even worse in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, nearly non-existent,[60] due to a foreign agent law

[60] Freedom House ranks Tskhinvali/South Ossetia with an overall freedom score of 12/100 and a specific score of 0/4 for freedom of NGOs (Freedom House 2023b) Comparatively, Abkhazia has an overall freedom score of 39/100 and a specific score of 1/4 for freedom of NGOs (Freedom House 2023a). Worth mentioning is the famous case of Tamar Mearakishvili, a Georgian civic activist and journalist in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, who has been in a legal battle for years with the de facto authorities who regularly harass and arrest her (Nikuradze 2020).

similar to the one in Russia. Abkhaz women I interviewed told me that they are not even able to connect online with Ossetian women, revealing the severity of their isolation.

When asked about what WPS represents for them today, a consensus among my interviewees is that it is a good advocacy tool that creates connections and a "window" of opportunity for more action. Words like structure, platform, base, entry point, instrument, framework, space, and tool were frequently used as metaphors. One representative from the Government described it to me as a "bridge," an instrument for the Government to help them reach conflict-affected communities and show their engagement and political will toward this vulnerable fringe of the population (Interview 18). For women NGOs/CSOs, it is a valuable advocacy tool to draw attention to the needs of the conflict-affected population and a springboard toward other advocacy goals. Two women IDPs tell me:

> Today, the only official document giving us the opportunity in civil society to work with conflict prevention and conflict consequences is the NAP on 1325 and local action plans. So, this is very important because *it gives us legitimacy*. It gives us the opportunity for the local government because it's really [an important part of] 1325, and that gives us the opportunity to improve the situation at the community level. (Iulia Kharashvili, Chairperson of the IDP Women Association Consent, Tbilisi, September 15, 2022)

> I am answering the question of what WPS means to me… It's participation. I don't want to be somewhere where my concerns and my life and future are decided [without me]. *I have to be there*. (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

To conclude this section, women from civil society and international organizations tended to describe how they understand and use WPS as a way to *leverage* goals: hold their government accountable, use it for advocacy, make their concerns heard, and push for incremental change. On the other hand, women in the government tended to describe it as

a way to *demonstrate* something: care toward vulnerable populations, showing democratic "Western" values, and respecting their commitments to international norms. Regardless of my interviewees' position, evidence points to a clear link between the WPS agenda and democratization in Georgia (before 2023), as well as the level of development and liberal Western values. The following sections explore the main challenges and critiques of the Georgian NAPs over the years.

4.2 Truly a leader? Challenges and lessons learned of implementing WPS in Georgia

> In Georgia, the reality is very often that on the legal level, everything is okay, and all documents are adopted, but the implementation process is very difficult. (Gender expert, Tbilisi, August 24, 2022)

4.2.1 Resourcing and budgeting the NAPs

A consensus among my interviewees is that despite a well-written NAP and Georgia wanting to be a leader in the WPS field, "it lacks the budget, and it lacks the ownership, broader ownership of the government to implement all the activities. And it depended on the donor support, which mostly [comes from] UN Women" (Interview 14).

Like in other countries around the world, the lack of budget and, more generally, the insufficient allocation of resources are structural problems impeding the implementation of the NAPs in Georgia and their sustainability in the long term, both at the national and local (municipality) levels. While the first and second NAPs did not have a budget at all, in the third, "they [the Government] managed to add, in 2019, some part of their budget

that was provided to IDPs. Since the Government already has policies and procedures, they somehow included it in the NAP and provided this budget, but it was never officially part of the NAP. Sometimes, that's the case that the ministries and the agencies, they are doing the work, but they don't connect it to the NAP," tells me a specialist working in an international organization (Interview 14). Similar to Moldova, some small budget may be allocated *indirectly* to cover NAP activities through other budgeted strategies. Still, the NAPs, including the third one, were not *directly* budgeted. It depended mostly on Western donors, in a project-based logic. This partial and indirect funding commitment by the government means that defense and security activities are often better funded than others in the plan, given that this is where more resources are available (Interviews 14, 17).

The fourth NAP, which we will discuss in Section 5.4, brings a different landscape for WPS in Georgia because the new Government Decree 629 requires a detailed budget and source of funding attributed to each activity. However, despite the fourth NAP's detailed costs and budget, it depends mainly on Western donors and UN agencies. Major donors and partners include UN Women (and other UN-related agencies like UNDP and UNFPA), the UK, American, Dutch, Swiss, Swedish and Norwegian Governments, the EU, the GIZ, the Austrian Development Agency and for specific localization and/or regional dialogue activities, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), Kvinna till Kvinna, OSCE, and the Global Network for Women Peacebuilders (GNWP).

As in Moldova, the absence of a state budget for NAPs is a recurring theme in my interviews, a dissatisfaction constantly expressed by my interviewees. However, the

bitterness seems greater in Georgia, where the government repeats that the WPS agenda is a priority, NAP after NAP, even though it does not fund it, pointing to a source of tension and contradiction. The frustration arises not so much from insufficient funding – as this is a recurrent feminist critique everywhere – but from the absence of State funding itself. Asking an interviewee working for an international organization if donors' interests impacted the content, process, or implementation of the NAP, she answered that "donors' interests, NGOs/CSOs' interests, and the Government's interests are quite streamlined. So, it's win-win in this case." (Interview 14) However, we will see in the last section that this is not the case anymore after 2023.

Not everyone necessarily agrees with this statement, however. While interests might often be aligned, relying on external funding brings challenges. A woman working in an international NGO told me about the difficulties NGOs/CSOs faced trying to get funds from foreign donors, who often ask for lengthy, bureaucratic, and complex grant application and reporting procedures, and who are not familiar with the country's context. She points out that there is a need for more flexible funding, especially in times of crisis when NGOs/CSOs are already overburdened (Interview 22). These complex procedures also mean that it is often the same well-established and experienced NGOs/CSOs that receive funding, as they are the ones who are well-versed in specific donor language and familiar with their requirements. Moreover, project-based funding creates a dependency on international donors and organizations who often have a short-term vision that does not enable long-term planning in the organization, as well as sustainable change. Another woman from civil society tells me about the unsustainability of some donors' vision:

> When you are implementing the WPS agenda, when you're talking about improving the situation of conflict-affected people and IDPs, when we are talking about peacebuilding… It is crucially important to have this long-term vision. *You shouldn't have sporadic and fragmented intervention or support, which is the case with many donors, including the European Union.* (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

Finally, the government's lack of ownership creates the idea that "internationals should fund this" (Interview 20). However, what stands out in my interviews is how the Government slowly saw over time that it was becoming strategic for them to care more about WPS and put more resources into the NAP, especially if it is linked to the EU and NATO. While a key takeaway from this section is that all Georgian NAPs have been systematically underfunded, the following section will detail how, nonetheless, the NAPs have been implemented on the ground despite financial challenges.

4.2.2 Localizing and implementing the NAPs

It is difficult to provide a generalized assessment of the level of implementation of the WPS agenda in Georgia, as this process has now been underway for 12 years and has fluctuated over time. Two observations can be drawn from my interview data. Firstly, the localization of the agenda through local action plans is a practice commonly mentioned as a source of pride and strength of WPS in Georgia among the women I interviewed. Localization of WPS in Georgia (not yet in every municipality) may take different forms, like through the creation of a tailored local action plan that suits local priorities and context, needs assessment of the population, and training for mayors, police, teachers, journalists, and other local authorities as well as informing women and other vulnerable communities

of their rights (Khanal 2017). While localization has its challenges, it is made possible by the hard work of local women's NGOs/CSOs and gender focal points in the *sakrebulos*, backed by national women's NGOs, which are in turn supported by international feminist NGOs (like GNWP) and UN Women. Secondly, while ownership and understanding of the importance of the agenda is not yet widespread across the Government, the WPS landscape in Georgia, at the Ministerial level, includes some WPS gender "champions" who understand the strategic importance of this agenda and advocate for it inside their respective institutions. These champions are supported by the political will of key players in the Ministries (whether femocrats or male allies) and the Inter-Agency Commission.

Prominent women national NGOs/CSOs have a central role in localizing WPS in Georgian municipalities by providing them with information and capacity-building sessions and helping them develop a local action plan tailored to their needs, in addition to supporting women NGOs/CSOs at the local level (Interviews 22, 30, 71). Other localization activities may include, for example, the establishment of free legal clinics by UN Women and "one-stop shops" where conflict-affected women can meet State representatives to discuss and resolve immediate issues, facilitated by NGOs like WIC (Kharashvili 2017, 14). Women NGOs/CSOs also directly respond to crises on the ground and provide critical early warnings for conflict prevention, although the government does not always listen to them, tells me the representative of an NGO (Interview 29).

It is worth recalling that the implementation of WPS in Georgia has seen an increased focus on localization over time, especially after 2016 (although there were small elements of

localization in previous NAPs), following amendments to the Gender Equality Law, which made mandatory the creation of Gender Equality Councils in all 64 municipalities. A young woman who has been involved in localization activities since 2018 tells me, however, some of the challenges she encountered:

> You know, it's really hard to talk about WPS when there is no ambulance or no hospital or doctor in the village. And people have to walk like six kilometers to get to the hospital. So, this is the case when WPS is not all on war or peace, it is not only the absence of war. Right? It's [also] about access to education or different services or to be able to live your life. I think that [it’s also about] providing all the services, or at least having a system where women, men, and children can feel safe, first of all, where they can trust their local government. (Natía Kostava, Program Officer for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia, Global Network for Women Peacebuilders, Tbilisi, September 1, 2022)

In addition to the inability of the NAP or the localization of the agenda to solve all the problems faced by communities, as the needs are so great, coordination between the different levels of government sometimes turns out to be difficult. While the drafting and elaboration of the NAPs were generally described as collaborative and participatory, it was sometimes more challenging at the implementation level. Because of decentralization, a few of my interviewees identified the need for coordination and communication between all actors during implementation, notably central and local authorities, and *between* state bodies, a critique also heard in Ukraine. This led to duplication of efforts, incoherence, confusion, difficult reporting process, local authorities feeling “left behind” with no funds left, and insufficient support from central authorities (Interviews 14, 19, 20, 22).

Moreover, localization is not systematic and often depends on specific personalities and geographical locations. Zugdidi, an ABL municipality located in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region (Western Georgia, bordering Abkhazia), is usually identified as a “leader”.

Not only do ABL municipalities tend to be slightly more aware of WPS-related issues because they are conflict-affected, but according to Elene Rusetskaia, Chairperson of the Women's Information Center, "stronger and weaker municipalities depend on who works in that municipality. And municipalities where many CSOs already work in general, it is stronger because [they serve as] watchdogs." Khashuri municipality, an ABL municipality located in the Shida Kartli region (Central Georgia, bordering Tskhinvali/South Ossetia) – headed by a strong and WPS-interested woman – is also a "champion" of localization. Beyond specific personalities in local governmental structures, most of the work remains done by women NGOs/CSOs on the ground. A Government representative tells me about what she observed while monitoring and evaluating the localization process:

> We saw that at the local level *if something was done, it was by the NGOs, not from these local municipalities*, [because] they told us that they had no money for this. For example, the UN helped them to write their [plan] at the local level. But when we went there and asked what they had done, they told us that 'we have this activity, but we cannot [do it] because we have no money for this.' (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 24, 2022)

The quote above – and countless others coming out of my interviews – showcase the tremendous work done by women NGOs/CSOs at the local level, often with minimal resources (sometimes no salary) and formal recognition in the NAP. Indeed, one representative of an international organization (Interview 14) explains that NGOs/CSOs are not formally recognized as implementing partners in the NAP because of bureaucratic reasons (i.e., each activity has to be associated with an implementing state agency, so civil society cannot be a "formal" implementer) although they do most of the work on the ground. A persisting problem regarding localization is the lack of funding. Despite that,

several women I interviewed told me that at the local level, this is where they see greater impacts of their work and proof that "the Resolution is working."

At the Ministerial level, each ministry has a designated focal point involved, and some have developed a ministry-level action plan. One of the ministries often described as "championing" the NAP in Georgia is the Ministry of Defense. Some of their implementing activities worth mentioning are awareness-raising and training for military staff (e.g., pre- and post-deployment) – both in the Ministry and its Defense Academy – and the appointment of gender advisors in each unit. Those initiatives are usually funded by partner countries (e.g., Sweden, UK, Spain), UN Women, NATO (i.e., through the Science for Peace and Security program), and specific organizations like DCAF in Geneva. In this context, NATO is not a donor for implementation but rather a partner organization that can assist with capacity-building, promoting interoperability, and facilitating continuous professional learning. Furthermore, NATO is a normative "role model" for good practices in the gender and military sector, something to *aspire* to. This is particularly important for Georgia, as they wish to join the alliance eventually. Despite the Ministry of Defense's notable efforts in the WPS sphere, women soldiers only represent 7% of the Georgian Defense Forces (UN Women Georgia 2024, 13).

Another champion mentioned is the Office of the State Ministry on Reconciliation and Civic Equality, whose role is to "engage women's organizations and conflict-affected women in the peace process, in confidence-building initiatives and as well as to share their recommendations and their views on the peace process in Georgia." They are also

“facilitating the economic development of conflict-affected women” through targeted grants on both sides of the divide (Interview 31). Another strategy within the reconciliation and engagement policy is to provide free healthcare services and education to Abkhazians and Ossetians to “attract” them to legality and build confidence between borders. NAP implementation cannot be done in occupied/breakaway territories, thus representing a central blind spot of all NAPs. Despite the involvement of this Ministry, evidence points to the fact that Georgian women remain underrepresented in formal peace negotiations (UN Women Georgia 2024; Public Defender of Georgia 2021), despite engaging in important informal peace work and people-to-people diplomacy.

To conclude this section, almost everyone I interviewed told me about varying levels of resistance they encountered at some point while either advocating, working on, or implementing the WPS agenda. Women inside institutions have seen their work paved with resistance at a time when most people still did not understand the importance of this agenda. Some said it was not resistance/opposition per se, but a lack of understanding, especially from certain Ministries more than others, and the high political turnover in institutions does not help that. Today, however, there seems to be less and less resistance and a better understanding of the importance of WPS altogether, at least according to three women I interviewed from three critical State structures during my first fieldwork in 2022 (Interviews 18, 21, 31). Finally, in broader society, experts I interviewed often underlined the persisting strong patriarchal beliefs about gender roles, especially in rural areas, rooted in strong Orthodox Christianity, and the mounting anti-democratic and anti-rights movements impacting the WPS landscape in Georgia. The Georgian women I interviewed

seemed less insistent on resistance than Moldovan women, for whom barriers and resistance seemed more pervasive and overwhelming. Resistance noticeably increased after the attempt to pass the foreign agent law in 2023 and its adoption in 2024. The following sections will focus on the monitoring and evaluation of the NAPs and the critiques and challenges of the Georgian NAPs during my fieldwork.

4.2.3 Monitoring and Evaluating the NAPs

Several people conduct monitoring and evaluation of the NAPs in Georgia. Within the Government, the Public Defender of Georgia (PDO) has a central role in monitoring and evaluation (PDO 2021; 2020; 2017; 2016). The PDO is a constitutional mandate that serves as an Ombudsman and independently monitors Georgia's actions in relation to human rights and other human security issues, ranging from gender equality to children's and IDP rights, including the WPS NAPs. In their overseeing role, they collect information from different State bodies, beneficiaries, and stakeholders to write reports and recommendations (Interview 19). The Inter-Agency Commission also coordinates and monitors the NAP. Before its creation in 2017, a woman involved in the first NAP process recalls that the monitoring was done by the same working groups developing the NAP at that time, notably Ministries focal points, Parliament, and NGOs/CSOs (Interview 15).

Naturally, NGOs/CSOs have an essential role in monitoring and evaluating the NAP – informally by independent shadow-reporting and formally by collaborating with State structures. Because of their direct ties with beneficiaries on the ground, women

NGOs/CSOs are essential in making recommendations for the following NAPs. So far, all NAPs' monitoring shows that their objectives have been partially fulfilled, and a lack of clear indicators and funding impedes their full implementation, making it hard to evaluate the concrete, qualitative improvement on the ground (e.g., WIC 2017; 2015). Indeed, indicators to measure progress (e.g., how many information sessions were held in X or Y village) are sometimes superficial, thus limiting meaningful and transformational changes for the NAP beneficiaries on the ground (Interviews 16, 18, 19, 22, 28), telling us very little about the actual change and quality of implementation beyond numbers.

UN Women is always in the background of this by providing technical and financial support to NGOs/CSOs and the PDO. As we will dig deeper into the gaps, critiques, and challenges of WPS in Georgia over the year, a takeaway from this section is that WPS implementation has fluctuated over time because of institutional mechanisms put in place for better coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of NAPs. However, both NGOs/CSOs and the PDO have shown in their reports that NAPs implementation has been partially realized, and there are yet to be concrete and *tangible* impacts of the NAPs on its beneficiaries. Despite mixed results, Georgian women's civil society is organized and efficient in developing, implementing, and monitoring the NAPs.

4.2.4 Reflecting on the three NAP processes: Gaps, critiques, and challenges

In the previous sections, evidence and quotes from my interviews have already brushed a portrait of commonly mentioned challenges of the WPS landscape in Georgia: a

lack of ownership and budget, a dependency on Western donor support, the underpaid and disproportionate work of women in civil society and the difficulty of implementing the agenda during emergencies (e.g., COVID, which postponed or cancelled many activities) and in occupied/breakaway territories. Reflecting on their respective involvement in the NAPs process in Georgia, I asked all the women I interviewed for their thoughts on gaps they felt were present in the implementation of the WPS agenda in Georgia. Below are the critiques that came up most frequently.

First, the Government is not only unprepared for crisis situations but also unresponsive to early warnings raised by NGOs/CSOs, leading to weak ‘prevention’ and ‘protection’ pillars (Interviews 14, 17, 22, 27, 28, 29). There are many examples, but a particularly telling one is when, during the COVID pandemic, following the de facto border shutdown, Georgian citizens in Abkhazia found themselves in the desperate situation[61] of having to swim across the Inguri River to reach Georgian-controlled territory. Despite several warning signs about the dangers of border closures and relentless warnings from women's organizations, several civilians drowned in the river.

Second, while this was not a popular view among those I interviewed, some critical interviewees mentioned that the Georgian NAPs failed to truly bring conflict transformation (Interviews 20, 24, 27, 29). As such, feminists are often compelled to adopt the main national narrative on the conflicts – as conflicts between Georgia and Russia –

[61] Despite intensive border restrictions administered by the de facto authorities, many citizens depend on informal trade between the conflict divide to survive (International Crisis Group 2018).

and if one deviates from this story, they will be either ostracized or not invited to consultations anymore. For example, like in Moldova, the *reintegration* of those territories into Georgia – despite their de facto independence for more than thirty years – is mentioned while their independence is almost never discussed, indicating a broad consensus on the national narrative of the conflicts. This view clashes with the Abkhaz women I interviewed who wish for Abkhazia's independence. Consequently, one expert who had skeptical views on the WPS agenda mentioned that the NAPs were inevitably reproducing harmful practices by *not* challenging the power structures and militarization in place. While most women I interviewed had positive views on UN Women, she, on the other hand, told me a different version of the story. According to her, the first NAP process was *more* inclusive and became less inclusive with time, as "UN Women took the ownership" of the NAP processes in Georgia and "became the main implementers and actors themselves." According to her, UN Women plays a crucial role in the critiques mentioned, uncritically accepting the Government's narrative and using an apolitical, technocratic language of WPS without challenging existing power structures problem:

> Yeah, with the occupation, it's another challenge. Over the years, the public narrative in Georgia has taken the whole public space, which is used and overused by Western media and scholars. *So, the only narrative that exists now is the kind of mainstream one that [Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia are] occupied territories by Russia*. It's the Russian-Georgian war. So, *the voices and the actual root causes of the conflicts, which were not about Russia, it's Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, [are erased].* The wars happened with Russian influence, yes, but ethno-territorial and ethno-political conflicts have happened between the ethnic groups on this territory. Now, their perspectives have disappeared completely. (Representative of an international NGO, Tbilisi, September 6, 2022)

As she argues, emphasizing that the conflicts in Georgia are solely a matter of Russian occupation and a conflict between Georgia and Russia completely erases the voices,

agency, and narratives of Abkhaz and Ossetian women who, for their part, view Georgia as the aggressor.[62] My virtual interviews with two Abkhaz women living in Sukhumi largely confirm this attitude to me. This prompts us to reflect on what kinds of discourses are desirable and acceptable in WPS spaces and which ones are not.

A woman civil society leader tells me that to be heard, her criticisms must be formulated constructively, not in opposition to the Government, but rather in collaboration with it. This signals again that there are "acceptable" WPS discourses and "unacceptable" ones. Several women I interviewed likewise mentioned that some of their suggestions formulated during the drafting process had to be deleted or reformulated as they were considered too politically sensible. This is also in line with what I heard that the Government often considers WPS as a "soft issue" – a "women's issue" – that is not too political, not "threatening." As such, WPS is depoliticized, and the sensitive parts of the agenda are removed (Interviews 14, 20, 24, 29). Ironically, its depoliticization makes it political.

As previously mentioned, all of this has the consequence of reducing the space for critiques and the variety of voices within WPS spaces. Those who know best how to strategically talk to the Government and international organizations – with the correct terms and

[62] Georgian women are engaging in various forms of women-to-women diplomacy and alternative peacebuilding grassroots methods across divides, and I am not the first to testify of that (see Cárdenas 2019; see also Vassileva 2024). Naturally, these discussions—about the *nature* of the conflicts, *who* is the aggressor and the *status* of these disputed regions—are extremely sensitive and lead to strong emotions. They are actively avoided in inter-ethnic informal peacebuilding dialogues. Several of the women I interviewed, who are also trained mediators, explain that these dialogues, by their tense and difficult character, focus primarily on issues of common grounds, such as human security, women's health, the environment or freedom of movement and avoid controversial subjects. I am therefore aware that these lines may be upsetting for some, but I also feel it is important to reflect divergent perspectives, notably those of Abkhaz women.

language – are often the same NGOs/CSOs. Like in Moldova, those women are English-speaking, well-educated, internationally connected, and have authority within Georgian society, which gives them access to high-level discussions, connections to the Government, and a direct possibility of influencing decision-makers. This brings me to another critique.

Third, a lack of diverse representation in the NAP processes has been mentioned to me. Ethnic minorities, marginalized groups (e.g., LGTBQ+, HIV positive, sex workers), women with disabilities, and young women were not sufficiently present and heard in the NAP processes (Interviews 22, 24, 27, 28, 29, 32). Several mentioned an important generational gap in WPS spaces in Georgia – and more largely in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus – (Interviews 20, 22, 24, 31), also pointing to the elitist nature of feminist NGOs. By generational gap, they meant that young women's voices are rare in WPS spaces, which are "dominated" by the same main NGOs/CSOs and leading activists on the matter, which come from the first generation of women after the conflicts:

> The generation of Beijing – so, women who are now middle-aged and elderly already, who have got all the possible training, and were young or middle-aged when the Beijing Conference happened. So, when Resolution 1325 was adopted, they were in this kind of activism [bubble]. They were on the frontlines, and they were invited everywhere. *Now, they are the powerful ones with the old knowledge and technical skills. And they are extremely monopolizing the space.* In Georgia, you have three, literally, three organizations that are experts on WPS, NAPs, and stuff like that. *And no young generation*. […] Young feminist movements. Young generation. They don't want to work with WPS. They don't want to be associated with organizations that are experts on that. They don't want to be seen as traditional NGOs anymore. And it's not only for Georgia but also true for all the South Caucasus countries as the young generation and, especially, young feminists and anti-war activists are challenging those patriarchal and militaristic concepts. […] Feminist movements are growing in the region, but they are also very fragmented. (Representative of an international NGO, Tbilisi, September 6, 2022)

On the other hand, while agreeing that young women are not sufficiently involved, one interviewee (Interview 27) also reminds me that the specific needs and challenges of aging populations and older women are not mentioned either, thus suggesting a blind spot in the NAP regarding the intersection between gender and age.

Fourth, although the primary focus and beneficiaries of the Georgian NAPs are conflict-affected and IDP women, several women mentioned how they do not have their voices heard enough in the process. Once again, this refers to a broader issue of inclusion/exclusion. While conflict-affected women's (i.e., IDPs and women living by the ABLs) concerns are represented through the main NGOs/CSOs who have grassroots connections on the ground, meaningful participation is often lacking, especially for women who are not well-versed in the international WPS language, do not speak English or Georgian, or those who do not reside in the capital. They have fewer resources, capacities, and leverage to influence the decision-makers. An IDP woman herself tells me frankly that if "you are in Zugdidi, Kutaisi, Tsalenjikha, Khoni or Senaki, you cannot come [to Tbilisi], and nobody knows you." (Interview 29) Consultations with civil society can sometimes be superficial ('ticking the box'), and conflict-affected women tend to be victimized rather than truly given a voice and space to influence decision-makers (Interviews 24, 28, 29).

Fifth, like in Moldova, several interviewees (Interviews 16, 17, 19, 22, 24, 27, 71) identified the problem of high turnover in institutions and politics (but also in certain municipalities like Zugdidi and Khashuri where the local leaders are personally invested and interested in the topic), which makes change highly personality-based (e.g., femocrats)

and dependent on specific people who are "at the right position at the right time." When a person leaves, the work must be redone, mainly relying on NGOs/CSOs' efforts and unpaid work. This impedes long-term sustainability and makes WPS gains fragile.

Finally, despite tremendous improvements, women in high-level decision-making – in all sectors, from the security sector to formal peace dialogues – remain limited and uneven due to several barriers to their meaningful participation. For example, "while women's contribution to peacebuilding is now recognized, this recognition is very much relegated to women having a role to play in informal peace processes, not in the official peace processes." In the GID, in 2022, women represented only 20% of the total Georgian participants (and none on the Abkhaz, Ossetian and Russian sides). In decision-making, women represent 17% and 24% of ministers' and deputy ministers' positions, respectively (UN Women Georgia 2024, 13). Additionally, several women mentioned that a significant blind spot of all NAPs is their failure to include the voices and needs of women in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, as the Georgian Government does not have access to those territories. Reflecting on the NAPs in Georgia since its beginning, two experts tell me:

> The NAPs have their challenges because they don't have any plan on how to include the non-recognized states. So, your NAP or your WPS agenda doesn't work in unrecognized states like Abkhazia or South Ossetia. So, you have this legislative framework. But so, what? So, what it can do, *and this is one of the weaknesses of the global WPS agenda, is that it actually doesn't have the mechanism to be used in the areas of unrecognized or conflict sites, let's say, or contested territories*. (Representative of an international NGO, Tbilisi, September 6, 2022)

> A challenge, of course, is the protracted character of the conflict. 1325. Okay. Now I go to a very dangerous topic. I'm afraid my colleagues will not understand me, but I still will give my opinion. Before, I was saying that 1325 is not for protracted cases, it's for emergencies. Now, in Ukraine's case, we see that it's not for emergencies [either]. So, it is something for intermediate situations *when it's not already opened fire*, but you have [still the chance] to organize something […] What I'm saying is that 1325 is not used enough in

> emergencies nor protracted situations […] We need some explanation on how it should work in emergencies, how it should work in situations of protracted conflicts because 80% of all [conflicts in the world] now are protracted. We also need to know what 1325 specifically can do in protracted situations. (Iulia Kharashvili Chairperson of the IDP Women Association Consent, Tbilisi, September 15, 2022)

The two quotes above highlight critical blind spots in the global WPS agenda. They point to shortcomings not only in the effective timing of WPS implementation (i.e., at *which stage* of a conflict should a NAP be used/deployed) but also in the geographical locations that appear to be excluded or unfit for the application of these norms (i.e., contested, occupied or separatist territories that do not fit into international-recognized borders). Those questions go largely beyond the case of Georgia and echo back into my other case studies, which we will return to later.

To conclude this section, most women I interviewed were nuanced and balanced in their critiques, although a few diverging voices existed, too. Like in Moldova, despite disappointments, the logic is that "it is better to have an imperfect NAP than none." As such, Georgia's reputation as a "WPS leader" does not come from extraordinary implementation achievements. Instead, it seems that its reputation comes more from work done on the ground by women peacebuilders who began the advocacy process exceptionally early compared to other countries in the region and that the NAPs' development and drafting processes have been particularly inclusive and full of good practices, despite its gaps and critiques. One of the most challenging aspects of the Georgian NAPs implementation is, so far, the lack of substantial, sustainable change and felt concrete impacts on women's (in)security on the ground, along with the severe

limitations brought by a protracted conflict on the territory. This carries us to the next section, which deals with those issues more in-depth.

4.3 'A frozen problem which you don't want to touch': the perception of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as gendered (in)securities

> I feel like this Resolution 1325 was written about me. (Lia Chlachidze, founder of the War Museum of Ergneti – a few meters from the occupation line – Ergneti, September 12, 2022)

Since the conflicts of the 1990s and again in 2008, Georgia has lost effective control of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions. Georgians and the international community recognize these territories as part of Georgia and illegally occupied by Russia.

Despite unsuccessful attempts and the existence of dialogue mechanisms mediated by the international community (i.e., the GID four times a year and the IPRM with Tskhinvali/South Ossetia once a month), these conflicts remain "frozen" in time and space, as these regions are de facto independent of Georgia. A feminist lens, however, necessitates a careful approach to the term "frozen" conflict. While those conflicts may be diplomatically stagnant, they still militarize people's lives, as seen in the case of Moldova. Notably, they bring constant insecurity for those near the ABLs due to 'borderization' and 'creeping occupation,' where authorities and Russian soldiers build fences and extend the de facto border into Tbilisi-controlled areas. These actions have resulted in the annexation of villages, leaving families forcibly separated. (Kharashvili 2017, 4).

Moreover, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has directly and indirectly impacted Georgia. Not only has it raised the fear of war and reignited trauma for citizens, but it also disrupted the GID and IPRM, led to anti-government protests (because the Georgian Dream initially refused to sanction Russia), heightened tensions with de facto authorities, economically impacted both breakaway regions[63] (as they are both dependent on Russia), delayed the adoption of the fourth NAP, added additional work to the plates of women NGOs/CSOs responding to the crisis and helped proliferate "anti-Western" propaganda and mis/disinformation (Santos et al. 2023, 5-6). Georgia has also welcomed 24,000 Ukrainians following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (UNHCR and World Vision 2023).

This section is organized around three major themes arising from my interviews with Georgian women. I asked everyone questions about the conflicts and their relation to WPS and NAP implementation. Similar to Moldovans, the answers highlighted deeper issues about how Georgians perceive these territories and understand peace and security.

4.3.1 Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as threats to Georgia's security

A recurring theme in my interviews with Georgian women is that Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia – two regions unanimously perceived as Russian-occupied territories – are a threat not only to Georgia's national security but also to everyday human

[63] The Russian invasion of Ukraine has direct consequences on both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as sanctions towards Russia (including the ruble, Russian banks and trade with Russia) automatically isolate them more, pushing them more into Russia's orbit of dependency. The Abkhaz women I interviewed told me that in Abkhazia, the general sentiment is that if Russia loses the war in Ukraine, people fear that it might create a pretext for Georgia to regain back its territories.

security. Several factors were frequently mentioned to illustrate this sentiment. First, there is no sense of “closure” in relation to the conflicts because of their protracted nature – and no resolution in sight. Despite being diplomatically “frozen,” the militarization of people’s lives is concretely felt through fear, Russian intimidation, borderization process, kidnappings, and illegal detainment of Georgian citizens living near the ABLs:

> There are people still in danger. People who live close to the so-called occupation line, people are kidnapped, and their plants and their harvest are taken every day by moving [the line]. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 31, 2022)

> IDPs and conflict-affected women are more vulnerable groups. I'm living in Tbilisi, but if I have some problems, *then they have really different problems*. They are looking and watching everyday men who are standing there with their guns. Sometimes, [there is a clearly indicated] boundary line, but sometimes, in some villages, there is nothing written. There is no line. And women told us that when women pick fruits or walk with their cows… Last year, we had some kidnappings of women by Russian soldiers because they said that she was walking in their territory. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 24, 2022)

Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia are thus perceived as spaces of insecurity for Georgia’s national security—through the ongoing borderization process—and human security, considering the human rights violations happening in those spaces. Second, human rights violations by de facto authorities were frequently mentioned as having direct and indirect impacts on Georgia. Among those injustices are the lack of medical services (e.g., sexual and reproductive health services, as abortion is illegal in Abkhazia) and quality education for people in their language of choice (e.g., for Georgian citizens) living inside those territories. Other human rights violations most notably include the harsh border restrictions, impacting freedom of movement for separated relatives (e.g., the lack of access to sacred religious sites on the other side is often cited). Through different programs, the Georgian government tries to offer healthcare and education services to its citizens on the

other side, but its reach remains limited since it has no legitimate rule there. Moreover, some entrepreneurship initiatives have been established to increase the socio-economic situation of conflict-affected people on both sides. Two women working in key implementation Ministries tell me:

> The NAP, of course, reflects all the principles that are given by the Resolution, but it is also adjusted to the national context and the pillars. What we have on this NAP focuses on the protection of the rights of women who live in the occupied territories. *Unfortunately, we do not have access to those territories, but still, we provide some kind of services for them, for free.* We have several education programs free of charge for the people who live in the occupied territories and the young population, and they just can cross this ABL and receive education free of charge here in Georgia. As well as they can receive medical assistance free of charge if they cross this ABL. Unfortunately, we did have a bad experience in the period of COVID when the ABL was closed by the occupiers, by the Russians, and they didn't allow them to cross the border, and that caused the death of some of them. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 19, 2022)

> In terms of the implementation, I would say that the occupation and the subsequent consequences that it brings result in a shortage of access to the conflict-affected women living inside the occupied territories. For example, I mentioned that we conduct information meetings for the conflict-affected population living here on the Georgian-controlled territory. But we cannot conduct such meetings inside the occupied territories, and I'm pretty sure that this issue is a huge challenge for them as well *because there are no proper mechanisms or, you know, some activities that would protect women from violence.* And, of course, there are international organizations operating on the ground in the Abkhazia region, not in the Tskhinvali region because the ICRC is the only international organization that has access on the ground […] But in Abkhazia, yes, there are international organizations, mostly UN agencies and UN Women, operating on the ground, conducting various trainings, and facilitating awareness-raising for the local women on various issues. *But I think that more could be done if there is, you know, no occupation on the ground.* (Government representative, Zoom, September 26, 2022)

Third, as those above quotes can suggest, those restrictions and human rights violations altogether are often cited as "reasons" why the NAPs cannot be fully implemented – often by officials – by the Georgian Government, as they do not have effective control there:

> The occupation itself, you know, results in huge human rights violations of the local population, including women, because they are deprived of their fundamental rights […] And, of course, it has its impact on the effective implementation of that National Action

> Plan, which is designed for the protection of human rights, women, I mean, for their more active engagement in the peacebuilding process. *But we cannot do more than what we do right now, unfortunately, due to the occupation.* (Government representative, Zoom, September 26, 2022)

Worth mentioning also is that the Abkhaz women I interviewed did not feel concerned by – or included in – any discussions around WPS in Georgia, given their desire to be independent of Georgia and other technical barriers related to Abkhazia's unrecognized status (e.g., normally, WPS international discussion and advocacy spaces are by default structured around internationally-recognized boundaries, forcing them to register as either Russian or Georgian, identities in which they do not recognize themselves). In this section, we saw that Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia represent constant sources of insecurity for Georgians and limitations to WPS implementation. The following section addresses the anxieties thus far mentioned more deeply through collective trauma and the fear those regions represent for Georgians.

4.3.2 Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as "sleeping" conflicts that could be revived at any time

Another recurring theme, similar to Moldova and Transnistria, is the constant fear that conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and therefore with Russia, could be reignited at any moment. Since Russian troops illegally occupy these regions, several of my participants mention Russia as Georgia's enemy and an obstacle to peace. Similar to Moldova, this anxiety has been significantly revived since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Georgians have also experienced this:

> This war in Ukraine, this is like a mirage for us… (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 12, 2022)

> It's [a] really difficult situation at the present. I think that any moment, I'm not sure that nothing will not start here… […] So, it is really difficult, and also, we have [renewed] trauma cases after the Ukraine war because when they started seeing everything like Bucha cases, every case happening in Ukraine, it started reminding people what they had been through, and trauma is alive again. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 17, 2022)

> I would say that after what happened in Ukraine, what happens now, like, I really see tensions in the society, not only in the conflict regions but in general. I see tensions in every family that they are afraid, and not only women as such. So, they're afraid of the war, they're afraid of Russia's aggression. What happened also between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. We are in the middle of the situation and also this fall of democracy in our country and this rise of ultranationalism and ultraconservative groups, and our society, after years and years, we are becoming poorer and poorer. (Gender expert, Tbilisi, September 15, 2022)

> Sure, it not only revives the trauma, but we face the very realistic threat of eruption of some even war […] But once this conflict started, even in Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a few years ago. And now it's always open, you see, and especially Ukraine, it's just immediately sparked. Once the conflict started in Ukraine, it sparked fears and some comments about using the opportunity to forcibly take back Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, as Russia was concentrated on Ukraine. This is very, very dangerous. However, it's important to note that most of the population and IDPs did not share such sentiments. (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund 'Sukhumi,' Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

The quotes above speak to different fears and trauma, but they all share the fact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a turning point in the region, leading to trauma revival and fear of conflict. Second, in a context of militarization, this sustained anxiety seems also to impact people's *understanding* of peace and security. A speaker noted that in her experience as a peacebuilder and IDP, militarization, fear, and regional conflicts shape Georgian perceptions of peace and security. Another speaker echoed this, stating that insecurity and anxiety over war have become a "normal" part of life for Georgians:

> I think that still today, both sides have this fear of the war […] But events which are happening are influencing this direction as well. Unfortunately, *the war in Karabakh and*

> *the war in Ukraine now give people the feeling that militarization is the way to solve the problems* […] The emotions are quite high. And, of course, we as a country also have quite a lot of security challenges. And so, yeah, I think that, on the one hand, now it's more obvious that we need to strengthen our work in the direction of WPS, and it's becoming more and more important. *But on the other hand, we see that people are not believing in that anymore.* (Gender expert, Tbilisi, August 24, 2022)

> I strongly believe that the scholars who call those conflicts here "frozen" are very much lacking the perspective from the ground because the people here who experienced the conflicts, *they normalized the conflicts as part of their lives; it continues, they don't call it anymore conflict, they don't call it war, they don't call it peace, but for them it's just part of their life, of their everyday*… which influences everything like fear, PTSD and the lack of freedom of movement. *So, those conflicts were never frozen; they were protracted. They are not violent anymore so much [in terms of] physical and armed violence, but they are violent in psychological, social, economic, and other ways*. (Representative of an international NGO, Tbilisi, September 6, 2022)

These passages convey a fascinating insight into how continued anxiety and fear of war can lead to different results based on lived experiences and location, and feminist security studies help us to make sense of them. On the one hand, some may lose confidence and faith in peace itself, leading to skepticism about peaceful methods of conflict resolution, a greater desire for militarization, and/or a feeling that war is inevitable as Russia has the "ultimate" power to decide where and when war takes place by invading countries and fomenting conflict in their neighborhoods, with impunity (also Interview 29). For others, this can lead to conflicts being "trivialized" or even "forgotten," given their protracted nature – echoing the case of Moldova where Transnistria is simultaneously portrayed by some of my interviewees as an anxiety, and for others, as a "forgotten" conflict.

Third, interestingly, when my participants mentioned these anxieties and the fear of reigniting conflict, the link with WPS was not explicitly mentioned. However, the link between regional anxieties and the agenda was clear. These anxieties are multidimensional and influence how policies are developed and how WPS activities are conducted:

> As I said, we're just surrounded by lots of threats. This WPS is practically about investing, developing conflict-affected people, and creating a favourable environment for their well-being and participation. It's about, you know, peace processes and peace negotiation, engagement in peacebuilding and reconciliation and confidence-building. *But when you're surrounded by these kinds of threats and immediate threats of war, I don't even want to pronounce that word, but this is reality. Of course, it's one of the biggest challenges that we can face. Everything could just disappear at once. All the efforts that we have done.* We felt that in 2008 when we were striving and struggling for peace, we couldn't do anything to prevent the war. This is the same with Azerbaijanis as Armenians. It's big, big, big lessons learned for us. (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

Several women told me of their informal ties and friendships that have persisted over time, making cross-border connections possible to this day. Civil society collaboration with conflict-affected women and NGOs/CSOs on the other side, however, is extremely difficult as civil society is heavily restricted there:

> One challenge, of course, is that all these NAPs build peace *only from one side.* We do not have counterparts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, officially. And I think that it should be part of the Geneva International Discussions. (Iulia Kharashvili Chairperson of the IDP Women Association Consent, Tbilisi, September 15, 2022)

In these last excerpts, we can read a sentiment of helplessness and fear of having made all these efforts of confidence-building and informal peace dialogues "for nothing," very much paralleling the case of Armenia, which we will see in the following chapter. In addition, the above extracts raise questions about the potential and implementation of the agenda and the NAP despite multiple crises occurring simultaneously; hence, the above-mentioned point is that those multilayered crises are "obstacles" to NAP implementation.

To conclude, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia are not only perceived as insecure regions but also as potential sources of destabilization and conflict, with the Russian

invasion of Ukraine acting as a catalyst through a spillover effect. More generally, these national and regional anxieties influence societal perceptions of peace and security issues. Some participants were skeptical about the real impact of the WPS agenda in the face of these multidimensional crises, and several expressed their concern about the actual impacts of peacebuilding activities in the context of growing national and regional militarization.

According to my participants, the illegal occupation of Georgian territory has several direct and indirect impacts on the WPS agenda. Not only is access to these regions difficult or non-existent, as Government officials mention, but collaboration with Georgian citizens on the other side is restricted, and cooperation with civil society—an essential component of the WPS agenda—is limited, as women peacebuilders deplore. As a result, the potential of the NAP altogether is limited. However, the following section explores an interesting tension. Despite the limitations posed by Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as a source of insecurity and anxiety, these spaces are also seen as the "raison d'être" of the Georgian NAPs and, therefore, their crucial significance. Since Georgia has lived through two wars, it is understood that this represents a particular collective experience and expertise in the matter, thus justifying the existence of the NAP.

4.3.3 Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as arguments for the NAPs

Considering the themes discussed in the previous two sections, one idea expressed by the majority of the participants, similar to Moldova and Transnistria, is that Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia and the insecurities that these regions represent are "obstacles" to the implementation of the NAPs, despite the Georgian leadership in this

area. As we have seen previously, this is because the Georgian Government has no access to these regions, which are home to many Georgians whose rights are being violated by the *de facto* authorities and Russian troops. However, an interesting tension is that despite the significant limitations and challenges that conflicts represent for the full implementation of the WPS agenda, when asked about its relevance for Georgia, almost everyone mentioned that it was relevant because Georgia is a conflict-affected country with many IDPs. These conflicts thus are unanimously described to me as the "raison d'être" of the NAPs. While some countries find it challenging to push for their government to adopt a NAP, this is not the case for Georgia, according to my participants, who mention that Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia are actually the reasons *why* it is vital to have a NAP, as it directly impacts people's perception of security:

> It changed everything. Going back to the Abkhazia war [in 1992], it was a long time ago. And you know, when things happened several years ago, you have somehow adjusted to the situation. It's not normal for you, but you have these 200,000 IDPs within the country. So, it becomes kind of a normal thing, because you know that you had it... But when you have a new war [in 2008], which is about 30 kilometers from the capital... It's very different. *So, your perceptions from that war you had 30 years ago changed*. Everything changes with this new situation […] Of course, WPS is important. Because we have this ongoing war. *I don't think, and I never thought, that it started only in 2008 and ended in 5 days. No, it's ongoing*. We still have this. *So, it's very important for us to have this kind of instrument. To protect the most vulnerable people* […] When you have GID and IPRM, it's a very important instrument, an internationally recognized instrument. So, you have to have women in this process, not just women like me or you, but women who were victims, directly targeted, who are IDPs, because they knew it, they feel it with their skin. *This is one thing when we know something, when we learn, when we read that, but when we live it… we feel it differently*. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 12, 2022)

> Of course, it influences, I mean, our own implementation; we feel the impact of these conflicts practically every day […] So here, if you talk about this agenda, I believe that not many ask *you why. You can justify its existence because of the conflicts* […] It's bad to say, but [this is a] strong factor that also *leverages us to demand more, proper implementation of this agenda*. (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

> You know, I think that it comes from the fact that 20% of our territories are occupied, *and the protection of women's rights for us is a reality. This is a necessity.* (Government representative, Zoom, September 26, 2022)

> This is very relevant, especially in terms of protection and prevention of conflicts or any sort of violence. I think it's very relevant for Georgia, and especially, you probably know that in Abkhazia here, there is Gali district that has about 45-50,000 ethnic Georgians still living there, and it's very much connected to the Zugdidi region [Tbilisi-controlled]. In the Tskhinvali region, you have Akhalgori district, which has been occupied since 2008 and is well connected to the Gori Municipality [Tbilisi-controlled], for example. You have a lot of people who would travel at the checkpoints, back and forth. So obviously, it affects local communities quite extensively because whenever they close the checkpoints, for example, during COVID, they close the checkpoint [in Abkhazia]. And then, we had five people who died because they tried to cross the Inguri River. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 11, 2022)

The quotes above suggest the importance of lived and embodied experiences of war and insecurity in WPS politics and NAP processes. Not only do the conflicts serve as a justification for NAP adoption and localization, but they also help civil society structure their work and use this tool as a means of holding their government accountable:

> I think this is very important because, especially in our societies, women play quite important roles in Georgia. After the war, at the beginning of the 1990s, women were the first to start some reconciliation work; they started to meet with each other and take the role of mediators, and they took these very hard steps to start dialogue with each other. But despite this, women in the decision-making process are absolutely not visible, and sometimes even the women's needs are not visible. […] So, I think in this case, this Resolution is very important because, on the one hand, it makes the government feel some obligation to pay attention to its directives. *On the other hand, women believe that something is under [frame] in their activities, which supports them in being more engaged and active. And it also gives some structure.* (Gender expert, Tbilisi, August 24, 2022)

Nonetheless, one of my participants (Interview 16) notes that despite WPS being relevant for Georgia, the general population is unaware of this resolution. An important way of informing the population about their rights and the services available is through, among other things, the localization of the NAP in Georgia's different municipalities. One

participant highlights that the municipalities near the ABLs significantly "know" better the importance of the NAP as they live daily and concretely the consequences of the conflict:

> When it comes to municipalities, it's also that those municipalities that are located closer to the conflict territories and the ABLs understand it better. Municipalities in other regions do not even comprehend why they should have it in their budget, if you will, because their population is not so directly affected or because they don't have IDPs living in their villages. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, September 15, 2022)

As such, beyond the limited access to these regions, citizens living on the border of the ABL are vulnerable, and it is challenging to ensure their protection due to the volatile and dangerous situation. In addition, the Georgian Government also must protect the rights of IDP populations, emerging from the 2008 and the 1992 wars. A woman from a key Ministry explains how the NAP is relevant for that:

> The Resolution 1325, I can say that the reason is that… the situation of Georgia, I mean, prolonged conflict… We do not have armed conflict right now, but we do not have peace as well. So, it means that still the situation, especially along the ABLs, is insecure, and it is well known that the main principle of the agenda is that women and girls are impacted and affected by the war disproportionately. Right. *So, it means that the Government of Georgia also understands and realizes that the community living along the ABL, as well as communities living in the territories that are occupied by Russia, need specific measures and specific help from us.* […] People who live alongside the ABLs, we try to disseminate information to them *[to show] that the Government cares about them, that the Government sees them as vulnerable people,* and that we make additional efforts to protect them and to assist them in the liberalization of their rights. Yes. *We see this NAP as a bridge, an instrument to the Government for the people who live in occupied territories and close to the ABL*. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 19, 2022)

To conclude this section, the interviews conducted in Georgia reveal several layers of a complex reality. Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia – regions illegally occupied by the Russian army (as defined by international law) – are understood as areas of deep insecurity that revive collective traumas and create sentiments of fear, helplessness, and

sometimes "normalization" or adaptation to the conflict. At the same time, the lack of access to the populations inside these areas, where several human rights violations exist, is mentioned as a major limitation to the implementation of the NAP, as emphasized by several of my participants, mostly Government officials.

Nevertheless, the wars that Georgia has been through in the past serve as a justification for NAPs adoption and implementation based on lived experiences. Contrary to Moldova, those conflicts are the explicit *centerpiece* of all NAPs. For Georgian feminists, this is the main tool, framework, and structure with which to work – as well as to frame their activities in an internationally recognized language. It provides them with an instrument to hold their government accountable. For the government, it is a way to recognize the specific needs of conflict-affected people and show those populations that they care about them. The following section will explore what happens next: preparation for the fourth NAP under difficult national and regional circumstances and looking to the future.

4.4 What comes next? The fourth Georgian WPS NAPS (2022-2024) in a new political environment

Similar to my experience in Moldova, there was a febrility pending in the air regarding the adoption of the fourth NAP during my first fieldwork in Georgia in August 2022. The document had already been completed in the Spring but was still waiting to be officially approved by the Government. Although less pronounced than in Chișinău, as Georgia does not share a border with Ukraine, there was notable instability following the

recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent large waves of Russian migrants in Tbilisi, along with the remnants of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some of my respondents were pessimistic about the fourth NAP, others had faith that it would reflect the fruits of their efforts.

After a two-year gap between the third and fourth NAPs, the fourth NAP was finally adopted in October 2022 for the period 2022 to 2024. Although the costs for each activity are more detailed than in the previous NAP because of the new decree 629, the NAP still relies heavily on foreign donors. The fourth NAP contains an in-depth situation analysis and is significantly longer than the previous ones.

This last section of the chapter will proceed as follows. First, we will dive deeper into the challenges encountered during the development and adoption of the fourth Georgian NAP, occurring in a radically different context than the first one. Second, looking to the future, I'll present the challenges ahead for the fourth NAP, according to the participants in my research. Thirdly, we will explore the question of the NAP in Moldova in the context of Euro-Atlantic ascension and significant democratic backsliding. Finally, looking back at the process, we will discuss the achievements of the WPS agenda so far in Georgia, in the words of the women I interviewed.

4.4.1 The adoption of the fourth Georgian NAP (2022-2024)

As in Moldova, the adoption of the fourth NAP took place in a landscape significantly different from the others. Firstly, the evaluation of the third NAP and the

consultations for the elaboration of the fourth NAP took place mainly on Zoom due to the COVID pandemic, which affected the progress of things by canceling, transforming, or delaying certain activities. It also reduced the reach of in-person civil society consultations across the country. This same period also saw the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which had both direct and indirect consequences for Georgia, as we saw in the previous section. The invasion imposed new considerations for both national and regional peace and security issues. Then, in 2019, a new government decree directly impacted the development of the NAP, as it imposed new measures on national public policies and strategies. Finally, we shall see in section 5.4.3 how a draft Foreign Agent Law marked a real before-and-after relationship between government and civil society.

Based on shadow reporting, experience sharing, and PDO reports, the evaluation of the third NAP showed mixed results with limited impacts on its supposed beneficiaries, which is a similar conclusion to the past ones. So, based on those results and technical assessments (interest, needs, priorities, capacities) within the different state institutions, consultation sessions were held to develop the fourth NAP with stakeholders, municipalities, civil society, and the Inter-agency Commission. A woman who was directly involved in the elaboration of the fourth NAP (Interview 17) told me about the challenges she encountered given the COVID-19 pandemic. They started working on the fourth NAP in Spring 2021, gathering information on the needs and challenges of conflict-affected women across the country, the main beneficiaries of all Georgian NAPs. Like the previous one, this was done in close collaboration with the Prime Minister's advisor on human rights and gender issues, Niko Tatulashvili (still in office), the Head of the Human Rights Secretariat, and the PDO.

Needs assessments and meetings with state entities were held, followed by more meetings with relevant NGOs/CSOs and finally with ABL municipalities and/or large numbers of IDPs. Those meetings primarily took place on Zoom because of the pandemic. After drafting, they finalized the drafting of the fourth NAP during the Fall of 2021. Although it was supposed to be formally adopted by the end of that year, the process dragged on, and the Russian invasion happened.

The Government Decree 629 also imposed a new methodology that was previously nonexistent, and it complicated the drafting process. Two women who were involved in this explain how the decree modified the process:

> The structure of the new NAP is based on Government Decree 629, which was adopted in 2019, meaning that all the national action plans, policies, or strategies developed by the Government should have indicators, targets, and budget. Without a budget, it will not be approved. So that's why it also took a lot of time to go back and forth with the institutions and with leading implementers to see where they fit. […] So that's why, because of the guidance of this decree 629, the process has been prolonged at this stage. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 11, 2022)

> This [new] methodology is quite complex and comprehensive. It requires a lot of criteria to be in place while you are working on the policy paper; for example, it should have a narrative, like an explanatory report of why you intend to elaborate on this national action plan. It needs to have a situation analysis, it needs to have a problem tree, it needs to have a log frame, it needs to have risks, and it needs to mention the resources and how we are going to implement it. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 19, 2022)

Although the new decree made the development of the fourth NAP much more complex, it was identified by my interviewees generally as a good thing since it made the document more robust, with a necessity to indicate a budget, timeline, and clearer monitoring mechanisms, for example, something that was not required for the previous NAPs. Indeed, most women told me that the fourth NAP was the most detailed so far. At the same time,

because of the delay, the time frame of the fourth NAP is shorter than the previous ones (i.e., almost over at the time of writing), and because of the political crises, it was put aside by the Government in a deteriorating environment for civil society. Those who developed the fourth NAP met again during the winter to update the draft in light of recent developments and finalized a new draft in Spring 2022, with feedback from all State entities, NGOs/CSOs, and UN Women. The majority of women I interviewed expressed their disappointment about the dragging, bureaucratic process of the fourth NAP, which is inconsistent with their experience of WPS processes in Georgia so far, leaving the impression that it was not a priority for the Government. Many expressed their confusion about the NAP's current status, given the lack of information and updates:

> In 2020, we were told by our Government that, right now, the NAP is over, and we're going to start working on the fourth NAP. 'This time will be different; we will be coordinating it with you, the civil society, international organizations, etc.' UN Women took the lead in starting the process and hired consultants. So, actually, I would say that the process was participatory because there were a couple of consultations. After the consultations, CSOs provided recommendations to the Government. But right now, it's already 2022, and we have no idea if the recommendations are taken into account or not. So yeah, that's a gap… (Natía Kostava, Program Officer for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia, Global Network for Women Peacebuilders, Tbilisi, September 1, 2022)

In the fourth NAP, the focus remains on conflict-affected and IDP women, similar to previous plans. The themes (organized around WPS pillars) and structure are consistent with previous NAPs, but the fourth NAP is more detailed and includes a longer situation analysis. The fourth NAP broadly included mentions of crisis/emergency management and did not include any mention of Ukrainian refugees in Georgia (Government of Georgia 2022). However, despite this focus, a key femocrat shares with me that:

> Beneficiaries are [conflict-affected] women themselves. [But] they were not so much involved, frankly, [because] NGOs/CSOs who work with women who are IDPs or living along the ABLs, they all already know the needs of those women, that's why we invited them. Because, you know, what was the point of why we didn't invite the women themselves in that process? Because they have some kind of, like, how to say… The needs that can't be incorporated into the National Action Plan. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 19, 2022)

Here, she means that the beneficiaries are not involved in developing the document per se as their needs and priorities are not formulated in a palatable way for decision-makers, something that well-established NGOs/CSOs and experts can do better. This is noteworthy because it relates to our earlier discussion of what kinds of discourse and language are acceptable or not in WPS spaces and how they should be articulated to decision-makers.

To conclude this section, many of the women I spoke to during my fieldwork in the Summer and Fall of 2022 told me about their hopes related to the fourth NAP, but many were scared that it would not reflect the depth of their comments. When I went again in 2023, after fourth NAP adoption, the discussion was not so much on the content of it but more about anger related to the tentative Foreign Agent Law of March 2023, which created an important break of trust between civil society and the Government. The atmosphere was entirely different. In the words of the women interviewed, the next section will explore these hopes and worries about the uncertain future of the WPS agenda in Georgia.

4.4.2 What are the future WPS challenges in Georgia?

According to a report by IDP Women Association Consent (2021, 1) Georgia is not only in a situation of unresolved, protracted conflict but also “in a situation of protracted

displacement, [which] means fatigue of donors, a lack of attention from the international community, and a lack of understanding of existing IDP specific challenges also sometimes within the country." This encapsulates well the situation in which Georgia currently finds itself. There are several structural factors influencing the Georgian landscape that are inextricably linked to the understanding, adoption, and implementation of the NAP. The protracted, low-intensity nature of the conflicts, with no end in sight may lead to a lack of international attention and resources towards Georgia for "hotter" conflicts such as those in Ukraine or in Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, these conflicts themselves are influenced by regional geopolitical developments and internal political crises. These internal political crises, such as the rise of anti-gender movements, the erosion of democracy, the ambiguous policies and rhetoric of the Georgian Dream – swinging both towards the West and towards Russia – and the political polarization in Georgia, in turn, influence the NAP process through the attention and resources given to the NAP by the Government.

When asked about the future challenges they thought were the greatest regarding WPS in Georgia, several concerns were mentioned by my research participants. First, this unstable and fragile context was mentioned as a future challenge for WPS. More flexibility in the face of mounting challenges and adaptability to crises and emergencies (e.g., with functioning early-warning mechanisms) were named potential solutions to those challenges. Although slightly less overwhelming than in Moldova, my discussions with Georgian women indicated some level of anxiety (Interviews 14, 19, 27, 29, 30).

Second, while the NAPs processes are usually gradually more and more inclusive, a future challenge would be to include further marginalized communities (e.g., ethnic minorities, LGTBQ+, HIV positive, migrants, Roma women) themselves and address violence within communities as well (e.g., tensions with Russian migrants or inter-ethnic dialogues within regions that are not traditionally seen as conflict-affected, like Pankisi, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti[64]). This latter point would also include growing attacks against Georgian LGBTQIA+ and include that in the NAP, through protection mechanisms, for example. But again, these refer to larger structural problems in the country, which might make the document "too politically sensitive" to be adopted by the Government, given the current context (Interviews 14, 24).

Third, a future challenge of WPS in Georgia is the overall sustainability of the process in time and the protection of hard-won gains. In addition to the limited political will and financial resources allocated to the NAPs, the high turnover in politics (i.e., governmental institutions are losing qualified personnel and young people are moving abroad) and the break of trust with the Government, which we will discuss in the following section, are impediments to this sustainability. Protecting the progress made since 2011 is a challenge, as I sensed the discouragement of feminists while I was twice in Georgia for different reasons: the significant delays in adopting the fourth NAP, the tentative Foreign Agent Law, the deterioration of relations between civil society and the Government, and the decrease in financial support to women's organizations – support which, we recall, is often

[64] I was told that these issues were not included in the third NAPs despite recommendations from feminist civil society and experts.

entirely dependent on Western donors and short-term projects – (Interview 29) are all factors amplifying anxiety about the future.

Fourth, as we have seen in Section 4, risks and insecurity related to trauma- and conflict revival and Russian occupation (Interviews 17, 18, 31) are frequently mentioned as major challenges for the future of WPS in Georgia, as told by a Government official to me:

> There's just one simple answer. Occupation again. And Russia, and unpredictable actions of Russia. This is the only risk that I see from my perspective that can affect the implementation of the NAP on Resolution of 1325, but not only. It can also affect the whole policy and the direction of the protection of human rights. *When you have like conflict and war in your country, then yeah, that's quite difficult or maybe impossible to protect human rights in a proper way*. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 19, 2022)

While the government representatives I interviewed tend to put the blame entirely on Russia, women from civil society have a deeper analysis of these risks. Growing militarization, losing faith in peaceful ways of conflict resolution, and the fear of seeing past and current efforts go in vain are mentioned (Interviews 14, 22, 27, 29). Moreover, instability and geopolitical risks, all of this happening in a context of democratic backsliding and a toxic political environment (Interviews 28, 71), may lead to trauma-based responses and policy decisions, a result of Russian imperialism:

> Everybody is looking for the big brother who will protect us. For one part of our society, it's NATO and the EU. For the other part, it's just the policy of to be quiet, not to play on the nerves of Russia… what our Government is doing is like that [laugh], we call it, 'not make Russia angry.' (Gender expert, Tbilisi, August 20, 2022)

Fifth, and related to the first and fourth points, the absence of conflict *transformation* and engaging the other sides of the conflicts are mentioned to me as challenges for the future of the NAPs (Interviews 24, 27, 29). There is a growing difficulty in connecting with Abkhaz feminists, where the de facto authorities are following the path of heavy civil society restrictions like the ones in place in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia and Russia (Kotova 2022). One IDP woman I interviewed admitted that, in her opinion, the occupation law signed by Saakashvili in 2008 is an obstacle to building a lasting peace between the two sides (Interview 29). The political isolation of Abkhazia and its increasing dependency on Russia,[65] the development of a NAP that reflects only one side of the story, the militarization of society, and the growing difficulty of working on peace lead her to question the "honesty" and real potential of the NAP in Georgia:

> My fear is also that… are we sufficiently honest in what we're doing? For me, it's crucially important. We are facing the threats. I don't want to think about war, but we are facing the threat of instability or even this war. Let's look to the reality. *Are we sufficiently strong in our commitments, in our positions, that we are committed to peace, and that we will do everything to prevent it?* (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

Finally, like in Moldova, material security and concretely changing and improving the lives of conflict-affected women—including their access to land, medical services, child services, safe transport, connectivity, and a life without daily fears (Interviews 15, 19, 26, 28)—are mentioned as future challenges of WPS in Georgia, things that the NAPs have not done or partially done (indirectly, through the work of women NGOs/CSOs).

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[65] It is interesting to mention that isolation from the international community, non-recognition of Abkhazia and growing dependency on Russia are also mentioned by the Abkhaz women I interviewed.

As this section shows, the anxieties of the present are often intertwined and projected into the future. They are also inseparable from the context in which the WPS agenda is understood, developed, and implemented in Georgia. The following section digs deeper into a major development that took place between my first and second fieldwork and explores its consequences for democracy and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

4.4.3 WPS in the context of Euro-Atlantic accession, the Foreign Agent Law, and democratic backsliding

> Current circumstances and political situation are, at some point, confusing because, you know, we have these commitments now; we strive to get the EU candidacy, but on the other hand, we see the Government is being pro-Russian. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 11, 2022)

Strolling around the capital, it is hard not to notice all the anti-Russia and pro-EU, NATO, and US graffiti everywhere. Everywhere you lay your eyes in Tbilisi, chances are that you will see Georgian and Ukrainian flags along each other and a 'Fuck Russia' tag nearby. Despite the strong bond between Georgians and Ukrainians, the Georgian Dream Government has refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia following the invasion. The ruling party has also been accused of not supporting Ukraine enough and pursuing "Russia-appeasing" politics since 2022, slowly falling back into Russia's orbit.

When I made my second field trip to Georgia in the late summer of 2023, the atmosphere was not joyful. The tension was palpable. Many women I had met the previous summer were in low spirits. The attempted Foreign Agent Law initiated by a Parliamentary faction in February 2023 and voted later in a first reading in the Parliament led to massive protests

in Tbilisi involving police brutality and public arrests in early March. Despite the ruling party retracting the bills later (RFE/RL's Georgian Service 2023), it marked a real rupture of trust and connection between Georgian civil society and the Georgian Government, a once good relationship. The UN in Georgia, the EU, the Council of Europe human rights commissioner, and more than 400 local NGOs and media expressed deep concern toward this tentative law. Georgia's own President Salome Zurabishvili called it 'Russian influence' and said she would veto the bill (Human Rights Watch 2023). This draft law sent a confusing message to Georgian civil society and was perceived as incompatible with international and European human rights frameworks and Georgia's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. In follow-up chats in Tbilisi in August 2023, it was described to me as a 'before-and-after moment' in Georgian politics, a point of no return in the country.

And what does all of this have to do with WPS? With this breaking point, anti-gender threats (coming from both outside and inside institutions) and democratic backsliding are worsening, "now the situation is absolutely catastrophic for gender issues, and let's not even talk about LGBTQ issues," tells me Elene Rusetskaia, a woman peacebuilder, in August 2023. The civic space in which NGOs/CSOs and activists working for gender equality, human rights and peace is further shrinking, sometimes even endangering them. In addition, the current Head of the Gender Equality Council, Nino Tsilosani—an essential point person in Parliament for Georgian women—was involved in a scandal for publicly supporting a well-known Georgian personality accused of sexual harassment and for voting in favor of the Foreign Agent Law in Parliament, which led to several women NGOs/CSOs calling for her resignation (JAM News 2023). A woman who has been advocating for WPS

since the early 2000s and is used to working with the government reflects on recent developments while we discuss in her office:

> When we work in advocacy, we need to work with the Government. And because we have no problem, absolutely no problem, not [with] Gender Equality Council, [neither] other institution bodies. *But after this law, it was a surprise for us, and we [were not expecting this] from our partners such a decision, and many of those who were initiators [of this law] were our friends.* After this, the situation changed, not only because of this initiative but also rhetorically. And we see anti-gender rhetoric, it's very influencing our activities and our work […] We don't know how to continue our work now. (Elene Rusetskaia, Chairperson of the Women's Information Center, Tbilisi, July 20, 2023)

This Law—albeit unsuccessful at the time of my second fieldwork—was difficult for Georgian feminists to digest. Those I met again in 2023 told me that a lot of work would have to be done to rebuild trust with the Government, a setback that was already impacting the implementation of the fourth NAP. Not only was this draft Foreign Agent Law understood as being in complete contradiction to the EU process, but *also* with the adoption of the fourth NAP, as its public launch occurred right during that same period. Indeed, the Law clashes with what emerged from my interviews with Government officials during my first fieldwork in 2022. When I asked them how the Government understood the WPS agenda, I received different answers. It was clear that the Government perceived WPS as a strategic tool for Euro-Atlantic integration:

> The Minister of Defense led this [WPS] process, and the main reason was their aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration. It is [because] it's very much connected to NATO's goals and objectives and [that is why] the Minister of Defense follows the guidelines and commitments that NATO has on WPS. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 11, 2022)

> Well NATO and EU care a lot about WPS, and we report [to them], we have a commitment to EU and NATO. We have a plan [partnership] with NATO, and we are kind of getting closer to Euro-Atlantic integration. We have commitments that we will do this for this year

> and next year, and we are successfully doing this. *And the Georgian Government sees WPS, gender equality, and human rights as a… kind of a tool, not a tool, but something which makes us closer to the EU and NATO*. And definitely, the Government has quite expressed support for all of these ideas. The Prime Minister's office, which has a special Commission in it, and also the MoD leadership, *is very much supportive in this regard because we see [it as] something which makes us closer to NATO and EU*, and this is visible. (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 31, 2022)

> Of course, the government of Georgia treats this resolution very seriously, and continuous efforts are aimed at, you know, *implementing all those obligations and commitments* that were undertaken by the Government within this framework. (Government representative, Zoom, September 26, 2022)

As mentioned above, while NATO is not a formal donor or actor in Georgia's WPS NAPs, it nevertheless acts as a normative influence, a goal to be achieved, and an example to be followed. Despite resistance in the past decades and the Government not fully understanding the importance of WPS at the beginning, a woman tells me that:

> Now, because of the commitments, new commitments, this strive of the Government to the European path, and its requirements it puts on this, I mean integration, *I think that they were just obliged and forced to accept that this agenda is something that they need to pay attention to.* (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund Sukhumi, Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

She further explained that if we consider the recommendations laid out by the EU to the Georgian government to attain the EU candidate status (that was before Georgia obtained the status in December 2023), terms like 'WPS' are not explicitly mentioned. Rather, they are attempting to focus more on gender equality as a whole, which includes women's participation and paying attention to the EU's recommendations on violence against women – and these are all crucial components of the WPS agenda. Another woman starts from a different point of departure. She explains that the Government, on the contrary, has realized

the true value of the agenda *over time*, beyond its strategic importance for Euro-Atlantic integration:

> So probably at the beginning, they [the Government] saw that this was a tool and a mechanism that could support us as we strive to integrate EU and NATO. But then, I guess they saw the value as well, especially when we talk about, for example, platforms where they exchange with women's CSOs and grassroots women. First, they would do it just because it was an obligation in the NAP. We started it in 2014, but then they saw such a great value because they would receive feedback or they would receive information they had no idea about from women in certain villages telling them, 'Oh, I saw Russians building fences here and police, can you come and check?' From [my] experience, they saw a huge value in communicating directly with the beneficiaries. (Representative of an international organization, Tbilisi, August 11, 2022)

As we can note from the quotes presented above, when I asked my participants about the perception of WPS and the importance that the Government attaches to this agenda, the answers were often nuanced, contradictory, and perplexing. For some women I interviewed (experts and representatives of NGOs/CSOs), the agenda is relatively well understood and prioritized by the Government, but these reflections were tempered by the fact that the NAP is underfunded and, above all, delayed (the fourth NAP), which sends a signal that it is *not* a priority for the Government, especially in politically difficult times. For others, these examples precisely show that it is not a priority. More answers in that regard included that there is readiness from the Government, but based on their experience, it is often a "show off" for international partners, without any substantial understanding of it or without accountability toward their own people (Interview 28). Because the WPS NAPs can be perceived as a "soft" "women's" issue, the Government might not be "afraid" of it as long as they don't see it as a threat to their political interests; they are warm about WPS initiatives "as long as internationals fund them." (Interviews 20, 24) These contrasted narratives all echo what I have heard in the other case studies.

In contrast, responses from the Government generally tended to be a bit more idealistic, polished, and framed positively. For those working in the government I interviewed, the delays and weaknesses of the NAPs in Georgia were explained by external factors, such as structural reasons outside the government's political will and control: COVID, Russian occupation, or decree 629. Although some women from civil society have also done so, those working in the Government systematically made explicit links to Euro-Atlantic integration and Georgia's responsibility toward its international commitments. Before 2023, the WPS agenda helped position Georgia in international fora – as a country that wants peace – and as a country that is *different* from Russia by respecting international norms (Santoire 2024b). My interviews and the review of existing documents clearly showed that civil society and officials associated the development of WPS norms with democratization (e.g., Assistant to the Prime Minister of Georgia on Human Rights and Gender Equality Issues, interviewed by UN Women Georgia 2016).

Despite not fulfilling EU requirements, Georgia became an EU candidate country in December 2023, after the announcement made in June 2022 (Jozwiak 2023). Now, however, Georgia's democratic future is uncertain, and its Euro-Atlantic integration seems more distant than ever. In 2024, the ruling party again attempted to pass the foreign agent law, which was successful this time. This led to tens of thousands of citizens taking to the streets of Tbilisi in April and May, resulting in a brutal crackdown by Georgian riot police. The situation for NGOs/CSOs and civil society in general is dire and this law marks a critical turning point in the country's descent into autocracy. Any organization receiving more than 20% of its budget from abroad – which include the majority of NGOs/CSOs in

Georgia – will be registered as agents of 'foreign influence,' severely repressing their work and possible sources of funding and leading to heavier reporting requirements. On August 1st, 2024, the foreign agent law took effect despite President Salome Zurabishvili having vetoed the law (later overridden by the Parliament) and facing multiple constitutional challenges. As of October 2024, Georgia has registered the first NGOs/CSOs, nonprofits, and media outlets considered agents of "foreign influence," further widening the gap between the government and Georgian civil society previously mentioned. While many have pledged not to register as foreign agents, noncompliance with the law will subject them to severe fines. Currently, the EU has paused Georgia's negotiations toward membership (RFE/RL's Georgian Service 2024; OC Media 2024).

4.4.4 Reflecting on progress made in radically changing times – and what can others learn from the Georgian experience

> We, as the pioneers, let's say, especially in the close neighborhood, have our lessons learned, even sometimes bitter ones. (Ekaterine Gamakharia, Head of the Tbilisi Office of the Women Fund 'Sukhumi,' Tbilisi, September 16, 2022)

The very last section reflects on progress made over time and provides insights into what neighboring countries can learn from the Georgian experience. When asked about WPS successes in Georgia and what made them proud, three common elements emerged from my interviews.

First, as Georgia was the first country in the region to develop a NAP, Georgian feminists had few examples to turn to, so they are leading the way and are proud to inspire and guide other feminists in the Caucasus region. This aligns with and stems from a rich history and

centuries of civic activism led by strong Georgian women (Gaprindashvili 2017). Women NGOs/CSOs working in peacebuilding are extremely active, resilient, and well-established across the countries, making Georgia a leader in that regard (Santos et al. 2023). The NAPs, despite their imperfections, gave Georgian feminists a vital framework to work with:

> Having this document gives me the power to start doing things. This is the base where I start; and when you have this base, you can just build on so many things [off of that]" (Natía Kostava, Program Officer for Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia, Global Network for Women Peacebuilders, Tbilisi, September 1, 2022)

As such, the NAPs opened the space for greater collaboration with the Government (prior to 2023) and gave feminists a strategic tool to hold their Government accountable, engaged, and transparent. It gave a lot of Georgian women the "feel[ing] that their voices and needs have been heard and understood." (Interview 14) Like in Moldova, most Georgian women mentioned to me that the NAPs' impacts are less transformative than they had hoped for, but "it is better than nothing," and having a document to ground their work in is useful.

While the realities and specific needs of IDPs and conflict-affected women are still not fully addressed nor realized (see Gamakharia 2021b), the NAPs gave Georgian feminists legitimacy, a space, and acquired skills to rely on. Those are not necessarily coming from the document *itself* but are more about the ideas it brought to the table and normalized. Many women I interviewed gave me anecdotes (often linked with localization) of how, from their perspective, WPS advocacy has borne fruit. For example, informing rural women of the importance of their voice and where and to whom they can express their concerns if they have any; previously isolated villages now linked by roads, electricity,

water, and telecommunication; the establishment of clinics, schools or medical centers where women can receive services, and police officers now trained to intervene in different situations of gender-based violence, are examples among others, which indicate that this is not necessarily a direct result of the document per se, but that it has served as a vehicle to accomplish other goals, incrementally.

Second, despite disappointing results still to this day, the NAPs lead to an increase of women in decision-making and once exclusively male-dominated structures. Although their representation in key high-level positions remains limited, the WPS agenda also gave femocrats a tool to work with, to enhance gender sensitivity among public servants (Interview 18) and confront patriarchal resistance:

> When we started, it was just a few people who were talking about this […] when we were going around to the units and talking [about WPS], we've had quite, quite a big resistance, especially when we were [talking] about women's rights… (Government representative, Tbilisi, August 31, 2022)

Third, the elaboration and drafting of the NAPs – especially the third and fourth ones – were mentioned to me as highly collaborative and full of good practices from which neighboring countries can benefit, a success in itself (Interviews 16). In light of recent developments, the future will tell whether civil society's trust in government will remain shaken, whether relations between government and NGOs/CSOs – and between feminist civil society and femocrats – will be re-established, and what impact the foreign agent law will have on the development of future NAPs, given that many NGOs/CSOs working on WPS will now be considered "foreign agents."

In contrast to the recent NAP process in Moldova, it is more difficult to establish a clear "takeaway" from my interviews in Georgia, as changes are unfolding as I write. My interviews revealed multiple contradictory narratives, and it is these contradictions that make them rich. For example, some said that there is strong ownership from the Government, and some said not at all. Some said that the agenda is pushed by civil society, and others said UN Women and Western donors push it. All those narratives are authentic, but my research points to the most likely evidence that civil society pushed for it first in the early 2000s, but UN Women became the "invisible hand" behind everything over time – supporting with crucial financial and technical assistance – and without them, civil society's advocacy would probably not have been sufficient on its own. While there is a growing ownership in the Government over time (prior to 2023), Many Georgian feminists question whether this reflects a genuine commitment or merely a "show off" to international partners. They also wonder if the Government truly prioritizes the NAPs), considering its lack of capacity, funding, human and institutional resources, and access to all its territory needed to fully implement the NAP.

To conclude, my data reveals that Georgia is not considered a WPS "champion" or leader in the region because of groundbreaking results, but mostly because it was the first to adopt a NAP in 2011 and because its NAP development process included several good practices—mostly related to WPS localization in municipalities—and a wide-reaching consultation process. As in Moldova, the WPS agenda has opened doors for Georgian feminists, giving them space, voice, legitimacy, and tools that were previously absent. The process itself is a success. With civil society deteriorating further, the official adoption of

the Foreign Agent Law in May 2024, alongside other indicators of serious democratic backsliding such as the anti-LGBTQIA+ law adopted in September 2024, the rigged elections in November 2024, and the Georgia Dream's attempts to erase ‘gender’ from legislation in February 2025, it is currently challenging to predict the future of the WPS agenda in Georgia.

One thing is certain: the future of WPS will rely on women's creativity, courage, and tireless work in Georgian civil society.

Conclusion and Discussion of Section I

Despite significant differences between Moldova and Georgia in various respects, such as their paths toward Euro-Atlantic accession (Moldova aiming for EU membership while Georgia seeked both EU and NATO membership, prior to 2023), domestic politics and the structure of their institutions, their recent history of conflict (2008 for Georgia, 1992 for Moldova), their democracy status (Moldova is further democratizing while the opposite is now observed in Georgia), and WPS regional leadership (Georgia initiated WPS advocacy before Moldova and localization is more advanced), as detailed throughout Section I, both countries share several common elements, which makes their comparison interesting. One major point of comparison is the protracted nature of their conflicts – often qualified as "frozen" conflicts. The other common elements are detailed below.

How did WPS NAPs emerge in Moldova and Georgia? In Moldova, an alliance of Moldovan feminists inside and outside institutions played an instrumental part in adopting the first NAP. This alliance was composed of national women's rights NGOs/CSOs, femocrats inside the State apparatus, and gender experts such as UN Women Moldova, UN Women-hired national consultants, academic experts from the Military Academy, and various experts from international organizations and NGOs/CSOs supporting the process. The actors who took part in the first NAP process made pragmatic decisions and compromises in order to have a first NAP that was seen as not "too political" and served as a foundation for the second NAP, adopted later in 2023. In Georgia, too, an alliance of feminists inside and outside institutions was instrumental in the adoption of the first NAP

back in 2011. This alliance consisted of NGOs/CSOs led by women who are themselves conflict-affected or IDPs. It also included women working within the Government and Parliament, as well as gender experts such as UN Women Georgia, UN Women-hired national consultants, and experts from international organizations and NGOs supporting the processes. In Georgia and Moldova, their respective UN Women country offices provided key support, material resources, authority, and training to local feminists. These velvet triangles, however, can be perceived as elitist by other feminists as a handful of NGOs/CSOs – generally headed by middle-aged women from the "Beijing Generation" – located in the capital "monopolize" the WPS landscape.

In both countries, feminists have been creative and pragmatic in their advocacy efforts, aiming for incremental changes. They have established links between gender and their country's security issues, using the WPS agenda as a strategic tool to achieve a broader understanding of security, hold their governments accountable, and legitimize the work they have been doing for a long time, though Georgia has a longer history of WPS advocacy compared to Moldova. In Georgia, WPS advocacy especially took off after the Rose Revolution and then again after the 2008 war, which served as catalysts in the emergence of NAP advocacy. Contrary to Georgia and the other countries in this study, WPS advocacy in Moldova did not begin after a social and political revolution, as no such major event occurred there. While I received conflicting explanations in both Moldova and Georgia, evidence indicates that the advocacy for WPS NAP was initially started by civil society. However, it was not enough on its own and required support from UN Women, other international organizations, and women in positions of power within the system. Georgia's

first NAP was adopted in 2011 and is now at its fourth version in 2024, while Moldova adopted its first NAP in 2018 and is now at its second version in 2024.

How did the militarized environment in Moldova and Georgia influence WPS NAP adoption and implementation? Following the adoption, the implementation of the first NAP in Moldova faced numerous challenges due to a lack of resources. The process was further disrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events led to a significant diversion of efforts, as the country had to deal with a large influx of refugees, hybrid attacks, and heightened anxiety related to the conflict with Transnistria. In Georgia, it is more difficult to provide an overall picture of implementation as the country has four NAPs, and their process started significantly earlier, in the early 2000s, but like in Moldova, the adoption of the fourth NAP was seriously delayed because the COVID pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In both cases, external donors' resources and support were crucial in implementing the NAPs, which contain barely any or no financial commitments from the state budget.

In both cases, we observe a gap between rhetoric and reality regarding implementation, where the sustainability of the NAPs is fragile and often relies on a few dedicated individuals inside the system. Government-wide ownership and a deep understanding of what WPS entails remains limited, exacerbating patriarchal resistance in male-dominated sectors like defense and security and conflict settlements, where women are still severely underrepresented. In both Moldova and Georgia, women NGOs/CSOs – supported by UN Women and international organizations – on the ground deliver essential services, training,

support, and humanitarian aid when needed. However, women-led NGOs/CSOs that directly respond to the needs on the ground often have to compete with each other. They typically operate and are managed on a short-term, project-based logic, leaving them overworked, under-resourced, fragile and dependent on external donors.

In Moldova and Georgia, however, there are also more structural problems impacting NAP implementation: the Soviet legacy includes protracted conflicts on their territories and their resulting troubled relations with Russia. It is evident that these conflicts justify the need for NAP adoption and make the existence of a NAP crucial, especially in Moldova after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and after the 2008 war in Georgia. However, these conflicts also hinder implementation because the respective governments do not have access to the Russian-occupied territories. Engaging the other sides of the conflicts – namely Transnistrian, Abkhazian, and Ossetian women – is challenging in both NAP processes and remains either taboo and/or inaccessible. In Moldova, Transnistria was not mentioned in the first NAP as this was deemed too politically sensitive; in Georgia, Abkhazia, and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia are mentioned in all four NAPs as IDPs, and conflict-affected women are the primary beneficiaries of the NAPs but work in and around those areas are extremely limited given the Government's limited access. In both cases, the root causes of the conflict or the political status of these breakaway regions are not part of NAP discussions as they are deemed too political.

In both countries, my questions about WPS and the conflicts were met with answers that revealed deeper anxieties. In both countries, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Tskhinvali/South

Ossetia are perceived as geographical spaces of gendered insecurities. Using various metaphors, those spaces are described as "black holes" where several gendered violations of human rights occur, along with illegal phenomena, ongoing violence at the boundary lines (Georgia), and unreachable citizens. In Georgia, women interviewed underlined how people were getting discouraged by peaceful means of conflict resolution, echoing the cases of Ukraine and Armenia more than the case of Moldova. One thing is clear: while these conflicts are considered "frozen" by analysts, they nonetheless are at risk of sparking and becoming "hot" again – and their consequences continue to pose risks and daily militarization to civilians, especially those residing near the boundary lines. Paradoxically, because of the protracted nature of those conflicts, they also became "normalized" in the lives of many. Both cases underline the limitations of applying normative frameworks like WPS in occupied territories and/or unrecognized states, as these spaces are unrecognized by the international community and are not UN Member States.

In Moldova and Georgia, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a turning point in both countries' history, directly impacting their respective conflicts, and therefore has direct and indirect implications for the WPS landscape. The adoption of the second NAP in Moldova and the fourth one in Georgia occurred within a new security architecture, highlighting the importance of observing NAP processes as closely linked to the countries' *zeitgeist.* In Moldova, the invasion made the Government deal with additional issues like hybrid attacks, Russia's energy bullying, growing inflation, and internal political crises, diverting resources and attention from the WPS NAP but at the same time helping to raise awareness about its importance, especially among previously resistant government officials. In

Georgia, the invasion marked an important point in the acceleration of authoritarianism and democratic deterioration in Georgia, in addition to Russian émigrés coming *en masse* to Tbilisi and heightened insecurity around the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts.

How do different state and non-state actors understand and use the WPS agenda in Moldova and Georgia? Despite receiving numerous critiques and yielding mixed implementation results, NAPs serve as important advocacy tools in Moldova and Georgia. They structure and legitimize feminist work in civil society while also empowering female public servants who face resistance in male-dominated sectors, echoing the case of Ukraine as well. In Georgia, women from civil society and international organizations tended to describe how they understood and used WPS as a leverage and as an advocacy tool, whereas women in the government tended to describe it as a way to demonstrate or prove something: respect for Western liberal democratic values, care toward vulnerable citizens and commitment to EU and NATO requirements. In Georgia, the relationship between civil society and the government was positive for a long time. However, there has been a deterioration in these relations, leading to a dramatic loss of trust between civil society and the government in 2023 due to the draft foreign agent law, and its official adoption in 2024. In Moldova, my data does not show a clear distinction between how the different actors understand and use the NAPs. This may be attributable to the fact that WPS is still in its early stages, and there seems to be a closely connected understanding of WPS among all three corners of the triangle. Although it was less apparent in Moldova than in Georgia, where government officials explicitly told me about how they saw WPS as a useful tool for Euro-Atlantic integration, evidence indicates that Moldovan authorities perceive the

WPS agenda in a similar way. They are also working to build a positive Western image of the country abroad, especially under Maia Sandu's administration.

Throughout their careers, gender experts navigate positions and spaces, shifting from one corner of the triangle to another. In contrast to the previously discussed actors, my data does not uncover a specific perspective on how these experts understand and use the WPS.

In both cases, I have heard dramatically opposite narratives on the political will of the Moldovan and Georgian governments. Some people argue that the adoption and implementation of NAPs demonstrate genuine progress and political commitment. However, others believe that it is merely a way to impress Western donors and partners, especially as both countries are pursuing EU accession and NATO membership (in the case of Georgia, prior to 2023). These narratives, even if in appearance contradictory, coexist with each other. Most women I interviewed, regardless of their position, were pragmatic and strategic in their use of WPS.

Also, in both countries, we notice that a handful of powerful and experienced NGOs/CSOs located in the capital "dominate" the WPS landscape in the country, and the most radical critiques are pushed aside the WPS processes and remain marginal. Most visible in Georgia is a single national narrative of the conflict. If one deviates from it, they will not be included, indicating the existence of a polished, acceptable WPS discourse.

In both Moldova and Georgia, NAPs have progressively improved over time and laid the ground for the following NAPs, with processes generally described to me as progressively more inclusive of civil society and more thematic than the first ones, although there is still not a lot of space for women from ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ communities, young women, refugees/IDPs or those living in rural areas.

In conclusion, while policy changes regarding WPS often rely on specific individuals, in both Moldova and Georgia, the political context in which these processes and feminist alliances take place *significantly* matters. The concerning political developments in Georgia indicate a growing difference in the democratic paths of Moldova and Georgia. While Moldova aims to align itself more closely with Western alliances and confront Russian threats and attacks, Georgia is hindering its decade-long efforts to integrate Euro-Atlantic institutions and has recently implemented policies that seriously violate human rights. Taking a broader view, my research indicates that these new developments will have further implications for the WPS landscape in both countries.

Section II – WPS in Active Conflicts

Introduction to Section II and National Contexts

Section II of this thesis focuses on the Armenian and Ukrainian case studies analyzed separately and together. The two countries are interesting to contrast in the same section as both have a current or very recent history of war. In Chapters 5 (Armenia) and 6 (Ukraine), I analyze the emergence, adoption, and implementation of their respective NAPs for WPS in the context of an active conflict, military occupation, and state of emergency. I examine how wars, such as the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in Armenia (2020) and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, impact the understanding of gendered (in)security and the application of the WPS framework. First, let's introduce our two case studies of Section II by providing a bit of historical and political context in which both countries are situated.

The Republic of Armenia (hereafter Armenia) is a small, landlocked country between Eastern Europe and Western Asia with a population of about 3 million. Its size and difficult relations with neighbors – Georgia, Iran, Turkey, and Azerbaijan – make it geographically fragile and isolated, with 80% of its border closed. While Armenia is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in the world (98% Armenian), there are small ethnic minorities, including Yazidis, Russians, Kurds, Assyrians, Jews and Greeks (Arab and Abrahamyan 2019, 16). Worth noting is Armenia's profound collective trauma dating back to the early 1900s Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire, today's Turkey.

Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia has faced significant challenges, including several economic and political crises, the first Nagorno-Karabakh war (1988-1994), the four-day war (2016), the Velvet Revolution (2018), the second Nagorno-Karabakh war (2020), the blockade of the Lachin corridor (2022-2023), and the Azerbaijan offensive in September 2023, which led to the total dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh as of January 1st, 2024, to name but a few.

Nagorno-Karabakh (NK), 'Artsakh' in Armenian, is a mountainous land that holds significant historical and spiritual importance for Armenians. Historically, this small territory (located in today's internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan) has been populated mainly by Armenians, although evidence of co-existence with Azeri people existed before and during the Soviet Union. While the root causes of conflict[66] go back to the Russian Empire, tensions were aggravated in 1988 as Armenians in the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (which was part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic) asked the Central Soviet authorities to be integrated into the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic instead. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the first NK war, which displaced close to a million Armenians and Azerbaijanis, with records of several war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and other atrocities committed by both sides. Fighting ceased in 1994, leaving Armenian forces victorious and in control of not only NK but also seven adjacent regions (International Crisis Group 2023b).

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[66] In these lines, I recognize that the depth and complexity of more than thirty years of conflict are extremely difficult to render in just a few paragraphs. I also recognize that by the nature of my research and interviewees, the information shared in this chapter almost entirely reflects Armenian voices, grievances, and narratives.

Since the 1994 ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia, negotiations mediated by the OSCE and the Minsk Group (France, Russia, and the United States) were unsuccessful and never led to a peace agreement, leaving the conflict – like many others in the former Soviet Union – characterized as "frozen." As elsewhere in the region, the NK conflict was never truly "frozen"; sporadic clashes and "low-intensity violence" occurred regularly along the line of contact (the frontline separating Armenian and Azeri forces) from 1994 until 2020. Over its thirty years of existence, the deadliest incident was the four-day war in 2016.

From 1991 until its dissolution at the end of 2023, NK was a *de facto* state like many others in the region (i.e., Transnistria, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali/South Ossetia), its unrecognized status meaning that it was politically and economically isolated from the rest of the world. While this complex conflict "is often presented as a classic struggle between the right to self-determination for Karabakh Armenians, and the right to territorial integrity for Azerbaijanis, [there] is another narrative that is favoured by many people living in the region [which is that] the conflict is unresolved not because of the irreconcilable enmity between the two sides, but because of Russian *realpolitik*, which views the status quo as a useful lever in its foreign policy towards both Armenia and Azerbaijan." (Walsh 2014) This ambiguous state of 'not war nor peace' was abruptly put to an end in 2020.

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War – or 44-day war – lasted from September 27 until Russia brokered a ceasefire on November 10, 2020. Part of that deal included the establishment of a Russian peacekeeping mission and Azerbaijan's regaining by force the seven adjacent regions it had previously lost during the first Nagorno-Karabakh War, in

addition to parts of NK itself (International Crisis Group 2023b) (Figure 5 below). During those months, 72 civilians and around 4,000 Armenian armed forces personnel were killed by Azerbaijani shelling of densely populated cities like Stepanakert, NK's capital. Around 90,000 Armenian civilians lost their land/homes and were displaced, out of which 88% were women and children. Public and civilian infrastructure was deliberately targeted and bombed by the Azerbaijani forces. The fact that this war also happened during the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic intensified and complexified the humanitarian crisis response. Like other conflicts around the world, it had profound gendered consequences; various human rights violations and instances of sexual violence and torture of civilians were recorded by several local sources on the ground (Women's Resource Center 2021).

Figure 5: Map of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after 2020

Source: RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service and RFE/RL's Armenian Service (2020)

The 44-day war significantly shifted the balance of power in the South Caucasus region. While Armenia (historically backed by Russia) was the “winner” of the first NK war, it became the “loser” in the second NK war, with dramatic human, material, and territorial losses. Azerbaijan (backed by Turkey and Israel) emerged victorious and stronger than ever, regaining several swaths of its territory previously occupied/controlled by Armenian forces since the first NK war, as well as several regions and major cities of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh, including Shushi, Hadrut, and Fuzuli. The 44-day war caused destruction, displacement, death, and injuries, exacerbating the physical and psychological trauma for survivors of the first NK war, all amid widespread COVID-19 contamination.

Despite notable improvements in gender equality legislation, especially after the Velvet Revolution, Armenian women today still face multiple challenges impacting their rights to bodily autonomy, safety, health, financial independence, and mobility. Women in the LGBTQIA+ community, women with disabilities, poor women, and those living with HIV face immense discrimination. Rigid patriarchal norms are impacting women’s life choices and safety and contributing to the challenges mentioned above (Arab and Abrahamyan 2019). For example, sex-selective abortion and high maternal mortality rates are still common in today’s Armenia. Moreover, militarization, fear of war, various forms of gender-based violence, and everyday stress are affecting women, especially those in rural and bordering regions (Kvinna till Kvinna, n.d.; 2019). Despite being extremely active and with decades of experience in various peacebuilding initiatives with one another, both Armenian and Azeri women have been virtually excluded from all peace processes to this day, which are dominated by male elites.

Turning now to Eastern Europe, Ukraine differs significantly from the other countries I am investigating in my research in several ways. The starkest one is geographic: Ukraine is eighteen times bigger than Moldova, nine times bigger than Georgia, and twenty times bigger than Armenia in square kilometers. Its vast and diverse landscape stretches from Eastern Europe to Western Russia, spanning the Black and Azov Seas. Although Ukrainian is the official language, Russian and *surzhyk*[67] are widely spoken. Ukraine has numerous ethnic minorities, including Russians, Romanians/Moldovans, Crimean Tatars, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Poles, Jews, Roma, and Afro-Ukrainians, to name a few. Ukraine's population as of January 2022 was about 41 million.[68] Along with Moldova, Ukraine has succeeded in significantly improving its Human Development Index in the last two decades, but it is still considered among the poorest countries in Europe with far-reaching structural socio-economic inequalities. Moreover, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine "has caused staggering losses to Ukraine's people and economy, setting back 15 years of development gains and increasing poverty." (The World Bank 2024)

Since Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country—today a semi-presidential republic—has faced several political, economic, and social upheavals, notably the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromaidan (also known as the Maidan Revolution) (2013-2014). In November 2013, after controversial pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych rejected an EU Association Agreement in favour of seeking closer ties

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[67] Surzhyk is a mix of Ukrainian and Russian languages.

[68] Although official statistics have not been updated since the Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine's population as of January 2022 was about 41 million. This number largely fluctuates given the large movement of population across Ukraine's borders (refugees), within Ukraine (IDPs) and across government-controlled and non-government-controlled (occupied) regions since the invasion (European Union and NIRAS 2023).

with Russia, large-scale protests erupted in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv. Among others, these violent civic uprisings lasted months and led to several human rights violations by the state and civilian deaths, culminating in the resignation of Yanukovych, the signing of the EU Association Agreement and marking a significant Western shift in Ukraine's history, collective memory, and foreign policy. Soon after, Russia illegally annexed Crimea in March 2014 – widely denounced as a violation of international law by most of the world – and started (what was previously called, until early 2022) the Donbas War, in April 2014 (International Crisis Group 2021). The first eight years of the conflict were mostly located in Eastern Ukraine (Donetsk and Luhansk regions and Crimea), fought between Ukrainian forces (Armed Forces and numerous volunteer battalions) and Russian-backed separatist forces of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk "People's Republics." The conflict was relatively "low intensity" and "frozen" for several years after repeated failed negotiations and violated ceasefires, leading to tens of thousands of casualties and civilian suffering (ibid.) However, the war took a drastic turn when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, which we will discuss in Chapter 6 (a map of Ukraine is not included here given the limited space and rapidly-changing situation on the ground).

Despite war and structural challenges, Ukraine's entry into the EU Association Agreement in 2014 led to democratic reforms and "provided additional impetus to advance gender equality commitments and ensure equal opportunities for both women and men." (European Union and NIRAS 2023, 19) Ukraine being granted EU candidate status in June 2022 has also accelerated greater efforts with respect to decentralization, the fight

against corruption and organized crime, the protection of human rights, and reforms in the public administration, judicial, and financial sectors (European Commission 2023).

Nevertheless, despite significant legislative changes in gender equality and human rights protection in the country over the last decade (and since their independence), Ukrainian women still face multiple challenges today, including patriarchal norms, high levels of gender-based violence, bodily autonomy, safety, feminization of poverty, economic insecurities and the deeply gendered consequences of society-wide militarization and war (O'Sullivan 2020). However, Ukrainian women are far from being passive victims: although they were largely excluded from the Minsk agreements[69], since the Euromaidan, they have been engaged and active in all sectors of society as activists, political leaders, soldiers, deminers, nurses, doctors, and paramedics, lawyers, researchers, entrepreneurs and so on, reflecting a rich and complex history of Ukrainian feminist activism. As we will see extensively in this chapter, feminist civil society has been working on the ground and around the clock since 2014 in order to respond to the immediate effects of the conflict in the country. In this unique context, Ukrainian women have found windows of opportunity to push for the adoption of a National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS – and their efforts are often hailed as leading Ukraine to be the "first country to adopt a NAP during a war."

[69] The Minsk Agreements (Minsk I and II) were a series of high-level mediations and unsuccessful agreements aimed at tentatively ending the war in Ukraine, until 2022. These involved Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE, the Normandy Format (France and Germany), and at times, representatives of the Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics," without recognition of their status.

The scale, diversity, and timeline of the WPS landscape in Ukraine differ substantially from those of other countries in this research. Trying to retrace this history in such a vast country is an ambitious task. Contrary to other countries in my research, academic literature on Ukraine and WPS has been published already (and is abundant), so assembling my data in line with the literature previously produced felt more like a giant "puzzle" than in my other chapters, as information was sometimes scattered and contradictory. Moreover, although Ukraine has formally adopted two NAPs, they – in reality – have four, as both NAPs were significantly updated mid-term, resulting in *four* distinct processes and documents; for this reason, the current chapter cannot follow the same structure as the others. Sections 6.1 and 6.2 cover both versions of the first NAP and the initial version of the second NAP, primarily utilizing secondary sources. Writing a precise and exhaustive timeline of the first NAP is rather difficult, given the number of actors involved across the country and levels of governance. Given the timing of my interviews, my own data reflects more on the post-2022 period and the consequences of the Russian invasion on WPS implementation of the second NAP, which will be reflected in the last two sections (6.3 and 6.4)

The next two chapters detail the *process* of NAP emergence, adoption, and implementation in Armenia and Ukraine, rather than focusing on their *content*, following a similar approach to Section I. Both will also explore the different perspectives of various actors involved in WPS advocacy and work.

Chapter 5: Armenia

5.1 The emergence of the first WPS NAP (2019-2021) in a new era of democratization

5.1.1 (Re)introducing Resolution 1325 in Armenia after the 2018 Velvet Revolution

In Spring 2018, Armenia experienced massive anti-government protests, resulting in the resignation of former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and the democratic election of current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. Those mass protests – referred to as the 'Velvet Revolution' – were a pivotal moment in Armenian history, marking a change in Armenia's domestic and foreign policy, including various democratic reforms, a shift towards the West, and the removal of the pro-Russian politicians who had dominated the political landscape since the fall of the Soviet Union. Armenian women held significant leadership roles and were at the forefront of this peaceful Revolution, in continuity with a long history of women's activism in the country (e.g., see Shirinian 2020; Nikoghosyan 2019).

The election of Nikol Pashinyan also marked the "era of peace" and a clear breakaway from past politics, notably the so-called decades-ruling of the "Karabakh clan," which was in power for most of Armenia's post-Soviet era (Broers 2024). After the Revolution, there was a reshuffle of Government staff and ministries. Many people were recruited from the NGO and civil society sector, and they brought with them liberal ideas that were very different from the conservative Sargsyan Government. This facilitated a shift towards embracing an "international agenda" (Interviews 46, 50). Since then, "the country has

witnessed an opening up of civic space and increased freedom of speech, assembly, and participation in political processes." (Santos et al. 2023, 4)

While the Armenian Government formally adopted the first NAP after the Revolution (in February 2019), the previous Government committed to adopting one in September 2017 as part of its larger Human Rights Protection Strategy and created an inter-agency committee related to the development of a WPS NAP. However, this is in no way representative of the history of the WPS process in Armenia, which goes way back to before the Velvet Revolution. Indeed, there is evidence that Armenian women NGOs/CSOs were advocating for a WPS NAP before the Revolution, in the days of the Sargsyan Government, but feminists' demands back then were met with silence and strong resistance. The Revolution thus opened a window of opportunity for Armenian feminists and brought new opportunities for engagement and dialogue between the Government and civil society because of the broader democratization process. WPS advocacy to pressure the Government to adopt a NAP grew bigger after the Velvet Revolution.

Evidence from my interviews and documents produced by civil society testifies that advocacy for WPS started around 2012, pushed mainly by Armenian feminist NGOs/CSOs, doing informal WPS work, such as identifying women's challenges during conflict and informal women-to-women diplomacy work. Some even mentioned 2010[70] as

[70] It is worth mentioning that before feminist activism was framed under Resolution 1325, WPS-*related* work was being done already in Armenia for decades, for example, on domestic violence, gender-based violence, and informal cross-border peacebuilding dialogues and networks with Azeri women – however, those were not necessarily framed as "WPS."

the first attempt ever to advocate for a WPS NAP (Interview 42). The NGO Society without Violence was particularly vocal back then, supported notably by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and the Austrian Development Agency. They were doing shadow reporting, raising awareness, publishing educational materials on 1325, conducting training, and doing informal assessments and mappings of WPS initiatives in Armenia despite having no formal NAP adopted yet (e.g., Asatryan and Kostanyan 2018; Harutyunyan and Mkrtchyan 2017; Minasyan 2017; Mkrtchyan and Siradeghyan 2017). Worth noting was also the Armenian local branch of 'Women in Black,' a transnational antimilitarist feminist network founded in Israel/Palestine and Serbia, which was very active at the time. Two women involved in those early days of WPS advocacy recount:

> In 2016, we were lobbying and campaigning for the adoption of the first National Action Plan; there wasn't any retrospection from the ministry; it was mostly *a one-way campaigning or one-way pushing the agenda to be acknowledged.* […] Since then, obviously, a lot of things have happened in Armenia, and one of them was the 2018 Revolution, which I must say, *was a very positive development in the process of democratization,* in the process of holding fair and free elections in the country and elect your authorities, rather than being appointed over and over again. So obviously, that had an impact on different areas of the country's development as well. (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

> There wasn't any NAP, and back then, there wasn't any discussion with the Government. From the Government, there was no [interest]; I mean, this was all being done by civil society, with no discussions. Even civil society wouldn't have a discussion with the Government. It wasn't on the agenda. *There were no advocacy windows*, you know, touch base, nothing. *So, it was all taken forward by civil society*. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 17, 2022)

Before the adoption of the first NAP, Armenian feminists advocating for WPS were facing resistance on 'all sides,' hearing things like "why do we need a NAP for that?" "Why so

many action plans[71]?" "All these things are already included in some other documents; why do we need this one?" Armenian feminist civil society was trying to convince the Government and show the added value of an additional mechanism and standalone document specific to WPS, but they were facing resistance from the Government (Interview 43). One of the first steps taken to advocate for Resolution 1325 in Armenia was the creation of a Monitoring Group composed of eight NGOs/CSOs in 2013 (Mkrtchyan and Siradeghyan 2017, 13). At that point in time, a lack of both political will by the Government and gender sensitivity in decision-making, an absence of effective communication mechanisms between Ministries *and* between NGOs/CSOs, and society-wide militarization were identified as obstacles hindering NAP adoption in Armenia (ibid. 35-35). It was mentioned to me that the topic of WPS was new in Armenia, echoing much more Moldova's experience with WPS than was the case in neighboring Georgia, with WPS advocacy going back to the early 2000s. A woman I interviewed reflects on this:

> Back then, it wasn't a very, you know, hot topic; women's rights are always pushed [aside] in terms of, when you would talk, everyone would say, 'that's not a priority. There are so many other things to handle first before that!' […] Like, people would call us like that in the street, like, saying, 'go home and have a child, particularly a boy, that's how you can help!' So, in this context, it was pretty much hard to bring [anything related to WPS], you know, but there was the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 17, 2022)

This same woman explains further how, in the context of the fragile region Armenia is in (which we will discuss further in section 5.3), the WPS agenda didn't hold much significance outside feminist circles. She explains how Armenian society constantly faces the pressure of past traumas and ongoing threats, which, in turn, affect how women are

[71] The documents in question are the action plans and national strategies on domestic violence, human trafficking, and gender equality.

perceived by society in their reproductive roles as mothers or caretakers for children. Additionally, there is a clear preference for boys: women's roles as child-bearers are essential to nation-building, particularly when they raise patriotic *male* children who will later become soldiers defending the country. As such, when a woman chooses not to marry early or have children, they are perceived as a "betrayer" of the nation. She explains that advocating for WPS at that time was extremely difficult, as testified by the quote above.

After years of feminist advocacy and resistance by the Armenian Government, she mentions (Interview 43) that the 15th anniversary of Resolution 1325 provided an opportunity for progress, which is coherent with global WPS literature pointing to a 'momentum' around that time. During the WPS week in New York, some international organizations supported NGO/CSO representatives from Armenia to attend. Government officials also attended, leading to discussions on both governmental and societal levels this time and the creation of an inter-agency working group for the first NAP. According to her, this engagement from Armenia must also be understood as part of EU budget support programs aimed at fulfilling human rights criteria. Eventually, after the 15th anniversary, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the lead in WPS discussions at the Governmental level, opening a small space of political will within the Armenian Government and initiatives within the Ministry of Defense, supported by UNDP and UNFPA.

While the pre-Revolution (Sargsyan) Government in place at the time had already begun the WPS process, the Velvet Revolution slightly delayed the adoption of the first NAP but simultaneously created a democratic space more conducive to its adoption after 2018 with

the new (Pashinyan) Government. The following section will examine the formal adoption of the first NAP in Armenia in February 2019.

5.1.2 Adoption of the first NAP (2019-2021)

In discussions with the women I interviewed, one observation is that it is difficult to detail the adoption of the first NAP in Armenia, as a common conclusion is that its drafting process has been described to me as top-down and lacking transparency. It was also challenging to have an 'insider' governmental perspective as Armenia is the only country where I could not meet any Government officials (I met only one woman from a state agency, but none from the Ministries involved in the preparation of the NAPs). Based on the available data, the lead agency in matters related to the NAP is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, specifically with one woman – Karine Sujayan – at its center.

Several active Armenian NGOs/CSOs working specifically on WPS were not consulted in the drafting process; based on available data, only a few carefully selected NGOs like Democracy Today, the Armenian Red Cross, Mission Armenia Organization, and Helsinki Committee Armenia were present, described to me as the "MFA's favorites" (Interview 42). Those organizations focus on human rights broadly but do not specialize in gender or WPS issues specifically, except for Democracy Today. Civil society recommendations were not adopted (Interviews 37, 40, 42, 46, 47, 50). A well-known WPS expert tells me:

> The process was closed. *We didn't have much chance to impact it because even if we had shared some comments before it was, the product was already there*. Many comments were not even taken into consideration. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 14, 2022)

This personal account of the first NAP process also coincides with other observations and personal discussions that I have had during my fieldwork and experiences participating in regional events. The fact that my multiple attempts to reach out to government officials were systematically left unanswered (compared to other countries) is also telling. Not only women from civil society in Armenia said to me that they were facing the same problem as me and that "I should not take it personally," but other organizations with several local partners, like GNWP, noted:

> GNWP has previously noted *the unwillingness of the Armenian government to collaborate with civil society during the development of the NAP*. In 2018, the Government committed to establishing a working group to inform the development of the NAP in Armenia, following NAP development workshops co-organized by GNWP and its civil society partners. Armenian CSOs sent a letter to the Interagency Committee developing the NAP to follow up on this commitment and inquire about the NAP status. Following the Government change, and thanks largely to sustained advocacy by civil society, including GNWP partners, the Government began to inform civil society about NAP efforts and the meetings of the Interagency Committee. *However, the engagement remained minimal, and civil society often only received information about meetings after they had happened.* (Santos et al. 2023, 29)

According to an insider NGO representative mentioned above (Interview 52), there were several disagreements inside the Interagency Commission and working groups working on the first NAP adoption. A notable difference between Armenia and the other countries in my study is that there is no UN Women Country Office in Armenia.[72] While Armenia is

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[72] UN Women is a non-resident agency in Armenia, with existing initiatives and programs led by the UN Women Georgia office in Tbilisi, and supported by the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia in Istanbul (Arab and Abrahamyan 2019).

technically under the mandate of the Tbilisi Office, their absence is felt as there is no "superseding" presence "above" Governmental and societal actors, gluing everyone together in the same place and pushing and financing the NAP. While UNDP and UNFPA may have filled this spot in the WPS landscape in Armenia, WPS is not a part of their mandate. I thought the difference was notable in Armenia compared to other countries. So, who did high-level advocacy? The UK Embassy has been mentioned to me as having an important influence on the NAP process in Armenia, not only as an implementer but also as a lobbyist to the Government (Interview 42) The First Lady – Anna Hakobyan – might have had a role in high-level WPS advocacy too, with her 'Women for Peace' campaign.[73] Worth mentioning is also Maria Karapetyan, a Member of Parliament and leading figure of the Velvet Revolution, who is vocal about gender-related issues. (Interview 42)

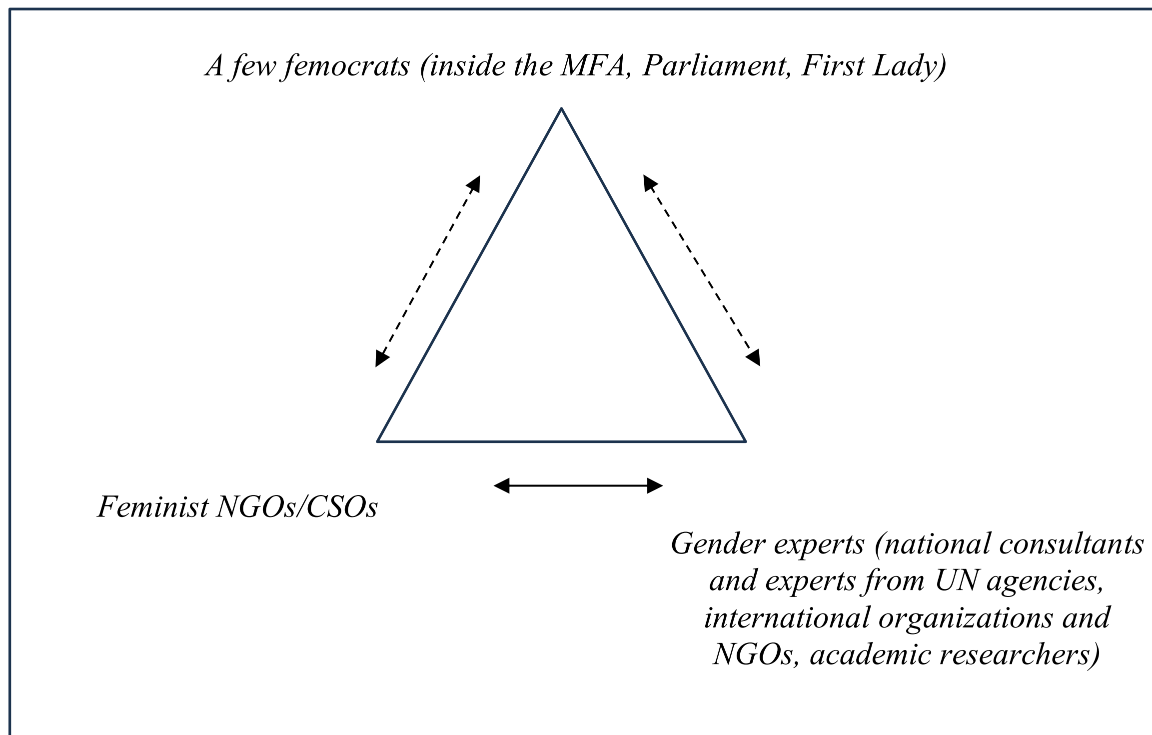
When asked about the involvement of local authorities in Armenia – where the decentralization of power is less pronounced than in other countries – two women peacebuilders I met told me that "they're so excluded to the level that they don't even know about the existence of this document [the NAP]." (Interview 42; 46)

A now-former public servant from the Human Rights Defender's Office told me that "each and every draft government decision and each and every normative legal act in Armenia should be put for public consultations [on] a draft platform 'e-draft' [for] a period of minimum 15 days." While this might be true in theory, evidence from my interviews shows the discrepancy between the Government's actions and civil society. Moreover, while there

[73] See page 270 for further details.

are certainly a few committed and interested femocrats in the Government, there is very little evidence in my data pointing to solid alliances between feminist civil society and femocrats inside the Government, unlike in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, leading to a weak and disorganized velvet triangle (Figure 6). The dashed lines, unlike full lines, symbolize fragile relationships and communication.

Figure 6: Triangle of feminist actors working on the first Armenian NAP



Considering the insights outlined in this section, the first NAP was developed in a top-down manner without any real consultation and input from Armenian civil society (other than a few selected NGOs), including organizations specialized in WPS, which created a great deal of resentment among Armenian feminists. A consequence of this can be seen in the change in the WPS landscape over time. While *before* the adoption of the first NAP,

there were more anti-militarist feminist organizations involved in WPS work – sidelined during the drafting and adoption process and whose recommendations were not listened to – the organizations engaged in WPS matters *after* the adoption of the NAP were different. What also makes the above triangle fragile is how feminist civil society itself is not united on WPS issues. The following section delves deeper into those tensions.

5.1.3 Insatisfaction, tensions, and refusal: Reflections on the first NAP and disagreements between Armenian feminists

Unlike other countries, the interview participants did not express a general sense of satisfaction with the first NAP in Armenia. Most of them criticized it because of its top-down and non-consultative development, as detailed in the previous section. Most interviewees in Armenia, like those in Georgia, view WPS as a tool and framework for advocacy, representing the "bare minimum" for the government in a conflict-affected country. Armenian feminists unanimously recognize the WPS agenda's importance within this context. While imperfect, it is a valuable framework that can be used strategically:

> I believe that, as a mechanism, it is very important to have it, at least this, because this is the minimum that we have, *and there is no alternative to this*. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

> It's very important to take into consideration the particular women's needs when it comes to conflicts because it is a little bit undermined and underestimated in the Armenian reality, where war is some kind of, I'd say, a heroic event where mainly men take part, and women have no take in it, and women just deal with the consequences […] We only glorify the men who sacrificed their lives and, well, the women are just left there and the work that they do is in the shadows. *So, the resolution casts light on it, although I wouldn't say that it's, well, quite successfully implemented in Armenia*. (Armine Sahakyan, independent expert, Zoom, October 25, 2022)

While asked to reflect on the first NAP broadly—from the drafting process to its implementation—respondents raised important critiques, concerns, and points of tension among feminists. First, almost all Armenian women I interviewed, regardless of their position (e.g., individual experts, NGOs/CSOs, or UN agencies), often described the first NAP as “top-down” and not participatory enough. Contact and communication with government officials were not transparent, regular, or easy. When I was doing interviews in Armenia, I had the impression that even the WPS experts I was interviewing sometimes did not have the information themselves about their Government’s activities in that regard, indicating poor communication, monitoring mechanisms, and transparency from the NAP’s lead, the MFA, to civil society. In short, civil society was informed at the end when everything was over, and opportunities to provide feedback and change the NAP was too late. Those challenges continued into the second NAP, as we will see later, although we do see a slight improvement. Because civil society was not sufficiently consulted as a whole, talks about the *diversity* of women involved were generally not reflected in my interview (issues related to intersectionality, youth, and local actors were mentioned in Interviews 42 and 46). While this was less apparent in my fieldwork than in Georgia or Moldova – where well-known WPS experts and NGOs/CSOs are older women only – a generational gap in the civil society landscape working on WPS and women’s issues was noticeable, too (Santos et al. 2023, 8) Moreover, women at the grassroots level and living outside of the capital do not have opportunities to voice their concerns directly (and in the proper ‘WPS language’), influence decision-makers and go to meetings in Yerevan. As such, “the actual conflict-affected people do not know about this NAP” (Interview 40), explains a woman peacebuilder, and there is a lack of communication about what WPS is to broader society

and even *within* Ministries, outside the very small "WPS bubble" of elite NGOs/CSOs and beyond the MFA niche (Interview 49, 76):

> I think [they, the MFA, consulted] with several ministries, but *ridiculous*, the focal points in other ministries are not much aware or are not taking much ownership of that because every time we, even during that event, we ask some questions, and they're like, 'it's MFA.' And MFA is just Karine Sujayan, who has been there for a really, really, really long time. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 14, 2022)

Second, almost everyone I interviewed mentioned the government's lack of ownership and institutionalization and how progress is based on a few individuals' commitment, personal interest, and political will. As change depends on specific people inside the system, WPS implementation is uneven and unsustainable (Interview 46). Third, similar to Moldova and Georgia, the lack of impact and *reach* of the Armenian NAP in Nagorno-Karabakh was mentioned to me as a major limitation of the NAP. While, in theory, the first Armenian NAP is extended[74] to Nagorno-Karabakh, in reality, it is not happening. Two women I interviewed originally from Nagorno-Karabakh and/or who have worked there mention:

> In Nagorno-Karabakh, whenever there is a discussion about women's rights, the first thing that would come to a woman's mind *is the right to live, to physically survive*. (Gender expert, Women's Center Shushi, previously located in Nagorno-Karabakh, Yerevan, October 5, 2022)

> *The society in Artsakh is much more patriarchal than in Armenia, and it's, of course, a direct result of the conflict*. They tried to protect themselves from so-called Western influence and resolutions related to, like, I don't know, women, LGBT, and anything like that *is perceived as some kind of threat to their integrity and to their security*. So, they are much more protective when it comes to resolutions like these than the Armenian society […] In Armenia before the Revolution in 2018, the Governments of Armenia and Artsakh

[74] The Objective 12 of the first NAP mentions the aim of cooperation "with the authorities of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) in respect of implementation of the UNSCR Resolution 1325" through "conduct [of] regular consultations between the state authorities of the Republic of Armenia and those of Artsakh." (Peace Women n.d, 6)

> were very much interrelated, and there was a kind of mutual trust. But following the Revolution, I would say that the relations between the Armenian and the Artsakh Governments are troubled, and the Government in Artsakh doesn't trust the new [Pashinyan] Government, especially after the war. They have the feeling that they were left alone. And now, like I would say, they trust, for example, Russians more than they would trust the Armenian Government because Russia basically provides security to them. *That's why there is nothing much that the Armenian Government can do regarding the Resolution*. Of course, there can be efforts to implement some kind of projects, to do awareness-raising, etc. But given the situation and the level of trust, I wouldn't say that it would be possible to bring fruitful results. (Armine Sahakyan, independent expert, Zoom, October 25, 2022)

As explained in the two quotes above, a breach of trust between the Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Governments, patriarchal and conservative values as a "trauma response" to the conflict, a lack of women's meaningful influence on decision-making in the *de facto* Government, and the unrecognized and isolated status of Nagorno-Karabakh are possible reasons explaining the lack of reach and application of the Armenian NAP to Nagorno-Karabakh. Legal and political institutions and mechanisms were often "copied" from the ones in Armenia (see also Aharonian and Mkrtchyan 2014) to Nagorno-Karabakh; however, the Velvet Revolution (which ousted the 'Karabakh clan' politicians for more liberal, Western/EU-leaning politicians) and the 2020 war created a shift in Armenia-Karabakh relations. Moreover, "as an internationally unrecognized state, Nagorno-Karabakh cannot [formally] ratify international treaties and agreements, including those on gender issues" (ibid. 6), and as in the case of other countries in my study, there is a notable difficulty in protecting people in unrecognized/*de facto* states because they are not subject to international law (Interview 44). Here, it is important to mention that despite the "formal reach" of the Armenian NAP to NK, an informal collaboration between women activists and organizations always existed. For example, the Women's Resource Center based in Yerevan had a local branch in Shushi, now operating in exile since Azerbaijan's takeover of the city in 2020. As such, informal (albeit rare) initiatives on WPS specifically existed;

for example, one conference took place in 2014 on the topic of women in armed conflicts in Shushi (Кавказский Узел 2014). Asymmetric civic spaces, though, historically made it difficult for the collaboration between Armenian, Karabakh Armenian, and Azeri women peacebuilders to work together (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al. 2020, 5).

Fourth, despite the establishment of gender quotas in 2016, women's meaningful participation in decision-making both at the national and local levels in Armenia is limited, and while the NAP has drawn attention to that issue, it has not resolved it. For example, a lack of women in senior positions, mostly in low- and middle-level management, persists (Interview 51), as well as women's involvement in negotiation processes (only talks between elite individuals; not open to civil society) remains non-existent (Interview 37)

Fifth, many Armenian feminists I interviewed expressed notable resistance—and sometimes outright *opposition*—to the WPS agenda (see Nikoghosyan 2018). A major point of disagreement and tension between the Government and civil society—and between Armenian feminists—concerns women's participation in the military. Some Armenian feminists even strategically refuse to work with the WPS agenda, and I have not witnessed such strong sentiments and opposition to WPS anywhere else than in Armenia. While there is indeed occasional resistance by a few very critical feminists in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, those narratives are significantly more present in Armenia. The excerpts below (with the two women being directly involved in WPS advocacy since the early days) will

detail the different views on WPS. Generally, antimilitarist feminists point[75] to how WPS and the NAP in Armenia have been co-opted and militarized by the Government:

> Maybe I'm going to say something that is a bit depressing [laugh], but I think we really have to cancel this Resolution because as long as you have that Resolution, you say, "Ah, at least we have that Resolution, so that makes things a bit better," but it really is not. […] *Now, we have something in the middle that tames and softens our anger, our demands, and our requests*. There's a whole mechanism at work here that has interests, works, and shows the whole world that it's important to have this agenda to protect women in times of war. *But the reality is that women are not better protected. Women continue to be raped during wars, to be manipulated, abused, killed.* It goes on, it hasn't stopped, and it's getting worse and worse. For me, it's perhaps very drastic, but we really must stop having this Resolution, work against this Resolution, *and abolish this Resolution at a global level.* (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 12, 2022)

> I have many reservations as an anti-militarist feminist about 1325 […] I think that we need to work with what we have, and we have 1325, and we have this NAP […] Yes, women have to be in all sectors of society, and the Armed Forces is not an exception. But what I'm trying to say, and what I said at the beginning, is that *we must be vigilant. That we are playing this game, but we are not becoming the objects of this game, that we are not becoming objects of this patriarchal game. That we are not actually internalizing, reinforcing, or interpreting the same militarist, patriarchal agenda into the society.* (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

> Since 2020, the WPS agenda in Armenia has been serving, unfortunately, this overall environment, like strengthening the army, having more women involved in the army, and [this is] what reaches out to a larger public. I would say it's only this component that people hear about, that women will be serving in the army, which is a bit controversial because, in a way, *this agenda is supposed to promote peace and prevent war.* In our context, the most visible point in the action plan that was described was increasing women's participation in the military and the police; these are the aspects that are the most visible. […] *This NAP has kind of served more the overall like, uh, militaristic agenda, and the Resolution itself is very detached from the society*. (Gender expert, Yerevan, August 3, 2023)

As the quotes above recount, some women's antimilitarist values led them to be distrustful of this agenda while, in rarer cases, rejecting it. Others had more ambivalent and skeptical

[75] A good reflection of these sentiments is a manifesto – 'They Make Money Through Our Dead Bodies' – published by a group of antimilitarist anonymous feminists (2016).

views of it, borrowing from both antimilitarist and "liberal" feminist perspectives to be pragmatic in their advocacy:

> I don't even remember what we were discussing because I always had a feeling *that this would not go further than on paper.* (Nona Shahnazarian, gender expert, Zoom, September 28, 2022)

> Frankly speaking, I was resisting for a while working on 1325 *because I thought it's just a piece of paper and no one really takes it seriously*. (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 11, 2022)

However, not all Armenian feminists agreed with antimilitarist feminist critiques and, in turn, chose to engage strategically with the agenda. When I asked them about how they were feeling about vocal antimilitarist feminist critiques in Armenia, representatives of NGOs, UN agencies, and WPS experts explained their perspectives to me:

> This resolution is not for the UN to do [laugh]. *This is a resolution that offers you a framework in which you can put the content and then own it*. And if you don't have this sense of ownership over this plan, then I mean, the UN can't do anything basically. […] Yet first and foremost, it is something that you need to sort of... *It's your homework, it's nobody else's.* (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 11, 2022)

> Unfortunately, this criticism is coming from the fact that the provisions of the Resolution are implemented unequally because those institutions that have money and resources, unfortunately, are militaristic institutions, and those that are [working] on negotiations, decision-making, and everything, they lack resources, especially given the fact that the Armenian NAP doesn't have budget allocations, which is a real challenge for us. So, this imbalanced situation creates this unequal situation, tackling the issue on the one hand. *On the other hand, through this criticism, we abandon the Resolution more, and we voluntarily give it as a gift to those militaristic institutions. Our goal is also to create an anti-militaristic agenda towards this and regain it*. Take it back from these militaristic institutions. *Unfortunately, in this matter, this criticism hurts the situation and harms this process.* (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 14, 2022)

> I understand the critique coming from the antimilitarist [civil] society. *But then the reality is different. You don't have women decision-makers in the security sector and it's very bad.* And probably that's why you have different decisions that are not so good or that are not balanced. So, as far as we don't have a lot of women participating in these sectors, I would

> say that any action and activity towards that is good. But I agree that we shouldn't militarize our society even more because then everything, our daily life revolves around the conflict. […] We need to think that, of course, it's Women, Peace and Security. *So, there is a security component to it as well. And you cannot ignore that.* (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

> I would not boycott [this agenda]. I would work [with it]. I mean, I will try myself, and as an organization, I also think that it is actually… *we need to consume whatever opportunity is there from this NAP.* (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

The quotes above clearly show examples of feminist pragmatism. Others – less frequently – did not agree with this critique of militarization and embraced a more "liberal" feminist perspective on women's participation in the defense and security sector:

> There are very few women in the security sector in Armenia. So, I don't think there is too much focus on that because we need women to be there and to have good participation in the police. Absolutely necessary. Because if you speak about GBV prevention, then you have to have women police officers. In the military, if you want to change the whole concept of the military and how they approach everything, then you definitely need to have women at high levels, not women sitting in your offices and doing just the background job, you know. So, I wouldn't say that there's too much attention paid to that. (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

> I do not agree with this statement because the point is that our country was put in a situation where we have an issue that is *an existential issue* because, as you know, during the war, it was not the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it was a war of Armenia against Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Russia. And we, a small country of 3 million people, were fighting against Turkey with an army of 1 million people. *So basically, the issue was not just to protect ourselves but to make sure that we will exist further.* Yeah, so basically that's why the society was very much, they understood that this protection of the country is the only chance for our survival. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 30, 2022)

The quotes above testify to the security realities of the country and women's participation in the defense and security sector as being good and even necessary, given the existential threats Armenia is facing (a narrative that very much echoes the case of Ukraine, which we will discuss in the following chapter). At the same time, it is worth mentioning that while the "add women and stir" approach is present in the NAP, several pieces of evidence point

to the fact that Armenian women choosing to enroll in a military career are not safe[76] (follow-up chat in July 2023). To conclude this point, it is very interesting to notice the whole "spectrum" of feminist views in Armenia, from more antimilitarist and anarchist approaches to a bit of both, 'nuanced' and pragmatic and a bit more "liberal." Individual experts and activists are found across this spectrum.

As we have seen in this section, the WPS NAP in Armenia may be a useful instrument for some, while for others, it might be *restrictive* and not reflective of their ambitions and antimilitarist feminist values. Available evidence also shows that it is first the antimilitarist feminist organizations and activists that started WPS advocacy in Armenia, but once it has been institutionalized and formally adopted by the Government – and they were excluded from it – they have abandoned it (as they argue that the Government co-opted and militarized it) and other women's organizations and the MFA took the lead. But it is even more complex than that: back *before* the adoption of the first NAP, "the attitude of civil society towards the UNSCR 1325 and its implementation [was] not homogeneous. Interviews with field experts and field-related observations showed that actors who advocate[d] for the UNSCR 1325 were criticized" (Mkrtchyan and Siradeghyan 2017, 34–35) as the WPS agenda was perceived as militarized and promoted by militarist entities. A key takeaway from this section is that the WPS landscape and history of advocacy in Armenia are scattered, tense, complex, and highly heterogeneous. In that context, the

[76] One case that particularly shook Armenian civil society during my first field trip to Armenia in September 2022 was that of Armenian soldier Anush Apetyan, who was captured by Azeri forces in Jermuk, tortured, raped, and killed, all filmed and widely disseminated on social media, notably through videos and GIFs.

following section will detail how the first NAP was implemented in Armenia, considering the 2020 war, which created a clear 'before' and 'after' in the country's history.

5.2 Implementation of the first NAP before and after the Nagorno-Karabakh War

5.2.1 Resourcing and budgeting the NAP

Similar to other countries in my research, the absence of a budget remains a structural and persistent obstacle to implementation in Armenia, as both NAPs rely entirely on external donors (we will discuss the second NAP in section 5.4). A broad consensus among my interviewees is that the NAP lacks a budget and state funding, which signals a lack of political will and undermines the Government's credibility.

As elsewhere, State funding might be directed indirectly towards WPS activities. For example, some State agencies—like the Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Social and Labor Affairs—are designated implementers in the NAP, and if they have sufficient resources, they implement them through their own budgets.

> Sometimes, what they do is create one general agenda of women's involvement and just [touch upon] different components because they have limited funding. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 30, 2022)

This has the consequence of putting additional tasks onto people's shoulders in already overworked and under-resourced Ministries. This also leads to Ministries with the most financial resources, like the Ministry of Defense, being implementation leaders. Overall, the implementation of the NAP and its sustainability over time is compromised.

Like elsewhere in the region, the Government relies on the invisible work of NGOs/CSOs done on the ground who are dependent on Western funds, which makes WPS implementation fragile, short-term and managed on a project-based logic (e.g., Peace Dialogue 2020). This also leads to important competition for funding between NGOs/CSOs. Because the overall community working on WPS in Armenia is significantly smaller than in other countries of my research, competition for funding, communication, and coordination among civil society is difficult. “The funds that are coming to Armenia are really, very small,” so “the organizations perceive each other more as [people] that they [should] compete with rather than collaborate with,” and some organizations tend to be “elitists” by gatekeeping information from other NGOs, explains representatives of civil society (Interview 39, 42) (see also Santos et al. 2023).

In Armenia, embassies (notably the British Embassy), the EU/Council of Europe, the Austrian Development Agency, UNDP, and UNFPA are the main donors for WPS activities (Interview 49), but the bulk of the work on the ground rests on the shoulders of precarious women NGOs/CSOs. This makes WPS work dependent on foreign donors, which is unpredictable and sometimes imposes external or foreign vision unfamiliar to the local context, in addition to requesting lengthy and complicated procedures (Santos et al. 2023). An alternative to this kind of “traditional” funding is feminist funding by international NGOs such as GNWP and Kvinna till Kvinna, which are directly supporting women peacebuilders’ work on the ground through flexible and rapid funding, based on their needs and priorities. While the funding and allocation of resources dedicated to the

NAP was initially fragile, uneven, and dependent on external donors, this situation worsened after the 2020 war:

> The issue is always funding for the NAP. We have problems with funding because we thought that parts of the NAP would be funded and supported by the Ministry of Finance. But since it was after the war, a lot of the budget was allocated to the refugees, and the military budget was increased, it [the NAP] wasn't funded enough. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 30, 2022)

Not only did the war shift the Government's focus (and the extremely minimal resources that were dedicated to the NAP before) to immediate national security priorities, but the activities of women's organizations had to be urgently turned towards delivering immediate humanitarian aid, sometimes with the same or fewer resources as before the war (this also reflects the realities of Ukrainian women, which we will see in the following chapter). Many NGOs/CSOs working on the ground to distribute humanitarian aid, help refugees, or provide material and psychological support to those affected by the war are underpaid, undervalued, and rely on women's free labor. Despite these structural challenges, the following section looks at the implementation of the first NAP.

5.2.2 Localizing and implementing the NAP

Although Armenia has committed itself to implementing the WPS agenda, "there is a gap between formal commitments and reality, declaration, and substance." (Tatikyan 2022, n.p.) Looking at the first NAP, one can notice its very short length (9 pages) and vague language, measures, and indicators, as well as a lack of sufficient details and no allocated budget (e.g., all funding sources in the NAP indicate 'Other sources not

prohibited by law'). The first NAP situates its existence within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It focuses mainly on the defense and security sector, notably raising awareness, protecting conflict-affected women and girls, implementing police- and security-sector reforms, and promoting women's participation in the army. It has 17 objectives articulated around the traditional four pillars of Resolution 1325 (Peace Women n.d). Let's unpack the main actors behind the implementation.

First, Government actors and state agencies play a role in NAP implementation, especially the MFA. The first NAP indicates the Ministry of Defense, UNDP, UNHCR, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Police, OSCE, UNFPA, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Nature Protection, Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia, ICRC, NGOs, Armenian Red Cross, the Special Investigation Service, the General Prosecutor's Office, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Justice and the United Nations Children's Fund as implementers and co-implementers. While there is not much more that my data can provide regarding the Government's actions toward WPS implementation (beyond a textual mention in the NAP because I was not able to interview Government officials and because there is no publicly available evaluation report of the first NAP), the existence of state committees on UNSCR1325 and Ministerial focal points is worth mentioning. As previously mentioned, the work often depends on specific interested individuals inside ministries, and ministries that have more financial resources, like the MoD, are "better" implementers.

Second, as elsewhere, national NGOs/CSOs have the most important role in implementing and localizing WPS across the country, particularly in bordering regions. Organizations like Society Without Violence (Հասարակություն առանց բռնության ՀԿ) Women's Resource Centre (Կանանց ռեսուրսային կենտրոն) and Women in Black Armenia were active in early advocacy days *before* the adoption of the NAP and before the Revolution. After its formal adoption in 2019, and after 2020, the WPS landscape significantly changed. Antimilitarist feminists were less present, claiming that the NAP has been coopted by the Government, among other things. Organizations like Women's Agenda (Կանանց Օրակարգ), Women's Resource Centre, Frontline Youth Network, Democracy Today, and later OxYGen, became at the front of implementing the NAP, supported by some UN agencies (e.g., UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR), foreign embassies and international NGOs. Worth mentioning are localization projects funded by GNWP and by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting under the umbrella project called 'Building Resilience in Eastern Neighborhood (BREN).' Such localization projects include, for example, raising awareness about WPS with the population in borderline areas (Syunik, Tavush, and Vayots Dzor), research, capacity-building training, and workshops, needs assessments, and mapping of local women's organizations (Interviews 41, 42).

Different independent projects run by NGOs/CSOs and supported by UN agencies are also indirectly (not always explicitly framed as "WPS") feeding into the NAP implementation with some specific interventions targeting the NAP. For example, UNFPA has been quite active in Armenia, developing projects ensuring the safety and security of women and girls in rural areas, creating women's resources centers, preparing handbooks and training for

civil servants, working with law enforcement and the Ministry of Emergency Situations to prevent GBV and fighting gender stereotypes (Interview 45).

As such, NGOs/CSOs often independently perform localization activities, but those activities are not formally put in the NAP. Their work serves to understand the local needs on the ground, the local government's capacity and willingness to implement the NAP, and then convey what they heard to a higher level when (and if) invited by the Government for WPS consultations. Like in Georgia, a few national women's organizations serve as a bridge between the Government and conflict-affected women (Interviews 42, 46). Similar to Georgia, the "informal" work done by local women peacebuilders is not formally recognized in the NAP, which depends mainly on their work on the ground, supported by Western donors. However, the difference between Armenia and all the other case studies is the minimal civil society consultations for drafting the NAPs.

Third, since there are very few key femocrats inside the system and WPS "superstars" advancing the WPS agenda as in other countries, the First Lady herself (Anna Hakobyan) has been personally invested in this agenda, notably in creating her own peacebuilding campaigns, "Women for Peace." Her campaign focused on nurturing a culture of peace in Armenia, challenging patriarchal stereotypes of widowhood and grieving mothers who lost their sons in wars and (failed) attempts to establish bridges with the First Lady of Azerbaijan, for example. Although with a lot of visibility and outreach, her initiatives were not really popular according to several women I interviewed (Interview 39), and she faced

a lot of sexist pushback, online attacks, and critiques from feminists (Hovhannisyan 2020; Simonyan 2018), which significantly got worse after the 2020 war.

Similar to the other cases, a significant limitation of the implementation of the two NAPs in Armenia is the difficulty of implementing them in Nagorno-Karabakh. As previously mentioned, while the NAP is extended to Nagorno-Karabakh in theory, it is not the case in practice, especially not after the 2018 Revolution and the war in 2020:

> The Resolution [NAP] mainly concerns the women in bordering communities. I mean, the women who live in Artsakh bordering regions or Armenia's bordering regions. Now, after the war, the picture has changed greatly. *And I don't think that the Resolution and the NAP reflect the new reality because now we have women touched and affected pretty much everywhere in Armenia, be it the city center, the capital, or any other city*. The geography of conflict-affected women has been enlarged greatly following the 2020 Karabakh and ever since. We know that the border clashes continue every day, and well, you can see people around you living in the capital, losing their brothers, losing their husbands, etc. […] So, because it develops pretty fast, the action plan doesn't adapt as fast as the situation develops. (Armine Sahakyan, independent expert, Zoom, October 25, 2022)

As such, the quote above tells us something important: not only is it difficult to implement the NAP in the conflict-affected area of Nagorno-Karabakh, but the Government also fails to react quickly to crises or prevent them in advance by doing risk assessments or establishing early warning mechanisms, a finding that largely echoes the other countries. The 2020 war and the period that followed transformed the geography of conflict-affected populations and created a volatile and rapidly changing situation in the country, which relayed the first NAP entirely to the side – both in terms of attention given to it but also in allocations of resources to it – and a delay for the development of the second NAP. Unlike the Ukrainian case, the first NAP in Armenia was not updated to reflect the new realities of the country. Those reflections also tell us something crucial about how WPS norms and

frameworks, such as NAPs, are profoundly unfit for fragile and unstable environments of protracted conflicts. The following section looks at NAP monitoring and evaluation.

5.2.3 Monitoring and evaluating the NAP

The first NAP indicated that "in order to conduct monitoring and evaluation of the National Plan, a year prior to the [end of] implementation, a working group will be established, consisting of three Ministries (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) and three Non-governmental organizations, which have sufficient experience and knowledge on issues related to Women, Peace and Security." (Republic of Armenia 2019, 10) So, technically, the Inter-Agency, which developed the NAP – and three unnamed NGOs/CSOs – was also monitoring it. However, the reality is that monitoring and evaluating the first NAP barely happened. There was no official report on the implementation of the first NAP in Armenia (Tatikyan 2022), at least none that is publicly available.[77] In the same line of criticisms by Armenian feminists mentioned in this chapter, a consequence of vague language – and absence of budget – inevitably leads to vague indicators and monitoring mechanisms, which makes it hard to track implementation over time. Like in other countries, as the activities of the NAP are sometimes intertwined with other action plans and "indirectly" implemented, it makes it difficult to truly measure the impact of the WPS NAP. For example, the NAP was often described to me as having hard-to-reach targets and weak

[77] A woman from civil society whom I interviewed shared with me a short report created based on the action reports from different ministries and CSOs, summarizing the work implemented by the Ministries involved. She mentioned, however, that this is not a final evaluation report of the first NAP but rather an internal monitoring report. The document is not publicly available and is only in Armenia.

monitoring mechanisms (Interview 45) and not always displaying a link between goals, actions, and indicators (Interview 46).

Moreover, the final evaluation of the NAP that was supposed to be conducted by the working group one year prior to its end occurred in 2020, so around the same time as the war happened and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman) of Armenia's mandate, they should also be doing independent monitoring and evaluation of it, but it is unclear whether they have done so or not. Although my data overall provides very little information on monitoring and evaluation – in part because I did not get to interview involved Government officials and because civil society was not informed about it – it is logical to imagine either of the following scenarios: that the final evaluation was delayed or canceled because of the war.

The absence of the UN Women country office is particularly felt here as it is not there to help the Government conduct a final evaluation or to financially support local NGOs/CSOs in their shadow monitoring. As such, without a formal, final evaluation of the first NAP, two sources can provide a few insights into the results of it. First, a periodic report produced by Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2021, 25) on Armenia's implementation of CEDAW indicates that "on 23 April 2020, a commission for implementation and monitoring of the National Action Plan on Resolution 1325" was created. The report further monitors the different activities carried out during the timeframe of the NAP, ranging from awareness-raising events to educational programs and needs assessment of female military servicewomen and wives of military servicemen. A

cooperation program established between the Ministry of Defence and the UNFPA in Armenia from 2016 to 2019 seems to have been fruitful in terms of measurable results. Second, there is evidence from my interviews and documents informally shared with me that, as in other countries, women NGOs/CSOs performed shadow monitoring on the first NAP (CEDAW Task Force Armenia 2022), though not always publicly available or in English. However, a takeaway from these other sources is that they mostly monitored the implementation of the NAP and formulated policy recommendations for the second one (as we will discuss in section 6.4) but did not perform a final evaluation of the first NAP.

To conclude this section, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the first NAP in Armenia was seriously weakened and disrupted by the war of 2020 and the emergency measures that the war imposed on the country, which further impoverished the attention and political will given to it, as well as the already limited financial resources allocated to it. As in other countries, it is women's organizations, funded by international NGOs, that bear the burden of implementing this plan. Unlike in other countries, the absence of UN Women is particularly noticeable even though other UN agencies have established cooperation programs with state agencies. At first glance, the activities of the Ministry of Defense seem to have been the most successful, but it is difficult to draw clear conclusions since no final evaluation of the first plan has been carried out. The official implementation of the NAP has, therefore, been uneven, relying mainly on sporadic projects funded by external donors. Unlike in other countries, feminist alliances inside and outside the system appear less sustained, hence the partial and selective participation of civil society in the preparation of the NAP (as seen in Figure 6).

The following section continues with a discussion of the war of 2020 and the narratives that emerge from it, as well as what links my interviewees make with the WPS agenda.

5.3 'Living on a ticking time bomb': Grief, collective trauma and gendered emergencies

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020. Unsurprisingly, this had gender-specific consequences before, during, and after the conflict. Deliberate attacks on civilians, the destruction of schools and medical and sanitary infrastructures, and forced mass migration have differentiated gendered ramifications and implications for the distinct population groups targeted, wounded, displaced, and killed.

Kvinna till Kvinna noted that the 2020 war happened "in a context of medical shortages, where shelters [were] not prepared or in poor shape, and experiencing shortages in basic humanitarian needs, particularly women's humanitarian needs which [were] once again overlooked." (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al. 2020, 6-7) The COVID-19 pandemic and the war led to increased reliance on income from militarized sources, foreign fighters and mercenaries entering the region, and diaspora remittances bolstering the war economy. This resulted in a loss of financial independence and basic needs for vulnerable populations, increased physical and psychological vulnerability of women caregivers, and a rise in gender-based and domestic violence, among other issues.

To be borne in mind for this section is the severity with which the 2020 war has affected the psyche of the Armenian nation worldwide, overturning decades of status quo regarding the Karabakh conflict. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, while the first Karabakh War positioned Armenia as the "winner" for almost three decades, the second Karabakh War had disastrous material, physical, psychological, and symbolic consequences for Armenians, leaving a stronger-than-ever and autocratic, emboldened Azerbaijan. In this difficult context, the existence and implementation of a NAP proved to be extremely challenging. Patriarchal gender norms in Armenian society were exacerbated after 2020 as a direct result of the conflict – all discussions or concerns over "women's issues" were pushed aside and deemed "not a priority," as the usual story goes.

This section is organized around two major themes arising from my interviews with Armenian women. I asked everyone specific questions about the conflicts and their relation to WPS and the implementation of the NAP. As with Moldovans and Georgians, the answers revealed issues deeper than the WPS NAPs, tapping into the perception of this conflict on Armenians' understanding of peace and security after 2020. However, in contrast with Moldovans and Georgians, and much more similarly to Ukrainians, the 2020 war triggered existential fear and trauma, seen as a continuation of the Armenian genocide. The 2020 war also "unfroze" the conflict, which made the comparison with Moldovans and Georgians harder today. Echoing the Ukrainian case, the 2020 war also made any discussions or work on peace highly contentious for feminist activists. This section will, therefore, focus on those two specificities shared between Armenians and Ukrainians.

5.3.1 Responding to the immediate humanitarian needs after the 2020 war

> I lost all my references during this war. Everything I thought was good… But the only reference I didn't lose was working at the grassroots level, with people. Everyday problems. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 12, 2022)

The 2020 war revealed several insights regarding the WPS NAP in Armenia. First, it showed how women in civil society had to pivot from their usual programming (either on WPS or other topics) to programming based on urgency and immediate measures, relegating WPS to the side. Secondly, the 2020 war showed how ill-prepared the Armenian Government was to prevent and anticipate crises, leading to concerns of human security being pushed aside as not an "immediate" priority due to the existential and exceptional war circumstances. The NAP was, therefore, not fit for the unstable, fragile, and rapidly changing context. Third, the NAP is essentially rendered useless regarding territories with unrecognized status. Let's unpack these issues in the following paragraphs.

First, during the 2020 war and the period after, women's organizations were on the frontline responding to immediate humanitarian needs, distributing aid, and finding accommodations for the waves of refugees, for example. They had to pivot from their usual programming to a "survival" mode. Similar to the case of Ukraine, "women human rights defenders and peacebuilders [were] organizing the support work in the hardly reachable or restrictive places. Many of them transforming their offices into aid collection centers." (Nemsitsveridze-Daniels et al. 2020, 7–8) Women organizations in Armenia proper were directly collaborating and supporting NGOs/CSOs in Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh on humanitarian issues like sending hygiene goods, collecting food and clothes for soldiers

and refugees, providing psychological support, crowdfunding, and doing advocacy (Interview 47). The 2020 war also opened up the space for more WPS advocacy. For example, a new organization advocating for WPS, Women's Agenda (Կանանց Օրակարգ)—the first in Armenia—was created. One area of focus of this organization is localization activities in bordering communities, for example.

Second, at the Government level, one takeaway from my interviews in Armenia and a regular answer to my questions on the NAP was often and simply that the Armenian government was "busy with other issues." In the urgency mode of the crises (post-2020 humanitarian needs as revealed during my 2022 fieldwork, but also during the closing of the Lachin corridor during my 2023 fieldwork), the reality is that the NAP was pushed aside as it was not a priority. Several women experts and NGOs/CSOs I interviewed highlighted how the Government's understanding of security was getting narrower (e.g., more militaristic and oriented toward traditionally understood security matters like territorial integrity) than theirs as a direct consequence of the 2020 war. As women NGOs/CSOs work on the ground, they see hands-on the concrete security needs in terms of physical, psychological, health, social, environmental, and food security. Even point persons inside Ministries were not making the links between "hard" security issues and human rights, according to several women I interviewed (e.g., Interviews 42, 47).

In the context of a perceived existential crisis, it is tough to plan ahead while the present is under constant threat and insecurity. The 2020 war drastically changed the geography of conflict-affected people in Armenia and increased the needs of borderline communities:

> Now, we have a very long border with Azerbaijan[78]; after the war of 2020, it has been extended. You know, we have become longer than we used to be. *And more villages and communities which were not borderline [before] became borderline now*. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 13, 2022)

> Because of the prolonged conflict, *the only source of security for most of the population has become the army.* Strong army. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 14, 2022)

As the quotes above mention, before the 2020 war, Armenia's security concerns were mostly about Nagorno-Karabakh, but after 2020, new critical security concerns were also for Armenia *proper*, as several villages along the border have been attacked and occupied by Azerbaijan. After 2020, not only were Armenians displaced from Karabakh, but also from the southern province of Syunik. In this context, the first NAP should have been significantly revised and updated to reflect the evolving realities and growing humanitarian needs on the ground (similar to what happened in Ukraine). However, physical security and immediate needs were the number one priority after the 2020 war, and these needs (and the security context) are gendered. Thousands of men, and especially *young* men, have lost their lives during the war. Because of the exceptional circumstances imposed by the war and the resulting militarization of society, the NAP inevitably follows and reproduces a traditionally understood view of security, when not simply pushed aside. In times of existential threat, understandings of security become narrower, and speaking about *peace*, a term that carries multiple meanings, is increasingly difficult.

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[78] Here, the interlocutor mentions that the border has been "extended" because the territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, previously occupied by Armenia, that Azerbaijan forcibly recaptured during the 2020 war, are all along Armenia proper's border. Before 2020, as Armenian forces militarily controlled those regions adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia proper shared only a small portion of its (internationally recognized) borders with Azerbaijan (to the north in the Tavush marzes and part of Gegharkunik, and to the south with the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan around the Syunik, Vayots Dzor and Ararat marzes). But the war of 2020 led to a profound redrawing of the borders to the east – previously the Line of Contact – thus lengthening the direct (internationally-recognized) land border between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the provinces of Gegharkunik, Syunik, and Vayots Dzor.

Third, the 2020 war also revealed the shortcomings of existing international frameworks regarding the protection of individuals in unrecognized states. A woman I met shared with me her thoughts about the failure of the international community to protect NK citizens:

> At that moment [during the 2020 war], I faced this very acute feeling. That, for the international community, and we know that the international community creates all these instruments like Resolution 1325, and international law concepts [such as] human rights, *it is for and about people who belong to this or that country* […] So, if you are a person coming from an unrecognized territory like Nagorno-Karabakh or Abkhazia or I don't know, pick any hot zone all over the world, then it seems that the international law stops working there, in all sense. Even the humanitarian law, if you ask me. *So, I had a feeling that the people of Nagorno-Karabakh were without any protection. Because international law international humanitarian law, and human rights law do not really cover those areas.* […] Because that territory is not recognized internationally, it means that people living on that land are not recognized as human beings. See what I mean? *Unfortunately, NAPs are being developed under these concepts.* (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

She goes on to mention:

> I remember distinctly when we were campaigning for the UN representative in Armenia to go to Nagorno-Karabakh and see what was actually happening on the ground. There was always this argument that 'NK is a disputable territory, an unrecognized territory, and we do not have a mandate there.' *So, my question here would be, if the UN does not have a mandate in these places, then who does?* (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

The quote above resonates with other discussions and interviews I have had in Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia about disputed territories. As the international legal system is based on a Westphalian framework of nation-states, disputed territories – occupied territories and/or de facto/unrecognized states – fall into a grey area. WPS NAPs do not exist in a vacuum but precisely in an international system based on internationally recognized borders. In times of war and crisis, those territories are therefore faced with a conundrum

because international organizations have no mandate to work there,[79] and their populations are left without legal or humanitarian protection. For example, the challenges associated with the legal status (i.e., not a refugee *nor* an IDP) of displaced Karabakh Armenians have been mentioned to me (Interviews 35, 40).

Moreover, citizens of disputed territories are often excluded from international forums and discussions, and their voices and agency are left overlooked. Many Artsakhi women (before its dissolution) were isolated and excluded from many peacebuilding, WPS, and international development initiatives, as well as direct funding, because of Karabakh's unrecognized status (Aharonian and Mkrtchyan 2014). A testimony of an Artsakh Armenian woman interviewed by the Community of Democracies (2019) demonstrates this sentiment very well, echoing my interviews with Abkhazian women:

> I see a problem in the *isolation* of Artsakhian people from the world. *Nobody wants to even ask us what we want, what we need, what we feel*. Everybody is trying to make decisions about people. I think to sustain peace *the international society has to accept that we exist!* (Marina Simonyan, a woman peacebuilder from Stepanakert)

The quotes above also signal another sentiment among my interviewees that I observed during my fieldwork and regional events: Armenians were generally left alone and unprotected by the international community. This failure of the international community to protect the citizens of Artsakh/ Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 also added to the feeling that Armenians have been "let down" by the world and led to a distrust of the UN:

[79] As we will see in the final section of this chapter, after the mass exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, a rare UN mission has been deployed to evaluate humanitarian needs, marking the first UN access to the region in over 30 years (AFP 2023).

> When you tell them about Resolution 1325, this agenda, and especially in Karabakh, from what my experience has been, *they are very negative towards anything that is coming from, let's say, not particularly from the UN, but from these internationals*. In a way, saying that "during the war, you didn't care about us at all, about women and children, everything that we had to go through," they felt very much left alone by themselves. (Gender expert, Yerevan, August 3, 2023)

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2020, this sentiment was amplified because of the double standards observed. "As the focus of the international media and community is fixed on Ukraine, the escalation of tensions and gas disruptions in Nagorno-Karabakh has dropped from news agendas, which hinders humanitarian aid" and "cases of the donor community pivoting their focus to Ukraine and reallocating funds for Armenia" increased the sentiment of Armenians being alone and unimportant to the world (Santos et al. 2023, 4), leading to occasional friction between Ukrainian and Armenian feminists (Interviews 22, 35, 42, 46, 55). The next section tackles the difficulty of talking about peace after 2020.

5.3.2 'It's extremely difficult to talk about peace when they are coming to kill you': On the different meanings of peace – and the difficulty to talk about peace after 2020

Almost everyone I interviewed in Armenia brought up the subject of peace without me asking first. Everyone agreed how difficult it was to talk about peace in the current context, as 'peace' is a term associated with a *loser,* failing, defeatist position – it has a shameful connotation and is therefore stigmatized in public opinion. The intense emotions following the devasting losses of the 2020 war made it hard to talk about peace. Thus, Armenian women working for peace – or WPS broadly speaking – at any level, from the family level to the highest instances of the country, found their work extremely difficult after the 2020 war. A woman peacebuilder I interviewed explains:

> Before 2020, we were in a winning position. It was fine, then we lost, and now we perceive peace as something that is for the weak. What's the first impression I get every time I go to some young audience to talk about peacebuilding? Whenever I mentioned peacebuilding, they would say, 'What about Azerbaijan? They are not pushing for peace.' So, they are strong enough not to push it. *We are the weak side [now]. That's why we want peace. Peace is equal to being weak.* This is the way it is perceived, at least at the moment. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

The status quo was accepted and "normalized" by everyone before the 2020 war, notably because since the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, it was Armenia who was in a position of power and Azerbaijan who had "the short end of the stick":

> Before 2020, it was always Armenians who were like, "yeah, let's talk [about peace], let's push the dialogue." Now kind of we are closed again. [It] is mirroring situation, now instead Azerbaijan people are like "okay, let's talk. Let's solve the problem." [It's] about like either we are in the winning or losing position. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

The reorganization of power and geopolitical infrastructure in the South Caucasus following the 2020 war thus drastically changed the situation for Azerbaijan and put Armenia in the 'loser' position. As such, consistent with previous research (Kvinna till Kvinna 2019), there are multiple meanings of peace, and in this context, it entails a negative connotation. Not only is peace perceived as a position of the weak by broader society, but you can also be seen as a traitor for advocating for it (also in Interview 47):

> And all this narrative [about women's participation in peace negotiations] that has been spoken and told in peacetime is out of the roof. *That does not exist anymore*. Because the war dictates its own militaristic, you know, agenda. *And in that militaristic agenda, women go back to kitchens, as they say, right, to keep the household, to give birth to males, to boys, as future soldiers, and to be objects of protection*. (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

The quote above illustrates the links between motherhood and nation-building in times of war, where 'peace' is not welcome anymore; worst, it is discouraged. For decades,

Armenian and Azeri women peacebuilders have carried out informal peace dialogues across the divide, and I felt during my interviews in Armenia a profound sense of grief, hopelessness, and frustration about it. After the 2020 war, it was a shock for many Armenian women to see their Azerbaijani peacebuilders, colleagues, and friends sharing nationalistic posts and symbols on Facebook. A clear takeaway from fieldwork is the loss of trust in Azerbaijani women peacebuilders and the "erasure" of all the hard peacebuilding work done in the past decades. After the 2020 war, those feminist peacebuilding networks and efforts between Armenians and Azeris stopped, pointing to a setback in progress. Remembering times of cross-border activism and projects, two women share with me:

> It's even impossible now to have some joint statement. On what? Let's build peace, okay, *but which kind of peace*? If the price of this peace is the loss of Karabakh... Some people in Armenia are not agreeing with this. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 10, 2022)

> [There was] expectation, for example, from Azerbaijani women's groups that they would react in some way to this mutilated body[80] thing here, or there were earlier attempts to unite the efforts of women who lost their sons in both countries. All these efforts failed. And not only on a personal level, but they also don't want to get involved. It's also the political sensitivity, particularly in Azerbaijan, where they will be sort of criticized like hell [if they collaborate with us or speak up against their Government]. (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 11, 2022)

> Everyone paused with their peace activism. They [peacebuilders] were calling it like conflict resolution; they changed the names. Many of them, organizations, conflict resolution or, you know, transformation, but security, human security, *but not mentioning peace because it was too sensitive for people to say 'peace' when it was like right after the war.* (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

> After 2020, all efforts just collapsed. Now, it's seriously impossible to talk about peace with anyone, especially in Artsakh, because they don't have the basic feeling of security. And if you start to talk to them about, like, how 'this conflict needs to be solved someday, like something needs to be done, this is the geography, we are neighbors, we got to deal with the situation somehow. Yes. You cannot pack your things and go into other regions. You have to deal with the situation somehow if you want to continue living here.' It's like it's useless because they don't have basic feeling of security for themselves, for their husbands,

[80] See footnote 76 for context.

> their kids, etc. So, it's impossible, if you start talking about things like that or *if you start planning any kind of peacebuilding project, you will be labeled as an international [foreign] agent, or* something like that. You know, these talks which are popular in the post-Soviet region. (Armine Sahakyan, independent expert, Zoom, October 25, 2022)

With this major step backward for some and the interruption of work for others, those choosing to continue talking about peace have seen their work repressed and stigmatized. Politicians like the MP Maria Karapetyan had greater freedom of speech before the 2020 war, although her advocacy for peace was not always popular. But "during the war and after it, the peacebuilders, they were very much pressured to not say anything about trying to build relations, negotiations, because they were severely targeted in all possible levels." (Interview 76) Activists and feminists like Maria were targeted, cyber-attacked, and deemed as traitors of the nation with greater vitriol than ever before by nationalist groups. Widespread disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, and militarized narratives online and offline do not help in that regard (Santos et al. 2023, 20).

As such, the post-2020 collective trauma does not foster a fertile environment in Armenia to promote WPS. When I asked the women I interviewed whether they had any hope about WPS being a tool for fostering peace, I had mixed replies, reflecting again the wide range of feminist positions in Armenia and the disagreements among them. Some were more skeptical or even pessimistic about WPS in this context.

> No documents can be a tool. [Why?] People are fed up with all these documents and resolutions. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 17, 2022)

> Talking about peacebuilding when the neighboring country is promoting Armenophobia is not realistic; it's just wishful thinking. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 24, 2022)
> Nobody wants to lose any more relatives, any more family. But I think people are afraid to say that they are ready [for peace] because there's this threat. *You know, whenever you say*

> *you are ready for peace, then boom, something happens.* And then it happened so many times. Now you say, "Okay, I don't want to handle this issue. I don't want to decide whether I'm ready or not. I just want this big geopolitical game to finish so that we can just settle and live a normal life." And so, whenever we would go and speak with women about peace and security, they would ask and say, "Okay, but is there a commitment from the other side? Am I just being the one who's been coming ready for it? Are you only implementing these things here?" (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

While this type of narrative was not always common in my interviews, it does point to an understanding of peace that exists mutually and in relationality with Azerbaijanis (Interviews 45, 48, 49). Others, on the contrary, thought it was the moment "now more than ever" to talk *about* and push *for* peace. On using WPS as a tool, despite its shortcomings, some mentioned:

> Even within the civil society sector. You'll meet a huge resistance on that [peace] because… and I totally understand that it's extremely difficult to talk about peace when they are coming to kill you. Right. So, again, you know, I'm sure that this narrative [on peace] should always be kept open, *and 1325 NAP is another platform for it to be open.* (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

Although the 2020 war amplified the anxieties already present in the country, there is also evidence of a hostile environment for peacebuilding initiatives before 2020, where human rights defenders and peacebuilders were often targeted, harassed, and attacked by nationalist groups (Mkrtchyan and Siradeghyan 2017). Notable episodes of conflict escalation, like the four-day war in April 2016, have also affected communication links and collaboration between Armenian and Azeri activists (ibid. 27) (see also Kvinna till Kvinna 2019) Similar to the case of Georgia, Armenian women collaborating with Azeri women peacebuilders had to be careful not to endanger their counterparts, given the

extreme limitations that civil society is facing in Azerbaijan (ibid. 24), and they were both deemed as traitors in their respective communities (Interview 35)

During my fieldwork in Armenia, I instantly noticed how my questions on peace were answered with long, complex, and sometimes even philosophical reflections about what peace is and what it means to be *at peace*. As we will see in the following chapter tackling the Ukrainian case, I argue that this results from proximity and "freshness" of the war, impacting holistic ways of perceiving security. For Armenians, not only is the war with Azerbaijan an existential threat, but it is also a continuation of longer trauma. The following quote painfully explains that:

> You know, when you live in a constant conflict area where there is a possibility of a war hanging over your head every other day, *it affects everything*. It doesn't affect one specific NAP. But it affects what is prioritized in your country, it affects your life expectancy. It affects your choices in life. It affects your decision-making, it affects everything. […] It's not a new thing. It's been happening over the years since the first Nagorno-Karabakh war after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And trauma-wise, after the Armenian genocide, it's also a longer history; though it's not the same, trauma is trauma, and then the constant affiliation of Turkey with Azerbaijan is hitting on that, right? So, it's like one big enemy picture, and then it's adding up on the stress. Maybe if it were another country, it would be only a small part, but it wouldn't add up to the older trauma. *But in this scenario, it's adding up to this apocalyptic thinking that, you know, it's still genocide. And I don't know how it's… it's [in our] DNA*. It's a long history of trauma. It's not easy to overcome that […] *It's part of your identity. It's part of how your nation sees itself going forward.* (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 17, 2022)

Although interviews with Moldovan and Georgian women also pointed to anxieties over protracted conflicts, the ones with Armenian women—and Ukrainians—point to a more profound and existential threat that feels omnipresent and constant. Armenia's case is also interesting because it shows how "frozen" conflicts are never truly frozen, and the 2020 war and recent events in Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrate that.

To conclude this section, the 2020 war triggered existential fear and collective trauma, seen as a continuation of the Armenian genocide. The 2020 war also "unfroze" the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh, (re)opening the wounds of the first war. The 2020 war forced women NGOs/CSOs to pivot from their usual gender-focused programming to operating in survival mode. Due to the existential and exceptional circumstances imposed by the war, WPS was pushed aside during a time of crisis, leaving an unmodified NAP unfit for unstable, fragile, and rapidly changing contexts. The 2020 unraveled the complexity of protecting citizens of unrecognized states. Finally, the 2020 war also made any discussions or work on *peace* extremely difficult for feminist activists, reverting decades of process, friendships, and dialogues between Armenian and Azeri women. In a context where peace is synonymous with being a loser, those advocating for and working on peace are stigmatized; in this unfertile environment for WPS, the NAP is either pushed aside or left reproducing harmful dynamics. The next section delves deeper into the second NAP adoption and the significant changes happening in Armenia since my two fieldworks.

5.4 The adoption of the second NAP (2022-2024), a foreign policy shift to the West, and the fall of Nagorno-Karabakh (2023)

When I conducted my first fieldwork in Armenia in September-October 2022, the second NAP had just been recently approved in June. That time was restless and insecure: the largest military escalation since the 2020 war happened from September 12 to 14. Following a series of clashes at the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Azeri forces crossed into Armenia proper and targeted several villages and major cities in the South of

the country, including Jermuk, Goris, and Vardenis. Although Russia brokered a ceasefire on September 13, there were ceasefire violations recorded several times until the end of September. Needless to say, the atmosphere was scary and fragile – the newly adopted WPS NAP was on no one's plate or mind.

The last section of the chapter will proceed as follows. First, we will dive deeper into the challenges encountered during the development and adoption of the second Armenian NAP, which was developed and adopted in a significantly different context than the first one. Second, I asked my participants to share with me what they think are the biggest WPS challenges in the future, and I'll present their reflections. Thirdly, similar to the previous chapter, we will explore the question of the NAP in Armenia in the context of a significant foreign policy shift towards the West following the 2018 Revolution and the 2020 war. Finally, the last section reflects on progress made in Armenia and the recent developments regarding the total dissolution of the Republic of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023.

5.4.1 The adoption of the second Armenian NAP

> I think that in all countries, the first NAP of any resolution is always very, very vague. Yeah, because even the country and representatives of the Interagency Commission don't exactly know what to include. There are problems related to funding, there are problems related to cooperation, policies, how they are going to do, because everything is also about experience. […] And of course, the second one was better, I think, we still have a lot of things to work on. *I don't say that it's perfect, but still, it was an evolving process, and we feel that.* (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 30, 2022)

The first NAP was developed before 2020, so the country was still in a 'no war, no peace' situation, in which Armenia had the greatest power. The development of the second

NAP happened in a totally different environment, following Armenia's devasting losses in the 2020 war, after which Azerbaijan now had greater power. A consensus among my interviewees is that the second NAP process in Armenia was more inclusive than the first one, including more NGO/CSO participation and public consultations (Interview 37, 41), taking the form of different working groups. It was adopted in June 2022 for the timeline of 2022-2024, so it was still very new at the time of my first fieldwork. The funding of the second NAP still relies on Western donors only.

The second NAP reflected the new realities of the country, notably the needs of displaced women and those living in border regions. The second NAP "addresses three key security issues that have arisen as a result of the most recent war: the redrawing of borders, new security realities and actors, and an influx of displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh, a majority of which are women." (Shahinian 2023, 50) In addition to the four usual WPS pillars, there is a fifth pillar added – cooperation – to tackle WPS collaboration and study visits with diverse actors such as local authorities, WPS-experienced countries, authorities, and NGOs/CSOs in Karabakh (prior to its dissolution) and the UN Secretary-General's Office on Genocide Prevention. It is worth mentioning how the second NAP makes a more thorough assessment and contextualization of the new geopolitical realities in the document than the first one. The preamble also situates the second NAP in synergy with Armenia's other commitments toward international frameworks like the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the Universal Periodic Review and others." Finally, the NAP "defines a new strategy of

monitoring and proposes a mechanism which can best assess the effectiveness of its implementation" and is defined as "being a living document [that] has the opportunity to be revised and amended" in the current volatile situation (Government of the Republic of Armenia 2022, 3), but it is not clear what this new strategy is or how and by whom will the NAP will be updated – we can assume by the Inter-Agency Commission.

In short, the 2020 war impacted the second NAP development and drafting, from *which* issues to consider to *who is* invited to public consultations. Echoing Moldova's and Georgia's understanding of conflicts as "war knowledge," similarly, the 2020 war also directly fueled Armenia's second NAP, equipping those responsible for it with new perspectives and tools for the future:

> For the Second National Action Plan, there were a lot of lessons learned that were reflected because it was drafted after the war escalation in 2020. So, whenever there was a discussion, people were saying, "Oh, but we figured out that this didn't work. Let's reformulate it." So, I would say it had a direct impact in even formulating some activities and even having some activities there, thinking that the conflict may escalate tomorrow. (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 20, 2022)

During the second NAP process, I was told that one woman—Naira Sultanyan, then a UN peace and development advisor at the UN Armenia Office—was particularly crucial in bringing the government and civil society into dialogue. The NGOs/CSOs included in the second NAP process act as a bridge between the Inter-Agency Commission and the conflict-affected women on the ground, relaying their needs and perspectives on a higher level (Interview 52). In the first NAP, the relief and recovery pillar was not given sufficient attention, and civil society pushed for it in the second NAP, now with an even more substantial "justification" than before, considering the greater humanitarian needs

following the 2020 war (Interview 52). Despite a greater inclusion of civil society in the second NAP, an NGO working on WPS localization explains:

> The second time, the process was a little bit more participatory because more civil society actors were involved in the process since the beginning, but also due to the collaboration between MFA and UNDP, there was a huge event organized where the MFA basically tried to consult or be more accountable and report back to a wider community of CSOs on the process of the development of the second NAP […] But those who participated, again, like they have long-lasting experience with MFA. They're like those safe options, you know? But again, like, I mean, I still see the progress, which is good, but we are still not [there yet]. We cannot really call it meaningful participation. We have also submitted written recommendations after this big event. […] I don't know what the reason was, but they just politely said, 'Oh, we're sorry. We didn't include your recommendations in the document.' (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 14, 2022)

For others, the first NAP process left such a bad impression that they disengaged from WPS discussion and did not participate in the second NAP process:

> I got an invitation after everything had been developed for a conference where I went once, the first time, for the first NAP. The second time, *I stopped going because I didn't want to be a part of that comedy anymore* [laugh]. And of course, I reviewed all those plans, and I kept finding the same problems. First of all, no consultations during the process. No monitoring, no budget! (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 12, 2022)

> The inconsistencies will always be there *because the Government's prerogative and priority are different from the civil society*; civil society is eager to reveal their wrongdoings or their, I don't want to say negative, but, you know, the areas for improvement. While the Government is trying to show the progress and the positive side. So that the inconsistency, whatever people are sitting in the Government of Armenia, would always be there because that's what they are pushing on their agenda, *the Government is trying to show how absolutely brilliant they are to the international community,* right [laugh]. *And the civil society's role is to show how they are not*. And that inconsistency will always be. (Gender expert, Zoom, October 17, 2022)

In parallel, the Parliament of Armenia approved a law in June 2023 allowing women to volunteer for military service in the Armed Forces. This law – developed and adopted without any consultations with civil society – once again raised concerns and angered Armenian feminists who are fighting against the further militarization of WPS in Armenia,

especially in the backdrop of several recent incidents of gender-based violence and systemic discrimination of servicewomen in the Army (NIIRAS 2024, 54).

When I was in Armenia during my second fieldwork, Armenian women I met for follow-up chats told me that the NAP was not being implemented and that the Government was using excuses not to do so (e.g., overloaded, insufficient resources, crisis management). Already, women NGOs/CSOs have formulated recommendations to the Government, such as the importance of developing a solid monitoring and evaluation framework and more inclusive civil society participation (Sargizova et al. 2023; Shahinian 2023).

As previously mentioned, it is difficult to counterbalance civil society's observations with the Government's assessment as I could not speak to Government officials in the Ministries involved in the NAP. Based on available evidence, however, it is credible to believe that the second NAP continued to be deemed a non-priority considering the situation in which Armenia finds itself. In August 2023, there was notable anxiety in the air because of an 8-month-long blockade of the Lachin corridor by Azerbaijan, the only road connecting Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh to the outside world. As we will discuss in section 5.4.4, this political crisis further engulfed Armenia in internal turmoil and enhanced the sentiments of Armenians that a new war with Azerbaijan was imminent. As the second NAP is almost coming to an end at the time of writing (Spring 2024), further research and monitoring will be necessary to monitor its outcomes. The following section will explore the future WPS challenges in Armenia.

5.4.2 What are the future WPS challenges in Armenia?

During our conversation over *soorj*[81] at a local café, a woman (representative of an international organization) whom I had interviewed in 2022, and met again in the summer of 2023, expressed her pessimism about the slow implementation of the second NAP and the irregular and difficult relationship between civil society and the government. As she explained, the government is in a "defensive" mode because civil society is critical of them, so they invite just a few selected individuals, always the same ones, and those who don't criticize them too much. There has been a lack of understanding and willingness by government officials to engage with civil society, and she mentions that there has been no comprehensive public sector reform in Armenia since the 2018 Revolution. NGOs/CSOs, on the other hand, have also been affected as many have lost their impact and sense of "common purpose." For her, there is a communication gap between civil society and the Government, where both sides find it difficult to communicate with the other using commonly understood language and tone.

Her observations largely correspond with other conversations I had and observations during my fieldwork. In general, the relations between Government and civil society were not described to me as harmonious in both my fieldwork in Armenia and by most of my interviewees. Everyone mentioned how, for the future of WPS in Armenia, genuine understanding and political will coming from the Government, with sufficient resources, transparency, and accountability, are needed. Stemming from this common observation

[81] Armenian coffee.

shared by everyone I interviewed, when I asked about future challenges, several points kept surfacing. For those of my participants who still "believed" in this agenda, I received several responses. First, the most prevalent was the extremely difficult, fragile, and volatile geopolitical context in which Armenia finds itself. As discussed earlier, this has many consequences on people's psyche and makes working on peace particularly sensitive. Because many people do not believe in peace or peaceful means of conflict resolution anymore, as people live under constant stress and fear of war, there is extreme difficulty in talking *about* peace and working *on* peace (Interviews 37, 42, 44, 45, 46). Not only does the word 'peace' carry different meanings and sensitivities, but "after the war, it became almost impossible to understand what a *reasonable* step for peace would be," explains the representative of an international organization (Interview 39). The instability of the upcoming years makes it challenging to plan ahead and answer my question:

> Well, the biggest challenge, currently and in the future, after all of the developments, and especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Azerbaijan's kind of invasion of Armenia proper, and the European Union also signing this gas deal with Azerbaijan, *the main feelings that the people in Armenia have is some kind of like, they are left alone. And they have this basic feeling for, they're afraid for their security and they don't see who's going to do anything if anything happens.* Like, I mean, something happened. Yes. Armenia proper was invaded, and no one reacted properly. Neither Russia nor the West and Armenians are pretty much afraid about their security. *That's why everything else, any other agenda is put on hold because there is some kind of instinct of self-protection*. (Armine Sahakyan, independent expert, Zoom, October 25, 2022)

> Despite all the negative perceptions of this notion of peace and all the obstacles, you know, we are always living in the expectation of another attack. *It's not the proper environment and a constructive environment to work and talk about WPS* […] The biggest challenge could be the unstable situation and future attacks by Azerbaijan. If it's there, it will be really difficult to make it more urgent, but it is still difficult to implement a number of lines in there; that's the biggest one that I can see because we need stability and security, at least not in this turmoil. *We need stability to move on with the agenda.* That's first. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 26, 2022)

> Of course, the main challenge is political, security stability, at first because *in our region, we do not know what will happen,* because what has happened on September 13th, you know, it's one night and everything has changed. So, the main issue and the main challenge is the security challenge in Armenia. To have a secure and safe environment, to work, for women to consider living in bordering communities without any threat of their children to be killed, bombed, or shelled. That's the main challenge. (Anna Karapetyan, former public servant at the Human Rights Defender's Office, Yerevan, October 27, 2022)

The three quotes above clearly demonstrate that the NAP does not exist in a vacuum and is indissociable from the geopolitical context in which it finds itself. Without stability and basic security, it is hardly possible to implement and advocate WPS values.

In a similar vein, a few people have mentioned to me being irritated by the popular idea that Armenia is "pro-Russian." An NGO representative (Interview 52) noted that she feared Russia's actions given Armenia's turn to the West (which we will discuss in the following section) and Russia's inaction and refusal to help Armenians during the recent Azeri attacks, even more so considering Russia's heavy military presence in Armenia (a military base in Gyumri and Russian peacekeeping troops in Nagorno-Karabakh, at the time of our interview). To her, it "is very clear that they are here only for their interests. And they're interested in oppressing Armenians to make sure that they will be pro-Russian. And civil society is not pro-Russian, and neither is the people."

Second, the anti-gender movements and patriarchal attitudes are still strong (Interviews 33, 35, 37, 43, 44, 50) and on the rise (Women's Fund Armenia 2023; Khalatyan et al. 2020). The connection is still not made between them and the NAP because "it doesn't have any sort of vocabulary that falls into this framework of criticism about Soros, gender perversion and all of that. So that's why it somehow stayed outside of this criticism" (Interview 39;

also 42) – at least for now. However, we can expect a growing number of such anti-gender pushbacks in the future as they are directly connected to nationalist and populist sentiments. Opposed to Pashinyan's decisions since 2020, the Armenian opposition is strong and often criticizes "Western liberal views," gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, accusing his Government of making peace with Azerbaijan and being a traitor in "giving away" Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh. Women human rights defenders and activists are being attacked online and offline for speaking about peacebuilding, sexuality, sex education and/or gender-based violence, accused of betraying "traditional Armenian values" (Interview 40, 43, 46, 76) (Women's Fund Armenia 2023). In this context, a young woman shares with me her concerns about the security of peacebuilding activists in Armenia and what she thinks is a future WPS challenge:

> Being punished for speaking about peace. Because it is the most taboo to talk about. Women are particularly targeted for speaking about peace, like publicly speaking about anything, because they are being criticized for everything: their looks, the way they speak, and their identity. And plus, if they speak about peace, they are double [targeted]. Being targeted and criticized. So, I would say this is the biggest challenge because the WPS agenda remains heavily difficult to talk about. (Gender expert, Yerevan, August 3, 2023)

Third, changes in male roles in society after the 2020 war and the glorification of the "war hero" are worrying to Armenian feminists (Interviews 40, 44). Just as in any conflict around the world, women will bear the indirect consequences of war, such as PTSD and an increase in domestic violence, an increase in the unpaid care burden while caring for the wounded, reproductive pressure, and long-term psychological trauma. As such, those issues and the social rehabilitation of war veterans (Interviews 43, 45, 47) and victims have been mentioned to me as areas of concern for the future. The following section focuses on what "all of this" means in the context of major foreign policy transformations in Armenia.

5.4.3 From Russia to the West: WPS in the context of foreign policy transformations and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

As explained earlier in this chapter, the Government change following the 2018 Revolution in Armenia signaled an apparent turn toward the West and a domestic and foreign policy that increasingly moves away from dependence on Russia. This shift only accelerated after the 2020 war (and Russia's failure to protect Armenians) and the 2022 Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to analysts, the Russian invasion of Ukraine "has had significant implications for the South Caucasus. It has triggered processes that have changed the status quo on the ground and notably destabilized the region. In the Armenia-Azerbaijan context, Russia's decreasing capabilities in the South Caucasus, its changing priorities, and growing dependence on the Turkish-Azerbaijani tandem [have] created a new configuration that enable[d] escalations and repeated use of coercive diplomacy by Azerbaijan." (Grigoryan 2023, n.p)

As both the 2020 war and the Russian invasion of Ukraine reorganized the security architecture in the South Caucasus, according to one of my participants, "South Caucasus is pushed aside. But I think it's really... we're also on the first line, because we are small, and we're not in the heart of Europe, so there is not a very strong interest [in us]" (Interviews 37 and 48) These women are not the first to mention feeling "left alone" and not being "important enough" for the international community, compared to all the attention that Ukraine is getting. A woman tells me how the Russian invasion had an impact on her organization's funding, which was already limited (Interviews 42 and 46):

> This affects a lot. *Because first of all, the war in Ukraine is against Russia, and Russia is the enemy of all the countries where donations arrive for NGOs and civil society*. So, if your enemy is Russia, 'we'll support you, we'll back you, we'll give you anything you want, all the aid goes to civil society, to humanitarian aid' and all that. And Armenia... It's not really against Russia, although Russia plays a huge role, [for us, the enemy] it's Azerbaijan. [And this] neighbor is not so much the enemy of the whole of Europe, now that it provides gas and all that. So, we're experiencing more or less the same consequences, but we don't have equal support for civil society, *and we know that in this region if you don't have international European support, it's very difficult to survive*. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 12, 2022)

> For instance, the invasion of Armenia, which took part in September, only happened, I think [because of] the situation in Ukraine; *a lot of people and the international community were very busy with the situation in Ukraine. And since our country is much smaller. It's not so visible, and it's not so close to Europe, like Ukraine*. I think until we started to shout that this is the situation that is going on in Armenia, people, the international community didn't notice that because, and this very much affected the geopolitical situation, because there are so many conflicts in different countries that international community doesn't even know which one to target. Which one to pay attention more? And this is the situation that the world is so shaky now, and there are so many challenges that sometimes a lot of issues either are delayed or due to a lot of conflicts and a lot of developments are not targeted well. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 30, 2022)

While the link with the WPS agenda may seem stretched, the 2020 war, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the geopolitical reordering of powers in the region indirectly affect the work of several of the women I interviewed, as these two quotes attest. Interesting is the feeling of being "unworthy" or less worthy of Western support if one is perceived to be pro-Russian; however, this is a cruel misunderstanding of the complex history and power dynamics between Russia and Armenia. Also coherent with other discussions in this chapter is the feeling of Armenians being left alone while both Russia and the West are "too busy elsewhere to intervene."

Considering all the shortcomings of the Armenian NAP mentioned in this chapter and the challenging environment I was observing during my fieldwork visits in Armenia, I was often puzzled by the silences, lack of answers, and lack of political will from the

Government – as usually said to me. I was asking my interviewees then, "why did the Government decide to adopt a NAP, especially a *second* one in a period of acute crisis?" While it is difficult to verify this as I did not interview Government officials, an answer that was often brought up was the desire for Armenia to look democratic to the Western world, as its foreign policy is shifting away from Russia:

> I think it's basically after the Revolution, *our Government wanted to look more democratic*, especially, you know, there were many early warnings and situation changes leading towards the conflict. And although it was not very obvious for some, I mean, politically, it was, everything was leading to that. And I think the Armenian Government tried to do its best to improve *its human rights [record] and good governance situation* in these, you know, couple of years which happened before the war. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 14, 2022)

> We are really worried about our image. We are now in a very intensive negotiation process, and the EU and the West are part of this process. […] But if you follow, in the past few years, our Prime minister's statements from the National Security Council, everything, like there has been so much criticism towards Russia... So, if you look at it from its two sides, the geopolitical sides, *Armenia is very much eager to have strong relations with the EU and with the US and present itself as a promoter of these rights and European values, these universal human rights values*. (Gender expert, Yerevan, August 3, 2023)

These comments particularly resonate as, at the time of writing in April 2024, Armenia groundbreakingly announced that it is now seeking EU membership,[82] marking another major shift in Armenian foreign policy. In this rapidly evolving environment, looking democratic may appear especially important given Armenia's autocratic neighbors. There is evidence in my interviews of "competition" between Armenia (striving toward democracy) and Azerbaijan and Turkey (both authoritarian States). A representative of an international organization told me that Azerbaijan instrumentalized WPS against Armenia

[82] On April 5th, President von der Leyen announced a 'Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia' of 270 million euros over the next 4 years (European Commission 2024).

in international fora (Interview 39; also 42), which is also coherent with my assessment of *both* countries' diplomatic statements in the annual WPS Open Debates, meaning that Armenia also uses the opportunity to promote their narrative of the conflict in multilateral spaces such as the yearly WPS week in New York (Santoire 2024b; also visible in diplomatic statements, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2020).

A limit to my research is the inability to interview any Government officials from the key ministries in Armenia, so as to know precisely *what* and *how* they think about WPS in this context. When I asked my interviewees – who had links with Governmental officials and/or had worked previously in the Government – about how the Armenian Government perceives the WPS agenda in the current context, most highlighted that it was an international responsibility/commitment to do so, along with other obligations found in frameworks like the SDGs and CEDAW (Interviews 37, 41, 43, 46, 49) (also available in diplomatic statement Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020). Others mentioned that it was a good way to show the world that Armenia was ready for peace with Azerbaijan while improving the image of Armenia's democracy after the Revolution (Interviews 37, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 49, 50, 76) (also visible in diplomatic statements, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2018). Finally, others with a more antimilitarist tendency mentioned that the Government found a security interest in "adding" more women into defense and security structures, especially after the devasting human and material losses of the 2020 war (Interview 39, 40, 42, 44, 76).

As I tried to show in this chapter, those three reasons are clearly interrelated. According to many I spoke to, the Government's *first* priority is national security, but they don't necessarily make the link with the WPS agenda. If there is certainly interest and commitment toward WPS in some State agencies and Ministries, there is not a consistent ownership of it across the Government, and its adoption does not seem to come from a genuine understanding of the agenda's principles (Interview 45), as change very much depends on individuals and is not yet institutionalized (Interview 49). Those explanations are plausible and consistent overall among the diverse women I have spoken to across sectors, with expertise, positions, and feminist backgrounds.

With Armenia considering leaving the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (RFE/RL's Armenian Service 2024), distancing itself from its former ally Russia, diversifying its diplomatic relations, and seeking closer ties to the EU and Western countries, other major events are expected to come. As demonstrated in this section, Armenia has been on a path of democratization since the 2018 Revolution, which created a change of government and unprecedented democratic reforms in the country, facilitating the advent of new policies, ideas, and political commitments, such as the WPS NAP. This process of democratization has, however, been punctuated by several difficulties and major changes in Armenia's domestic and foreign politics, against a background that is inseparable from the development (i.e., who participated in consultation and drafting), implementation (i.e., which issues are prioritized and funded) and monitoring and evaluation of the NAP, but also the political uses of WPS (e.g., as a tool of democracy and

progressiveness). Documents such as NAPs exist in a specific moment and context, as evidenced by the case of Armenia, but also the other countries in my study.

5.4.4 Reflecting on progress made – and the fear that everyone anticipated

> I would say that [the fact that] it exists already is a success [laugh]. (Gender expert, Yerevan, August 3, 2023)

> [Laugh] To be honest, I don't recall anything to be proud of, but it's already a success to have a second one… after all this war situation, the situation with bordering communities, security sector, you just go on for peace, women, and security and have these three separate words in one document [is a success]. (Anna Karapetyan, former public servant at the Human Rights Defender's Office, Yerevan, October 27, 2022)

To conclude this chapter, we look at the progress made over time in Armenia and contextualize the recent events in Nagorno-Karabakh. When asked about the successes of WPS in Armenia – which sometimes seemed like there were not many – I received complex and nuanced answers. Armenian women mentioned fewer successes than my interviewees in other countries, and those successes were always nuanced with failures as well. Very much echoing the other countries in my research, however, while some women I interviewed had a more "radical" opinion about it, the large majority provided strategic answers about the potential of using WPS as a tool:

> Good or not very good... It's *some kind of mechanism* that we can use as a document, just in political terms. It's also important that, for example, "look, Armenia has this [paper]", *at least we have something*, you know. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 10, 2022)

> The failure is that we don't use the full potential of this resolution and the opportunities it creates. The failure is that the government is still, again, failing to understand that they can unite efforts under this resolution. *But the good thing is that the conversation started. And it has the potential to get to the right place*, let's say. (Representative of an international organization, Yerevan, October 11, 2022)

> It's part of the democratization of the country. It's part of the reform agenda. It's part of the negotiations. And it's part of the game. *You have to do it*. That's why probably women's rights agenda, you know have to play it cool in a way. It has to be done even if they don't believe in it, even if the people who are signing this paper. *But it's an opportunity that should be seized.* So, you do it. And then what you do, you continue doing your everyday job, educating, changing narratives, giving alternatives, changing mindsets, working in general on gender equality. *And then, one day, it won't be just a document which is there; it will be meaningful.* It will be meaningful because I know there will be people who are genuinely contributing to gender work. *But this will be individuals like here and there.* People who have given their lives, for example, life work for those things, but it will be here and there; it's not systemic. (Gender expert, Yerevan, October 17, 2022)

In those excerpts above, the key takeaway is that the WPS agenda – and how it has been institutionalized worldwide and implemented in Armenia – is imperfect. However, it serves as a powerful instrument for Armenian feminists to push for incremental change, create a legitimate space to have discussions about WPS issues (which was previously hard to have before adopting the NAP), and hold their Government accountable. Others – antimilitarist feminists – remain skeptical about the true impact of the WPS agenda on the ground:

> I've changed my perspective a bit, the discussions around 1325 and all that, I've seen that [it was] completely detached, I've seen that it really doesn't meet the needs that are there, right now. We really need to rework all that, rework how it's done. Technically, it may be fine. It looks fine on paper, on the documents, but in reality, really... *not only does it not work, but it's also been hijacked completely*, 1325, the action plans, by Governments, completely for their own interests. […] *We saw how 1325 helped Governments militarize their societies even more. And for me, that's the failure of 1325.* And that's why I've been saying 'no' ever since. (NGO representative, Yerevan, October 12, 2022)

After reading this chapter, one might ask why antimilitarist feminist perspectives are so prominent in Armenia compared to the other countries covered in this research. Three hypotheses can be tentatively put forward. Firstly, in Armenia, the protracted nature of the conflict has enabled feminist antimilitarist ideas to flourish, whereas in Ukraine, for example, this is still too recent. As one young woman jokingly said to me during my fieldwork in the summer of 2023, "Armenians are so fed up with war for decades now"

(Interview 76). Secondly, the notable absence of UN Women in Armenia, as we have seen in the case of Moldova, Georgia, and as we shall see for Ukraine, is a structuring force in the WPS landscape. It is then plausible to imagine that when UN Women is so present somewhere – edifying, advocating, and financing NAPs – it also structures what *kind* of feminism is found in WPS spaces, a feminism that is likely to be closer to a feminism that is more liberal and institutionalist. In its absence, and in the absence of substantive consultations with feminist civil society for the creation of the NAPs, the WPS environment in Armenia perhaps gave rise to a broader variety of feminist currents and ideological confrontations that are less present in other countries of my research. Finally, given the extensive Armenian diaspora in the Middle East, it is possible to suggest that Armenian feminists have been more inspired intellectually by Global South decolonial, anti-imperialist and antimilitarist feminisms than the rest of Eastern Europe.

Antimilitarist or not, Armenian women in civil society are already highly active in all spheres of society; the challenge is to make their voices heard and carve them a place for meaningful participation in decision-making (Interview 47), something that the NAP *can* help realize, but difficult in its current form given the criticisms laid out throughout the chapter. The NAP – and its Interagency Commission – also helped unite diverse actors from the Government, civil society, and local authorities for the first time (Interviews 37, 42) and may improve future relations. (CEDAW Task Force Armenia 2022, 6) One mentioned how, despite the many difficulties still facing women in the defense and security sector in Armenia, the visibility of *seeing* more women in those positions helps slowly deconstruct deep-rooted stereotypes of Armenian society (Interview 52)

As I tried to show in this chapter, the existence of a NAP—and the entirety of its process—highly depends on politics—not only the democratization process but also the political turnover and who is in power. The political atmosphere, such as political polarization, collective trauma after decades of war, and the rise of anti-democratic/anti-gender forces influence the NAP process as well. During my first and second fieldwork, a number of things and people I interviewed foreshadowed what was about to come, namely a very painful chapter in Armenians' history: the loss of Artsakh.

In December 2022, "building on its triumph in the 2020 war," (International Crisis Group 2023a) Azerbaijan started an intentional blockade of the Lachin, the only road connecting Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh to the outside world. This almost 10-month total blockade starved and deprived of human rights, food, medication, and fuel the entire population of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh until the Azerbaijani military offensive of September 19-20, 2023, leading to the total capitulation of de facto authorities and dissolution of the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh. While points of disagreement between the two countries remain, including border demarcations and the transportation route to the Nakhichevan exclave – known as the Zangezur corridor – Azerbaijan's final assault on Nagorno-Karabakh is "case closed."

Not only "its violent dissolution will loom large in the Armenian consciousness and reverberate across other majority-minority conflicts around the globe," (Broers 2024) but the humanitarian dimensions of this mass exodus have been disastrous. Forced to either leave or now live under the yoke of Azerbaijan, most Karabakh Armenians chose the first

option. Under the passive eyes of Russian peacekeepers *and* the Western world, the entire remaining population of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh – around 100,000 people – fled to Armenia in a 30-hour-long journey, leaving behind their ancestral homeland forever. Several international organizations, lawyers, and Armenian experts have qualified this tragedy as ethnic cleansing.

Welcoming more than 100,000 people in a few days has put enormous pressure on already fragile Armenia, particularly in terms of public services and infrastructure. Among the displaced people who have arrived in Armenia, 30,000 are thought to belong to vulnerable groups, including children, pregnant women, people with disabilities, and others suffering from chronic health problems (UNHCR Armenia 2023; International Crisis Group 2023a).

A peace agreement has yet to be signed—with no women in sight.

Chapter 6: Ukraine

6.1 "The first country to adopt a NAP during a war": Ukrainian feminist stories of advocacy for the first WPS NAP (from 2012 to 2016)

6.1.1 (Re)introducing Resolution 1325 after the Maidan Revolution

Although Ukraine formally adopted a NAP in 2016, evidence from my interviews indicates early activism in Ukraine regarding Resolution 1325 at the beginning of the 2010s. This early activism, however, was based on specific individuals and initiatives but remained largely unknown across the country. Before 2014, people in Ukraine did not find much "resonance" in this Resolution for their national context (Interviews 55, 68) as WPS is often traditionally believed to be for conflict-affected countries only:

> Our organization started the advocacy work on 1325 in 2012, when we did the first translation of the Resolution into Ukrainian. So, we wanted to share it with the people of other organizations and ask them to consider a real plan of action. Unfortunately, apart from the local feminists, people were not ready for many things in this area. (Olena Suslova, Founder of the Women's Information Consultative Center, Zoom, June 8, 2023)

> Working with the WPS agenda fell nicely into the overall framework of what we had been doing before. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

As in Moldova, one of the first steps in popularizing the principles and values of Resolution 1325 was translating it into the local language, as the first woman above explains. The last quote also suggests that women NGOs/CSOs in Ukraine had already been working on WPS-related issues before, but this work was not "framed" as such. Maidan and the events that followed – the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas – changed the

course of history and added more strength to Ukrainian feminists' demands for a NAP, as Ukraine was now a conflict-affected country.

Ukrainian women were active in various roles and "squads" during the Maidan Revolution, and many of them later joined different volunteer battalions and the armed forces (e.g., as soldiers, nurses, or doctors) during the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO)[83] period, as shown extensively in the literature (Khromeychuk 2018; Channell-Justice 2017; Martsenyuk, Grytsenko, and Kvit 2016; Benigni 2016; Phillips 2014; Onuch and Martsenyuk 2014) (article on gender roles). Maidan created opportunities for Ukrainian feminists, disrupted deep-rooted patriarchal norms, and their pivotal participation in Maidan has been described as a "revolution within a revolution" (Khromeychuk 2018, 51 in O'Sullivan 2019, 9).

Beyond civic engagement, women's activism in Maidan "at a critical time for the country contributed to a new awareness of the role of women in Ukrainian society as leaders" and opened space and opportunities for political activism. For example, "the share of female MPs rose by two percentage points, while the change in government empowered women MPs who aligned themselves with the [Petro] Poroshenko[84] bloc, many of whom are leaders[85] and members of the Equal Opportunity Caucus," a caucus working on gender

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[83] The Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone was the name given to the Russian-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts until 2018.

[84] The newly elected President after the Maidan Revolution. He served as the President of Ukraine from 2014 to 2019.

[85] Notable women MPs and early advocates of WPS in the Rada included Mariia Ionova, Iryna Gerashchenko, Iryna Lutsenko and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, who later became Vice Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration.

equality inside the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's Parliament) since 2011 (Warren et al. 2018, 33). These women MPs (some of them were active leaders during Maidan) in the system have been instrumental in influencing significant legislative changes on gender equality, acting as advocates for women's issues and WPS-related themes within the Parliament, and establishing direct links between civil society, Government, and policymakers. Alongside other actors like UN Women, OSCE, and women NGOs/CSOs (see section 6.2.2), they were early advocates pushing for the adoption of a WPS NAP (ibid.)

The first attempt to draft a NAP was led by feminist NGOs/CSOs, supported by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) during the summer of 2014 in Kyiv and Odesa. Following the start of the war in Donbas, WILPF (also supported by UN Women and OSCE) organized training and capacity-building workshops for local NGOs/CSOs to draft a NAP and brought into dialogue Ukrainian, Georgian, Bosnian, and Irish women (Interview 55; Warren et al. 2018, 33; Benigni 2016, 81; Kapur 2016; WILPF 2014). The 2014 civil society draft was later sent to the Ministry of Social Policy without any immediate success at that time. Another influential element in feminist WPS advocacy was the *Invisible Battalion* study, which facilitated the first NAP's adoption.

Invisible Battalion was a large veteran and women soldier-led advocacy and research initiative supported by the Ukrainian Women's Fund, UN Women and conducted by feminist researchers Tamara Martsenyuk, Anna Kvit, Anna Grytsenko, and Maria Berlinska in 2015. As we shall see throughout this chapter, these awareness-raising efforts produced significant political and legislative changes concerning discriminatory provisions

against women in combat positions (e.g. salary, official title, infrastructural inequalities, lack of access to social benefits available to male veterans). In addition, *Invisible Battalion* also helped to make visible the realities and difficulties experienced by female soldiers during their service as well as during their reintegration into civilian life, through public campaigns, social advertising, events, and documentaries (Grytsenko, Kvit, and Martsenyuk 2016; Martsenyuk et al. 2019). Previous research has shown how Ukrainian feminists – both inside and outside the system – have used the empirical evidence produced by this research as an advocacy tool for legislative change *and* the adoption of the first NAP (Warren et al. 2018). A woman who has been involved in this study shared with me:

> Women were fighting on the front line, but their rights were really undecided and very limited, it was unfair. And I thought, 'Oh, this is the thing I want to contribute to' because, well, back in 2015 and 2014, *I think the WPS agenda was very new for Ukraine, and the main motivation for me was not the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution, not at all* [laugh]. But it was the quality of life in Ukraine and of life of people who are directly affected by the war […] When I started, I saw the real-life problem which I wanted to address. *Later, I learned that there is an international regulation [framework] about this and that people have already done a lot in this area*. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

As such, *Invisible Battalion* was an additional advocacy tool and provided robust empirical evidence for Ukrainian feminists' work already done on the ground. It also created "momentum" and increased public attention to women's realities in the defense and security sector in the years before the adoption of the first NAP (Interview 68).

Another feminist legal expert from civil society that I met explained that, in 2015, "Ukraine did not report on the implementation of the WPS to either CEDAW's General Recommendation number 30 or UN Security Council Resolution on WPS" so her and other feminist organizations submitted the first shadow report to the CEDAW commission in

2016 to push for the adoption of the first WPS NAP, aiming to hold their Government accountable vis-à-vis international commitments (Interview 68). What this anecdote tells us is that Ukrainian women were creative through various advocacy channels, tools, and other frameworks like CEDAW, working in coalitions outside and inside the system.

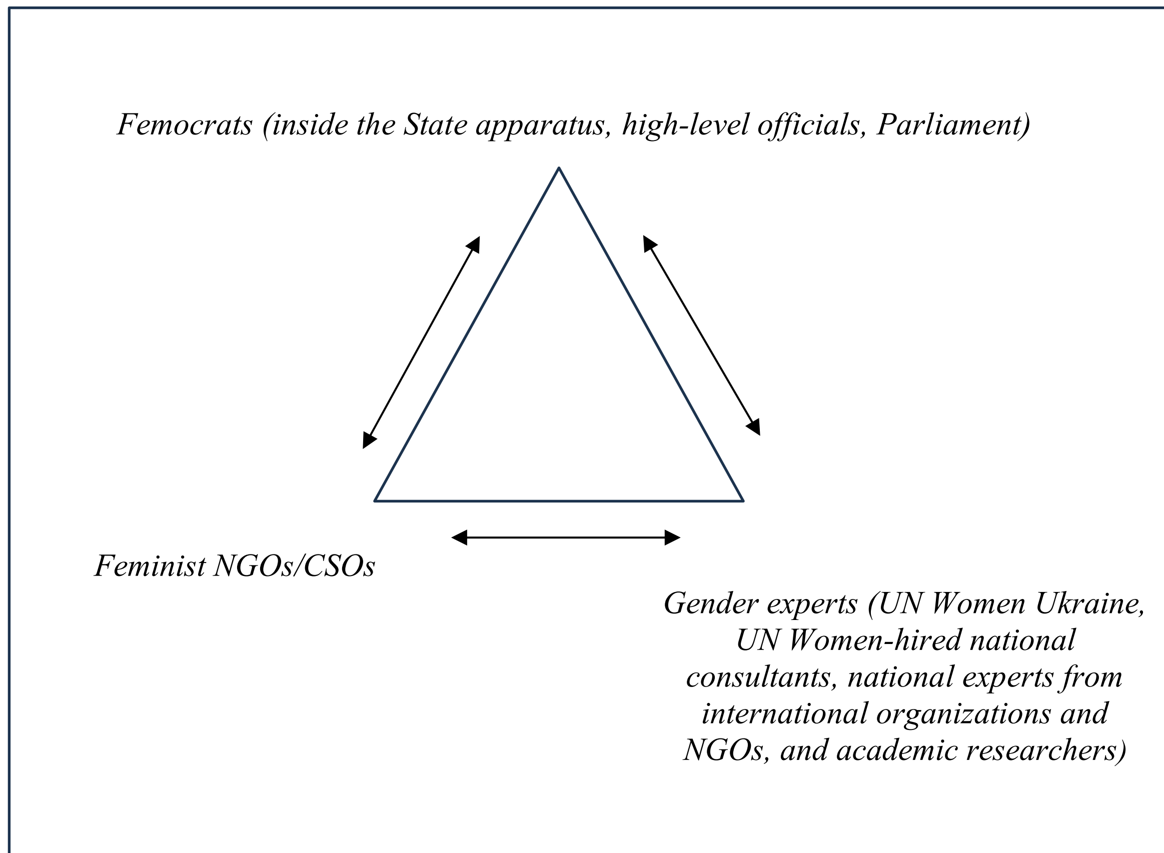
Moreover, Ukrainian feminists relied on existing national and international legal frameworks to push for WPS. The law on "Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men" (2005) and the one on "Adoption of the State Program for Ensuring Gender Equality in Ukrainian Society" (2006-2010) "laid the early legal foundation for Ukraine's national mechanism for gender equality" and "opened up a path towards gender mainstreaming (gender integration) by spurring the growth of legislative and administrative measures, laws and amendments to Civil Labor and Criminal Codes." (Porokhnyak et al. 2019, 60)

My interviews and previous research (Kähkönen 2023; Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022; O'Sullivan 2019a; Warren et al. 2018; Benigni 2016) clearly show that, step by step, it is a *conjuncture* of things, events, feminist initiatives, and coalitions (of women MPs, experts, researchers, and civil society leaders) that led to the adoption of the first WPS NAP (Figure 7). The political recomposition of the Rada, democratic reforms, legislative changes in the area of gender equality, the decentralization process,[86] and the arrival of international

[86] Starting in April 2014, "a process of decentralisation was introduced in Ukraine, aimed at instituting major changes to local self-government and the territorial structure of power in the country. In the political climate at the time, decentralisation reforms served as a tool aimed at lowering tensions between local and central government as well as providing more autonomy to local municipalities in managing the everyday life of the respective communities. At the same time, it was a response that provided alternatives to the discussions about federalisation of Ukraine." (Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022, 37)

organizations following Maidan all facilitated the advocacy, creation, and funding of WPS initiatives, leading to the adoption of the first NAP, as we shall see in the next section.

Figure 7: Triangle of feminist actors working on the first Ukrainian NAP



6.1.2 The adoption of the first Ukrainian NAP (2016-2020)

> You know that Ukraine is the first country to develop a NAP in a period of war? (NGO representative, Zoom, July 19, 2023)

The first Ukrainian NAP was approved in February 2016 for the period of 2016 to 2020 by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. The Ministry of Social Policy had the main

coordination role of the NAP at that time. Although women NGOs/CSOs – supported by international organizations and NGOs – had drafted an earlier NAP before, the one adopted in 2016 differed from the "informal" one drafted in 2014. This first official NAP was developed and drafted primarily by women NGOs/CSOs and by the Ministry of Social Policy with input from various government agencies and ministries, parliamentary committees and working groups, regional governments and administrations, UN agencies, and civil society. The first NAP process has been described to me as inclusive and "crowded" (Interview 53). A woman recalls the NAP process in which she was involved:

> It had women in the name, so the Ministry which was tasked with it, invited women's NGOs and told them: "Please write the action plan for us because we don't have time, we don't have knowledge, we just don't want to do that." And they sat down, they developed it. And because there was limited time and limited understanding of how it was supposed to be, it didn't include a whole bunch of other different groups of people, specifically women affected by the conflict. So, women's organizations wrote about what they knew, and that was not a comprehensive picture, and it didn't include a whole bunch of documents that addressed this issue from other silos. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

Similarly to other countries in my research, the first NAP process in Ukraine has been described to me as imperfect and a "learning experiment." With a lack of expertise inside the Government, the bulk of the work was on the shoulders of feminist experts working hard with few resources and not enough time, as the usual story goes. The first NAP itself lacked a logical framework and a sufficient budget and did not address a number of important issues, nor did it sufficiently integrate conflict-affected women themselves in the process (e.g., women in non-government-controlled areas, IDPs, veterans or widows) (Interviews 56, 59, 65).

The first NAP focused in large part on women's participation in the defense and security sector, as it situates its relevance in the context of the war with Russia in the Donbas and the ATO. It also focuses on the protection, assistance, and rehabilitation of conflict-affected women and girls, IDPs, and people living along the contact line. The 20-page long document contains ten tasks (e.g., preventing and combating violence against women and conducting training for defense and security sector) and is, at times, brief and vague. For each task, there are associated indicators and targets by year of implementation, along with related activities, responsible implementing actors, and a modest budget in *hryvnias* (state budget, local budget, or other/external resources) (Cabinet of Ministries of Ukraine 2016).

The assertion that Ukraine is the first country to adopt a NAP during a period of war, as quoted at the beginning of the section, has been repeated to me repeatedly by Ukrainian women I have interviewed and chatted with over the years. This is written in publications (O'Sullivan 2019a; Warren et al. 2018; Benigni 2016) and even upheld by UN Women (UN Women Ukraine 2020b). This is also a phrase that I said in the past. However, this is a rather curious affirmation when we look closer at it: multiple countries adopted a WPS NAP during armed conflicts way *before* Ukraine, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Mali, and DRC, to name a few. This quasi-myth nevertheless gives us a critical window into the WPS landscape in Ukraine. It is often mentioned as a source of pride to show Ukraine's political will to adopt a WPS during a classic case of *interstate* war[87], "open" or

[87] Since the Cold War, "classical" interstate conflicts have been declining; modern conflicts pertain to internationalized and non-internationalized civil wars and complex protracted conflicts (Kaldor 1999).

"active" conflict, but it tends to reproduce a narrow understanding of the conflict. This phrase, however, shows the *uniqueness* of the country regarding WPS worldwide.

This section and the previous one have shown that a conjuncture of events—at a crucial moment in Ukraine's post-Maidan history—has created various advocacy windows of opportunities for a coalition of Ukrainian feminists inside and outside the system to push for the adoption of the first NAP. Although this first NAP was not perfect, the next section will show how the document came "into life" from 2016 to 2021, when the Donbas war was significantly absorbing the country's economic and human resources.

6.2 WPS amid the Donbas war (2016 to 2021)

Like any war, the (previously called) Donbas war in the Eastern part of the country was a gendered one. Prior to 2022, the number of IDPs was estimated to be around 2 million, out of which the majority were women and children. It was primarily men who were dying on the front in Donbas or emigrating either to find jobs or to avoid mobilization, leading to separation or re-organization of families into women-headed households, thus, more vulnerable to poverty (Benigni 2016, 67). Besides the war heavily consuming human and financial resources, it led to economic and humanitarian crises, state-building reforms, and severe austerity measures tied to international financial institutions' conditions. The war, later coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, caused massive unemployment, destroyed civil infrastructure, disrupted social benefits, restricted movement, and impaired public services. These issues placed a disproportionate care burden on women, forcing

them into survival income modes, such as survival sex work, or prompted migration out of Ukraine, making them susceptible to human trafficking, labor exploitation, and gender-based violence. As elsewhere, certain groups of the population were more at risk than others, including IDPs, people living near the frontline and/or the line of contact, people with disabilities, older persons living alone and in rural areas, LGBTQIA+, people living with HIV and Roma, to name a few. Finally, society-wide militarization, circulation of weapons, and the return home of traumatized men increased domestic violence (UN Women Ukraine 2020a; O'Sullivan 2020; Mathers 2020; WILPF 2017; Protection Cluster Ukraine 2016; OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine 2017; 2015).

It is in this context that the first NAP on WPS was implemented and updated. Previous research on the first NAP has shown that Ukraine's NAP has "taken a narrow militarized form," which makes the NAP "not leading to peace but to militarization, neglecting broader insecurities, including socioeconomic inequalities that have, in turn, been exacerbated by the conflict and state's institutional reforms." Moreover, "gender issues have often been absorbed into the nationalistic and militaristic discourse generated by mainstream Ukrainians" and feminists (O'Sullivan 2019, 1-2). The following sections detail the first NAP process after its adoption in 2016.

6.2.1 Resourcing, implementing, monitoring, and updating the first NAP

Resourcing and budgeting. First and foremost, it is essential to mention that, unlike other countries in my research, the Ukrainian Government does provide state budget for

the NAP, albeit a modest one. The first NAP relied heavily on external resources, such as Western donors, and local budgets (oblasts and hromadas) due to the decentralization process. As we will see later, putting the burden of implementation and funding on oblasts and hromadas has been proven to be challenging because they often lack the understanding, expertise, and resources to do so properly, even more so than at the national level.

However, looking at the budget indicated in the NAP tells us little about the resources the implementing actors *actually* put into the NAP, as the resources were specified *before* the budget was approved. For example, "the relevant budget, as a part of the framework of the [NAP], was not formalized in the first year of the Plan's adoption (2016) and was therefore not reflected in any programme budgets of the implementing parties, including the budget of the authorized coordinating agency." (Niazova 2018, 45)

Similar to other countries in the region and around the world, a systematic dissatisfaction that was shared with me is the insufficient number of resources and funds for the NAP. In Ukraine, however, the donor landscape is significantly larger and more varied than in other countries as a plethora of international actors arrived in the country after Maidan (O'Sullivan 2019a; Benigni 2016). The main bilateral donors include Canada, the US, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Sweden and Japan. UN Women (and other relevant UN agencies like UNDP and UNFPA), the OSCE, the EU, Alinea International, the National Democratic Institute, the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), and the DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance are important donors in the WPS landscape in Ukraine by supporting local women

NGOs/CSOs' research, projects and initiatives, hiring national consultants and supporting State agencies and institutions in internal capacity-building and trainings, for example. Like in Moldova and Georgia, NATO serves as an "inspiration" and provides support and training for the defense sector for WPS activities (Interviews 53, 54, 61, 64).

Echoing other countries in my research, a dependence on Western donors for WPS activities creates problems. Because there is not enough money for the work that needs to be done on the ground, it creates intense competition between NGOs/CSOs who have to "fight" for short-term and project-based funds. Similar to what I have observed in other countries, a few women I interviewed mentioned that they found the WPS landscape in Ukraine to be "monopolized" by a handful of experienced, well-connected women NGOs/CSOs located in Kyiv (Interviews 60, 64 and 68; also Kvinna till Kvinna 2023, 2):

> Only them [this handful of women's organizations in Kyiv] are representing the interests of Ukrainian women's organizations. And for me, it's a lack of circulation of power and opportunities. My idea was, how can we bring other organizations from Dnipro, Lviv or Zaporizhzhia to the UN, for example? Or to Brussels discussions? *No, it's very difficult to share the space with them because they feel that they are the owners of this agenda [laugh]!* And they know how to implement this agenda, they are the main recipients for the resources. All money lands through them for many years. It's also a problem [the fault] of donors too. (Representative of an international NGO, Zoom, August 22, 2023)

> We have a pool of CSOs that are actively involved. *But it's, you understand that they have kind of a monopoly on what is going on* and like, you know, on the processes. But when it comes to some, I don't know, like some grassroots level organization that works on the National Action Plan implementation, in some Donetsk region, and they didn't have access to like the top management or some top, you know, position people in order to have even the name of their organization [mentioned] because they don't want to go to the national level, they are absolutely satisfied with what they're doing within their communities. But they have the voice, and they should have this voice. And what I see is that it's occupied by, you know, well-known experts, by well-known organizations, *but it does not represent the diversity of like the voices that we have on the ground*. (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 6, 2023)

It is important to mention, however, that even the largest and most established women NGOs/CSOs (the ones that the women above were referring to) also struggle to receive adequate funds for their work and mentioned to me the intense competition across civil society (Interviews 55, 56). This problem is such a big one that a specific word exists in the Ukrainian language to define it: “grant eaters” (грантоїд) (Interviews 54, 59). It forces those NGOs/CSOs to strategically navigate through complex grants applications and reporting requirements of international donors and organizations, while also staying true to their purpose and responding quickly to local needs:

> In a lot of cases, we are stuck in this situation, well, CSOs in Ukraine cannot earn their own money. We are prohibited from commercial activities, and the local granting system from local authorities offers very little funding. And we are stuck in a situation where many CSOs have to fight for very limited funding from international donors which have their own sometimes very strange ideas about what has to be done here and how. *And if you don't speak their lingo, you are out of luck. If you don't have personal connections at the embassy, let’s say, you are never going to win this competition*. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

Second, as we will see more extensively in section 6.3.1, a heavy reliance on foreign donors often creates a mismatch between them and the urgent needs of Ukrainian feminist civil society, especially in times of crisis, as humanitarian and international organizations are usually not attuned to the local context and ways of functioning on the ground. Feminist NGOs/CSOs need rapid and flexible funding since they are the ones determining the priorities on the ground, not international donors who are unfamiliar with the context and who require lengthy grant applications and donor reporting. Third, because of limited and competitive resources, women I interviewed involved in localization projects mentioned a “hierarchy” between oblasts (Interviews 57, 66, 70; Pourmalek, Crystal, and Farion 2022) receiving funds, something has had consequences after 2022.

Implementing and localizing. There are several WPS actors in Ukraine who are essential in contributing to the implementation of the NAP. First, women NGOs/CSOs in Ukraine are extremely active, and they take part in essential implementation work, such as training for smaller regional women organizations, awareness-raising and capacity-building, liaison with and between local authorities, central authorities, and conflict-affected women, the development of toolkits, research and help with the drafting of local and regional action plans. The most active in regard to WPS are: Ukrainian Women's Fund (Український Жіночий Фонд), Democracy Development Center (Центр - Розвиток демократії), Women's Information Consultative Center (Інформаційно-Консультативний Жіночий Центр), La Strada Ukraine (Ла Страда Україна), and smaller though active NGOs like the Zaporizhzhia Charitable fund "Unity for the future" (Запорізький благодійний фонд "Єдність" за майбутнє"), the Gender Strategic Platform, and Public Health Foundation Ukraine. In recent years, there has been a plethora of newly created organizations like JuriFem (Асоціація жінок-юристок України "ЮрФем"), Women's Voice and Leadership (Голос жінок і лідерство Україна) and UAFemnet (Українська Феміністична Мережа). Larger (with a broader mandate) organizations indirectly have been at times or are currently involved in WPS advocacy, such as the National Council of Women of Ukraine (Національна рада жінок України), Ukrainian Women Congress (Український Жіночий Конгрес) and World Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations (Світова Федерація Українських Жіночих Організацій). On specific topics like women in the Armed Forces, the Ukrainian Women Veterans Movement in Ukraine (Жіночий Ветеранський Рух) has been particularly active as a result of the *Invisible Battalion* advocacy and research.

Second, since the beginning of the NAP process in Ukraine, femocrats, notably high-level officials and Parliamentarians, have been essential in forming feminist coalitions with civil society and women experts across the country. This includes the Deputy Prime minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration (first, Ivanna Klympush-Tsindzadze was very active and invested in WPS advocacy and continues to do so outside of this position; the position is currently held by Olha Stefanishyna, who is also personally invested in the issue), which became the highest focal point in the Government on gender and WPS-related issues. The Office of the Governmental Commissioner on Gender Equality, Katerina Levchenko, is particularly appreciated as she came from civil society (formerly the President of La Strada Ukraine). She was mentioned by several interviewees as an important figure providing authority and legitimacy on WPS issues, as Ukraine "didn't have anything like that [position] before. So, it was a lot of like advocacy and support, technical support from UN Women to establish this [Office]." (Interview 65)

Other WPS "superstars" include Kateryna Pavlichenko, a young female police officer and Deputy Minister of the Interior Affairs since 2019. The importance of femocrats like her is manifold: not only do they contribute to various feminist advocacy coalitions, but they also can put pressure inside their respective ministries to implement the WPS agenda. This has been the case notably for the Ministry of Internal Affairs (and its five departments, National Police, State Emergency Services, State Border Guards, Migration Services and the National Guard) as they have been notable WPS "champions" in Ukraine, being the first (with the Ministry of Defense) to develop internal action plans (Interviews 64, 65; Niazova 2018; Warren et al. 2018).

Third, similar to the other countries we have studied (except Armenia), the UN Women Ukraine Country Office plays an essential role in the WPS landscape in Ukraine. UN Women has been working in Ukraine since 1999 but has had a central office in Kyiv since 2016 and a field office in Dnipro. As such, the notable success of certain ministries cannot be attributable to femocrats alone but also to the involvement of Western donors and UN agencies (e.g., support and funding of police- and security sector reforms). UN Women, for example, hired national consultants and gender experts to help those Ministries develop gender-sensitive approaches, ministry-level action plans, training for civil servants, internal gender assessments, and WPS awareness on the inside. Key ministries like the MoI and MoD also created gender units internal to them, with a focal point person charged with all things gender in the Ministry and ensuring that policies are gender sensitive. To what extent are those gender focal points able to change things substantially is difficult to measure and my interviews with two of those gender advisors testify to the various challenges they face while working inside the system. (Interviews 74, 75). Those gender focal points were often mentioned to me as innovative and an example to look up to in the other countries in which I conducted fieldwork. Gender focal points were created in 2018 following a recommendation from the central Government and then a Ministry decree; however, some Ministries still do not have any (Interview 74).

Previous research has shown, however, that "in their endeavour to bring UNSCR 1325 to the agenda in Ukraine, IOs [international organizations] have responded to the active conflict and the demands of mainstream feminists by prioritizing the security sectors within the WPS agenda. Despite gradually shedding light on other gender-related problems, their

privileging of the security sector has contributed to the narrow implementation of the WPS agenda." (O'Sullivan 2019a, 13) However, my research does not provide convincing evidence for the idea that international organizations like UN Women and NATO have pushed the WPS agenda in Ukraine in a "top-down" manner, especially not after 2022. Rather, my data shows that international organizations and partners bring *visibility* and *resources* to WPS in Ukraine, *complementing* the broad expertise of Ukrainian women NGOs/CSOs, though with challenges and sometimes mismatch. While international organizations influence WPS adoption and implementation, it is simplistic to assume Ukrainian women's NGOs/CSOs lacked agency or input in the process. This ties into a broader debate on the origins of the "push" for WPS, to which we return in section 6.2.3.

Finally, the 1325 Coalitions existing in almost all oblasts[88] (Interviews 55, 70) are another testimony to the power of feminist coalitions across the country. Some Coalitions have been historically deemed more "powerful" and active than others, like the Donetsk and Luhansk ones, who are also considered champions in the creation of local action plans (LAPs) (Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022, 39). Each oblast in Ukraine now has its own regional action plan, except Crimea (Interview 70). As they were more acutely conflict-affected, oblasts in the eastern part of the country have had a longer history of working with this resolution than others because of increased donor funding and attention. Although attention to localization increased after the second NAP and even more after the full-scale invasion (Interview 68), which we will see later, some Coalitions have existed since 2016. Various initiatives regarding WPS localization and capacity development in different

[88] Currently, 14 at the time of my interviews; 5 more were being developed as of July 2023.

oblasts have been supported by the Ukrainian Women's Fund, UN Women and GNWP (GNWP and Democracy Development Center 2022; Ukrainian Women's Fund 2021; Fal Dutra-Santos 2019; Lescure 2018; OSCE 2017). The 'backbone' of localization in Ukraine takes the form of oblast-level and hromadas-level action plans, which contextualize and adapt the NAP to the realities and specific challenges of each oblast and hromadas, as part of the decentralization process of the country. A researcher who was working in an international organization during the implementation period of the first NAP explains:

> You know, these local action plans on implementation of NAP, [they started] it was back in 2016 to 2020, that first action plan. So, a lot of action plans were actually done in Donetsk, Lugansk, and Zaporizhzhia, this was the area where I was also working. And they started also, it kind of coincided with the decentralization reform. So, this whole hromadas committees emerged. This is also how these communities, they started to do their local action plans. (Gender expert, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

However, localization has its limits, and it is not sufficiently institutionalized across the country. A man notes that "it really depends first on the local person [in position]. [The] more proactive regional government and the community authorities, you get a greater chance for progress and for lasting and sustainable outcomes are for these WPS localization processes" (Interview 53; also 55, 56, 70), very much echoing the Georgian case. A consensus among my interviewees working on localization, however, is that local capacities are very limited. Moreover, "the tasking to develop RAPs[89] that derived from the NAP was rather vague and did not provide enough guidance (nor, for example, a sample format), resulting in some of the local authorities viewing the UNSCR 1325 localization

[89] While RAPs generally refer to action plans of regional organizations like NATO, ASEAN, or the African Union, RAPs and LAPs are relatively synonyms in the context of Ukraine but local is on a smaller scale. The scales refer to different levels of governance; oblasts are bigger, and hromadas are smaller.

process as an unnecessary burden on them without understanding its full importance and benefits to their local communities" (Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022, 41). A recent mapping of localization prior to 2022 showed that although oblast-level action plans have been adopted in almost all oblasts, only a minority of those have sufficient resources to implement them and often rely on international donors (except Lviv, Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts who allocated funds from their own oblast budgets). The researchers also showed that local and regional authorities' knowledge of WPS varied across the country (GNWP and Democracy Development Center 2022, 5). Larger, established women NGOs/CSOs from Kyiv have been helpful in supporting and training smaller ones, forming country-wide solidarity and support networks (Interview 55) (Ukrainian Women's Fund 2021).

As such, as this section demonstrates, there has been a wide array of projects and actors supporting the implementation of the first NAP. A consensus among the literature and my interviewees is that as the first NAP mainly focused on women's participation in the defense and security sector, and because those Ministries (of Defense and Interior) were the most supported and active in that domain, this is where the most progress has been visible (e.g., improving the work conditions of women in combat, establishment of gender advisors positions and focal points).

Still, the conflict in Donbas has significantly affected service provision to victims and diverted attention and financial and human resources to the war, leaving millions of Ukrainians in need of humanitarian assistance. Despite improvements in certain Ministries and a high priority on protection and rehabilitation pillars in the first NAP, as Ukraine is

such a big country, there was still a lack of a comprehensive and Government-wide understanding and political will toward this agenda. Among others, these difficulties in implementing the first NAP and the changing realities of the security situation in the country led to the mid-term evaluation of the NAP.

Monitoring, evaluating and updating. In Ukraine, monitoring and evaluation of the first NAP have been a collective effort, with Government agencies involved as well as NGOs/CSOs producing shadow monitoring, both supported by UN Women and donors.

At the government level, the Ministry of Social Policy (MoSP) officially coordinated and monitored the first NAP within the government. However, this has been criticized by various actors and the mid-term evaluation because the MoSP is overloaded with many different significant societal issues and does not have sufficient authority to tell other Ministries what to do (Interview 56, 57, 60). In 2017, the Government put greater responsibility, authority, and oversight over the NAP on the Office of the Vice Prime Minister for Europe Integration, Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze (Warren et al. 2018, 37) In 2017, too, the Ministry of Internal Affairs created an Interagency Working Group for the NAP implementation as well as a parliamentary subcommittee for oversight of WPS issues (ibid. 36). In 2018, the Cabinet of the Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy, Kateryna Levchenko, also started to play an important role in NAP oversight and authority and have monitoring functions as well (Government of Ukraine 2018). Both "the Vice Prime Minister and the Commissioner took on active and visible roles, raising awareness on NAP-relevant issues, such as on the need for legislation on conflict-related

sexual violence, and played an important part in the development and promotion of gender equality policies and programs." (Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022, 32–33).

UN Women has been a crucial actor from the very beginning of the NAP process in Ukraine. Regarding monitoring, for example, they have supported the Ministry of Internal Affairs through technical expertise and training, as well as by hiring national consultants who helped the Ministry and its relevant departments implement the plan and monitor it (Interviews 54 and 65).

As elsewhere around the world, NGOs/CSOs are always key actors in monitoring and evaluating the NAPs as they are often intermediaries between beneficiaries (e.g., direct work with conflict-affected women) and Government officials. As they know the needs and realities on the ground best, they provide critical expertise, allowing them to advise the government and produce shadow monitoring to "complement" the official evaluations (e.g., Porokhnyak et al. 2019). A woman who worked on this issue in an international organization shares her observations:

> What is not working well, for example, reporting is not working really well because of the monitoring indicators to some extent, but also *because of the extreme workload of people who are expected to provide the data* to report on the implementation of the National Action Plan. These are few people [in the Government] who are burdened with reporting on very different programs and action plans, and they just have no capacity to do it in a way, in a very proper way how I would do it, because it's my main work, while it's not their main job for them […] And it is a problem because it's difficult to measure the effectiveness of the NAP and develop the next one. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

Because of several weaknesses in the first NAP mentioned in this section, UN Women conducted a mid-term assessment of the first NAP, requested by the Deputy Prime Minister

for Euro-Atlantic Integration Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze (Niazova 2018), a former MP who was personally invested in advancing the WPS agenda in Ukraine. A woman working in a UN agency at that time recalls:

> The whole idea of the revision was initiated by the Government because, at that time, it was clear that the first plan was not inclusive [enough] or did not reflect all the realities [that the country was facing]. So basically, UN Women supported the Government with technical expertise in terms of the evaluation of the implementation of the first plan […] It was the first plan, and basically, we have to be realistic that, you know, the Government of Ukraine had, let's say, a task to develop the plan. *There was very scarce expertise at the time in Ukraine about the WPS agenda*. And basically, in terms of realities, I think first, *a lot of institutions that were listed as main implementers did not have power nor authority, and even access to implement it* because if there are certain tasks and activities that should be implemented in Crimea, which is like under occupation […] how can you ensure its implementation? (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 7, 2023)

She goes on to explain:

> Another thing [about the first NAP is that] it engaged civil society, but it engaged mainly civil society who were active and present [on the topic], you know, gender advocates, let's say, human rights defenders who were active even before the war. So, *it didn't really engage conflict-affected women*, you know, who became displaced, who were tortured, who were assaulted, maybe who even were very active in their communities for peace dialogue, along the contact line […] the first NAP didn't reflect these realities. (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 7, 2023)

The midterm evaluation of the first NAP was important as it showed a willingness to adapt to crisis and evolving situations, contrary to other countries in my research. The midterm assessment found numerous achievements and challenges. Achievements identified related to legislative change regarding women in combat positions and the establishment of gender advisors positions and focal points in the defense and security sector as well as the development of ministry-level and oblast-level plans to implement the NAP (Niazova 2018). Other positive aspects are the establishment of the position of Government Commissioner on Gender Equality Policy and the addition of the coordination of the NAP

in the mandate of the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, reflecting Ukraine's commitment to implement a NAP during a war (ibid. 33).

Challenges identified related to coordination difficulties (i.e., the MoSP does not have sufficient capacity to do so), division of responsibilities (i.e., uneven institutionalization), lack of expertise, and low capacity of law enforcement to respond to cases of gender-based violence, non-involvement of key ministries (e.g., Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Areas and IDPs and the Military Prosecutor's Office) and the consequences of the conflict itself impeding the implementation of the NAP (e.g., provision of services to the population's growing needs, data collection and a hyperfocus on the participation and protection pillars). Like the women I interviewed also mentioned, the mid-term evaluation showed that the first NAP lacked a coherent and logical framework (e.g., no baseline data to measure progress over time, unclear links between activities, indicators, and outcomes, no 'theory of change' and robust monitoring mechanisms) (ibid.) Based on the recommendations of the midterm evaluation, the NAP was thus amended and modified in 2018 to reflect the changing realities of the country better and improve implementation for the remaining two years (Cabinet of Ministers 2020). According to Myrttinen et al. (2020, 54), "the amendments made at mid-term helped [in harmonizing with broader women's empowerment and gender equalities policies], as these were drafted at the same time as implementation plans on the broader Gender Equality policy and CEDAW recommendations, allowing for cross-referencing and harmonization between the three."

Available evidence shows that a final evaluation of the first NAP did not happen (Kähkönen 2023, 70). Based on other cases in my research, it is reasonable to assume that the lessons learned, and takeaways of the mid-term evaluation were "transferred" into the second NAP process instead of doing a final evaluation. The following section explores the process surrounding the adoption of the (first version of the) second NAP in 2020.

6.2.2 Adoption of the second Ukrainian NAP

Carrying on lessons learned from the first NAP, Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers adopted the second NAP, covering the period 2020 to 2025 in October 2020. Similarly to other countries in my research, the consensus is that the second NAP has been described to me as more inclusive and participatory than the first one, including Ukrainian civil society (18 NGOs), relevant Ministries (notably the Minister of Social Policy, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Veteran Affairs, Ministry of Temporarily Occupied Territories, Ministry of Internal Affairs) regional and local administrations, interested Parliamentarians and international organizations like UN Women, following public consultations in nine regions (Vinnytsia, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Luhansk, Lviv, Kherson, Khmelnystsky, Chernivtski) (Revuk 2020; Cabinet of Ministers 2020) On the process, a woman who participated recalls:

> The second NAP, the whole process of the development which I mentioned, was very inclusive and participatory. *It also opened new horizons for dialogue* because lots of women's organizations managed to establish dialogue with national level authorities to be able to meet with them, you know, at the working level afterwards and basically shape their decisions. (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 7, 2023)

> I can say that international partners supported civil society in this push. *But the main push was from civil society, of course.* I cannot say that the first NAP was excellent. And we learned a lot implementing it, *but the second is better and more tactical and more useful.* (NGO representative, Zoom, July 19, 2023)

It is worth noting that the process of drafting and adopting the NAP happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided an opportunity for wide-reaching participation in such a large country. A woman expert and representative of an NGO notes:

> The second NAP was developed during COVID-19, and it was a rare occasion when something bad made it possible for something good to happen because everybody was already used to Zoom. It was organized as a series of online events. [There were] strategic sessions facilitated by the Office of our Governmental High Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy. And [there were], if I'm not mistaken, 5 or 6 sessions that included people from different levels of decision-making and different civil society organizations, *which otherwise wouldn't have been possible because nobody would invest so much money to bring all these people to, say, to Kyiv* or somewhere else, to gather their opinions and put them together into the NAP. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

Although the pandemic, combined with the effects of the war in the East, was exhausting for many, it also enabled a diverse range of actors—beyond Kyiv and major cities—to connect virtually and take part in the consultation and plan development process. The second NAP provided more in-depth contextualization of the NAP in relation to Ukraine's international commitments, problem analysis, and an overarching "narrative," something that the first one lacked. The second NAP focused on five areas: women's participation in decision-making, resilience to security challenges, post-conflict reconstruction and transitional justice, combating gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence, and strengthening the institutional capacity of the NAP implementers. Each area is divided by strategic and operational objectives. Women I interviewed mentioned to me that the

second NAP also put a greater focus on localization and involving conflict-affected women directly, as visible in the second NAP process itself.

Indeed, at that time, UN Women organized focus group discussions with conflict-affected women, such as IDPs, women veterans and soldiers, women who were illegally detained and tortured, and women who suffered from conflict-related sexual violence, to provide them the opportunity to voice their concerns, provide recommendations and inputs on the drafts and influence decision-making. (Interview 65)

The second NAP, similar to the first, detailed a budget for each activity and identified the sources of funding. Although it is still dependent on international funding, a small budget from central authorities is allocated. Notable is the increased responsibility and funding by regional and local governments, which is in line with the decentralization process.

My interviews mainly reflected the update of this second NAP after the Russian invasion, which we will see in section 7.3.3. A key takeaway of the second NAP adoption is that the process was considered a highly inclusive and collaborative experience (see also GNWP and Democracy Development Center 2022), in part due to the several lessons learned from the first NAP and COVID-19, which created opportunities for even greater participation and reach. Before we cover the update of this second NAP, the following section will delve into reflections and lessons learned about both NAP processes. I asked each of my interviewees what, according to them, were the greatest strengths and challenges of the NAP and what WPS signified to them. Below are their answers.

6.2.3 Reflections on both NAP processes

In my interviews with Ukrainian women, as many of them have been involved in different stages of the NAPs and in different roles, I asked intentionally vague questions to see what patterns would emerge in the responses. What does Resolution 1325 mean to you? What issues has the NAP overlooked? What are the greatest strengths and challenges of the NAPs in Ukraine?

Identical to the other countries in my research, the overwhelming majority of my interviewees expressed how relevant and useful WPS and the NAPs have been for their work. When discussing the relevance of the NAP, terms like 'roadmap,' 'basis,' 'instrument,' 'framework,' and 'benchmark system' regularly emerged. Similar to Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, the women I interviewed simultaneously support and criticize WPS to varying degrees, highlighting how the NAP, despite being an imperfect tool, *is* a tool among others, providing both limitations and possibilities to their work, allowing them to address concrete issues observed on the ground, making sure the leadership is accountable and responsible vis-à-vis international commitments and helping their advocacy because the Government has committed to it. Reflecting on WPS and the NAP, women share with me:

> Absolutely useful, it is a principle for us. *It's our agenda. It's our schedule, our timeline, our framework. It's everything for us*, actually; it's the basis for different international documents and local-level documents. (Ella Lamakh, Head of the Democracy Development Center, Zoom, July 7, 2023)

> It helped in my work because… There are provisions about women in the military in the NAP. So, it helped to advocate because the government already committed to something. So, it was not us, researchers and women on the frontline, saying that it's not right. We were referring to the NAP saying that actually, 'you've already said that you would do this. So please [do it]!' (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

At the same time, while most interviewees shared those views, a male expert and consultant for an international organization remains skeptical about the NAP itself. He tempers the majority's positive view of the NAP by highlighting the larger structural barriers impacting the NAP's true potential (also Interview 78):

> It's not useful [the NAP] because the institutional capacity of ministries is not [enough, and they are not] ready to make big changes. When we say that gender policies in Ukraine are not implemented successfully, we cannot say that other policies are successful and that the gender policy ones are not successful. *No, it's because in Ukraine, our government mechanisms are very slow and very bureaucratic, we lack resources and understanding, and we have very old and ineffective legislative frameworks*. So, in all of this, even before the war, it was very hard to make real movements in all areas, not only in gender areas. (Gender expert, Zoom, June 6, 2023)

This quote echoes broader critiques. Despite the second NAP being better than the first one—as most of my interviewees formulated it—both NAPs still suffer from challenges greater than the documents themselves, including a lack of human and financial resources and Government-wide political will and understanding. It was often mentioned to me that the NAP and WPS principles are not sufficiently institutionalized (between oblasts and hromadas, but also between Ministries and state institutions), and there are various coordination problems between stakeholders and sectors. Because of limited capacity, implementing actors are sometimes monitoring multiple action plans at the same time (Interviews 57, 73) or working in silos (Interview 56). Moreover, change and ownership of the NAP often depend on motivated individuals inside the system (Interviews 56, 58, 64,

73), leading sometimes to an impression that the NAP is something that is “pushed from abroad.” An expert working on localization in different oblasts reflects:

> Based on our current NAP, all central executive bodies of power are supposed to work on this topic, but we see that they pretty much lack the understanding of why they need to do this. And it is perceived very often as something that has been imposed on us by international obligations, international partners, instead of understanding how it is in our best interest to use this knowledge to meet our own needs within our country. So, that part of the NAP on educating and raising awareness of the implementing bodies has been lacking. The same is true for the oblast level. *They are tasked with developing oblast action plans, but they have not been trained on why they would want to do this, why it is in their best interest and how to do this.* (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

When asked about whether my interviewees faced resistance while advocating for WPS and the NAP during their careers, two points of consensus emerged. First, while there was more patriarchal resistance at the beginning of the NAP process (i.e., in the early 2010s and right after Maidan), especially in the male-dominated defense and security sector (Interview 62), my interviewees generally did not qualify that as ‘overt’ resistance, but rather ignorance about WPS and overall, a lack of understanding about its relevance.

Second, many mentioned how there is less resistance toward WPS today because it's a flexible instrument that has “a bit of everything” for everyone. Reflecting on my question about the “crowded” WPS landscape in Ukraine, a male expert answered:

> I would say that, well, there were differences in priorities obviously, different mandates, and they were, each of those agencies [were trying] to adapt, to steer the agenda more toward their own preference. But overall, there was a shared recognition of the importance of the program, of the agenda, of the Resolutions. And I would say that was quite, well the instrument itself, the Resolution, *was quite flexible, provided quite a room and liberty for various interventions and engagements*. (Anton Shevchenko, independent consultant, Zoom, June 5, 2023)

This reflection is fascinating from a normative point of view, as it shows how the WPS agenda—often used interchangeably with 'Resolutions' or 'NAP'—is far from being fixed. On the contrary, it's a fundamentally malleable norm that can be adjusted to suit the current mood. I argue that the flexibility of this norm – coupled with other factors like the Euro-Atlantic integration context, which we will discuss later – actually reduces and "depoliticizes" resistance to it:

> I would say in Ukraine, usually the Government would say 'yes' to everything. This is not the country that would, you know, let's say, like Hungary or Turkey, say, 'No, we will not do this.' Kind of like, 'Yes, we will do everything! We signed this Convention, we want to do this, we want to do everything, we just need your help with this stuff.' So, I think they would not actively resist anything human rights [related], *but they would not actively implement it either* [laugh], it's more like that. And I think it is a big risk because this is what happens also with the NAP, there is so much push from the Government, from donors, whatever, you know, on like 'let's make a NAP!' Okay, they will make it, they will [sign], but the attention is cheap, they will forget [about it] for a while, but this is actually when you need to open it, especially in conflicts like Ukraine, because they will write whatever you want. They will sign what you want. Unless it's something super sensitive[90] at this time for society, like maybe LGBTQ+ issues (Gender expert, Zoom, June 9, 2023).

As such, the challenges of the two first NAPs (i.e., before the invasion) were numerous and many issues remained untackled given the significant needs of the population and the large geography of the country. According to my interviewees, neglected issues include survival sex and sexual exploitation as a result of the conflict (Interview 56), cross-border issues like human trafficking (Interviews 56, 60), gender-based discrimination and violence against men (Interview 57), early warning mechanisms (although the NAP mentions the

[90] Other very sensitive topics at the moment include conflict-related sexual violence committed by the Ukrainian side (Interviews 58, 60). Although on a significantly much smaller scale than what is being committed by the Russian side, such cases have been documented. For 2022, there were 125 reported cases of conflict-related sexual violence committed by Russian forces versus 24 reported cases committed by Ukrainian forces. For 2023, the reported cases were 85 committed by Russian forces versus ten reported cases by Ukrainian forces; most reported cases were committed against male prisoners of war (see the United Nations Secretary-General reports 2023, 23; 2024, 23 for more specific details).

importance of it, it is challenging to implement them given the decentralization of powers and varying capacities of the regional and local authorities), climate, environment and energy issues (Interview 64), LGBTQIA+ issues (Interview 57) and the engagement and dialogue with women in occupied territories (e.g., those who stay there are often perceived as 'traitors' and 'pro-Russian separatists') (Interviews 57, 50, 78).

Moreover, despite significant legislative changes and gains in gender equality policies since the first NAP, barriers to women's meaningful participation in politics and conflict resolution remain across the country. The latest numbers in women's representation in elected decision-making bodies are from 2021 and show that, in the Rada (Parliament of Ukraine), only 21% of MPs are women, despite the establishment of a quota system (of 30%) in 2013 (i.e., no sanctions for non-compliance with the quota). While "women's participation in local elected decision-making positions" is slightly better than on the national level, "it takes the shape of a pyramid – the lower is the level of authority, the higher the share of women." (European Union and NIRAS 2023, 8) In conflict resolution, formal involvement of women in peace processes has been minimal; based on available knowledge, only two women – Iryna Gerashchenko (MP) and Olga Aivazovska (civil society) – participated in the Minsk processes (Warren et al. 2018, 32). In 2019, the new Minsk negotiations included one woman only, Valeria Lutkovska (former Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights) (Porokhnyak et al. 2019, 51).

Some of the issues mentioned in this section remain – and are amplified – after the invasion as well, as we will see in the following sections.

6.3 The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) and its consequences

Despite early warnings of an imminent attack, the brutality of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shocked the world on February 24th, 2022. A notable difference before and after the full-scale invasion is the *geography* of conflict-affected target groups and their needs. If, before 2022, the conflict was mostly located in the Eastern part of Ukraine, after 2022, the scale of the population affected drastically changed. All oblasts and citizens of Ukraine became conflict-affected in different ways, from country-wide mobilization for men and massive influx of population inside and across the country's borders. More than 5.5 million refugees fled Ukraine (out of which 90% are women and children) to neighboring Moldova, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland – and nearly 8 million Ukrainians became IDPs, becoming the fastest displacement crisis in the world, and the largest one in Europe since the Second World War. As of April 2024, 4 million IDPs and 14.5 million people were in need of humanitarian aid (UN Women Ukraine 2024).

It is impossible to describe the gravity of the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the Russian invasion in just a few lines. A rapid assessment of the impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on women CSOs/NGOs and civil society conducted by UN Women between March 4th and 10th, 2022, identified immediate threats for women and girls in the following weeks of the invasion, such as threats to physical safety due to constant shellings, lack of basic necessities (e.g., WASH facilities, safe and sanitary shelter, food, transportation), loss of income/economic security, an increase of GBV (e.g., increased risks of domestic violence, CRSV, human trafficking), psychological impacts of the war (e.g.,

immense stress, PTSD, instability) and lack of social services (in part due to large-scale destruction of care infrastructure) and access to information (e.g., electricity and Internet) (UN Women Europe and Central Asia 2022).

While some immediate needs may have improved over time, this situation of urgency/survival mode continued months after. Another rapid gender assessment found that while women are often first responders to the humanitarian crisis, they have little impact on formal decision-making, and “issues of social development and gender equality tend to be sidelined, and the voices of women are not included meaningfully in planning and decision-making around the humanitarian response or wider peace processes. Decisions are often made quickly and do not adequately reflect the needs and priorities of different groups of women and men, including those most vulnerable and marginalized.” (UN Women and CARE International 2022, 6) The report also highlighted how the Russian invasion exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities (e.g., care burden, feminization of poverty, gender-based violence) that were already present in Ukrainian society as a result of the ongoing war since 2014 (ibid. 7).

As of 2024, many refugees voluntarily came back to Ukraine or were forced to return due to a lack of housing or employment opportunities abroad. Still, “women and girls living in conflict-affected areas and internally displaced women have limited access to justice, civil registrars, education, durable employment opportunities, social protection, health care, food, adequate water and sanitation shelter and electricity due to the destruction of or severe damage to a large number of schools, health centres, and other essential

infrastructure" (UN Women Ukraine 2023a, 5–6) Mirroring Ukraine's context prior to the invasion, post-2022 Ukraine's humanitarian context amplified all existing inequalities and particular groups of women are disproportionately at risk such as IDPs, women with disabilities, queer women, older women living in isolated, rural areas, women living with HIV and women from ethnic minorities (e.g., Roma, Crimean Tatar, BIPOC Ukrainians).

The invasion shifted many things in the WPS landscape in Ukraine, along with feminist work and organizing across the country. In this context, many NGOs/CSOs have changed, adapted, or expanded their mission and activities to respond to the current crisis. The invasion also profoundly impacted Ukrainians' understanding of peace and security. Very similarly to the Armenian case, talking about peacebuilding has become extremely difficult after the invasion. The present section details those changes and proceeds to the update of the second NAP that happened in December 2022.

6.3.1 Feminist mobilization to a multi-layered humanitarian catastrophe

From collecting and distributing aid to citizens and the defense and security sector (e.g., clothes, life vests, hygiene items, medicine) to crowd-funding and documenting war crimes, Ukrainian women's NGOs/CSOs pivoted their activities to immediate humanitarian relief after the full-scale invasion, often relying entirely on volunteers, often doing this work with insufficient funds (UN Women Europe and Central Asia 2022). For some organizations, a small "break" after the invasion was needed to adapt and reorient their work as their usual programming was severely disrupted, for others, the response on

the ground has been immediate, providing essential humanitarian aid in hard-to-reach places for government or international humanitarian organizations:

> After the full-scale invasion, the reaction of civil society was amazing. I'm not sure if amazing is the proper word, but they've done so much, and they did it because they knew it was the right thing to do. Nobody told them to do it. Nobody coordinated with them. They did it on their own. They started coordinating on their own. And basically, *they substituted the work of the government and international organizations for the first months*, for sure. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

> During the time of my involvement in this work, it was a time shortly after the full-scale invasion, so the priorities had been quite different. First, just having to survive, to help others survive, to provide humanitarian assistance. As maybe you have heard, the international organizations kind of stepped aside. They left the country and then took them some months to think about what to do. And so, *this has been local organizations, often women-led [that led these] initiatives to respond to the humanitarian crisis*. So that has been the priority. (Gender expert, Zoom, August 4, 2023)

Women-led NGOs/CSOs have a deep understanding of the needs of their communities and are often able to respond more quickly on the ground compared to most international organizations. This is because international organizations may not be familiar with the local context and often have time-consuming, bureaucratic, and slow application and donor reporting procedures. As Ukraine is a large country, local organizations on the ground are better positioned to respond quickly. A report found that volunteering has also been used as a coping mechanism for the catastrophe unfolding, "in some areas, this is limited to sharing food with one's neighbours or checking in on them regularly. In other cases, volunteer-led initiatives gather to mobilize resources for the community, with women most likely to spearhead these strategies." (UN Women and CARE International 2022, 54) However, "the overall picture is one of simultaneous resilience and exhaustion." (VOICE Amplified and HIAS 2024, 7) Reports by UN Women and other organizations working in the region have shown that the majority of NGOs/CSOs are facing complex challenges.

These challenges include insufficient funds, supply chain issues, restricted freedom of movement due to shelling (including humanitarian corridors) or occupation, limited access to offices and equipment, and having displaced or injured staff (UN Women Europe and Central Asia 2022). Additionally, "despite their extensive experience on the ground, local women's rights organizations have little opportunity to participate in shaping the humanitarian response. A familiar, unequal, and gendered dynamic is playing out between professional humanitarian actors, local service providers, and affected populations." (VOICE Amplified and HIAS 2022, 23)

UN Women Ukraine has been in the background of the humanitarian response by providing immediate humanitarian support and funding to women NGOs/CSOs, playing a coordination role in ensuring gender-responsive humanitarian action plans and processes (e.g., by chairing the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group and conducting rapid gender analyses) and by integrating gender considerations in early recovery through expertise input, to name just a few activities (UN Women Ukraine 2023c). With that information in mind, my data regarding feminist mobilization after 2022 can be summarized in three points.

First, in this context, and similar to Armenia, the usual programming of NGOs/CSOs—sometimes on WPS or other gender issues—has drastically changed priorities and focus as they pivoted to immediate humanitarian first-response initiatives (Interview 68). For some, this reprogramming meant pausing or putting aside their WPS advocacy activities:

> I feel that civil society, now with the second NAP, with the update, they unfortunately, most of them changed their work, not their expertise, but their emphasis, because *they now have other priorities*, you know, to bring ammunition to the security sector institutions instead of conducting some training. (Gender expert, Zoom, June 21, 2023)

For others, this reorganization provided opportunities to advocate for WPS even more than before. Unlike what I observed in Armenia, Ukrainian feminist NGOs/CSOs seemed slightly more prepared for crisis response as they were already doing this work, to a lesser degree, to respond to the consequences of the war in Donbas (i.e., Armenia, prior to the 2020 war, was more in a "status quo" position). A feminist organizer and representative of an NGO shares with me:

> Since the invasion began, we used this Telegram group as a way to share information and resources […] Ever since the beginning of the invasion, every single women NGO that I know switched or adopted additional duties as first responders and humanitarian workers […] And the flexibility that it allows us, it helped [us] address those issues very quickly in a very efficient way. *A lot of major humanitarian organizations that started operating in Ukraine didn't have an understanding of the context; they didn't have an understanding of the local needs and changes in them.* They request all this massive reporting from us, and they need us to do the needs assessment. And by the time we ever get our application considered, all the news has changed radically. And if we get the funding, we are still supposed to deliver on what we submitted like half a year ago, in case we get the money. So, the system is not flexible enough. […] And so, *our coordinating group of 1325 worked as a hub for women's initiatives, for supporting those groups affected by the invasion*. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

She goes on to explain about a collaborative initiative between Ukrainian and Lithuanian feminists over a truck full of humanitarian aid such as antibiotics, Plan B medication, menstrual cups, diapers, hygiene products, and so on. A bit puzzled, I asked her how this was related to the WPS NAP itself, as this sounded more like grassroots feminist organizing to me. She agreed and explained:

> It is [grassroots feminist organizing]. *But we indeed used the group that we formed as a part of our work on promoting the NAP at the local level.* We used the same group to help the Lithuanian feminists who had come into contact with us, reach local groups and initiatives that were supporting vulnerable people, and deliver to them medications, hygiene products, and infant food. Very soon, these feminists raised funds to buy and equip a mobile gynecological clinic, and they sent us three of them. One went to my home city; one went to Lviv because they have the largest share of IDPs in the country, and one went to Kherson. So, it is not directly related to NAP per se. But I use this example during trainings on NAP that when you have cooperation and interaction with different fields, it helps to meet needs quicker [on the ground]. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

A fascinating insight from this interview excerpt (also corroborated in other interviews and personal observations) is that WPS networks and the structures that existed prior to the invasion were crucial in enabling Ukrainian feminists to mobilize more efficiently after the invasion. Informal feminist mobilization to crisis response is not necessarily linked to the NAP itself, but the networking opportunities provided by pre-2022 WPS spaces and networking have allowed them to mobilize for quick humanitarian aid post-2022.

Second, according to several women I interviewed, the full-scale invasion seems to have created more cohesion among feminists in Ukraine. Indeed, the Ukrainian feminist landscape working on WPS, peacebuilding, and gender issues was more heterogeneous before 2022. While some were working more informally "outside" the system and at a more grassroots level (e.g., had critical approaches to peacebuilding and militarization, conducted informal dialogues), others were more strategic and "mainstream" in their approach to working with decision-makers, defense, and security sectors, and international organizations. As I was told – without making an over-generalization to the whole country – after the invasion, differences and disagreements between feminists dissipated to the background in order to produce a clear message with unity: Ukrainian feminists, *too*, are

asking for more weapons – especially air defense systems[91] – out of an absolute necessity to survive in the immediate present (Interviews 55, 56, 57, 58, 61, 64, 70, 77). This unity between feminists yielded several things, such as coherent and effective mobilization despite differences, a marginalization of those who still did not share this common national narrative after the invasion and a decolonial shift that we will see in the following sections.

Third, the structural, organizational, and circumstantial challenges mentioned above and the burden of delivering emergency humanitarian relief response to small, underfunded, and understaffed NGOs/CSOs have led to burnout – both personal and collective. Since 2014 and even more acutely since the invasion, a plethora of "international organizations and bilateral development partners/donors have been extensively involved in the rapid response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the full-scale invasion." (European Union and NIRAS 2023) However, my data and research show that access to sufficient, sustainable, long-term, core, and flexible humanitarian funding attuned to local needs and priorities is an immense challenge for feminist and women-led NGOs/CSOs. Two years after the invasion, the funding gap has increased. A report has shown that women-led organizations responding to the invasion (in Ukraine, but also neighboring Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Georgia) face the same core challenges as before: lack of funding, mismatch between donors' and organizations' priorities, complicated application procedures, short application deadlines and lack of flexibility in funding (UN Women Europe and Central Asia 2024). Despite that:

[91] See Martsenyuk (2022) and Tsymbalyuk and Zamuruieva (2022).

> Women's organizations are very active. They have taken this first challenge of the last year on humanitarian support and supporting IDPs, bringing people all over the country, getting international support, and evacuating people to help. We have done it with all the passion, *and we also are burned out*. And if you have your whole life the rockets and missiles flying in the sky, but you are not sleeping, you can't be as effective as you could be in peacetime… So, that's the very natural reason to stop you, not to stop, but to make your efforts longer. That's it. That's how it is. But, you know, we are still standing. *And we will be standing as long as we can and then as long as it takes.* (NGO representative, Zoom, June 28, 2023)

Mental, physical and psychological exhaustion, lack of sleep and time for self-care, past PTSD amplified, increased care burden, feminization of poverty and economic insecurities and the various *new* traumas associated with constant exposure to shellings, deaths, human suffering and misery are the result of all of this. As I tried to show in this section, the immediate pivoting of women NGOs/CSOs to humanitarian relief after the invasion had direct and indirect consequences on WPS advocacy and work. The next section explores a theme similar to my observations in Armenia: the difficulty of discussing peace after 2022.

6.3.2 On the different meanings of peace – and the difficulty of talking about peacebuilding after 2022

My data regarding feminist peacebuilding after 2022 can be summarized in four points. First, similar to what I observed in Armenia, 'peace' in the current context in Ukraine has pejorative meanings: losing territory, making concessions to Russia, more human suffering or simply losing the war – which is unacceptable to most Ukrainians:

> I would say that Ukrainians are not ready to accept peace under any conditions. They want peace *only in the situation where Ukraine is integral and no compromises*. (Olena Zaitseva, gender legal expert, Istanbul, June 27, 2023)

> I mean, peace is something that all of us want, but then it's important to keep in mind that all conflicts end up at the negotiation table. It matters greatly what power position we enter this dialogue in. And so, if we are in the position to really effectively negotiate and have the tools and necessary leverage to demand, to frame any demands. Well, for instance, for our independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. So, peace is something that everybody wants. *I do not see any contradiction in seeing a need to get armed to protect one's independence and sovereignty in search of territorial integrity and wanting peace.* There is no contradiction in my view. Moreover, Russia also wants peace. It wants peace on its own terms. It wants to take all the territory of Ukraine and maybe more. And have no resistance in place. (Gender expert, Zoom, August 4, 2023)

> *There are no peace negotiations with Russia until Russia is out of Ukraine*. It may take a long while for this very moment, but we have during this long while to push on every platform where decisions are taken, that women are there, step by step. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 28, 2023)

The views portrayed in those three quotes above are clear, and they reflect all my interviewees' opinions except one (Interview 78). As scholars Kyselova and Landau (2024) show, peace is understood through victory alone, and the full-scale invasion has brought unprecedented unity among Ukrainians (see also Potapova and O'Sullivan 2024).

Second, echoing the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, which abruptly ended dialogues, initiatives, projects, and friendships between Armenian and Azeri women, the full-scale invasion ruptured all connections between Ukrainians and Russians, even though they were already fragile and extremely marginal since 2014. While women NGOs/CSOs and sporadic initiatives (e.g., Ukrainian Women's Fund, Theater of Dialogue, Women Peace Dialogue Platform, Women Initiatives for Peace in Donbas, Donbas Dialogue, Union of Women of Ukraine) have organized informal dialogues, trust-building activities, and peace "talks" between Ukrainian, Russian and/or women in temporarily occupied territories before 2022 (Warren et al. 2018, 33), these initiatives entirely stopped after the invasion, especially with Russian women. For some Ukrainian women, this has resulted in losing

connections with friends and even family residing in Russia as they adopt pro-Kremlin narratives. A woman reflects on the impossibility of talking with Russians:

> After the war began in 2014, I lost pretty much all my Russian friends because I had dozens. Only four until now have kept their humanity and never said anything cannibalistic, like we had Russian women telling us, Ukrainian feminists, 'why are you resisting? As soon as you surrender, there will be no killing.' And Westerners are expecting us to sit at the same table with people who want our country destroyed and who believe that we are at fault for resisting. And it takes a lot of mental energy not to get into direct confrontation, it takes a lot of explaining why we refuse to participate in such events, and it usually doesn't help that Westerners still see us as uncooperative. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

Third, and very much related to the previous point, the Russian invasion highlighted major fractures in global feminist solidarity, created "dialogues of the deaf," and showed the inability of Western anti-militarist feminists to listen to the voices of Ukrainian women and support their cause (Hendl et al. 2024; Potapova and O'Sullivan 2024; Santoire 2024a; Potapova 2023; The Feminist Initiative Group 2022; Tsymbalyuk and Zamuruieva 2022; Mykytenko 2022). Several women I interviewed brought up this topic during my interviews while we were discussing the potential use of the WPS agenda as a tool for peace dialogue in this context:

> We have a lot of troubles because global feminists, particularly from imperial countries, often are resistant to our calls about weapons; they resist our right to be independent. (Olena Suslova, Founder of the Women's Information Consultative Center, Zoom, June 8, 2023)

> Many international women's organizations want to start the negotiation process with Russian women's organizations. But excuse me, [are] Russian women's organizations independent? No. [Do] they support our independence? No. (Ella Lamakh, Head of the Democracy Development Center, Zoom, July 7, 2023)

> Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have observed a lot of pressure on women's civil society organizations to make peace. The international feminist peacebuilding NGOs encourage peace negotiations with Russians and women's civil society organizations from Russia. You know, it sometimes looked like pressure. They started to create platforms for

> discussion and arguing that "you are women, you are peacebuilders. You must make peace. You must speak with them because they are against the war!" *In Ukraine, we believe it is time to review the understanding of women's role as peacebuilders*. When we resist the perpetrator, it is regarded as a willingness to continue the war. It's a total manipulation. *You know, it doesn't mean that if you are a woman, you have to speak with another woman even if she is a representative of the country of the perpetrator.* We will be ready for the peace negotiations after Ukraine victory and after the aggressor pays reparations for war crimes survivors. (Maryna Rudenko, gender expert, Zoom, July 10, 2023)

> *There has been a huge lack of transnational feminist solidarity*. Like, there have been some occasions and cases of solidarity that I can relate to. But then globally… I haven't encountered broader... After fleeing Ukraine, I spent a year in [a country in Western Europe]. I dedicated [this year] to advocacy. I've been trying so much to do events online. Trying to explain what kind of work feminists are doing in Ukraine and why we, the feminists, ask for arms. *And this has been very tiring* [laugh] […] *Dogmatic pacifism is not the answer. This is what I learned. I mean, I wish I could afford to be a pacifist. I truly wish I could. But it's a privilege for those states that are not being attacked*. (Gender expert, Zoom, August 4, 2023)

> If we skip all the obscenities I have on the topic, I know that such initiatives [of peace] are about conversations between Russian and Ukrainian women in the past that were initiated either by the Russian side or were used as a propaganda tool against Ukraine, or they were *initiated by well-meaning but very stupid Western feminists who think that if we all sit together and sing Kumbaya, we will have world peace. You don't get world peace with an imperialist power that is bent on world domination.* Yeah, and they intend to continue whatever they are doing. And we are pretty much in a situation where next year, we will be talking about how we are going to restore Europe after a nuclear strike. *And when I say this to Western feminists, they get offended. But when they tell me to sit and speak to Russian women who want my country gone, and I refuse, I'm the bad one. So far, I have seen so many initiatives run by Western feminists, women's groups, and donors to put Ukrainians and Russians at the same table and get us to speak on the same footing… I find it infuriating! I find it demeaning, and I find it, again, imperialist* […] And our problem is that they pretty much don't understand that when the Russians say peace, they mean that we give up and we surrender. And they [Russians] have been very public about this, including women's rights activists. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

The full-scale invasion highlighted major disagreements between Western and Ukrainian feminists on issues related to militarism and anti-militarism topics, revealing the profound limits of classical, feminist (antimilitarist by default) International Relations theories. Contrarily to the Armenian case, the Russian invasion attracted global attention, and feminists located in the West have often spoken about this war without sufficient expertise on the region and context. Positions of Western feminists on the war in Ukraine have been

shocking to Ukrainian feminists, tilting from apathy to outright reproduction of pro-Russian propaganda narratives and refusal to listen (e.g., denying Ukrainians the right to resist, putting the fault on US and NATO). This has notably led to immense frustration (as the quotes above testify) and has had the consequence of producing a decolonial shift in Ukrainian feminism, which we will see more in-depth in the last section of this chapter.

Fourth, previous research has shown that "Ukraine's mainstream feminists have directed attention towards women in the armed forces and thus have contributed to the narrow militarized WPS agenda, rather than problematizing it. By contrast, alternative feminist positions emphasizing socioeconomic insecurities and peaceful dialogue have been excluded from mainstream debate." (O'Sullivan 2019a, 9) Míla O'Sullivan's research reflected the feminist landscape prior to 2022. My research shows that the Russian invasion intensified some of her observations mentioned above but also increasingly unified feminists in their demands. Several of my interviewees mentioned that even critical and antimilitarist feminists shifted their positions after 2022 and started to ask for weapons as a survival necessity. After 2022, divisions among feminists faded into the background:

> After the full-scale invasion, there was a huge reflection being done on this 'arm Ukraine now' movement in which peace activists, real peace activists, not like CODEPINK,[92] you know, women who were really involved in the dialogue and peacebuilding in this country. They started to demand weapons, and they started to demand also, like, all this anti-missile system that would protect the sky for civilians and things like that. *And these women themselves know what the risks of small weapons and arms are and that they will be used*

[92] CODEPINK is an American antimilitarist feminist organization created by Medea Benjamin, Jodie Evans and Gael Murphy during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. They are well-known for their disruptive, loud and colourful protests, as well as their socialist views. Usually referred to as "tankies," they support authoritarian regimes like Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Assad's Syria and Venezuela in the name of anti-US imperialism. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, they have called for a halt to weapons exportation to Ukraine and have accused the US and NATO of having "provoked" the war with Russia.

> *in domestic violence. We know that, they know that*. But it's a very particular, you know, the situation really changed in that sense. And so, I think this was a huge realization. And I know many women [working in peacebuilding] who were in crisis at the start because they were thinking, 'what I was doing for the last eight years, was it the right investment of my energy?' (Gender expert, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

However, Ukrainian antimilitarist feminists who nevertheless continue to talk about peace and alternative, peaceful ways of peacebuilding are *extremely* marginal, and they are severely ostracized. A woman activist I interviewed explains that those who hold those views and still do not follow the main "script" and national narratives (e.g., peace without concessions, not talking to Russians, more weapons are needed) are deemed as 'traitors of Ukraine,' 'pro-Russian' and often are targets of cyberattacks, doxing and smear campaigns (Interview 78). In other words, talking about peace has become a dangerous business:

> For me, it's very sad that all talks about peace and conflict resolution now are out of the table. It's not even out, it's banned. It's really bad. We need to start these kinds of discussions because we need to know what kind of work, peace, or future we want to have. If they ban these discussions among different levels of… everywhere, now it's unacceptable. *I think it's even not safe to talk about this [peace].* How can we create our own agenda, demands, and recommendations? What kind of future will we have? I think now it's very dangerous times, for me [recovery issues] are just the last call to add something […] I am afraid the peace will not really be peace. (Representative of an international NGO, Zoom, August 22, 2023)

As shown in this section, the multi-layered trauma and urgency associated with the full-scale invasion have simultaneously narrowed and expanded the definitions of peace. It has *narrowed* it because the word 'peace' carries other meanings in the current context, notably being a 'loser' and making concessions to Russia, which is unacceptable for the large majority of Ukrainians – alternative approaches or opinions are not welcome or, worst, stigmatized and deemed as pro-Russian. The invasion also *expanded* notions of peace in a broader way to respond to the diverse needs of the population and also crafted a space for

dialogues, cohesion and cooperation among different groups of Ukrainians (Interview 70). Peace is not the only notion that has been shaken and transformed since the full-scale invasion, but security too. As the next section on the update of the second NAP will show, both peace and security are understood in a very practical matter in the current context (Interview 58). Contrary to what we see in Armenia, this difficulty in talking about peace has not necessarily shut down or diverted the work; instead, it has intensified it and may have led to a collective *redefinition* of fundamental notions of peace and security.

6.3.3 The update of the second Ukrainian NAP

The second NAP was adopted in the context described throughout this section. Similarly to the first one, the second NAP—adopted in 2020 for the period until 2025—no longer reflected the country's realities (e.g., martial law, Russian occupation of new territories[93]) and the scale of conflict-affected groups after 2022, making an update necessary. The updated NAP was accepted formally in December 2022 (Cabinet of Ministers 2022) and presented in March 2023 at CSW67 in New York. The present sub-section details this process.

The update of the second NAP a few months after the full-scale invasion has been initiated by well-established and connected women NGOs/CSOs who have direct links with

[93] Importantly, Manoilenko (2024, 208) notes how the first meetings for the NAP update in Spring 2022 occurred at a time following the liberation of territories in the outskirts of Kyiv (i.e., Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel and Borodianka, notably), revealing large-scale atrocities and evidence of indiscriminate killing, torture and rape of civilians committed by the Russian army.

femocrats in State institutions, notably decision-makers in key ministries, and highly positioned women like Kateryna Levchenko and Parliamentarians (Interview 59). It has been described to me as a particularly memorable, transparent, and inclusive experience, given the circumstances, with “no one left behind” (Interview 61):

> Everybody wanted to do something to contribute to, to progress, to have a plan, to implement the plan, and to make this overall horrible, painful situation more bearable. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

A consensus among my interviewees is clearly on the learning process over time and across Ukrainian NAPs. Two NGO representatives who were directly involved in this NAP update explained the course of action and their contribution:

> First, we had a presentation about our survey[94] in April, and we invited to this meeting Kateryna Levchenko. At the end of the presentation, we said to Kateryna, ‘We need your help with the advocacy of updating the NAP.’ And she said, ‘Okay, could you please prepare some draft?’ Okay. And we, many people, it was a very difficult period at this time, and we wrote to 14 NGOs and asked them to work with us about this, and at the beginning of May, we had a meeting, it was a very long meeting, more than 5 hours Zoom. (Anastasiya Nenka, Women's Information Consultative Center, Istanbul, June 25, 2023)

> When the full-scale invasion started, of course, we decided that we needed to revise the existing NAP, and we organized not only us but together with our partner organizations, together with the Government Commissioner on Gender Policy [Kateryna Levchenko], we initiated this process. And I can say that this was, in my opinion, it was like an excellent example of how the partnership of civil society and government structures can work. We had a transparent and participatory process. We started with the general discussion and involved more than 200 people in this process, and we worked very precisely on the strategic goals of the National Action Plan. We created five working groups, and then we elaborated recommendations to our Minister of Social Policy, which is the body responsible for the implementation of the National Action Plan. So, this was the process; it happened in May and July last year. And then, in August, if I'm not mistaken, the recommendations were submitted to the Ministry of Social Policy, and the process of approval was not short.

[94] The Women's Information Consultative Center conducted a survey across Ukraine prior to the invasion to investigate the safety measures taken by regional and local authorities in anticipation of a full-scale invasion. Their survey was not taken seriously – even sometimes ridiculed by some authorities – and overall showed the lack of preparedness across the country (Interviews 55, 59).

> So, it was only approved in December finally, the NAP was approved. I can say that what also contributed to the success of the development and the revision of the NAP, was the network of the regional coalitions on 1325. (NGO representative, Zoom, July 19, 2023)

As such, the update of the second NAP brought together a wide array of actors from civil society, NGOs/CSOs, conflict-affected women themselves, civil servants, and national, regional, and local authorities. Members of the 1325 coalitions are NGOs/CSOs but also the regional and local authorities and representatives of the security sector (e.g., national police, state emergency services, border guarding services), so they provide essential expertise from the ground and play an important role in coordination between different actors and authorities as part of the decentralization process. All in all, the update process has been supported by international organizations like UN Women. My findings are in line with recent research showing how feminist strategic partnerships have been essential in the update of the NAP (Manoilenko 2024, 205).[95] Despite the generally positive experience of the process, it was still paved with challenges, notably in terms of determining which issues to prioritize in the current context:

> The problem with the NAP and the war in Ukraine is that the whole country is in need. And you cannot put all the needs into one document. It's already too big! (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

As mentioned at the beginning, an important change before and after the invasion is the scale and geography of people affected by the war in Ukraine, from mostly located in the Donbas to the entire country being in need. Because of the hierarchy of needs across the

[95] Importantly, Manoilenko's (2024, 207) research largely reflects mine in that regard. She states: "despite the scholarly criticism regarding the responsibility of femocrats in diminishing the transformative potential of the agenda (Goetz 2020)," her findings "confirm the crucial role of such officials in ensuring that WPS remains in the focus of policy-making amid the ongoing war."

country previously mentioned, oblasts like Lviv, Zakarpattia, Chernihiv, Ternopil, and Ivano-Frankisvk and other oblasts in the West, Center, and North of Ukraine were the ones lacking the most information, donor support, and WPS knowledge, compared to the ones in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, like Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, and Kherson, for example, attracted a lot of Western support and projects since 2016 (Interviews 57, 66; see also GNWP and Democracy Development Center 2022). For instance, Western bordering oblasts like Zakarpattia and Lviv face specific challenges and pay greater attention to human trafficking and shelters for refugees as they host most IDPs. The heads of their 1325 coalitions (Marianna Kolodij and Lyubov Maksymovych) are well-known, active women with charisma and leadership (Interviews 57, 66, 68, 70).

The updated NAP included new target groups resulting from the full-scale invasion, like those forcibly displaced to Russia, those in newly occupied territories, survivors of CRSV, and victims of torture and captivity, for example. The update also highlights more clearly the practical responses to large-scale sexual violence, war crimes, and trauma. In its final form, the updated NAP builds on the first version. It has the same five aims (participation of women in decision-making, resilience to security challenges, post-conflict recovery and transitional justice, combatting gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence, and strengthening the institutional capacity of the NAP implementors), but it situates the NAP within the full-scale invasion context and expands on the strategic and operational goals while putting more focus on humanitarian assistance, victims protection, hybrid threats, and infrastructural safety. In May 2022, Pramila Patten, the Secretary General Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, signed a cooperation framework

with the Government of Ukraine on the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence (United Nations Secretary-General 2023).

As such, the update of the second NAP has been described to me as a 'roadmap' (Interview 64) and an increase in attention and taking this document seriously as a tool to make a precise difference on the ground, as compared to before the invasion (Interview 58). In fact, the full-scale invasion seems to have helped Ukrainian feminists in their WPS advocacy. When I asked about whether she encountered resistance in her work, a researcher and expert reflected on the before and after the full-scale invasion:

> No, there was no resistance. There was no resistance, but there was a lack of understanding and a lack of understanding of how it can be implemented in real life. *When people couldn't get through the shelters, I think it got clear what it means in real life.* But before that, not every government representative saw it [the NAP] as a priority or as an important area to act on. They had other priorities, or they had other problems. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

A woman working inside a key Ministry that I was able to interview also noticed a difference in acceptance and understanding of WPS after 2022 (Interview 74). Not only most women I interviewed noted the decline in resistance to WPS over time, but the full-scale invasion made it important now "more than ever," echoing the case of Moldova:

> The context helped, I think, because being under constant shelling helped to focus on the very practical things. *Maybe in another context, people would be more philosophical [about WPS], but nobody could afford to be very philosophical and think about very abstract things because the burning needs, immediate needs are so clear and so obvious* that I think people were more rational and more practical [about it]. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

> We were talking already in 2021 about legislation changes regarding conflict-related sexual violence, and we were working on the strategies and had a lot of meetings, but it was

> honestly not the easiest process because there was no political will to do it. *Now, of course, everyone, unfortunately, is sensitized by war crimes.* (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 6, 2023)

These quotes underline well the importance of lived experiences of war and the context in which NAPs are created or updated – forcing actors to be pragmatic. As we will see in the following section, if challenges to WPS implementation were already numerous prior to the full-scale invasion, they became worse after 2022, as the invasion absorbed financial and human resources for the defense of the country, brought new coordination problems in the State apparatus and also impeded the possibility of doing long-term planning in a situation of day-to-day emergencies (Manoilenko 2024, 215).

To conclude this section, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a profound impact on the country, amplifying structural insecurities that were already present due to the war in the Donbas since 2014. Insecurities, now omnipresent and countrywide, forced Ukrainian feminists to redirect their work to immediate humanitarian aid, leading, among other things, to burnout for many of them. In a context of prolonged fear, suffering, and mass destruction, discussions about 'peace' and what it means have become more difficult, but on the other hand, the invasion has led to impressive unity among Ukrainian women, notably in the demand for weapons exports, which in turn has revealed the limits of anti-militarist feminist theories coming from the West. Nevertheless, Ukrainian women were able to mobilize their WPS network strategically to act effectively on the ground and update the second NAP.

6.4 New WPS realities after the full-scale invasion

The final section of the chapter will proceed as follows. I asked my interviewees to share with me what they thought were the biggest WPS challenges in the future, given the actual context in Ukraine, and I will first present their answers. Second, similar to the previous chapters, I will explore the question of the WPS NAP in Ukraine in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. Finally, the last section will reflect on the progress made in Ukraine since the adoption of the first NAP. It will dive deeper into the decolonial feminist "shift" that one is observing because of the full-scale invasion.

6.4.1 "If there is no country, there is no NAP' On the necessity of self-defense and the future WPS challenges in Ukraine

As shown in the previous section, the full-scale invasion "drastically changed the landscape for WPS implementation in Ukraine, introducing new issues and amplifying some of the already existing ones." (Manoilenko 2024, 204)

During my interviews with Ukrainians, I noticed that despite the existential threats that Ukraine is facing, my interviews with Ukrainians were often cheerful and optimistic, noticeably *more* so than in other countries. Critiques were always accompanied by successes mentioned, with very few exceptions of "radical" opinions about WPS. When I asked them about what they thought were the future WPS challenges in the country given the context, four answers systematically came up, and they are all linked to each other.

First, Russia is mentioned as an existential threat to Ukraine (and beyond), hence the need to defeat them and make no concessions. As such, national security remains the "top priority" under the circumstances and a "precondition" for WPS (Interview 61), which is best described by the excerpt below:

> The future strongly depends on how the war goes. If there is no country with a government capable of exercising great control over its territories and people, or if it's not capable of exercising full and equal control of certain territories, [t]his would inevitably affect the NAP. In the first case, *if there is no country, there is no NAP*. *It's a national action plan. Tied to the country. To the government. To the state.* And in the second case, [i]t's also the question, how do we claim the need to take certain actions in the territories that one can't reach? So, the future of the WPS agenda in Ukraine strongly depends on how the war goes. *It strongly depends on whether activists and people involved in the work on the NAP are alive*, and this, in turn, effects, relies on, essentially, if we have antimissile systems in place. You know, it is as clear as that […] People have to be there at the place, working with the government and working with the communities to make sure that the NAP is localized. *But then this strongly depends on whether they have the necessary security, physical and mental security to be able to do that*. (Gender expert, Zoom, August 4, 2023)

As explained above, the existence of a NAP is intrinsically linked to the state itself and its security, understood in the traditional sense of the term (e.g., borders). The NAP is also linked to the hard work of feminists and all those who make it possible to implement this document across the country. If these people are dead, exhausted, illegally detained, or displaced outside the country, the NAP cannot be realized. A second answer that often came up is the emotional, mental, and physical burnout of women sustaining this agenda:

> The whole period of aggression during nine years, in particular in the past year, exhausted Ukrainian human resources. They fight, they are resilient, and they love. At the same time, it is really very difficult. (Olena Suslova, Founder of the Women's Information Consultative Center, Zoom, June 8, 2023)

> On challenges. For me personally, it would be a lack of time and lack of money because you cannot keep doing this with no remuneration because, at some point, you do have to eat, and you cannot afford to eat only at the events funded by international donors. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

As we have seen in the previous sections, women advocates working on the WPS agenda have had to redirect their daily efforts to emergency humanitarian aid since the invasion or to add this to their usual tasks. This, combined with stress, fear, sleep deprivation, and immediate physical insecurities, has led to personal and collective exhaustion. In addition to that, there is all the unpaid, invisible social reproduction work of women who must take care of children, elderly people, and their sick or wounded husbands (Interviews 60, 66, 77). Third, and linked to the previous point, the "masculinization" of society as a result of the war has been mentioned as a fear to me by several women I met:

> I will put it that way. The large-scale war as the global change of everything brings a very dangerous trend of masculinization of the society. Step by step, it is a risk, *to fall back into the stereotype that men are fighters with weapons in their hands and women are victims of the war.* (NGO representative, Zoom, June 28, 2023)

> When the war is over, so many heroes and veterans will come back from war. So, to say very nationalist. *Nationalism in Ukraine is going up now because it helps us to win, to unite our efforts*, but after this, it will continue to be popular. And we know that now nationalism is directed at that victory, at war issues. But when it is over, they will redirect their efforts, I think, to women's rights and will try to… because… all these far-right movements and these nationalist movements, religious movements, they are connected with each other. They are dangerous for women's rights issues in Ukraine, even before the war. And now they have other work to do; they are on the frontline, and they are concentrating their efforts on the war. *And so on. But we expect that we will have a backlash in Ukraine on women's rights*, and of course, we need to do everything to not let this happen. I think that it can be really challenging for us. (NGO representative, Zoom, July 19, 2023)

The concerns expressed by these women are real and foreseeable because this is what decades of feminist research have shown so. As the usual story goes, during a war, women's rights are put aside or in the background because it's not "the priority" and it's an issue to

be considered "later." When the "later" comes, for example, after a war, revolution or significant event, we see either a return to rigid gender norms or a setback on women's rights, for example. This is not a prediction of what is going to happen in Ukraine after the war. Still, warning signs are present: traumatized men coming back from war and widespread weapons circulation will likely increase domestic violence, and this might be later "excused" or justified because they are defenders and heroes of the nation (Interviews 57, 60) (also in Kvinna till Kvinna 2023, 4). There is also a real risk of exclusion of women from future negotiations, which is linked to the next point.

Fourth, most of my participants mentioned women's participation (or lack of) in the country's reconstruction as a concern, simultaneously as a source of fear *and* a source of hope for the future. Talks about rebuilding Ukraine are already happening—at the same time as massive destruction of civilian and energy infrastructure continues. As early as the Spring of 2022, Ukrainian feminists—supported by femocrats inside the system like MPs and the Government Commissioner on Gender Equality Policy—started advocating for gender considerations in the recovery planning process. (European Union and NIRAS 2023, 24) The massive destruction of civil and energy infrastructure, environment, and ecosystems, and the disruption of socio-economic activities all have gendered consequences. In "March 2023, the second Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment estimated that recovery and reconstruction would cost $411 billion, with costs increasing since then." (UN Women Ukraine 2023b, 1) So far, however, those recovery and reconstruction talks largely ignore gender considerations:

> Another area where I'm concerned is the recovery because women are very actively involved into the response. But I am worried that there are not that many women involved into the recovery process. And when I look at the recovery plan, it's gender blind, and when I look at the different groups of experts who advocate for the recovery plan, strategies and things like that, they are groups mainly composed of men. And some of them I see for the first time, these are some businessmen who were never in politics, and now they're telling Ukrainian society what our way should be and how we should get to the good life. And they are gender blind […] I hear a lot about investments, about the infrastructure like roads, which is very important. But then they say that we must bring our children and women back, but women and children will not come back because they don't have shelters. They don't have safe schools and kindergartens. Why would they come back? And they don't think about that. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

Not only is the *content* of those discussions gender blind, as highlighted by the woman above, but so is the *container* (the process itself). Others, like the feminist lawyer below, were fearful and expressed concerns about women's meaningful participation in decision-making in recovery at different levels of governance (national, regional/oblast, hromadas) based on observations of war decision-making:

> I would say very realistically, now. I think the WPS agenda and NAP are really important for us now because we have a very… I don't see enough women in our government, let's put it like this. And the ones who are really visible out there, okay, there are maybe a couple of women, but really, it's very male-dominated, Zelensky style […] So, and also the fact of how the refugee dynamic is working, that is mostly women who had to take the child, bring them to safety. So, I think there are a lot of risks that women would be left out of political processes in the future, post-martial law. And I think we need to think about it now. And I think that's why also this WPS could be used as a kind of a hook in a way, because we need to look and do all this, for instance, gender advisors, but also women inside [the system] […] *We will need women leaders to be in the future*. (Gender expert, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

As such, feminist leadership will be essential in all steps of the recovery process, from rebuilding infrastructure to ensuring the safe return of people who were displaced to cohabitation among Ukrainians and rehabilitation of veterans. The NAP can be a useful tool to ensure that women are included in future negotiations, peacebuilding, and recovery processes (Interviews 60, 64). The NAP is an instrument that also creates space and

platforms for various Ukrainians to come together and imagine a peaceful future and a stronger, more resilient country (Interview 62).

6.4.2 WPS in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration – On internal and external forces

Even in the early days of the first NAP, previous research identified that "women civil society leaders, parliamentarians, and government officials have tapped into Ukraine's foreign policy and conflict-related objectives, particularly integration with Europe, to advocate for women's protection and participation." (Warren et al. 2018, 37; see also Jacevic 2019) (this narrative is also visible in public documents: Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2016).

My findings show that not only women activists, femocrats, and NGOs/CSOs have used European and NATO integration as an argument to push for the NAP, but also public officials have used the NAP to "prove" Ukraine's "Europeanness" and ability to join those institutions. The political will and use of the NAP in proving Ukraine's merit for Euro-Atlantic integration is evident in diplomatic statements, such as during the annual WPS Open Debates at the Security Council. In the context of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainians link WPS to national security, the country's overall development and progress toward Europe, and it is a good way to distance themselves from Russia (read: not European, developed, democratic nor feminist) (Santoire 2024b; 2023). UN Women is essential not only in the WPS "machinery" of the country but also in supporting Ukraine's ambition to join the EU through reforms, as is observable for Moldova and Georgia.

During my interviews, discussions around the topic of Euro-Atlantic integration, Ukraine's "true" or "performative" political will to implement WPS, and where the push to implement a NAP comes from produced drastically varying answers. My intention is not to take a position or make judgments: I will present below the contrasting narratives and approaches of my interviewees, which I qualified as either "enthusiasts," "skeptics," or "nuanced." Selected quotes will illustrate those positions.

The enthusiasts claim that the NAP is organic, meaning that it originates from Ukrainians themselves and reflects their deep ambitions and desires to join the EU and NATO, emphasizing Ukrainian agency. Thus, the Government's political will is sincere, and the NAP/WPS is a priority for them; the timing of it all is especially telling for them: (Interviews 61, 62, 72, 74, 75):

> I will plug here that this is a unique situation because Ukraine became the only country in the world that has adopted Resolution 1325, being in a time of war. And last year, we have reviewed this NAP on WPS. And that is also a unique case because we are in the time of a large-scale war that confirms the Ukrainians' national view or ambition not to stop implementing women's meaningful participation in WPS despite all the security challenges that we face […] NATO and the European Union are the organizations that are built as a target that we are moving toward. These organizations provide us with values probably, and we have actually confirmed that these are *the values we are fighting for and dying for*. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 28, 2023)

> If it wouldn't be a priority, no one would revise it just in the middle of the war! […] We have absolutely clear commitments on gender quality, and it's not only [about] the commitments. It's about the Ukrainian future in general. And if you exclude 50% of women or 50% of the population from these agendas, then there will be no other future for your country. I guess it's not just about the EU and NATO; *it's about the Ukrainian path and how Ukraine chose this path and how they define this path.* (Government representative, Zoom, June 30, 2023)

> The Government and the high levels are actually very supportive of the WPS agenda because it has been marked as a priority for EU and NATO candidacy. (Government representative, Zoom, July 31, 2023)

Mostly Government officials (and one activist) endorsed this narrative. However, further questions on my part indicated that several challenges exist to their work inside the system and that all is not "rosy." Those enthusiasts were a bit more reluctant to critique the Government given the current context.

Skeptics claim that the NAP is a foreign product, mirroring the criticisms previously voiced in the literature, before 2022 (O'Sullivan 2019a). For them, the roots of the NAP are not organic, and the Government still fails to understand the fundamental importance of this Resolution, oscillating between passive resistance and neglect, emphasizing the structures and structural limits to the implementation of the NAP. For the skeptics, the Government's political will is merely performative and a conditionality for external motivations or requirements (Interview 54, 56, 60, 78):

> The Ministry of Defense is not very interested in the implementation of the NAP, experts of defense are not very involved in the development of the NAP, and they don't really want to do it, even before the full-scale invasion. Now, they say that it's not a good time for the development of the NAP, so they aren't really interested […] If we come to them and we say, "yes, we are ready to help you," they agree, *but by their own resources, they don't want to do this job, they have more important commitments*. […] When the Government have communication with international donors, they are asking about it [and say], "Yes, we have a good NAP, we successfully implemented more than half of commitments, we are good guys," *it's like a reputation story* […] [To whom?] To international society. To other countries, for example, to NATO. Most NATO countries have NAPs to implement WPS, and we say, "Yes, we also have WPS!" (Gender expert, Zoom, June 6, 2023)

> We, as civil society, use international reporting mechanisms as a way to make the state institutions do their job properly, and they are not always willing to do what is necessary, *and sometimes they just plainly sabotage it.* I would say this is a clear indicator that *they see these obligations not as something we have to do as a rule-of-law country but as something that we have to do to get technical assistance and money from international organizations* […] You can see that the Government feels that it is being imposed and not something that they themselves need from the way they implement it. The top officials lack understanding. They lack the feeling that this is something that is relevant to them. The government officials who are knowledgeable and committed to these topics are few and far

> between. And, even at the national level, we do have some… like with women's rights, it is pretty much *whatever has been developed and achieved in Ukrainian society comes as a result of a push from the civil society supported by international organizations, at best.* (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

> I think the Ukrainian government never cared about this. And this agenda came from donors and [from] outside of Ukraine. (Representative of an international NGO, Zoom, August 22, 2023)

While the last lines of the second quote above may seem contradictory to a skeptic position, there is another way to look at it. Skeptics claim that progress on the WPS agenda is based on a top-down approach by international organizations and donors *or* bottom-up and grassroots efforts by civil society. For them, this is *not* the Government's initiative, nor does it come from a sincere desire on their part to implement WPS. Interviewees who were positioned differently as activists, NGO representatives, and consultants hold this view.

Enthusiasts and skeptics are poles apart. In fact, the majority of my interviews offered nuanced explanations that incorporate elements from both camps, echoing once again the conversation of feminist pragmatism in Chapter 1 (Interviews 53, 55, 57, 58, 59, 64, 65, 66, 68, 70, 73, 77). This is also coherent with the recent literature detailing both top-down and bottom-up forces in the WPS landscape in Ukraine (Manoilenko 2024; Dudko and Langenhuizen 2022). This is what my interviewees mention:

> I mean, it's not surprising that it's a [Deputy] Prime 'inister for the Euro-Atlantic integration [who leads WPS issues], because when [we were sent] all kinds of recommendations which were provided to Ukraine, from NATO-Ukraine annual meetings and like annual reports and all kinds of reviews about the EU, they constantly have this recommendation related to gender. So, I think it's a very pragmatic thing, giving the task to implement recommendations to the biggest extent possible. *So, it's an external influence, meaning that the money will be given if the gender component is there*, gender is mainstreamed and potentially will be accepted, you know, if ever, because this important part is there as well. So yeah, I think it's this pressure in a way and also, again, *pressure from civil society.* But

> you know, what's more and what's best, is it because civil society has also been supported with external resources? You know, at the same time as well, it has been pushed by both sides on us. *It's hard to say, but definitely, the political pressure and the external pressure are there.* (Gender expert, Zoom, June 21, 2023)

> Why it is important for them [the Government]? Because it is their citizens and they must, they are committed to protecting them and improving their lives in the conditions of war. I think you know that Ukraine is the first country to adopt a NAP during the active war, not in the post-conflict stage. So, this is a very good instrument to coordinate resources and efforts to address the needs of vulnerable categories of the population, different categories of women, mainly. For them, it is also the way to fulfill their international commitments. It is important because it's one of the instruments to maintain or to have more support from the international community, and to have it, you must show that you are working on it. *It's like inward and outward motivations*. (Gender expert, Zoom, July 26, 2023)

Those highlighting the influence of both internal and external forces in the adoption and implementation of the NAP also mention other international gender norms such as CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention. Particularly interesting is the latter. Ukraine signed the Istanbul Convention in 2011 but did not ratify it until summer 2022. A report notes that "it is emblematic that ratification took place one day before the decision granting Ukraine EU candidate status was expected. According to experts, the Istanbul Convention's ratification was one of the unofficial requirements for being granted this status. This proves that the principle of conditionality is effectively applied in advancing Ukraine's reforms, including in the field of gender equality and women's rights." (European Union and NIRAS 2023, 19) As such, some women I interviewed recall the tireless efforts of Ukrainian feminists for the ratification of the Convention, in vain (see Ketelaars 2019), making the parallel with WPS:

> I think that the WPS NAP is the result of the civil society, vibrant civil society. But of course… I think you know the Istanbul Convention [Yes.] Here I need to admit that with Istanbul Convention, it was pushed from both sides, *but the final push was from the international community because we tried many, many times.* We made everything we could, but it was like, it stopped at one level, yes. And didn't move anywhere. (NGO representative, Zoom, July 19, 2023)

> If we don't fulfill them [reports and recommendations from CEDAW Committee], nobody will punish us. *And it's more about the image of the country*. And I see clearly that if the country wants something political, for example, if we want to enter the European Union, *so we will do what we are told*. For example, a lot of women's organizations were fighting for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and it didn't do any [success]. We did collect 2500 signatures on a petition to the President to ratify the Convention, I think even twice. And actually, it's my personal opinion, it wasn't the reason for ratification [in 2022]. The reason for ratification was simple. *European Union requested us to do it, to become a member*. (NGO representative, Istanbul, June 27, 2023)

What I showed in this section are contrasting narratives on Ukraine's political will in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. Some believe that the Ukrainian Government truly has the political will, while others claim that it is just another "show-off" to Western partners to fulfill requirements and international commitments. While both realities can exist at the same time, there is more compelling empirical evidence showing that it is a mix between external (top-down) and internal (bottom-up) forces. Most interviewees were balanced and pragmatic in their answers. The Ukrainian Government certainly cares enough about WPS to put efforts, time, and resources into adopting a NAP and updating it during the full-scale invasion. However, we cannot ignore its performative dimension, given the importance of the image and reputation of a country at war, bringing us back to the constitutive, identity-shaping dimension of norms.

6.4.3 Reflecting on progress made – and a decolonial shift

To conclude this chapter, we look at the progress made over time since the first NAP in Ukraine, in the words of the women I interviewed. What is overwhelmingly clear is how proud and optimistic Ukrainian women are when looking back at the progress and also when looking ahead. To open to the future, I also reflect on the decolonial shift that is

happening in Ukraine, and the feminist space is not spared from this tendency. As such, Ukrainian feminists are using the lessons they have learned – notably the deep frustrations they have vis-à-vis Western feminists – to affirm their voices and agency.

The majority considered the strategic potential of using the NAP as a tool of advocacy and accountability in Ukraine, echoing the other countries in my research. When asked about the WPS successes in Ukraine and what made them proud, many interviewees mentioned the growing ownership over time and inclusivity of the process as a success, reflecting broader democratic changes and reforms in the country:

> In terms of successes, I think this participatory, you know, approach and process was definitely a success because really, Ukraine managed to ensure that representation is there […] I think it's a good breakthrough because this is also, you know, the evidence of democracy and the dialogue. *And this also differs us from Russia*, from the country which is invading us, because basically, we have this dialogue between the authorities and people not only, you know, by participating in the elections once in four years, but also in shaping the policies. So, I think this is definitely a success. (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 7, 2023)

Several mentioned how developing, implementing, and revising a NAP in a period of war and full-scale war is an accomplishment in itself, putting Ukraine in a unique position in the world regarding WPS policy development and innovations in times of crisis. For example, while significant legal improvements have been made in that regard, thanks in part to large veteran and women soldiers-led advocacy and research initiatives like the *Invisible Battalion*—the Ukrainian State remains slow in ensuring women's adequate working conditions in the Army. Many legal and infrastructural impediments to their participation (and their reintegration into civilian life as veterans) remain to this day (Grytsenko, Kvit, and Martsenyuk 2016; Martsenyuk et al. 2019). Still, improvements in

that sector since the first NAP have been one of the most tangible accomplishments of WPS advocacy in Ukraine, and joint feminist efforts have produced increased attention to women's needs in the defense and security sector. Those changes and this synergy of feminist collaboration have set the stage for dialogue with authorities and incremental changes in patriarchal institutions, plus have indirectly helped and set the ground for other gender policies. Ukrainian feminists have been pragmatic and strategic in their advocacy, adapting to structural obstacles and shifting context on the ground.

Others, based on their grassroots experience, have highlighted the growing understanding of the importance of localization (oblast- and hromodas-level action plans) beyond just a "copy-pasting" from the national one or other oblasts, as well as growing capacities of local authorities, despite the fact that there is still a lot of work to do (Interview 70; also 59). The informal and formal networking and opportunities that WPS provided (e.g., training, gender-sensitive needs assessment, and capacity-building done by feminist civil society on the ground) brought small and big successes, which are not always visible right away. A woman recounts with emotion:

> After one city was liberated, [my friend] got a call from a man who is the head of a hromada. And he thanked her because, as he puts it, "*you taught us how to identify the vulnerable groups and their needs. And when the Russians came, I knew who my vulnerable [citizens] were and what their needs were. And with very limited resources, we had to ration very neatly for everybody to survive. And because of your training and because of the knowledge you gave us, I was able to do exactly that. And thanks to you, a lot more people survived, who would have perished otherwise*." So, I haven't heard anything like that from people we were training. But I really hope that the knowledge we gave them was useful and applicable. So, I see the urgency. I see how it applies to our needs, how it [WPS] can be used to improve the governmental response and local response to urgent matters. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

As detailed earlier, the networks around WPS advocacy in Ukraine have helped feminists mobilize during the full-scale invasion, allowing them to identify needs and act fast. As identified by Warren et al. (2018, 35) during the first NAP, "the NAP has provided a foundation and a structure for engagement for civil society and across government agencies." My findings have shown that this continued to be the case during the process of the second NAP and after the full-scale invasion until today. Ukrainian feminists, in strategic partnership with each other, have successfully leveraged the NAPs for advocacy, participation, protection, recovery, and accountability purposes. Still, some remain skeptical for different reasons:

> I think that the understanding is better now. *But at the same time, there is no money for it.* So, I cannot say that something, uh, some significant change happened. Yes. The understanding about this issue might be better, but again *it's not the priority for the State.* (NGO representative, Zoom, July 19, 2023)

> Since the full-scale invasion, the NAP is a bit like in a 'what's left' position. So, like they don't give a budget dedicated to the implementation of the NAP, it's more like, okay, well, "*if there is some money left, then we'll give it for those issues*." So, it's a bit like a second priority right now. (Government representative, Zoom, July 31, 2023)

> So, I am left with no answer to the question of how it is possible to incorporate and address the needs of people who are identified as the target audience of the NAP but stay in the territories outside of governmental control. So, for instance, people who stay under Russian occupation, they are part of the NAP. *Their needs are, to some extent, recognized. But then what's next? But how do we do that?* (Gender expert, Zoom, August 4, 2023)

Despite good intentions and tremendous progress, Ukraine remains a country at war, meaning that it has limited financial and human resources and long-term planning capacity due to existential, sustained, and omnipresent threats to its national security. Ukraine also has a limited capacity to exercise power over its entire territory, which is partly occupied

by Russia, as expressed by the last quote, echoing larger debates on sovereignty and occupation present in my previous chapters.

While discussing what others can learn from Ukraine and vice versa, an idea commonly mentioned by my interviewees was that Ukraine is now at the forefront of WPS in the region and perhaps the world. If Ukraine was able to follow the example of other countries (e.g., primarily Georgia, the Balkans and the Baltics), now it is others that could follow Ukraine's lead (Interview 73). A lot think that the world can and *should* learn from Ukraine's practical experience of WPS during war:

> I will tell you from a very practical way, as we have so many women in the armed forces, as we have so many women who have ensured the standing [stood against] the aggression and have taken the risks, economic and political risk in standings in front of the aggressor, *we have a different experience, very different experience in implementing the WPS agenda.* And what is going on, including what's our organization doing, is reflecting this experience, like thinking of what we have, what we went through, where we have a unique experience and where this experience can become a part of the global experience […] *We actually admire the collective experience that the world has in the WPS agenda. But we also flag and are very clear here that our experience is the only one in the world we have.* This is the new reality with Russia that has started this large-scale war in Europe in the 21st century […] We will make sure that the world listens to this experience […] Ukraine has felt, I will put it that way, *its agency that we really can respond, can lead, that we are changemakers. And so that's very important.* (NGO representative, Zoom, June 28, 2023)

> Everyone wants to teach us, sorry, but *we* can teach many, many other people in many other countries. (Representative of an international organization, Zoom, July 6, 2023)

In the wake of reflections on the tensions between Ukrainian and Western feminists, particularly on issues of armaments and militarism, many have chosen instead to embrace this apparent "contradiction" and divergence of feminist antimilitarist theories that underpin the WPS literature and Resolution 1325 itself, characterizing this tension instead as a unique feature specific to the Ukrainian experience:

> Very few donors until recently ever asked us what we need to do. They came with their own ideas. I think this issue has been discussed already. It's called *feminist imperialism*, if I'm not mistaken. (NGO representative, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

> I think what became much stronger [after the invasion] was this anti-colonial discourse that before we didn't have so much, I think we were much shyer and thought we needed to learn from our sisters [in the West], you know, we need to learn from the UN. So, we were more, "Okay, they think we need to do this, let's do that!" Even though many people didn't believe in this, didn't believe in that, okay, there was still this feeling like "We are Ukrainians, maybe we don't know something. You know, we need to learn. We need more capacity building; let's meet these people in Switzerland; maybe they know something special." *You know, I think there was a huge disillusion*. (Gender expert, Zoom, June 9, 2023)

Indeed, the disillusion of Ukrainian feminists resulting from the Russian invasion has exposed the significant fractures between them (but more broadly also the specificity of feminist traditions specific to Eastern Europe) and Western feminists, often deaf to the voices, agency, demands, and realities specific to Ukrainian women – and most importantly Russian imperialism. Going back to the discussion on the feminist post-socialist literature in Chapter 1, we know that these tensions between Western and post-socialist women are not new and trace back to a long history of misunderstandings, heated debates, and Western feminists speaking *over* women from the region. The full-scale invasion "is having an ambivalent impact on gender equality" and simultaneously creating new challenges but also opportunities (European Union and NIRAS 2023, 60). One of them, I argue, is this decolonial shift in the attitude of Ukrainian feminists after the invasion, taking the form of a re-appropriation of the narrative and pride in the uniqueness of feminist struggles in Ukraine and their realities as they attempt to overcome decades of brutal Russian imperialism and imagine a future for their country, a feminist future.

Conclusion and Discussion of Section II

Despite significant differences between Armenia and Ukraine in various respects, such as their paths toward Euro-Atlantic accession, domestic politics, and the nature of their respective conflicts, both countries share several common elements, making their comparison interesting but not very intuitive. Armenia is now shifting towards the West and aiming for EU membership after historically aligning with Russia, while Ukraine seeks both EU and NATO membership. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was the longest-standing protracted conflict in the post-Soviet space until it turned "hot" again in 2020. Meanwhile, Ukraine has been invaded and occupied by Russia since 2014, and the situation escalated seriously with a full-scale invasion in 2022. The feminist landscape and civil society-government relations also differ significantly between the two countries. Both have a similar democracy 'partly free' score according to Freedom House (2024) – 54/100 for Armenia and 49/100 for Ukraine – making them hybrid regimes.

Armenia and Ukraine, in part because of their divergent relationship with Russia and the West, and the factors mentioned above, are rarely analyzed together. Despite this non-intuitive comparison, it became clear to me as I was conducting fieldwork that I had to compare them together, as I noticed several similar patterns in the ways research participants from both countries talked about what 'peace' meant to them, feminist organizing during humanitarian crises, and the existence of WPS during multi-layered existential crises and wars.

How did WPS NAPs emerge in Armenia and Ukraine? In Armenia, memories of WPS advocacy date back to the early 2010s. Advocacy to pressure the government to adopt a NAP grew after the Velvet Revolution in 2018, which presented a democratic window of opportunity. Even before the formal adoption of a NAP, however, feminist civil society was divided about WPS, and feminist anti-militarist organizations were leading on WPS advocacy. The emergence and adoption of the first WPS NAP in Armenia is significantly challenging to retrace as there is not a strong velvet triangle similar to what is observed in other countries, and the formal development process did not have extensive participation from civil society. After the 15th anniversary of Resolution 1325, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the lead on WPS issues and has been the main state actor behind it ever since, along with the Ministry of Defense and other relevant Ministries. One thing to take away is that the WPS landscape and the history of advocacy in Armenia are fragmented, tense, complex, and highly diverse, significantly different from the other countries in this research. In Ukraine, the Maidan Revolution and the war with Russia significantly impacted the development and adoption of the first WPS NAP. However, it is important to note that WPS advocacy started in Ukraine before 2014, although it was not very well-known. Echoing the cases of Armenia and Georgia, the Maidan Revolution brought large democratic reforms, legislative changes, new allies, and a political recomposition of the Verkhovna Rada with women Members of Parliament favorable to WPS issues.

In Armenia, the adoption of the first NAP has been described to me unanimously as not transparent and insufficiently involving civil society. The velvet triangle described many times during this research significantly differs in Armenia. A notable difference between

Ukraine and the two other countries of this research is that Armenia does not have a UN Women country office. While some other UN agencies and embassies engaged in high-level advocacy for the NAP, the absence of UN Women from this WPS landscape is quite noticeable and has impacted the structure and strength of the velvet triangle. I argue that UN Women serves as a "glue," holding each corner of the triangle together by bringing resources, visibility, authority, and support to local women's NGOs/CSOs – and this absence in Armenia is noticeable. Another difference in Armenia is how divided the feminist civil society is over WPS, with some even totally rejecting the WPS framework altogether, perceiving it to be a co-opted and militarized project. A few femocrats within the State apparatus, particularly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are working on WPS. Additionally, a Member of Parliament and the First Lady are advocating for peace. However, overall, the different corners of the triangle are not communicating effectively with each other and are divided, making the velvet triangle particularly fragile.

Similarly to Moldova and Georgia, in Ukraine, an alliance of feminists inside and outside institutions played an instrumental part in adopting the first NAP. This alliance consisted of national women's rights NGOs/CSOs, government officials in key ministries, high-level figures including the Government Commissioner on Gender Equality Policy and the Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, members of Parliament, and gender experts such as UN Women-hired national consultants, academics, and various experts from international organizations and NGOs supporting the process. Both a strong velvet triangle and momentum created by various elements, notably the *Invisible Battalion* study in post-Maidan Ukraine, were crucial in the first NAP adoption.

The second NAP was adopted in Armenia in 2022 under significantly different circumstances compared to the first NAP, as Armenia had undergone major transformations after 2020. The second Nagorno-Karabakh war significantly derailed the first NAP. In Ukraine, the second NAP, adopted in 2020, had to be extensively revised midway – after the Russian invasion – to account for the country's new realities. The second NAP in Ukraine also noted a greater participation of conflict-affected women themselves than the first one and a greater number of issues tackled. Its 2022 update brought together a diverse group of participants, including civil society, NGOs/CSOs, conflict-affected women, civil servants, and national, regional, and local authorities. In both countries, despite shortcomings, my participants generally observed an improvement from the first NAP, becoming more inclusive over time. This trend was also seen in Moldova and Georgia, indicating a pattern of incremental change and pragmatism.

How did the militarized environment in Armenia and Ukraine influence the adoption and implementation of WPS NAP? In Armenia and Ukraine, NAP implementation has been paved with difficulties, and their respective conflicts were clearly major impediments to NAP development and implementation. In Armenia, the first NAP was intended to "extend" to Nagorno-Karabakh, but it did not happen. A breach of trust between the Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia Governments since the Velvet Revolution and the 2020 war, patriarchal and conservative values as a "trauma response" to the conflict, a lack of women's meaningful influence on decision-making in the de facto Government, and the unrecognized and isolated status of Nagorno-Karabakh may explain why the Armenian NAP has not been implemented in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the case of Ukraine, my

participants have identified Russia's occupation of large areas in the East, South, and Crimea as obvious obstacles to fully implementing the NAP. These comments in Ukraine and Armenia provoke larger reflections on the shortcomings of the WPS agenda as a global normative project: what happens to WPS NAPs in occupied and/or unrecognized spaces and contexts of "in-between" war and peace like Moldova and Georgia?

A major difference between Ukraine and Armenia, though, is how the first updated both of its NAPs midterms to better reflect the evolving situation on the ground, which the latter did not do and was less prepared for the humanitarian crisis. Another major difference is the obvious size difference between the two countries. Ukraine, as part of its decentralization process, has innovated in terms of WPS localization in various oblasts and hromadas, and feminist NGOs/CSOs have developed country-wide 1325 Coalitions for WPS localization, advocacy, and implementation, supported by UN Women and Western donors. While the feminist civil society landscape differs significantly between the two countries, in both cases, women-led NGOs/CSOs who directly respond to humanitarian needs on the ground must compete for funds. This often leads to overwork, understaffing, and dependency on external donors, like the situations in Moldova and Georgia.

Finally, a major difference between the two countries is the international "attention" they get; while the Russian invasion of Ukraine undoubtedly attracted funds, resources, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, the same thing cannot be said about Armenia and Armenian feminists sometimes feel resentment about this, often voicing to me how alone and "abandoned" they felt in the world. Ukrainian feminists, on the other hand, were frustrated

at Western feminists for speaking over them, asking them to make peace with Russian women "because they are women" and denying their agency and situated expertise.

In both cases, we observe a gap between rhetoric and reality regarding implementation, where the sustainability of the NAPs is fragile and often relies on a few dedicated individuals. Government-wide ownership and deep understanding of what WPS remains weak, and patriarchal resistance in male-dominated sectors like defense and security and conflict settlements persists, where women remain severely underrepresented, although Ukraine made tremendous improvements in that regard. In both countries, the usual problems of ownership, insufficient resources (although Ukraine does include the NAP in its State budget), and policy changes depending on a few dedicated overloaded individuals were also identified. However, just as in Moldova and Georgia, there are also more structural problems impacting NAP implementation in Armenia and Ukraine.

In both countries, prioritizing WPS amid complex crises and widespread militarization is a significant challenge. There is an extreme difficulty in discussing peace due to the fear of genocide and existential threats, making the work of women peacebuilders and peace activists particularly challenging. In both cases, 'peace' is synonymous with trauma, making concessions to the enemy (Azerbaijan for Armenians, and Russia for Ukrainians) and being a loser. Those who differ from these narratives are severely ostracized and face sexist pushback, online attacks, smear campaigns, and are accused of being anti-State. In both cases, the recent or ongoing episode of war completely cut ties between them (women in Armenia and Ukraine) and women "on the other side" (Russian women and Azeri

women), and many participants in Armenia and Ukraine voiced the concerns and grief of having worked on peacebuilding "for nothing."

In Armenia and Ukraine, both of their first NAPs heavily focused on defense and security issues. However, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the Russian invasion further shifted the Government's focus to immediate national security priorities. This led to a significant drain on human and material resources and expanded the scope and geography of populations affected by conflict, making the need for WPS more visible and "obvious" than ever. The activities of Armenian and Ukrainian women's organizations had to be quickly redirected to provide immediate humanitarian aid. They often acted as first responders, sometimes with fewer resources than before the war. In both cases, the women interviewed spoke about mental exhaustion and burnout from working around the clock during large-scale humanitarian crises. In Ukraine, established WPS networks supported grassroots feminist organizing. Despite the negative impacts of the war, it is important to mention that in both cases, the war also brought opportunities. The obvious multi-level crises forced actors to broaden their conception of security in more holistic ways, something that feminists were already talking about. In Armenia, new WPS NGOs/CSOs, projects, and initiatives were established after 2020. The second NAP process engaged multiple stakeholders, unlike the first NAP. The invasion sparked unprecedented unity among Ukrainians, and the country's leadership in the WPS domain on the global stage also became a defining aspect of Ukraine's public image during the war.

How do different state and non-state actors understand and use the WPS agenda in Armenia and Ukraine? Armenian feminists situate the relevance of the WPS agenda within their conflict-affected context, and those who were favorable to using this framework described it in a similar way as in other countries, namely as an advocacy tool to use strategically and pragmatically. The NAPs served as a powerful instrument for Armenian feminists to push for incremental change, create a legitimate space to have discussions about WPS issues, and try to hold their government accountable. Overall, though, Armenian feminists did not tend to reproduce the State narrative and were very critical of the highly militarized, nationalistic, and polarized environment they are in. There was noticeably more "opposition" to the WPS agenda in Armenia. In Ukraine, there is a strong unity among Ukrainian feminists, and tensions between them faded in the background to provide common messages and advocacy demands in response to the invasion, often reproducing the narrative of the State. Almost unanimously, my participants described WPS as a great framework, roadmap, and malleable instrument for their work. Despite being imperfect, WPS allowed Ukrainian and Armenian feminists (those who are favorable to WPS) a common language, a space giving legitimacy to their work, and a tool to hold their respective Governments accountable. Like in Moldova and Georgia, as gender experts have fluid positions and move over the course of their careers from one corner of the triangle to another, my research does not really show one specific point of view for these experts.

While it is challenging to gauge Armenian officials' views on WPS, my data suggests that they see it as a way to demonstrate Armenia's readiness for peace with Azerbaijan and enhance its democratic image post-Revolution, contrasting it with authoritarian Azerbaijan

and Turkey. In Ukraine, the link between WPS and Euro-Atlantic integration is clearer, portraying Ukraine as a democratic, feminist, *European* country deserving a place in the Western "club." In Ukraine, I heard starkly contrasting narratives about the government's political will. Some assert that the adoption of NAPs reflects real progress and commitment, while others view it as a tactic to impress Western donors amid EU and NATO ambition, resembling Moldova and Georgia's situations. Evidence indicates that NAP processes are influenced by both grassroots and top-down forces. In Armenia, many participants feel the government does not care or understand the WPS agenda.

Finally, for Armenia and the broader South Caucasus region, the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered significant changes and geopolitical shifts. This included Russia's shifting priorities and reduced involvement in the Caucasus, as well as Turkey's increased influence in the region, which emboldened Azerbaijan to make coercive diplomatic and military moves. With Armenia distancing itself from its former ally Russia and seeking closer ties to the EU and Western countries, Armenia has been on a path of democratization since the 2018 Revolution, but its path still significantly differs from Ukraine. While the Russian invasion is still ongoing and a peace agreement is out of sight, it seems like the status quo is back in the South Caucasus as Azerbaijan's final assault on Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to the ethnic cleansing of 120,000 Armenians in September 2023, is a thing of the past. This section shows that Armenia and Ukraine overlap on several key issues. Their cases illustrate how the WPS process is heavily influenced by national and regional humanitarian crises and insecurities.

Chapter 7: Regional Discussion and Conclusion

Long puzzled by the lack of post-socialist feminist perspectives and the experiences of women from the post-Soviet space in WPS literature, my aim in this thesis was to challenge this blind spot. Even the most thorough and radical critics of the WPS agenda, who use postcolonial theories, often overlook these perspectives, failing to build feminist solidarities with women from the former Eastern bloc and remaining confined to a North/South axis of analysis, missing many spaces of "in-betweenness." Those observations constitute the intellectual foundation and research puzzle of this dissertation.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I showed how post-socialist feminist literature sheds light on understanding this erasure. I argued that looking at the WPS agenda—our object of study—as a global normative framework that directly *derives* from transnational feminism makes it easier to see why the post-Soviet space is so absent from it. Post-socialist feminist literature has shown that transnational feminism has historically involved conversations primarily between women from the Global North and Global South, often overlooking the voices and unique experiences of post-socialist women.

This thesis was written in the context of major geopolitical shifts – the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – intensifying the frustrations and reflections mentioned above and in Chapter 1. Despite the ongoing widespread suffering and crucial decolonial reflections emerging from the region, these issues have not really garnered attention from WPS scholars or practitioners. When not ignored altogether, feminist IR, feminist security studies, and WPS scholars have *also*

perpetuated epistemic imperialism, overshadowing the voices of women directly affected by conflicts and the impacts of Russian imperialism (Hendl et al. 2024; O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023; Mykytenko 2022; see also Santoire 2024).

Those events, silences, reflections, and frustrations have profoundly influenced the research puzzle of this thesis. Centering the narratives and experiences of women in the post-Soviet space—specifically in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia—the thesis is an empirical exploration of this unexplored area within the WPS agenda, conceived as both an academic field and a space of transnational feminist advocacy. It identifies analytical lessons from this exploration and reveals how the unique experiences of this region enrich our understanding of concepts and theoretical debates within WPS literature.

Drawing on fieldwork interviews, observations, and policy analysis, the thesis examines the micro-dynamics of the emergence, adoption, and implementation of NAPs in these four countries, with particular attention to feminist alliances that shape and support these processes and the militarized, political context surrounding them. To do so, the present thesis answered the following research questions: 1) How did WPS NAPs emerge across the post-Soviet space? 2) How do different state and non-state actors understand and use the WPS agenda in their respective national contexts? 3) How does the militarized environment – characterized by various wars and protracted conflicts – influence the adoption and implementation of WPS NAPs? 4) What specificities can be observed in post-Soviet regional WPS politics, and what do they reveal about the WPS agenda as a global normative project? We return to these questions in this final chapter.

In addition to helping me organize and structure my research, these research questions served as a guide to the information I was seeking in each country and to the presentation of my empirical chapters. My initial questions enabled me to identify certain elements of similarity and difference according to cases. Sections I and II ended with a discussion comparing the two cases in pairs. In all four cases, I followed a process-oriented rather than content-oriented analysis and discussion as the NAPs documents did not reveal much in themselves. This is because these policy documents tell us very little about how the actors understand the NAP or the WPS agenda and tell us nothing about what has actually happened on the ground. This final chapter presents the key findings in four major points, in the form of a regional discussion.

First, the data strongly indicates that NAP emergence and adoption greatly rely on strategic feminist networks. These networks incorporate femocrats in state institutions, UN Women, feminist civil society, and gender experts, who shape and sustain these processes. Second, evidence shows that the nature of nearby conflicts—whether they are "active" (Ukraine, Armenia) or "frozen" (Moldova, Georgia)—along with regional geopolitical insecurities and transformations, play a significant role in NAP adoption and implementation and in how actors understand and use the WPS agenda. Third, the findings suggest that the entire NAP process(es) is deeply intertwined with broader political dynamics such as democratization, autocratization, nation-building, and Euro-Atlantic integration. Fourth, the thesis demonstrates that the post-Soviet space displays both region-specific dynamics and global trends in the implementation of the WPS agenda that are also observable in other parts of the world. I detail each point in the following section, along with the

implications of this research, its limitations, future avenues of reflection, and brief concluding remarks.

7.1 Discussion of the four main findings and implications of the research

7.1.1 Main finding 1: The emergence and adoption of NAPs heavily rely on strategic feminist networks

My findings clearly suggest that the emergence and adoption of NAPs are heavily dependent on feminist triangles and strategies inside/outside institutions, as well as the momentum created by larger political processes. What the feminist institutionalist literature has called 'velvet triangles' are essential in explaining how the presence or absence of solid feminist alliances between femocrats (e.g., public servants, politicians, members of Parliament, or high-level bureaucrats in UN agencies), feminist civil society (e.g., women-led or women's rights NGOs/CSOs) and gender experts (e.g., UN Women-hired national consultants, independent consultants, and academics) play a crucial role in NAP emergence and adoption.

Femocrats are critical actors in NAP adoption because they have insider knowledge of the bureaucratic rules and procedures within governmental institutions. They are instrumental in driving policy and legislative changes due to their understanding of the mechanisms behind these changes. Through their positions inside the system, they can ensure that WPS issues consistently remain on the table and convince other governmental actors, ministers,

and entities through their actions and links with the other corners of the triangle. In short, they are the individuals who advocate for NAPs within their respective institutions, navigating internal resistance and significant structural challenges from their colleagues while strategically and cautiously pushing for NAP adoption and implementation – as we saw in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia (prior to 2023).

Feminist civil society is essential for the adoption of NAP because they possess valuable local knowledge – this is where NAP advocacy generally first emerges. Through their work, they have often "done" WPS for a long time without explicitly calling it or framing it as such, until it became strategic for them to do so. They often work at the grassroots level across the country and have direct contact with conflict-affected populations, as many of them are conflict-affected women themselves. This enables them to identify needs and deliver services and programs effectively to vulnerable populations and smaller local NGOs/CSOs – and then relay back those concerns to femocrats and decision-makers. As we have seen in Chapter 1, women NGOs/CSOs across the region emerged following the fall of the Soviet Union. They were influenced by its resulting armed conflicts, as well as the rapid transition to a capitalist economy, political reforms, and liberal democracy. Later exposed to international women's rights discourses and networks, these organizations became intimately tied to the democratization process (Walsh 2015; Funk 2006; Ishkanian 2003) and professionalized their expertise, sometimes leading to a clear example of the 'NGO-ization' of feminism. For these reasons, women NGOs/CSOs face many challenges and are often "dependent on Western donors, have flitted between liberal concepts of human rights, democracy, and peacebuilding, creating a *bricolage* out of these concerns in

an attempt to secure financial survival and to weave a shield against political repression. As a result, they have variously been labeled as traitors, grant-eaters, and foreign agents by local politicians, and failed to gain the trust of the population at large—especially concerning peacebuilding." (Walsh 2015, 142) As such, women NGOs/CSOs have to navigate complex internal and external constraints quickly and creatively, often without or with very few resources, in patriarchal, militarized societies. This is evident in all four cases of this thesis; however, the attacks and the shrinking civic space in which they occur have been especially visible in Georgia since 2023.

Gender experts are pivotal players who often move from one corner of the triangle to the other. These experts, researchers, and consultants who have professionalized their gender and/or WPS expertise bring technocratic, empirical, and critical knowledge to support the work of women NGOs/CSOs and femocrats. These gender experts are often employed by international organizations such as UN Women. My research shows the crucial importance of UN Women country offices in NAP adoption, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Typically, UN Women supports local women NGOs/CSOs when WPS advocacy starts to emerge by providing them with capacity-building skills, material and human resources, visibility, and authority in advocating for a NAP at higher levels of the Government. They also support and train femocrats inside the system. Most importantly, my data shows that UN Women acts as some kind of "glue," "forcing" every actor in the triangle to come together in collaboration. This is very visible in the cases of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. What is interesting about the case of Armenia is that there is no UN Women's country office there, and the WPS landscape is fundamentally different from that

of the three other countries. Corners of the triangle (civil society and the Government) sometimes do not talk to each other, and there are several tensions *within* feminist civil society. Whether this is a causal result of the absence of a strong UN Women presence in Armenia is difficult to prove. Still, the presence of UN Women clearly has a "homogenizing" effect on the WPS landscape.

The importance of velvet triangles – or feminist alliances – in feminist policy change-making has been shown in the literature (e.g., True 2016, 316; True and Mintrom 2001), but the feminist institutionalist literature has been rarely applied to the WPS agenda, and it has not always paid attention to UN Women and other international organizations. Velvet triangles also help explain the professionalization and "elite" dimension of certain NGOs/CSOs, which are sometimes perceived as "dominating" the WPS landscape, discourse, and advocacy. These NGOs/CSOs are often led by highly educated, middle-aged, English-speaking women based in the capital, belonging to the "Beijing generation," meaning that they were there during the proliferation of NGOs/CSOs after the fall of the Soviet Union and were socialized in transnational feminist forums and spaces. These women civil society leaders of NGOs/CSOs are well-connected and experienced and, therefore, often get the most visibility, resources, and contacts with decision-makers as they know the proper language, timing, and strategies to push for policy change. While present in all four examples to different degrees, the "elite" aspect of women's NGOs/CSOs is particularly noticeable in Ukraine and Georgia, where WPS advocacy revolves around a small number of well-known leaders.

Each corner of the triangle understands and uses WPS differently. Generally, demonstrated through various metaphors used by my interviewees, in the case of governmental representatives, WPS is understood as a tool to *show* something. In contrast, for women NGOs/CSOs, it is instead a *leverage* and *advocacy tool* to channel ideas. As gender experts are versatile across the triangle, they did not display one single perspective. However, there is one clear thing, and that is how UN Women perpetuates a homogenous – but pragmatic – understanding of WPS, significantly shaping the national WPS landscape. UN Women often reproduces the national narrative by claiming to be politically neutral and working with any Government. At times, they even risk becoming *the* primary WPS actor, as I have heard from a few research participants. These different understandings across the triangle, even if they have apparent similarities, also lead to differences in strategies. Only in Armenia and post-2023 Georgia have I noticed a significant conflict between the goals and strategies of different actors, whereas, in other countries, there was a certain synergy between the three corners, energized in large part by feminist pragmatism.

However, it is crucial to mention that the feminist alliances themselves – and their use of strategies and pragmatism – do take place in a particular political context and momentum, and the strength of these triangles fluctuates over time. For example, in Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia, even though NAP advocacy existed years prior to its formal adoption, it became more successful *after* the opening of democratic opportunity structures following a social revolution (Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, Rose Revolution in Georgia and Velvet Revolution in Armenia). On the other hand, democratic backsliding can also significantly impact the sustainability of those feminist networks over time, as seen in Georgia today,

where there is an important break of trust and worsening of relations between the Government and civil society.

7.1.2 *Main finding 2: Nearby conflicts and regional geopolitical insecurities strongly influence NAP adoption and implementation, as well as how actors understand and use the WPS agenda*

Several elements should be discussed here. First, whether conflicts are "frozen," as in the cases of Moldova and Georgia (and Armenia before 2020), or "hot," as in the cases of Ukraine and Armenia post-2020, we can observe a central tension. Because the conflicts are sources of gendered insecurity, militarization, existential threat, and/or daily anxiety, these conflicts are seen as the *raison d'être* and rationale for adopting a NAP, and, therefore, their crucial significance. On the other hand, the conflicts themselves impact the ways the NAPs are implemented because they are limitations to a proper implementation with sufficient resources allocated and a full reach of its beneficiaries. Indeed, my research shows that NAPs are often pushed aside during conflicts and crises because other issues are seen as more pressing, and the Government usually does not make the connections between WPS and the crisis itself. In the cases of Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, feminist civil society advocating for the NAP (starting around 2014 for Moldova, 2002 for Georgia, and 2012 for Armenia) before its official adoption clearly linked their past countries' experience of conflict(s) as a reason to adopt a WPS NAP (the war with Transnistria, the Abkhazian war, and the first Nagorno-Karabakh war and periodic flare-ups). In Ukraine,

the war with Russia does not seem to have had an impact as feminist advocacy for a WPS NAP started in Ukraine *before* (around 2012) the start of the Donbas war in 2014.

Second, on a more fundamental level, the conflicts influence how people perceive security and peace, which in turn affects the development and implementation of WPS NAPs. The personal perceptions and experiences of war and peace – and everything in between – directly impact how my research participants approached the topic of WPS in highly polarized, insecure, and militarized political contexts. Some did so unintentionally, while others did so because it was directly linked to their own history as conflict-affected women, internally displaced persons, or survivors. My research has put them front and center as situated knowers and referents of security. Insecurities related to war, prolonged conflicts, or occupation seemed to be a – if not *the* – central concern for many of the women I interviewed in this research, and their answers to my questions often came back naturally to a broader discussion of the conflict. A fear of conflict revival in Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia was omnipresent in the specific periods during which I conducted my interviews. The way they understand and use (or do *not* use) the WPS norms derives directly from their experiences and situated knowledge rather than from theoretical analyses of the WPS agenda. In the case of Ukrainian feminists, we can clearly see a clash between feminist theoretical ideals of antimilitarism and the empirical reality of having to compose with multiple layers of insecurity and prolonged Russian aggression. WPS in Ukraine is indissociable from national security and the protection of its borders, which is understood in the most conventional sense of security. And the Ukrainian case shows that WPS

analyses often take this fundamental fact for granted. As one Ukrainian woman told me, "If there is no country, there is no NAP!"

Third, the role of Russia and Russian imperialism in all those conflicts is clear, omnipresent and linked to the two previous points. The four countries in my research, as former Soviet republics, have "inherited similar state administrative and governance structures upon independence." They "had to build their own national security and justice sector institutions by drawing on, as well as restructuring and reforming the ones from the Soviet era. The institutional culture of Soviet-era bureaucracy in these structures was one which in many ways was diametrically opposed to the spirit of the WPS agenda: obsessed with state security and secrecy, undemocratic and non-participatory, untransparent and hierarchical." (Myrttinen 2022, 107) Soviet legacies have had a significant impact on each country in different ways, shaping societal gender norms in the post-Soviet era. Enumerating them here would go beyond the scope of this research. Still, common patterns can be observed across cases, with one of the most obvious ones being the presence of "frozen" conflicts (in Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia before 2020) and Russia's imperialist aggression in Ukraine. These conflicts are a means to help Russia maintain a firm grip on and subordinate its neighboring countries, in line with its "near abroad" foreign policy playbook (de Waal 2024).

Fourth, my empirical data demonstrates the regional consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a point of no return (also see de Waal 2024; Gogoladze 2023). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has directly and indirectly impacted neighboring countries. In

Moldova, these challenges were evident through waves of refugees, increased insecurities related to the Transnistrian conflict, energy manipulation, and hybrid attacks aimed at the pro-Western Moldovan government. This has led to a significant shift in Moldova's neutrality policy as they now seek closer ties with NATO. In Georgia, there has been a trauma revival of the wars in 1992 and 2008, increased tensions regarding Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, and a growing alignment of the Georgian Dream with Russia. These changes are part of a broader trend of democracy backsliding in recent years, leading to strained relations between the government and civil society in Georgia. In Armenia, significant geopolitical changes and realignment of political alliances have occurred, along with Russia's disengagement in the region and the tacit approval of Azerbaijan's forceful (re)capture of Nagorno-Karabakh. This has worsened existing insecurities in the region and led to the creation of new ones. The declining role of Russia in the region has created a "power vacuum," leading to a shift with new actors gaining more prominence, such as the EU, the United States, and Turkey. The invasion also had an impact on the negotiation platforms in the region – regarding the Abkhazia, Tskhinvali/South Ossetia (GID and IPRM), and Transnistria conflicts (the 5+2 format) – where Russia is a direct party in the conflicts. The invasion further isolated residents in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, as they are heavily dependent on Russia and, therefore, also living with the consequences of international isolation and sanctions. The massive influx of Russian citizens emigrating to Georgia and Armenia, especially men, to avoid mobilization led to a dramatic increase in the cost of living and created communal tensions, especially in Georgia. Finally, women peacebuilders have noted an additional burden as they had to shift their usual work to directly respond on the ground for humanitarian

assistance and refugee response (e.g., in Moldova and Ukraine) with limited resources. They also noted an increase in Russian disinformation, online propaganda, and cyber-attacks directed at feminist civil society, women peacebuilders, and human rights defenders, making their work on peacebuilding extremely difficult as people see them as traitors of the nation, foreign agents, and/or they have themselves lost faith in peace (see Fal-Dutra Santos 2024; Gogoladze 2023). In short, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War earlier, has been a tectonic change nationally and regionally.

However, the invasion also created new opportunities for WPS advocacy and leadership nationally and regionally, bringing together networks of women peacebuilders united against Russian imperialism and wars. In Ukraine, WPS leadership – especially related to conflict-related sexual violence and women in combat – became a vital part of the country's global public image during the invasion. It also created a significant decolonial shift in feminist mentality as well. As Hanna Manoilenko, a woman peacebuilder and expert, explained in an interview conducted by the OSCE, "My inspiration is my Ukrainian sisters, the brave women that I work with. I used to look up a lot to feminist thinkers from the West, trying to find answers to my questions, especially on militarism and the way feminism *should* look like. However, since the invasion, I realized that these are the people around me that I should first listen to. While recognizing the value of exchange and mutual learning, at this point in my life, I understand that *knowledge comes from within*, and no one knows our context better than we do." (OSCE 2023, n.p) This echoes particularly well what I was also hearing in my interviews. Not only do Ukrainians have the potential to lead

and inspire globally on WPS issues, but they are also best positioned to do so based on their own experiences. This underscores once again the crucial importance of situated, lived, and embodied knowledge over Western feminist theories on WPS and militarism.

To conclude, while the wars and regional insecurities have made the need for WPS NAPs more "obvious," amplifying and exposing deep societal insecurities for all to see, they have also complicated the implementation, making it difficult for all actors involved. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a turning point in the broad region. It fueled conflict revival anxiety, common pain of Russian imperialism, and brought back war traumas from the past. It also further nourished the idea of the West being synonymous with progress, modernity, and respect for human rights, in opposition to a dangerous, autocratic Russia.

7.1.3 Main finding 3: The entire NAP process(es) is inseparable from broader political dynamics

From the context in which NAPs emerge to the way they are conceived, thought of, and implemented, they are inseparable from larger political processes in which they take place. Three elements stand out here. First, as suggested before in the WPS literature through quantitative data, the level of democratization of a country seems to be correlated to NAP adoption (True 2016, 317), which is largely shown in my cases. In Ukraine, Georgia (before 2023), and Armenia, WPS advocacy especially took off after democratic openings, namely after the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, after the Rose Revolution in Georgia, and after the Velvet Revolution in Armenia. No such major social upheaving

happened in Moldova, though there are also clear signs that WPS is associated with democracy, namely good governance, a vibrant civil society, and human rights. This correlation can be easily explained by the fact that fundamental elements associated with democracy – like free and fair election processes, political pluralism, freedom of the press and expression, transparency, the fight against corruption, and protection of minorities – go hand in hand with the adoption and implementation of WPS NAPs.

If democratization is associated with WPS, so is autocratization. This is highly visible in Georgia's case, where we observe an important fluctuation across time from active WPS regional leadership to stagnation following COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine to a decline in the importance of WPS. Internal political crisis due to the adoption of the foreign agent law, the rise of anti-gender movements, the erosion of democracy, and the ambiguous policies and rhetoric of the Georgian Dream influenced the NAP process through the attention and resources given to the NAP by the Government. The case of Georgia tells us how the gains associated with the WPS agenda are fragile and never set in stone – they can be overturned during political crises or changes of direction in foreign policy. It is unclear what the fifth NAP process will look like and whether there will be one at all, given the deteriorating relationships between the government and civil society.

Second, my data points clearly to how WPS NAPs and the WPS agenda itself are perceived as a symbol of democracy and "Europeanness" by Government officials mostly, but also by women NGOs/CSOs and gender experts. Thus, WPS is seen as a vehicle for change toward progress and a distinction from Russia, which is perceived as undemocratic, not

feminist, and not European. In Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia (before 2023), the NAP process is/was intrinsically linked to Euro-Atlantic integration cognitively (the EU and/or NATO as inspiration and standard to follow) but also practically (in terms of partnerships and fulfillment of EU membership requirements) (see also Santoire 2023; Myrttinen 2022). In Armenia, although they were not seeking to join the EU until recently, the NAP gives a positive democratic image to the country, contrary to autocratic Turkey and Azerbaijan. However, arguing that NAP adoption is solely an instrumental means for Euro-Atlantic integration or democratic appeals would downplay the valuable work of NGOs/CSOs on the ground and, most importantly, their agency. Many of them conform and use WPS jargon to their advantage, for visibility, legitimacy, the networks it provides, and the funding opportunities associated with it. Women NGOs/CSOs are flexible, pragmatic, and strategically engage with WPS, consistent with previous scarce literature (Walsh 2015).

Third, and related to the previous point, because norms are constitutive of the identity of actors that enact them, WPS is intimately tied to nation-building processes. The fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting violent conflicts over contested regions have fueled decades of militarized insecurity and nationalism. And "within the militarized contexts of these nations, nationalism becomes not only about defining and preserving identity along ethnic lines, but also along gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, and class lines. Any deviation from the hegemonic national identity of each context threatens the 'security' of said nation and casts all non-conforming people as 'enemies' or 'traitors' of that nation." (Abrahamyan, Mammadova, and Tskhvariashvili 2018, 53)

If WPS is perceived to be in line with larger national narratives of progress, Europeanization, and victory, like in Ukraine, there is less resistance to be found by Government actors and/or the wider society. If, on the contrary, WPS is *not* perceived to be positively in line with national narratives, like in Armenia, then there is more resistance. Previous research has shown that Russia, for example, actively opposes and spoils the agenda in multilateral settings, as they perceived this framework to be "gender propaganda" – a Western agenda aiming to destroy family and traditional values (Santoire 2024b; Hamilton, Pagot, and Shepherd 2021; Lukatela 2016). My interviews with women located in Transnistria and Abkhazia – two breakaway regions heavily dependent on Russia – suggest that similar dynamics are possibly at play where *de facto* authorities reject global gender frameworks. Two reasons were mentioned. First, *de facto* authorities reject UN frameworks because UN Member States do not recognize them. Therefore, they use their unrecognized status as an excuse not to implement international normative frameworks. Second, they argue, like Russia, that gender normative frameworks like the WPS agenda (or the Istanbul Convention) are threats to traditional families and values; in other terms, that they are "Western gender propaganda." To avoid attacks from antifeminist conservative actors, women NGOs/CSOs in those societies have to creatively frame their activities in a non "provocative" way, avoiding risky terms like 'feminism' or 'gender,' consistent with the literature that women often do WPS without necessarily naming it as such (Basini and Ryan 2016; see also Levitt and Merry 2009).

As we have seen in Chapter 1, norms like WPS diffuse precisely because they are vague and malleable; actors give meaning to them and, in doing so, constantly shape and reshape

the norm itself. Norms like WPS can be used differently according to the context and the actors and can be distorted and appropriated, too. The more elusive norms are, the easier they spread and "morph." Across cases, there was not a consensus among my interviewees about *where* the energy came from for a NAP, which is coherent with the literature (e.g., Basini and Ryan 2016). While some thought it only came from grassroots NGOs/CSOs, others thought it was a project "imposed" by foreign actors like Western donors and organizations and led to the co-optation of feminist activism (a view more prevalent in Armenia). My participants also had different visions of what constituted successful implementation for them based on their situated experiences of gender insecurity.

During my research, I was not searching for the most accurate explanation or determining who was *really* right. Multiple realities and truths coexist together. However, the data gathered from numerous sources in this research allows me to draw the following general observations. My research across the region demonstrates that a government's decision to adopt a NAP is influenced by four major factors, indissociable of the context and momentum in which the country and region are in. First, because they are the ones who can first identify needs at the local level, there is an initial push by feminist civil society, but this grassroots advocacy is not sufficient, and women NGOs/CSOs must find charismatic and interested allies (i.e., femocrats) in institutions and support from international organizations. Second, there is a push from international organizations and Western donors, mainly UN Women country offices acting as a "glue" holding all actors and initiatives together, bringing resources, legitimacy, and authority. Third, governments feel a certain normative "pressure" to abide by global gender norms and frameworks, but

they need a strong incentive to adopt a NAP as this requires time, effort, knowledge, and resources. Fourth, they do so, in part, because of a desire to promote a good image of the country through diverse means and arguments, notably by differentiating themselves from Russia or other neighboring countries, promoting their own national narrative of the conflict, and showing their commitment toward Euro-Atlantic integration processes. Whether this comes from a *genuine* prioritization of gender or a deep understanding of WPS is questionable – but not so important in this case and difficult to "prove." This timeline is not a generalizable rule for the entire region, but this pattern of both internal and external forces reflects closely the empirical data of this research.

7.1.4 Main finding 4: The region shows both unique and global trends

Finally, several elements discussed in this thesis are also found in other parts of the world. For instance, we can find global trends in the implementation of the WPS agenda in the post-Soviet space, including chronic underfunding of NAPs and local women's organizations, the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, the vulnerability of WPS gains to political crises or shifts in foreign policy, and insufficient attention to long-term prevention. However, as evidenced by the three other main findings, it is mostly a matter of context in which these dynamics take place. There are unique aspects of the region that deserve to be highlighted and explained in order to understand what they can bring to our overall understanding of the WPS agenda.

We knew very little about how the WPS agenda functions in the post-Soviet space, and my research fills this critical gap in the literature. In many ways, first and foremost, it is an empirical exploration, but one that in itself teaches us theoretical lessons. As alluded to across the chapters of this dissertation, my research shows that unique dynamics found in the post-Soviet space reveal important blind spots and shortcomings in the WPS literature, challenging some of its core debates and concepts.

First, the types of conflicts that we observe in the post-Soviet space – namely protracted conflicts, *de facto* states, and heavy Russian military presence or occupation – are unique to this/these region/s. They allow us to refine our understanding of conflicts than those currently in the WPS literature. My data on Moldova and Georgia show that the WPS agenda clearly fails to capture the complexity of these spaces and protracted conflicts as a manifestation and continuation of Russian imperialism. While the possibility of dialogue with women "on the other side," i.e., in the occupied and/or separatist territories, is more significant than in the cases of Ukraine and Armenia, it nevertheless remains complex, taboo, or deemed too politically sensitive to do so (even among peacebuilders themselves). For Ukraine and Armenia, my data show a failure to grasp the difficulty of implementing – or even thinking about – the WPS agenda in "hot" conflicts and crises. There is a fundamental blind spot in the WPS agenda – understood broadly as a global normative framework and an epistemic community of theory and practice – because this framework is a direct *product* of the post-Cold War era and transnational feminist debates and spaces, as seen in Chapter 1. Consequently, not only are the voices of post-socialist women erased, but the parameters of this agenda are built on a Western, Westphalian understanding of the

nation-state, and make it difficult to conceive what this agenda can or cannot do in ambiguously defined geographies, separatist or occupied territories, like those found in the post-Soviet space. As such, there are important shortcomings not only in the effective timing of the implementation of WPS norms (i.e., at *which stage* of a conflict should a NAP be used/deployed) but also in the geographical locations that appear to be excluded or unfit for the application of these norms (i.e., contested, occupied or separatist territories that do not fit into internationally recognized borders).

Second, my data reveals critical empirical grounds to challenge and nuance the binary "militarist" vs. "antimilitarist" and "co-optation" vs. "transformation" debates found in the WPS literature. Although empirical evidence from other geographical contexts may challenge these debates too, my data illustrates their frequent incompatibility in the post-Soviet region, highlighting the need for more nuance and pragmatism. What is deemed as transformational by feminists is profoundly contextual. The critical literature on the WPS agenda, because it is founded on anti-militarist grounds, is quick to say that there is a militarization of the WPS agenda worldwide. While this is definitely not false, these analyses often fail to listen to the voices of the women on the ground (who do not have such a black-and-white view of antimilitarism because militarization and resistance to it is an integral part of their lives) and build solidarity with them. As my data shows, particularly in Ukraine, Ukrainian feminists are aware of the militarization that the war entails in the social fabric, but out of survival, they must advocate for weapons because there can be no NAP without a country in the first place. The binary debates of "co-optation" vs. "transformation" underestimate the challenges that women living in militarized

environments must deal with, navigating through complex dilemmas and pragmatic choices. Worst, antimilitarist feminists have reproduced harmful patterns of "Westplaining" and epistemic imperialism by speaking over feminists of the region, denying their expertise and agency (Hendl et al. 2024).

Third, while the WPS agenda literature has a lot to say about American and Western imperialism and colonialism, one has to search hard to find critiques of *Russian* imperialism and colonialism. This is despite the fact that Russia has been engaged in imperialist wars and invasions for decades in the region, including more recently in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine (as well as its mercenary involvement in several African states), endangering the lives of civilians, committing war crimes, notably using rape as a weapon of war. Again, the post-socialist feminist literature has provided us with important cues to understand why this is the case. As a product of the post-Cold War era, transnational feminist discourses have been shaped mainly by dialogue and debates between women from the Global North and the Global South, with anti-(US)imperialism at its core. My research has shown that the devastating and unique consequences of Russian imperialism and Soviet legacies, particularly through region-wide militarization and protracted conflicts where Russia plays a dominant role, as well as economic and political dependency on Russia, should be of concern to feminists. These issues warrant adequate attention or should at least raise feminist curiosity.

Fourth, while NAPs are undoubtedly technocratic and often do not lead to transformative *feminist* change, my research shows that NAPs themselves, simply by existing, are

strategically useful for local women activists, who are well aware of their shortcomings. While this can be observed in other geographic contexts, my research reveals the limitations of certain theoretical approaches and narratives in the WPS literature by confronting them with the lived experiences of women in the post-Soviet space, thus exposing their own core contradictions and tensions. An excessively critical approach toward WPS often found in the literature overlooks this practical dimension as well as local women's agency in this process (e.g., even if Western donors were to 'impose' a certain vision, they still have agency to strategically engage or not, formulating elaborated critiques of WPS norms and how they apply or do not apply to their local context – in short, they *shape* the norm). My research shows the real need to be pragmatic through incremental change, for example, because descriptive representation can transform itself over time into meaningful representation and participation. This pragmatism "provides an opening that was not there before and would not be there if [they] pushed for a 'perfect' version of what the normative agenda should look like in that local context." (Davies and True 2019, 4–5)

7.2 Limitations of the research and future avenues of reflections

While every effort has been made to ensure that all points of view are as representative and diverse as possible (even though the research is not quantitative and is not conducted from a positivist epistemological stance), there is limited but potential generalizability to other countries of the broader post-Soviet space. It would be essential to specifically investigate other subregions that were not covered in this research, such as Central Asia and the Baltic states, to denote subregional dynamics. For instance, although the Baltic

states belong to both the EU and NATO, they have established themselves as distinct WPS leaders. In Central Asia, the situation contrasts sharply, with the NAPs reflecting the regional challenges posed by border conflicts, terrorism and Afghanistan (Santoire 2024).

Moreover, while means were employed to overcome this limitation, it would undoubtedly have been relevant to have access to a larger number of governmental representatives and femocrats, which would have made it possible to accumulate more empirical data on their internal strategies and challenges. For example, in the case of Armenia, I was unable to interview key people within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is, therefore, difficult to establish with any certainty what the government thinks or understands and uses the WPS agenda other than through secondary sources. In other countries, interviewing a larger number of femocrats would have reinforced my empirical findings even more.

Several aspects of this research would benefit from further investigation in future projects. While processes of regional policy learning and emulation have been shown in the literature before (True 2016, 311), my findings do not provide sufficient evidence to establish causal relations. However, there is limited but plausible evidence pointing to regional influence in NAP adoption among the four countries in my research: regional consultations and capacity-building, use of Georgian training manuals, and regional exchange of expertise and lessons learned. In doing so, comparing with the Balkans countries would be interesting as there seems to be a "domino" effect of NAP adoption there, too, where most of them adopted NAPs successively between 2010 and 2014.

In the same vein, my research points to the various roles of feminist peacebuilding networks and learning exchanges nationally and in the broader former Soviet Union. Through a common language and history, networks of women peacebuilders create rare spaces for nurturing dialogue, friendships, and regional feminist solidarity in the face of the destructive legacies and ongoing impacts of Russian imperialism. In regional networks, women peacebuilders can share experiences, lessons learned, and difficulties encountered in their WPS advocacy work at the national and local levels, enabling them to learn about NAP processes in other authoritarian or semi-democratic societies. Also, networks of women peacebuilders allow them to develop collective skills, regional strategies, and possibilities to influence decision-makers and Western donors, thanks to capacity-building initiatives by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, among others. These observations need more dedicated attention (Santoire, Farion and Kostava, forthcoming).

As mentioned earlier, if democratization influences WPS processes, so does autocratization. As such, it would be interesting to investigate cases in which WPS advocacy failed and did *not* result in NAP adoption, such as in Azerbaijan. Continuing this research as the region's dynamics are constantly changing and unfolding in new ways will be essential. For example, looking at the impact of foreign agent laws on WPS advocacy, feminist organizing, and the development and implementation of NAPs (e.g., in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan) will be crucial. Likewise, paying close attention to what a future peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Ukraine and Russia might do (or not) to WPS landscapes will be fascinating.

Finally, in my view, it is vitally important to look more closely at gender-related insecurities in unrecognized and contested regions, such as de facto states and/or occupied territories. The *de facto* research community generally pays more attention to why these quasi states and regimes survive in the international system when they are isolated from the rest of the world, dependent on another state. This literature is deeply lacking in analyses that focus specifically on the humanitarian and security dimensions of these sites and their consequences for the people living there.

7.3 Concluding remarks

Fundamentally, this thesis reveals the tensions between the theoretical ideals of feminist International Relations theories and the empirical realities of an often overlooked and uncharted area: the post-Soviet space. It emphasizes the need to *broaden* our theoretical "toolkit," our methods of inquiry and our feminist curiosity. The empirical richness of this thesis exposes the limits and shortcomings of some of the current theorization of the WPS agenda through the complexity of the lived, situated experiences and processes behind NAPs in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia. It shows that NAPs – as national public policy documents but also as manifestations of a global UN normative framework – can only be understood in their respective context. Thus, their emergence, adoption, and implementation are inextricably linked to the broader political and geopolitical processes in which they are embedded. In addition, national and regional (gendered) insecurities directly influence not only these stages of the NAPs process but also how the different actors involved understand and use the WPS agenda.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Consent form

Consent Form

Title of the study: The Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in the Post-Soviet Space

Principal Investigator :
Bénédicte Santoire
School of Political Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

Name of Supervisor :
Claire Turenne-Sjolander
School of Political Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

Invitation to participate :

You are invited to participate in the abovementioned research study (doctoral thesis) conducted by Bénédicte Santoire, under the supervision of Professor Claire Turenne-Sjolander.

The research project is funded by the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture (FRQSC) and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS).

Purpose of the study :

First of all, thank you for agreeing to meet with me and take some of your time for this research, it is highly appreciated.

The present thesis focuses on the implementation of the WPS agenda in the post-Soviet space, using the four existing (NAPs) of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia as one regional case study. It seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) How is this WPS agenda (as a vast normative policy framework) perceived, framed, and contested at the national and regional levels by different actors (e.g., state actors, IO workers, NGOs/CSO, women activists)? 2) What roles have regional exchanges and cooperation among NAP adopters played in the implementation of this agenda? 3) How does the regional militarized environment influence the production, understanding, framing and implementation of the WPS agenda?

The goal and contribution of this research are threefold. First, the thesis aims to go beyond the usual global North/South dichotomy in WPS literature and remedy the theoretical and empirical disregard for this region. Second, the study pays attention to the performative and constitutive dimensions of NAP adoption by state actors and how these narratives are in line (or contrast) with other actors such as UN Women and women NGOs/CSOs. Third, the research attempts to establish regional trends in commitments towards the WPS agenda in the post-Soviet space by observing peer learning and cooperation, especially in regional women solidarity networks such as the Women's Peace Dialogue Platform for Resolution 1325.

Participation :

Your participation will consist of participating in a semi-directed interview (one session) with the principal investigator. The interview duration is determined by your availability (approximately from 1h to 1h30 maximum) and preferences. At your convenience, the interview can also be done virtually (e.g., Zoom, Skype or Facetime). Unless asked otherwise, the interview will be conducted in English.

During the interview, you will be asked questions on the implementation of the WPS agenda in your country and region, more specifically on topics such as: National Action Plans (NAPs), regional cooperation, the roles of women non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil

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society organizations (CSOs) in WPS, and the influence of the regional environment (e.g., militarization, [name of the conflict], the impact of Russia's invasion on Ukraine) on the NAP.

To facilitate the researcher's task of the interview's retranscription, you consent to the interview being recorded (audio only) (Note: the audio file will be kept confidentially until the end of the doctoral degree for data integrity purposes): Yes, I agree □ No, I disagree □

Risks :

Technically, your participation in this study – based on your professional expertise and experience – does not entail any risks, except for potential negative perception by peers or employers (e.g., speaking against your organization or sharing conflicting/controversial opinions of your organization's work and/or on a political topic).

If there are certain questions that you prefer to avoid, you can mention that to me at the beginning. You can say as much or as little as you want for each question. You are free not to answer one or more questions and point this out to me. I will try to be as alert as possible and avoid getting into uncomfortable or personal topics (e.g., about your private life, personal beliefs or affiliations). I will be as responsive as possible throughout the whole interview. Please note that you can stop the interview at any time without negative consequences.

Benefits :

Your participation will not bring you any particular personal benefit. However, your participation will contribute to the advancement of knowledge. It will help to better understand how the WPS agenda is perceived, understood, framed and implemented in your country and region, an area of the world that is significantly understudied in the gender, peace and security literature. Your participation will also help better understand regional cooperation in the diffusion and adoption of WPS NAPs.

Confidentiality and privacy :

You have received assurance from the researcher that the information you share will remain strictly confidential. Only the principal investigator will be responsible for the data collection, handling and analysis throughout the whole process of the research. You understand that the interview content will be used for the researcher's doctoral thesis and resulting research publications and communications.

Unless you choose to be identified, the interview will be anonymous by default, meaning that your name will never be mentioned anywhere. If there is any information that could identify you, it will be changed to protect your anonymity. However, if you would like me to explicitly name you in my research and resulting publications and communications, please let me know at the beginning. In addition, the data from the interview will be secured and kept on password-protected files, computers, and external hard drives.

You wish to remain anonymous (<u>both</u> your name and your organization) □
You wish to remain anonymous (<u>only</u> your name, but your organization can be shared) □
You do <u>not</u> wish to remain anonymous (both your name and your organization can be shared) □

Please note that despite the confidentiality and privacy measures taken by the researcher, given the small community of individuals working on the WPS agenda in the region, it is possible that

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you or your organization could be indirectly identified based on the professional opinions and/or information shared in the interview.

*If the interview is conducted online, you are aware of the following information: In order to minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure your confidentiality, it is recommended that you use standard safety measures, such as signing out of your account, closing your browser, and locking your device when you have completed the study.

Conservation of data :

All anonymized data (i.e., interview transcripts and field notes) will be secured on the researcher's password-protected computer. Non-anonymized data (i.e., recruitment letters and consent forms containing names and email addresses), however, will be doubly protected as they will be kept on a separate password-protected hard drive (kept in a locked cabinet). The data collected in the interviews will be kept for a period of 10 years. The interview audio file, where applicable, will be kept confidentially until the end of the doctoral degree (for data integrity purposes). At all times, the data will only be accessible by the principal investigator. After the retention period, the data will be safely destroyed.

Compensation :

There is no monetary compensation for my participation in this research.

Voluntary Participation :

You understand that your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate, and if you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the interview at any time, and you can refuse to answer any questions without suffering any negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the dataset and not used in the study.

If you have any questions about the study, you may contact the researcher or their supervisor at the above addresses.

If you have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the University of Ottawa Office of Research Ethics and Integrity via telephone at +1 (613) 562-5387 or via email at ethics@uottawa.ca

It is recommended that you keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Acceptance: By signing my name below, you agree to participate in this research study.

Participant's name: ________________________ Date: _________________
Participant's signature: ______________________ Date: _________________
Researcher's signature: ______________________ Date: _________________

3

Appendix B – Interview guide (Moldova)

List of preliminary interview questions

The interview will begin by a brief introduction of yourself, your professional experience and how you started working with WPS agenda.

Then, I will ask you questions about the NAP process in Moldova, who are the main actors, topics, challenges, gaps, etc. Based on your experience working at X organization.

Then I will ask questions about the specificities of the Moldovan context, but also about WPS in a regional perspective as well because I am interested in that for my research.

To begin, would you like to briefly introduce yourself and share with me how/when did you (or your organization) started working on the WPS agenda? What is your relationship with WPS?

1. What does Resolution 1325 mean to you?

Optional: Do you think other women in your country know about this resolution? In your opinion, does the NAP reflect the needs of Moldovan women?

2. Have you been involved (directly or indirectly) in the development, consultation and implementation of activities related to the WPS agenda? Can you relate on your experience?

3. Who have been the main actors in the development, consultation, and implementation of the NAP? I would like to know, for example:
    i. Are there other actors that should have been more involved?
    ii. Which themes of WPS have been the most/least considered?
    iii. Are there actors that were resistant to the WPS agenda/the NAP?
    iv. Were there consensus/tensions among participants?
    v. How did international organizations like NATO or the EU influenced this process?

4. Based on your experience, how does your government perceive and understand the WPS agenda?

5. How the protracted conflict with Transnistria influenced the Moldovan NAP?

Optional: Do you think the WPS agenda could be a useful tool for peace dialogues with Transnistria, mediation, and conflict resolution in the future?

6. Regarding the implementation of the Moldovan NAP so far. Like everywhere else, there are always gaps between what is said "on paper" and what is happening in reality? So, I would like to hear your thoughts on that. For example:
    a. What are the biggest achievements of the Moldovan NAP so far? What didn't work well?

b. Do you see any inconsistencies in the implementation of the Moldovan NAP between different ministries and government bodies? Between civil society and government? Between Dodon and Sandu?

7. In your opinion, to what extent do the neighboring countries' experiences with WPS influence the Moldovan NAP and vice-versa? (E.g., regional mutual learning, shared Soviet past)

Optional: What do you think these countries have in common? How did these exchanges go? Were there any tensions?

8. To conclude, so many things have changed since the first Moldovan NAP, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moldova received the EU candidate status, to name a few. With the second NAP recently adopted, what are the biggest WPS challenges for Moldova in the future? What are your expectations of the second NAP?

Optional: Is there something else you would like to share with me?

Appendix C – Interview guide (Georgia)

List of preliminary interview questions

The interview will begin by a brief introduction of your professional experience and how you started working with WPS. Then, I will ask you questions about the NAP process in Georgia, who were the main actors, themes, challenges, gaps, resistances, etc. I will ask questions about the specificities of the Georgian context, but also about WPS in a regional perspective as well because I am interested in that for my research.

To begin, would you like to briefly introduce yourself and share with me how/when did you (or your organization) started working on the WPS agenda? Whatever you feel comfortable with.

1. What does Resolution 1325 mean to you?
   a. Do you think other women in your country know about this resolution?
      i. In your opinion, does the NAP reflect the needs of Georgian women?

2. Have you been involved (directly or indirectly) in the development, consultation and implementation of activities related to the WPS agenda?
   a. Can you relate on your experience?

3. Who have been the main actors in the development, consultation, and implementation of the NAP? I would like to know, for example:
   i. Are there other actors that should have been more involved?
   ii. Which themes of WPS have been the most/least considered?
   iii. Are there actors that were resistant to the WPS agenda/the NAP?
   iv. Was there consensus/tensions among participants?
   v. How did NATO or the EU influenced this process?

4. In your opinion, is the WPS agenda – as a global normative framework – relevant to your national and larger regional context?

5. What does an effective implementation of the WPS agenda look like to you?
   a. What are the biggest achievements of the Georgian NAP so far?

6. Based on your experience, how does your government perceive and understand the WPS agenda?
   a. Did you notice a difference on this perception between the different government administrations?

7. In your opinion, has the situation in Abkhazia & Tskhinvali/South Ossetia influenced the Georgian NAP?
   a. Do you think the WPS agenda could be a useful tool for peace dialogues, mediation, and conflict resolution?

8. In your opinion, are there any gaps between what is said "on paper" and what is applied in reality? For example:

   a. Do you see any inconsistencies in the implementation of the Georgian NAP between different ministries and government bodies? Between civil society and government?

9. In your opinion, to what extent do the neighboring countries' experiences with WPS influence the Georgian NAP? (E.g., regional mutual learning, shared Soviet past)
   a. What do you think these countries have in common?
   b. How did these exchanges go? Were there any tensions?
   c. Why is Georgia often perceived as a WPS "policy leader"?

10. To conclude, so many things have changed since the first NAP, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU membership application, to name a few. In prevision of the fourth NAP, what are the biggest WPS challenges for Georgia, and the region?

Is there something else you would like to share with me?

Appendix D – Interview guide (Armenia)

List of preliminary interview questions

The interview will begin by a brief introduction of yourself, your professional experience and how you started working with WPS agenda. Then, I will ask you questions about the NAP process in Armenia, who are the main actors, topics, challenges, gaps, etc. Then I will ask questions about the specificities of the Armenian context, but also about WPS in a regional perspective as well because I am interested in that for my research.

To begin, would you like to briefly introduce yourself and share with me how/when did you (or your organization) started working on the WPS agenda? What is your relationship with WPS?

1. What does Resolution 1325 mean to you?
   a. Do you think other women in your country know about this resolution?
      i. In your opinion, does the NAP reflect the needs of Armenian women?

2. Have you been involved (directly or indirectly) in the development, consultation and implementation of activities related to the WPS agenda?
   a. Can you relate on your experience?

3. Who have been the main actors in the development, consultation, and implementation of the NAP? I would like to know, for example:
   i. Are there other actors that should have been more involved?
   ii. Which themes of WPS have been the most/least considered?
   iii. Are there actors that were resistant to the WPS agenda/the NAP?
   iv. Were there consensus/tensions among participants?
   v. How did NATO or the EU influenced this process?

4. Based on your experience, how does your government perceive and understand the WPS agenda?

5. In your opinion, how is the WPS agenda – as a global normative framework – relevant to the Armenian national context? More specifically, how does the situation with Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh influenced the Armenian NAP/understanding of security?
   a. Do you think the WPS agenda could be a useful tool for peace dialogues, mediation, and conflict resolution?

6. Regarding the implementation of the Armenian NAP so far. Like everywhere else, there are always gaps between what is said "on paper" and what is happening in reality? So, I would like to hear your thoughts on that. For example:
   a. What are the biggest achievements of the Armenian NAP so far? What didn't work well?
   b. Do you see any inconsistencies in the implementation of the Armenian NAP between different ministries and government bodies? Between civil society and government?

7. In your opinion, to what extent do the neighboring countries' experiences with WPS influence the Armenian NAP and vice-versa? (E.g., regional mutual learning, shared Soviet past)
    a. What do you think these countries have in common?
    b. How did these exchanges go? Were there any tensions?

8. To conclude, so many things have changed since the first Armenian NAP, including the war with Azerbaijan in 2020, constant militarization and political instability, but also regionally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to name a few. With the second NAP adopted, what are the biggest WPS challenges for Armenia in the future, and the region?

Is there something else you would like to share with me?

Appendix E – Interview guide (Ukraine)

List of preliminary interview questions

The interview will begin by a brief introduction of yourself, your professional experience and how you started working with WPS agenda.

Then, I will ask you questions about the NAP process in Ukraine, who are the main actors, topics, challenges, gaps, etc. Based on your experience working with X organization.

Then I will ask questions about the specificities of the Ukrainian context, but also about WPS in a regional perspective as well because I am interested in that for my research.

To begin, would you like to briefly introduce yourself and share with me how/when did you (or your organization) started working on the WPS agenda? What is your relationship with WPS?

1. As a Ukrainian woman, what does Resolution 1325 mean to you?

Optional: Do you think other women in your country know about this resolution? In your opinion, does the current NAP reflect the needs of Ukrainian women?

2. Have you been involved (directly or indirectly) in the development, consultation and implementation of activities related to the WPS agenda? Can you relate on your experience?

3. Who have been the main actors in the development, consultation, and implementation of the NAP? I would like to know, for example:
    i. Are there other actors that should have been more involved?
    ii. Which themes of WPS have been the most/least considered?
    iii. Are there actors that were resistant to the WPS agenda/the NAP?
    iv. Were there consensus/tensions among participants?
    v. How did international organizations like UN, NATO or the EU influenced this process?

4. Based on your experience, how does your government perceive and understand the WPS agenda?

5. In your opinion, how is the WPS agenda – as a global normative framework – relevant to the Ukrainian national context? More specifically, how does the ongoing war with Russia influenced the Ukrainian NAP and/or understanding of security since 2014?

Optional: Do you think the WPS agenda could be a useful tool for peace dialogues, mediation, and conflict resolution in the future?

6. Regarding the implementation of the Ukrainian NAP so far. Like everywhere else, there are always gaps between what is said "on paper" and what is happening in reality? So, I would like to hear your thoughts on that. For example:
   a. What are the biggest achievements of the Ukrainian NAP so far? What didn't work well?
   b. Do you see any inconsistencies in the implementation of the Ukrainian NAP between different ministries and government bodies? Between civil society and government? Between oblasts?

7. In your opinion, to what extent do the neighboring countries' experiences with WPS influence the Ukrainian NAP and vice-versa?

Optional: What do you think these countries have in common? How did these exchanges go? Were there any tensions?

8. To conclude, so many things have changed since the first Ukrainian NAP, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukraine received the EU candidate status, to name a few. With the second NAP recently adopted, what are the biggest WPS challenges for Ukraine in the future?

Optional: Is there something else you would like to share with me?

Appendix F – Certificate of ethics approval

24/05/2022

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE I CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-05-22-7974
Titre du projet / Project Title	The Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Post-Soviet Space
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	24/05/2022
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	23/05/2023

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Appendix G – Certificate of ethics approval (renewed)

02/05/2023

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE I CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-05-22-7974
Titre du projet / Project Title	The Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Post-Soviet Space
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Renouvelé / Renewed
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Appendix H – List of NVivo nodes for data analysis

- $, resourcing & donors - A
- $, resourcing & donors - G
- $, resourcing & donors - M
- $, resourcing & donors - U
- Abkhazia
- Before NAP adoption & drafting process - A
- Before NAP adoption & drafting process - G
- Before NAP adoption & drafting process - M
- Before NAP adoption & drafting process - U
- Consequences of Russian invasion
- Coordination of actors - A
- Coordination of actors - G
- Coordination of actors - M
- Coordination of actors - U
- Euro-Atlantic integration - G
- Euro-Atlantic integration - M
- Euro-Atlantic integration - U
- Future WPS challenges - A
- Future WPS challenges - G
- Future WPS challenges - M
- Future WPS challenges - U
- Gaps, critiques & challenges - A
- Gaps, critiques & challenges - G
- Gaps, critiques & challenges - M
- Gaps, critiques & challenges - U
- Institutional dynamics - A
- Institutional dynamics - G
- Institutional dynamics - M
- Institutional dynamics - U
- Instrumentalization of WPS
- Intergenerational issues
- Intersectionality
- M&E - A
- M&E - G
- M&E - M
- M&E - U
- Militarization & conflict - A
- Militarization & conflict - G
- Militarization & conflict - M
- Militarization & conflict - U
- NAP content - A
- NAP content - G
- NAP content - M
- NAP content - U
- NAP implementation - A
- NAP implementation - G
- NAP implementation - M
- NAP implementation - U
- National politics - A
- National politics - G
- National politics - M
- National politics - U
- Personal introduction to WPS - A
- Personal introduction to WPS - G
- Personal introduction to WPS - M
- Personal introduction to WPS - U
- Postcolonial dimension
- Regional networks & learning - A
- Regional networks & learning - G
- Regional networks & learning - M
- Regional networks & learning - U
- Resistance & contestation - A
- Resistance & contestation - G
- Resistance & contestation - M
- Resistance & contestation - U
- Russia - A
- Russia - G
- Russia - M

- Russia - U
- Soviet legacy - A
- Soviet legacy - G
- Soviet legacy - M
- Soviet legacy - U
- Trauma, fear, anxiety - A
- Trauma, fear, anxiety - G
- Trauma, fear, anxiety - M
- Trauma, fear, anxiety - U
- Understanding & relevance of WPS national - A
- Understanding & relevance of WPS national - G
- Understanding & relevance of WPS national - M
- Understanding & relevance of WPS national - U
- Understanding of peace - A
- Understanding of peace - G
- Understanding of peace - M
- Understanding of peace - U
- Understanding of security - A
- Understanding of security - G
- Understanding of security - M
- Understanding of security - U
- Understanding of WPS global - A
- Understanding of WPS global - G
- Understanding of WPS global - M
- Understanding of WPS global - U
- Understanding of WPS Gov - A
- Understanding of WPS Gov - G
- Understanding of WPS Gov - M
- Understanding of WPS Gov - U
- Understandings of WPS personal - A
- Understandings of WPS personal - G
- Understandings of WPS personal - M
- Understandings of WPS personal - U
- What can others learn from us - A
- What can others learn from us - G
- What can others learn from us - M
- What can others learn from us - U
- WPS actors international - A
- WPS actors international - G
- WPS actors international - M
- WPS actors international - U
- WPS actors national - A
- WPS actors national - G
- WPS actors national - M
- WPS actors national - U
- WPS neglected topics - A
- WPS neglected topics - G
- WPS neglected topics - M
- WPS neglected topics - U
- WPS successes - A
- WPS successes - G
- WPS successes - M
- WPS successes - U
- WPS superstars