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Emasculation and Peace: A Gender Study of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

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Emasculation and Peace: A Gender Study of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

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Para a minha avó, que apoiou entusiasticamente as minhas ambições académicas e deveria ter tido as mesmas oportunidades que eu. Obrigada por tudo!

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Porto, 30 de julho de 2026 / *Porto, July 30, 2026*

Noa Xiomara Santos Anjos Silva Silva

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Resumo

A masculinidade permeou, historicamente, o sistema internacional e, apesar da feminilidade ser cada vez mais aceite na sua estrutura, muitos estados continuam a agir com base em identidades nacionais hipermasculinas, hegemónicas e militarizadas, que, ao invés de promoverem a paz, semeiam a guerra e a discórdia.

Exemplo claro desta atitude é a Rússia, cuja postura e representação masculinas, assumidas durante a presidência de Vladimir Putin, assentam em uma masculinidade hegemónica e profundamente militarizada, em que se alicerça a identidade russa. Promovendo a nível estatal valores conservadores, focados na família tradicional e na superioridade moral do país face a um Ocidente "degenerado". Características que permitiram a justificação interna de uma grave transgressão do direito internacional — a invasão da Ucrânia, em 2022. Já a Ucrânia, país aparentemente visto, a nível internacional, no feminino e assumido como vítima vulnerável da penetração russa, apresenta uma liderança masculina, na pessoa de Volodymyr Zelenskyy, que contrasta não só com a presumida precaridade das suas circunstâncias, mas também com a masculinidade do presidente russo.

Deste modo, este conflito permite perceber a ligação entre a masculinidade e a guerra e, sobretudo, a relutância de atores (hiper)masculinos em aceitar a paz, que percecionam como uma forma de emasculação. Conclui-se que para promover os métodos pacíficos de resolução de disputas a nível global, é necessário desvirtuar a masculinidade hegemónica e militarizada de muitos atores internacionais, que continuam a percecionar uma vitória militar como a solução ideal para um conflito.

Palavras-chave: Masculinidade, Paz, Conflito Russo-ucraniano, Feminismo, Emasculação

Abstract

Masculinity has historically permeated the international system, and despite femininity being increasingly accepted in its structure, many states continue to act based on hypermasculine, hegemonic, and militarized national identities, which, instead of promoting peace, sow war and discord.

A clear example of this attitude is Russia, whose masculine posture and representation, assumed during Vladimir Putin's presidency, are based on a hegemonic and deeply militarized masculinity, on which Russian identity is grounded, promoting conservative state values centered on the traditional family and the country's moral superiority in the face of a "degenerate" West. Characteristics that allowed the internal justification of a serious transgression of international law — the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Ukraine, on the other hand, a country apparently seen, at the international level, as feminine and assumed as a vulnerable victim of Russian penetration, presents a male leadership, in the person of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, which contrasts not only with his seemingly precarious circumstances but also with the masculinity of the Russian president.

In this way, this conflict allows for the understanding of the connection between masculinity and war, and above all, the reluctance of (hyper)masculine actors to accept peace, which they perceive as emasculating. This study concludes that to promote peaceful methods of conflict resolution at the global level, it is necessary to discredit the hegemonic and militarized masculinity of many international actors, who continue to perceive military victory as the ideal solution to a conflict.

Keywords: Masculinity, Peace, Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, Feminism, Emasculation

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CDA ..... Critical Discourse Analysis

CEE..... Central and Eastern European

EU ..... European Union

FAO..... Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FCDA ..... Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

IR ..... International Relations

LGBTQIA+ ..... Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual

MHRIC ..... Master in History, International Relations and Cooperation

NAP ..... National Action Plan

NATO ..... North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NGO ..... Nongovernmental Organization

PSS ..... Peace and Security Studies

RAF ..... Russian Armed Forces

UAF ..... Ukrainian Armed Forces

UN ..... United Nations

UNHCR..... United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USA ..... United States of America

USSR ..... The Soviet Union

WPH ..... Women and Peace Hypothesis

WPS ..... Women, Peace and Security

WWI ..... World War I

WWII ..... World War II

1. Introduction

Gender, war, and militarism have significant impacts on world politics (Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b). Conflicts do not exist in a vacuum; they are embedded in a world where social mores and power dynamics impact the possibilities for their resolution. In fact, gender norms and hierarchies influence and are influenced by domestic and international policies, which, in turn, define international power relations (Åse, 2025). According to Åse (2025), no state today guarantees women and men equal resources, rights, and responsibilities. Focusing on the contributions of critical feminist scholars and masculinity studies — who have long contended that international politics is not gender-neutral — this dissertation inquires: How does militarized and/or hegemonic masculinity, as represented by most states in the global arena, influence peace negotiations in international conflicts?

More concretely, this academic work seeks to understand how, in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, discourses and international practices are shaped by gender, particularly in relation to assumptions about leadership and the negotiation of peace. This work also questions the differences between the leaders of Russia and Ukraine in terms of how they represent their gender, suggesting that they both embody male actors and that masculinity generates difficulties in negotiating peace.

Although the relationship between masculinity and war has been studied by masculinity studies (e.g., Connell, 2005, 2016; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001; Meger, 2016; Peterson, 2010), as noted by Ralph-Morrow (2022), men and masculinity remain particularly undertheorized within Political Science and International Relations (IR). Additionally, the counterpart to war and masculinity, the relationship between peace and emasculation, is further underdeveloped, with little academic focus being paid to how different masculinities — performed through both discursive and visual means — shape peace negotiations and views on compromise. By studying these dichotomies, via a critical discourse and visual analysis, and applying them to a contemporary case study — the Russo-Ukrainian war — this dissertation seeks to contribute to the field of IR as a whole. Principally in what concerns (feminist) peace and

security studies (PSS) as well as gender studies, contributing to the scholarship and the main debates of both masculinity studies and the feminist theory of IR, focusing on how masculinity influences and/or reproduces militarism while examining how gender performances are built by both language and visual representations. In doing so, this academic work also contributes to the study of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the underlying militarism (and masculinity) of its parties, offering an insight into their unsuccessful efforts to achieve sustainable peace.

Existing scholarship on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the countries' current bilateral relations primarily focuses on the actions of state actors. It often highlights — using realist, constructivist, or postcolonial theoretical frameworks — the geopolitical rivalry between the United States (USA) and Russia, as well as the European Union's (EU) response to the war, rather than focusing on the agency or discourse of the individuals directly involved. Therefore, this dissertation is relevant to the understanding of a highly politicized conflict that has already altered the relations of many European countries with war (e.g., BBC, 2025; Hartog, 2025) and whose peaceful conclusion would be essential in maintaining the war-averse order that has been present in Europe ever since the end of World War II (WWII).

Drawing on the academic consensus, the roots of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be traced to the 2008 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit, where Ukraine's potential accession was discussed. This possibility led Russia to unequivocally express its opposition to the expansion, which it considered a direct threat to its border security (Delanty, 2023; Fedorchak, 2024; Włodkowska, 2023; Zherebkina, 2024). But following its independence, Ukraine sought to maintain a balanced foreign policy, cultivating closer relations with both the countries of the former Soviet Union (USSR) and other European countries. Likewise, it defined itself as neutral, so as not to attract further interference from Russia, which resented Ukraine's movement toward the West. Despite Ukraine framing its relations with the EU and NATO as simply part of its development as a new democracy, critiques from Moscow persisted (Meleshchenko, 2021; Türkeş-Kılıç, 2024). And after the 2014 Euromaidan demonstrations, when Ukrainians clearly expressed their desire to join the EU, tensions between the two

countries increased, culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea and the sparking of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine, which ultimately led to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 (Fedorchak, 2024; O'Sullivan, 2019; Türkeş-Kılıç, 2024), described by Ukraine as an existential conflict.

The Russian invasion has caused massive casualties and destroyed much of Ukraine's civilian infrastructure, leading to a steep decline in Ukraine's economic output, while displacing millions of people — after the start of the conflict, in February 2022, almost 6 million Ukrainians have sought refuge in other countries (UNHCR, 2026). The wartime sanctions have also impacted the Russian economy, with rising inflation and disruptions in industrial production due to the exodus of several international companies and businesses (Kislenko, 2026; World Bank, 2025). In this manner, both countries have endured heavy losses since the beginning of the war (financial, infrastructural, and human), and yet, efforts at a diplomatic resolution have been half-hearted at best.

Moreover, political discourse has developed into a central element of this conflict, alongside the military's operations and leaders' visual representations, which have shaped domestic adherence to the war effort and international support for either party. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, have emerged as embodiments of their rival narratives, using language and visuality to legitimize their military objectives and authority. Indeed, gender can shape political attitudes and performances, and the failure to interrogate the position of men and masculinities within this conflict renders invisible, among other factors, the role played by the male leaders of both countries (Ralph-Morrow, 2022).

In employing a critical feminist approach, I posit that IR needs to problematize mainstream notions that it takes for granted. In this sense, I am interested in the role of militarized and hegemonic notions of masculinity in international conflicts and peace settlements. Accordingly, this study gives special significance to the connection between gender, a nation's political institutions, and the relations of power that lend legitimacy to the heteropatriarchy. Via the discourse analysis of Putin's and Zelenskyy's political statements, along with their visual performances, this study's theoretical focus seeks to examine the construction of gendered identities and shed light on possible pathways for

dismantling violence's association with manhood, emphasizing alternative conceptions of masculinity and their underlying assumptions or ideological stances, as well as their role within militarism's understandings of peace and security.

As a system of power, gender affects how people interpret politics or other events, influencing domestic and international policies, which then shape gender norms and power relations (Åse, 2025). As Shapovalova (2025) argues, in war propaganda masculine bodies are intimately connected with combat, reproducing masculinity in connection with conflict, despite there being nothing "natural" about the notion of the masculinized soldier or the feminized civilian. In addition, the waging of war strengthens traditional gender roles, assuming a link between masculinity and war that connects "real men" to those who have served in the military (Eichler, 2009; Strelnyk, 2024). Given that masculinity is accorded more status and power, male gender roles are generally stricter than female ones (Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024) and have been extensively connected with exclusionary movements and ideas, including nationalism, misogyny, and homophobia, frequently presented as the "ultimate male values" and tendentially exacerbated in wartime circumstances, to the detriment of diplomatic peace efforts (Caprioli, 2005; Shmatko & Rachok, 2024; Strelnyk, 2024).

Taking into account feminism's criticism of mainstream theorizing of security and political legitimacy — that disregards the role of gender — and considering the current global political climate, this dissertation suggests that by rethinking notions of manhood and womanhood, or altering traditional conceptions and perceptions of masculinity, diplomacy could become the primary medium of conflict resolution in the international arena. By studying masculinity and conflict, a resolution to the Russian invasion of Ukraine could be more clearly defined and less constrained by gender performances.

This dissertation consists of six chapters, the first of which is the present introduction. Each chapter is dedicated to a different aspect of the research, so that the rest of the dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on feminist IR and its conceptualizations of war, the distinct types of masculinity, and feminism in Russia and Ukraine. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework of the study, defining the principles of the discourse analysis. Chapter 4 presents this analysis, examining

Putin's and Zelenskyy's political speeches and visual representations. Chapter 5 discusses the analysis's findings and associates them with IR feminism and PSS, defining their implications for peace. Finally, Chapter 6 comprises the research's conclusion, followed by its bibliography and annexes.

2. Masculinity and War: Literature Review on Feminism's Intersection with the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

This chapter seeks to review the literature on the relationship between masculinity and war, establishing its framework within feminist theory and masculinity studies (e.g., Cohn, 2013; Connell, 2005, 2016; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001; Elshtain, 1987; Enloe, 2014; Meger, 2016; Peterson, 2010), while highlighting its counterpart, the relationship between peace and emasculation. Taking this into account, the literature on the case study, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, is also reviewed.

2.1. Theoretical-Conceptual Framework: Feminism and Masculinity

2.1.1. The Feminist Theory of IR

Historically, the discipline of IR has been shaped primarily by the perspectives of privileged men, particularly in relation to war and the international system. In fact, realist theory, one of the most influential in security studies, emphasizes power, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and rationality as essential attributes for state survival within an anarchic international system. These are all attributes often associated with masculinity (Cohn & Enloe, 2003; Tickner, 2004):

> Most of the works in the field of international relations and the laws governing them are male, and therefore one-sided. This is the result of being based on theories and research approaches dominated by men, but also on problems described from the point of view of men, […] which influences the focus of this discipline on 'high politics' and on issues such as power, competition, conflict (Włodkowska, 2023, p. 95)

Taking this into account, gender can be defined as a sociocultural practice that divides society into a male/female binary, establishing structural power relations. In other

words, gender is socially constructed and produced by societal norms and scientific, medical, or legal discourses, which shape the identities of individuals and how they behave in society (Agius, 2024; Butler, 1999; Cohn, 2013). More specifically, in the words of Judith Butler: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1999, pp. 43-44). Thus, gender is not a stable or biological category — not something we are — but rather a performative one — something we do. This is illustrated by Butler (1999), who establishes gender as a performance individuals put on in order to fit into socially and historically constructed roles, creating an illusion of their naturalness (Butler, 1999; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011) so that “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler, 1990, p.6). The feminist theory of IR points out the importance that these binary and hierarchical gender relations maintain at the international level and the way they tend to exacerbate themselves in contexts of war (Agius, 2024; Rigual et al., 2022; Sjoberg & Tickner, 2011).

As exposed by Cohn (2013), there is a clear linkage between war and masculinity. Masculinity is historically and socially constructed and is generally associated with attributes such as power, aggression, physical strength, heterosexuality, independence, leadership, and rationality. Nonetheless, masculinity is a plural concept, which varies across temporal and spatial contexts (Desoutter, 2025; Hutchings, 2008; Rigual et al., 2022). This also applies to femininity, which is often conceptualized as the antithesis of masculinity and is frequently linked to the notion of peace (Desoutter, 2025; Hutchings, 2008). Consequently, femininity is similarly socially constructed and associated with characteristics such as passivity, weakness, sensitivity, vulnerability, dependence, or irrationality (Sjoberg & Tickner, 2011). The distinction between these attributes is relational and inherently value-laden: characteristics aligned with masculinity are privileged, while those associated with femininity are devalued (Cohn, 2013; Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b).

Given that the defense and national security sectors remain inaccessible to many women, analyzing war and masculinity through a feminist lens is essential. This approach

clarifies how oppressive and artificial gender hierarchies shape the security of individuals, turning the "private" into the "political". That is, by adopting gender as an analytical category, it becomes possible to identify political dynamics within spaces traditionally considered "personal" (Cohn & Enloe, 2003; Tickner, 2004, 2006), as exemplified by the "household":

> Human gender hierarchies are one of the most persistent, pervasive, and pernicious forms of inequality in the world. Gender is used as the basis for systems of discrimination which can, even within the same household, provide that those designated 'male' receive more food and live longer (Miller, 1993, as cited in Hudson et al., 2008, p. 15)

The feminist theory of IR dates back to the late 1980s, having stood out for questioning the assumptions, basic concepts, and traditional methodologies of IR through a gender-focused lens, analyzing conflicts through a bottom-up, often post-positivist perspective, to ascertain their impacts down to the micro scale, especially concerning civilians (Tickner, 2004, 2006). Indeed, IR feminism seeks to understand why wars are predominantly fought by men and, as mentioned, how gender structures, specifically masculinity, allow for their legitimization and the militarization of societies.

More concretely, militarism is an ideology that is dependent on social, political, and historical contexts. It distinguishes itself by promoting a central role for the military and war itself in the state and society. In this manner, militarism will be evident in a country's actions, namely in the preference for military over non-violent solutions in its foreign policy (Eichler, 2009). Taking this into account, militarization refers to processes by which characteristically military practices are incentivized to help establish the central role of the military in a state, blurring the distinction between military and civilian society (e.g., when local companies become dependent on military contracts). For this reason, militarism requires militarization to perpetuate and normalize itself (Eichler, 2009; Singh, 2025; Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b). Feminist theory argues that the social and political pervasiveness of militarism is due to militaristic behavior and values being seen as a path by which men (and states themselves) can prove their masculinity (Singh, 2025; Via, 2010) — palpable in the cliché "the military helps turn boys into men" (Duncanson, 2019). Hence, militarization is gendered in its competitive and violent aims,

as well as in its language of strength and domination, and, because of this, has gendered effects (Cohn, 2013; Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b).

In connection with militarism, militarized masculinity, while not a unitary concept, denotes the affirmation and valorization of traits stereotypically associated with masculinity. As noted by both Ferguson (2021) and Eichler (2009, 2011), such traits are assumed and validated through military service, more specifically through combat. These characteristics are typically defined in hierarchical opposition to femininity, which is marginalized, denigrated, and subordinated (Ferguson, 2021; Hutchings, 2008; Shand, 2022). In fact, for Desoutter (2025), armed conflict often promotes the conceptualization of masculinity as "protective" and femininity as "vulnerable" — the essentialist protector/protected binary.

Feminist theory critically challenges this pervasive narrative that wars are primarily waged to protect women and children, a trope that constructs women as inherently passive victims. This perspective clarifies that the impacts of war are gendered, affecting men and women in varied and often unequal ways (Cohn, 2013). Crucially, feminist scholars have challenged the problematic equation of women with peace. An association that diminishes the recognition of women's active roles in combat and fails to acknowledge the changes in the gender composition of military institutions over the 20th century, erasing the complexity of women's experiences in wartime (Eichler, 2009; Tickner, 2001, 2004, 2006). Consequently, IR feminists have advanced the study of women's participation in both conflict and peace processes, problematizing traditional assumptions and foregrounding research on the diverse roles women occupy (e.g. Cohn, 2013; Eichler, 2009; Enloe, 2014; Rigual et al., 2022; Sjoberg & Tickner, 2011; Sjoberg & Via, 2010; Tickner, 2001, 2004, 2006).

Feminist PSS have made visible the countless ways in which gender mars the violent practices assumed as a byproduct of conflict, reconceptualizing war and how it exacerbates the relevance of traditional gender roles (Rigual et al., 2022). Feminists argue that gender structures are upheld through power relations that legitimize them (Tickner, 2001; Cohn, 2013), maintaining the systemic oppression of women and the link between masculinity and power (Eichler, 2009; Włodkowska, 2023). Thus, for Tickner

(2004), the gender binary in power shapes the perspectives of a nation in relation to others, which it tends to construct as feminized, less rational, and more emotional.

Furthermore, although scholars like Hooper (1998), as cited in Tickner (2004), view a relaxation of militarized masculinities in the West, owing to the increasing visibility of women and the LGBTQIA+ community in the military, Tickner (2004) highlights that the reduction of militarism can only be achieved through advances in the feminist agenda. Given that, regardless of gender, those who oppose military solutions to conflicts are more likely to support feminist goals, i.e., there tends to be a positive correlation between support for gender equality and support for diplomacy, compromise, and the protection of human rights. As a matter of fact, a state's levels of gender equality have been empirically linked to its propensity to engage in violent conflict: societies with lower levels of gender equality will experience higher levels of (intra)state conflict and human rights abuses (Caprioli, 2005; Hudson et al., 2008; Reiter, 2015).

This statement is reinforced by Sjoberg (2010), who considers that the level of gender inequality in a state predicts its aggressiveness in the international system. Building on this, Hudson et al. (2008) argue that the treatment of women within society, namely their physical security, is fundamental in shaping a state's foreign policy and international behavior. In this sense, these authors empirically defend that the higher the level of violence against women, the worse a state's relations with its neighboring countries, and the greater the likelihood that a country will go against international law and adopt bellicose positions. For instance, Hudson et al. (2008), referring to the studies of Cockburn (2001), Erchak and Rosenfeld (1994), and Levinson (1989), contend that if domestic violence is accepted in familial contexts, then a society is more likely to have militaristic policies and rely on violence to resolve struggles — as Russia's high rates of domestic violence (Włodkowska, 2023), underlined below, appear to demonstrate. Similarly to Caprioli (2005), Hudson et al. (2008) posit that a larger gender gap increases the likelihood of a state's involvement in inter- or intrastate conflicts, while higher levels of women in parliament and higher education have a "pacifying effect": "To the extent that the security of women is a societal priority, the security and peacefulness of the state will be significantly enhanced" (Hudson et al., 2008, p. 26).

Włodkowska (2023) supports this position, highlighting it in her study of Russian "machismo" in the Russo-Ukrainian war: "There is a link between high levels of violence against women and a greater likelihood of breaches of international law and more aggressive behavior towards other countries" (Włodkowska, 2023, p. 102). J. Krause et al. (2018) also mention this relation, arguing that women's direct participation in peace negotiations is greatly beneficial to the building of a more stable and durable peace. In particular, when those negotiators and legislators have connections with women's civil society groups (J. Krause et al., 2018; Prügl et al., 2019).

In effect, even international law is deeply gendered, with masculine being frequently its default and *jus cogens*[1] anchored in predominantly male values (Sellers, 2022). International law empowers masculinity, while feminism, in its deconstruction of the international system, challenges its claim to objectivity, underscoring how the law, the state, and its major institutions are built around men's interests (Sellers, 2022; Megret, 2018).

Even academic analysis suffers from gender biases, as Enloe (2019) points out, addressing how the study of war in IR often sees humanitarian concerns as feminized and of subordinate relevance to the field. Generally, wars are indissociable from the masculine, with women having a passive role in wartime: stereotypically, they serve as an audience whom the men "protect" (Connell, 2005; Ruddick, 2019). Consequently, ideas about masculinity are intrinsically intertwined with ideas about the nation, principally about its protection and security, leading to masculine policies, based on demonstrations of force and military power, which can result in the delegitimization of diplomacy, subjecting justice to power (Cohn & Enloe, 2003; Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 2019).

Moreover, war rhetoric tends to root itself in the shaming of the opponent as weak and, therefore, feminine. This "feminization" of the opponent according to racialized,

[1] As per the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (UN, 1969), *jus cogens* is a "peremptory norm of general international law". That is, a fundamental principle of law, which is accepted and recognized by the entire international community and from which none of its actors can be exempted.

homophobic, and misogynist stereotypes is prevalent during many interstate conflicts. This can also be due to women embodying the "homeland", which contributes to making them targets of sexual violence and rape during war, since these violations tend to be seen as a way to emasculate the enemy and destroy "the nation's childbearing future" (Åse, 2025; Cohn, 2013; Tickner, 2001). Nationalist movements, for instance, tend to reduce women to "patriarchally sculpted symbols" of the nation or the bearers of tradition (Eichler, 2009; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011): "Women have served as symbols of the nation violated, the nation suffering, the nation reproducing itself, the nation at its purest" (Enloe, 2014, p. 87). In this way, emasculation is connected to feminization and can be thought of as a synonym for castration, linked to the loss of "masculine traits" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.), making it threatening to the virility of an individual or entity. Accordingly, emasculation is a factor that calls into question male domination, power, and the patriarchal social order (Shand, 2022; Wood, 2024).

During wartime, women are positioned as either "ours" or "theirs" and thus become sites for the control of both masculinist protection and masculinist aggression (Åse, 2025; Singh, 2025). This is why Sjoberg and Peet (2011) contend, through a gendered reading of Clausewitz, that belligerents do not posit violence against civilians or non-combatants as gender-neutral, but as intrinsically anti-female. Still, soldiers attack the enemy's women not as "just women" but as proxies for the nation itself. The characterization of the nation as a "primordial homeland" generates corporeal constructions around it — "motherland" or "fatherland" (Agius, 2024; Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023) — that rely on the image of women as "vulnerable", making their protection crucial — states fight to protect "their women", while attacking "their adversaries' women" (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). In other words, in seeking to feminize and emasculate the enemy's men, armies seek to render them incapable of performing their masculinity by targeting and humiliating "their" women. Sjoberg and Peet (2011) suggest that this is especially true in cases where the conflict is framed as existential, women are absent from the army, or the dynamics of the struggle allow one side to view the other as culturally or racially inferior.

These factors highlight the relevance of a document: the *United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325* (2000). This resolution admonishes the exclusion of women from official decision-making processes and endorses their greater participation in peacebuilding efforts (Aharoni, 2017; Security Council, 2000). To date, a total of ten of these Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions have been adopted (McLeod & O'Reilly, 2019; UN, n.d.)[2]. For McLeod and O'Reilly (2019), the effects of this agenda have been wide-ranging: it has shaped the governmental programs of several countries and international organizations, generating further academic interest in the integration of gender perspectives into peacebuilding. However, until 2023, less than 10% of negotiators in peace processes were women (McLeod & O'Reilly, 2019; UN Women, 2024).

References to gender in peace agreements have increased, and more women have been participating in peace operations, though Resolution 1325 has not yet become part of the informal rules of the UN, being employed only on an ad hoc basis (Kreft, 2017). For scholars such as Cohn (2013), given women's experiences in postwar scenarios, these developments are insufficient. In fact, as indicated by UN Women (2024), conflict and violence overwhelmingly threaten the safety of women and girls worldwide. In 2023, 612 million women and girls lived within 50 km of an armed conflict, an increase of more than 40% since 2015 (UN Women, 2024). Women are also often denied access to decision-making roles, maintaining a minoritarian participation in politics: in 2023, they held 1 in every 4 seats in parliament (27%) (UN Women, 2024), despite evidence that the presence of more women in decision-making bodies reduces a country's predisposition toward conflict (Hudson et al., 2008; Reiter, 2015).

Cohn and Enloe (2003) also warn that the oppression of women is increasingly used in an orientalist way to measure the "development" of a society. Indeed, the UN's emphasis on the protection of women and girls risks encouraging essentialist

[2] Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019) condemned, among others, the use of sexual violence as a strategy of war and called on all parties to prevent and combat it (Kreft, 2017; UN, n.d.).

approaches to gender, which profoundly affect defense policy, as they promote the idea that labor should be “naturally and inevitably” divided in relation to an individual's biological sex. On the one hand, this means that men are both directed to the defense machine and guaranteed access to positions of economic and political power. On the other hand, women are relegated to the private sphere and portrayed as wives and mothers, i.e., “homemakers”. An occupation that freezes women in roles of dependency and subordination vis-à-vis a masculine protector (Duncanson, 2009; Megret, 2018; Mohanty, 1984). This underlines the need to study the concepts of feminization and masculinization, which relegate women to roles with minimal influence and divide men into those who are or not — through notions of race, ethnicity, or class — suitable to hold positions of power, within and beyond the military (Cohn, 2013; Duncanson, 2019; Enloe, 2019).

Feminist IR scholars have also highlighted the gendering of countries’ national identities, portraying the state as a masculine institution (Caprioli, 2005; Eichler, 2009). As mentioned, the state promotes and supports practices that are primarily in the interests of men and whose legitimacy is achieved through militarism, as well as demonstrations of manliness, that work against women’s participation in policymaking and the army (Eichler, 2009; Ruddick, 2019; Tickner, 2001). As Enloe (2019) points out, women’s integration into state politics and the military does not change their gender basis. In other words, women who join these institutions do so in governments and armies that are not neutral, just because they are now willing to include women in their ranks — they are already defined in terms of masculine values and structures (Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b). These structures then contribute to the privileging of militarization and war, while devaluing peace, which is often seen as feminized and thus undesirable or unrealistic (Enloe, 2014; Tickner, 2001).

Taking this into account, the WPS agenda is clearly rooted in the Women and Peace Hypothesis (WPH). This hypothesis posits that women are more oriented toward peace and compromise than men and are therefore less likely to support the use of force and more likely to support diplomatic negotiations. Nevertheless, the WPH has been widely criticized for basing itself on gender essentialism and reproducing gender stereotypes,

namely due to its assumption that peace is a common interest of all women. In viewing women as a monolithic category, this hypothesis ignores the specific political and social contexts of different groups of women, as well as the differences between the Global North and the Global South, where women have supported the use of force in emancipatory contexts, as exemplified by independence wars (Aharoni, 2017)[3].

Furthermore, there is little evidence that men are "naturally" more aggressive and women more peaceful (Cohn, 2013; Tickner, 2001). As Aharoni (2017) observes in her study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "opinion surveys in Israel/Palestine consistently show that the sex variable is relatively insignificant" (Aharoni, 2017, p. 8). More concretely, referring to studies by Hermann (2009), Tessler et al. (1999), and Tessler and Warriner (1997), the author remarks:

> In Israel, which is a heavily researched society, quantitative surveys that use the sex variable often show no clear differences between attitudes of women and men with regard to their views about the conflict and its resolution. (Aharoni, 2017, p. 8)

This phenomenon is addressed by Elshtain (1987), who, in her influential book *Women and War,* explores the forms of legitimization of war and the intersection between gender and war, challenging the traditional and dichotomous narrative of men as "life takers" and women as "life givers". To this end, she introduces the concepts of men as "Just Warrior" and women as "Beautiful Soul", which she uses to question what she names the "Manichean view of war". In this view, men are seen as violent and women as peaceful, creating a violent/non-violent and combatant/non-combatant dichotomy that overshadows the voices of pacific men and bellicose women. A phenomenon that she denounces as the social justification for the exclusion of women from the military. In other words, through the feminine "Beautiful Soul", the author establishes that the virtues and values defended as inherent to women are in natural disagreement with the

[3] For instance, women in Algeria played an integral role in the armed struggle for independence from France. Their participation challenged traditional gender roles, which barred women from actively partaking in armed movements (Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 2014).

destructiveness of war, an essentialist notion that she criticizes, emphasizing the historical role of women, both in war and in peace.

For Elshtain (1987), though images of war as masculine depend on rendering women invisible, history has abundant examples of what she calls “the Ferocious Few” — women who adopted the role of “Just Warrior”. She enumerates the various cases of female mobilization and participation in conflicts, whether directly, in the role of combatants, as was the case in the American Revolution, or indirectly, in the production of weapons to fuel the war effort, as during World War I (WWI) (Agius, 2024; Elshtain, 1987). More importantly, Elshtain (1987) establishes a position currently mainstream in feminism, arguing that one must go beyond binary oppositions to achieve the full participation of women in society, through support for both pacifism and the equal inclusion of women in military roles.

At the same time, feminists have drawn attention to how men are socialized into militarism, via the production of an unnatural link between men, masculinity, and the military. This link leads to violent consequences, as evidenced by wartime rape and other violence perpetrated by soldiers (Eichler, 2011). Rape is not just a side-effect of war. It is an organized and often systematic military strategy that is used to humiliate the enemy or undermine their national identity while establishing the dominance of one’s own group (Eichler, 2009; Tickner, 2001; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011). A case in point is the Rwandan genocide, where more than 250,000 women were raped and, as a result, infected with STDs, stigmatized, and cast out of their communities. As per Brounéus’s (2014) findings, these experiences made them more suspicious and distrustful of peace efforts; effectively, they supported peace to a lesser extent than men. In a 2006 survey, in stark contrast with the WPH, women had significantly more negative attitudes than men toward peacebuilding, especially in what concerns the coexistence with perpetrators of the genocide (Brounéus, 2014).

Conversely, the UN’s defense of the efficacy of women negotiators seems well-founded. As both Reitner (2015) and Ta-Johnson et al. (2022) remark, positivist feminism establishes that the inclusion of women in negotiations contributes to more peaceful solutions. Nominally, as Ta-Johnson et al. (2022) found in their international bargaining

experiment, bilateral disputes are settled more efficiently and equitably when both sides are represented by women. Their results suggest that women contribute positively to peace settlements because they tend to seek more symmetrical solutions to territorial disputes, even if these provide lower payoffs. For this reason, in bilateral efforts, greater representation of women within both delegations increases the probability of settling a dispute.

It appears women have a greater propensity toward establishing an empathetic connection with other negotiation parties. This quality, combined with a preference for more cooperative approaches — frequently acquired through female socialization — means that conflicts will be resolved faster and more fairly when both sides are represented by women. As the gap in female representation grows between the parties, the risk of not reaching a settlement increases (Ta-Johnson et al., 2022). Ta-Johnson et al. (2022) found that women's fast and balanced negotiation style was only hindered when they were tasked with reaching a settlement with men, who reduced the likelihood of attaining equitable solutions and increased the risk of both prolonging negotiations (in search of asymmetric gains) and requiring third-party assistance to mediate the dispute. Though these conclusions might not be universally applicable, they are illustrated by the failed peace negotiations of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, highlighted by Włodkowska (2023). Attempts to reach an agreement between Russia and Ukraine, both of whom are predominantly represented by men (Wright, 2022), have been repeatedly squashed since 2022 (e.g. Kent & Tarasova, 2025):

> [W]hen women are involved in peace negotiations, agreements are more durable. This does not mean that women are more peaceful than men, it only shows that they can bring new elements to negotiations and pay attention to what is of little importance to men. If both sides of the conflict want to reach a lasting agreement, they should remember to involve women in the negotiations. What was noticeable during the broadcast of the Russo-Ukrainian negotiations in Istanbul was the room filled almost exclusively with men (Włodkowska, 2023, pp. 108-109)

2.1.2. Masculinity Studies

Since the late 1980s, masculinity studies have emerged as a significant subfield within gender studies (Connell, 2005), focusing on the construction of masculinities and the

development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity. This concept was formalized in Connell's foundational work *Masculinities* (2005), which, recognizing the diversity of masculinities and femininities, examines the differences between masculinities across regions, ethnic groups, and social classes. For this author, hegemonic masculinity is defined as a form of power and a normative pattern of behavior that, aiming to reproduce the patriarchal social order — the "global dominance of men over women" (Connell, 1987, as cited in Demetriou, 2001, p. 340) — defines what, in a given time, culture, and social context, are seen as the ideal masculine features and behavior, however intangible they may be (Andersen & Wendt, 2015; Tickner, 2001). More specifically, this masculinity is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees [...] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 77).

Throughout the world and throughout history, men have predominantly served as state leaders and members of the armed forces, thereby positioning virility as the standard for determining fitness for combat. As a result, war is commonly thought of in the masculine, even when this does not correspond to reality. In this way, war is often conceptualized in terms that align with masculine ideals and societal expectations — a convergence most acute on attributes related to combat, namely aggressiveness, strength, rationality, and courage, creating an association viewed as justified by the character and intensity of war (Ferguson, 2021; Peterson, 2010). Despite the spatial and temporal variations inherent to different contexts and evolving institutional and societal practices, the performance of these traits remains central to the perception of masculinity and wartime behavior (Connel, 2005). Notably, militarized masculinity is marked by risk-taking, discipline, resistance, and emotional restraint, traits seen as advantageous in combat scenarios (Hutchings, 2008; Peterson, 2010). Consequently, war serves as a venue for the performance of masculinity (Butler, 1999), where deviation from these norms, in peace negotiation strategies or opportunities for compromise, may be dismissed as feminine and perceived as "a sign of weakness" (Winterbotham, 2023).

In this sense, it is also argued that the war-masculinity relationship is attributable to the basic structures and institutions of society, which, in view of their need to "make" war, build perceptions of gender that intertwine it with masculinity (Hutchings, 2008). As Goldstein (2003, as cited in Duncanson, 2019) contends, masculinity is an "artificial status which is typically constructed around a culture's need for brave and disciplined soldiers" (p. 3). In fact, discourses and norms related to war are often exclusively male, reinforcing the view of soldier as a profession that excludes the feminine (Elshtain, 1987; Hutchings, 2008), while attributing to war a masculinizing capacity:

> Men do not dominate in the world's militaries because they are naturally more violent, aggressive and tough, […] but because in many cultures across time and space proving oneself on the battlefield has been deemed an important way to prove oneself a man […] Boys and men are socialized into thinking that being tough, being aggressive, being in authority, in control, are important markers of being a man. (Duncanson, 2019, p. 3)

This means that, when it comes to the defense of the nation, attributes seen as feminine are repeatedly and institutionally reviled, establishing a negative correlation between femininity and war (Duncanson, 2009; Hutchings, 2008): in militarized societies, a woman's patriotism is defined in terms of her willingness to sacrifice her son to war, while a man's patriotism is intrinsically tied to his military service — particularly if conscription is mandatory — that in proving his manhood, constitutes his claim to citizenship, elevating men's status over that of women (Eichler, 2009; Peterson, 2010).

As emphasized by Enloe (2014) and Elshtain (1987), the representation of masculinity in contexts of war can be considered an extrapolation of the patriarchal hierarchy between masculine and feminine and its intersection with the military hierarchy, generating a gender framework in which masculinity is superior to femininity. Women are rendered passive victims who need military protection due to their physically "inferior" attributes or their peaceful disposition (Duncanson, 2009; Winterbotham, 2023). Indeed, the military is one of the core sources of gendered unequal power relations in society, as evidenced by the insults most recruits face in the army, which are gendered, racialized, and homophobic, teaching soldiers to deny any "otherness" or distinct identity within themselves (Duncanson, 2019; Eichler, 2009; Shmatko & Rachok, 2024). Women are, in

this manner, disproportionately negatively impacted by war. Even when belligerents emphasize concerns with their protection (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011):

> [M]asculinity depends on being framed in opposition to a subordinated femininity because "real men" cannot be heroes without "innocent women" to "save" and be heroes for. […] women's need for protection justifies wars generally and individuals fighting in them specifically (Sjoberg & Peet, 2011, p. 173)

Hence, hegemonic masculinity is understood as institutionalized in gender regimes, which mark both the ascendancy of men over women, and the ascendancy of one group of men over others. These regimes reinforce the power of already dominant groups and establish both the subordination of femininity and the marginalization of other types of masculinity, which result from the intersection of gender with other categories, among which sexuality or ethnicity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2016; Tickner, 2001). This creates a hierarchy of masculinities, which allows for the discrimination between different forms of masculinity and the projection of scorned aspects of femininity onto less privileged groups of men.

Homosexual men, for example, are subordinated to the hegemonic model, given that they go against a fundamental element of it, heterosexuality, which is of primary importance for the reproduction of patriarchy (Duncanson, 2009; Hutchings, 2008). In effect, the dominant culture defines homosexual men as effeminate, making their masculinities subversive and subordinated to the heterosexual hegemony. For Connell (2005), this is further evidenced by the aversion of many gay men toward "queens", i.e., gay men who are more effeminate and "flaunt" their gayness, which is another example of how femininity is constantly devalued (Peterson, 2010). Moreover, complicit masculinity represents the men who do not act according to the hegemonic model but passively support it, in order to obtain and maintain the advantages provided by the patriarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001).

Members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their domination. The masculinities of empire, for instance, were linked to the enablement of violence (Connell, 2016). Notably, European and American gender relations greatly influenced the development of colonized peoples, leading to the expansion of the Eurocentric

model of patriarchy (Connell, 2005). This factor highlights the need for an intersectional[4] notion of gender and masculinity, since they are both involved with other social structures, interacting with race, class, nationality, or geography (Connell, 2005).

As feminists from the Global South have emphasized, a fixed understanding of "men" ignores the implications of white supremacy and privilege, ignoring white women's complicity within them, as well as the fact that not all men share the same rights (Chodorow, 2002; Wiegman, 2002). More concretely, Global South feminism posits that the socio-historical context of distinct groups of women and men is fundamental, warning Global North feminists against appropriating the intricacies which characterize the lives of women (and some men) of different classes, religions, cultures, or races in countries of the Global South (Mohanty, 1984) — "the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women" (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338).

On the other hand, masculinity only exists in contrast with femininity and defines what is thought of as the norm; owing to this, for many academics, there can be no hegemonic femininity (Tickner, 2001). Nevertheless, for Schneiker (2021), hegemonic femininity is an intelligible concept that establishes the hierarchical relations between different groups of women. It translates how the ideal woman should act and behave in a male-dominated world order, placing this performance over other subordinate forms of femininity. Hegemonic masculinity is then a "sociocultural ideal", which is defined in

[4] Intersectionality is a notion developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) in her study of women of color's experiences of violence in the USA. This lens is essential for a nuanced study of gender, since presupposing "woman" or "men" and "femininity" or "masculinity" as universal categories is problematic. This is due to the exclusion of differences between these categories, such as race or sexuality, that intersect to form different realities (Butler, 1999). That is, for some individuals, the multiple intersections of their identity aggravate the degree of discrimination they suffer, while rendering their hardships invisible (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991): "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, […] because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler, 1999, p.6).

opposition to hegemonic femininity, and sustains, through the support and "consent" of civil society, patriarchal social and political orders (Demetriou, 2001; Duncanson, 2019). For both Connell (2016) and Enloe (2014), this issue is part of a historical process and not a self-perpetuating system, since it requires a considerable effort to maintain and impose on society. For example, through the "policing" of male behavior or the exclusion of women from positions of power (Cohn & Enloe, 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Via, 2010).

This panorama is criticized by several authors, including Collier (1998), who disagrees with the view of hegemonic masculinity as inherently negative and argues that it is, according to Connell's assumptions, framed in both heteronormative and essentialist terms. Demetriou (2001) also criticizes Connell's hegemonic masculinity, arguing that the concept is too simplistic and thus inadequate in its understanding of masculinity, a point also breached by Hollander (2014). Additionally, both Demetriou (2001) and Hollander (2014) contend that Connell (2005) does not recognize the way in which marginalized and alternative masculinities can influence changes in hegemonic masculinity.

Criticisms refuted by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), who affirm that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed and objective entity, as it depends on gender relations and social practices, subject to spatial and temporal changes, as well as external influences. These authors also affirm that hegemonic masculinity's attributes are not simply negative, because although they refer to practices that allow for the continuation of the heteropatriarchal system, they also include characteristics generally considered positive, such as fatherhood and idealized standards, which most men would not be able to emulate. Accordingly, this idealized masculinity is linked to a growing literature on "frustrated" or "thwarted" masculinities: the idea that men resort to violent behaviors, against both others and themselves, to make up for their inability to comply with masculinity's assumptions (Duncanson, 2019; Rigual et al., 2022).

This issue is also addressed by Hutchings (2008), who highlights a possible causal relationship between these two variables, identifying masculinity as a significant factor in the emergence of violent conflicts. As mentioned, positivist feminism suggests that

there is a causal relationship between gender equality, the state of the patriarchy, and the likelihood of war (Caprioli, 2005; Rigual et al., 2022). The perception of emasculation can, consequently, generate violent reactions, especially among those who view it as an existential threat (Shand, 2022; Wood, 2024). Violence is, in turn, seen as a way to regain lost masculinity. This argument is illustrated by studies of perpetrators of sexual violence in war scenarios, who often justify their crimes as a masculine impetus, connected to other soldiers' expectations, or feelings of disempowerment, that is, of not being "masculine enough" (Hollander, 2014).

For other feminist authors, such as Ferguson (2021) and Elshtain (1987), this does not imply that men are inherently violent or militaristic and, conversely, that women are intrinsically more peaceful. Going against the WPH, whose conclusions are often obtained through the study of populations not directly impacted by conflict and, as a result, only seem to apply in those situations (Elshtain, 1987; Pavliuc, 2025). This can also be seen through the perspective of leading Ukrainian feminists, developed below, who support their nation's fight against Russia, seeing it as a way for the country to achieve "peace" on its own terms, despite the feminist movement's typical anti-militarism (I. Lysychkina & O. Lysychkina, 2023).

Likewise, in his study of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Hollander (2014) finds two types of masculinities that arise from the differences in gender order provoked by the country's civil war: ''victimized masculinity'' and ''effaced masculinity". "Victimized masculinity" describes civilian men whose disempowerment by the country's internal conflict has led them to perceive themselves as victims, that is, as holding no responsibility for their misfortune. "Effaced masculinity", contrarily, humbled men, making them behave modestly and inconspicuously in both their families and communities. In this way, Hollander (2014) establishes that not every man would turn to violence when faced with emasculation.

In non-democratic regimes, however, the masculinities embodied by the population tend to anchor themselves more strongly to those of political leaders. In their study of Türkiye, Ozbay and Soybakis (2020) found that President Erdogan's influence goes beyond his politics and into his way of "doing masculinity", which seems to be

increasingly embodied by Turkish men, who, similarly to Erdogan, oppose gender ideologies regarded as Western. This makes Turkish politicians active agents in the promotion of a more conservative hypermasculinity (Ozbay & Soybakis, 2020), aligned with Hollander's (2014) ''victimized masculinity''. This situation is also connected with political masculinity, a type of masculinity that differs from its hegemonic and militarized counterparts because it only encompasses the kinds of masculinity ascribed or claimed by politicians and political actors in general (Löffler et al., 2020). These masculinities are important in the reproduction of (gender) power relations, as the interactions between ordinary men and political movements' discourses and beliefs on gender can affect how men perform or perceive their masculinity (Löffler et al., 2020; Ozbay & Soybakis, 2020).

On the other hand, in many nations, as is the case in Russia, the national territory tends to be sexualized and embodied in national discourses, being seen either as a woman, the "motherland", who must be protected, or as a man, the "fatherland", to whom one must obey. This is done through metaphors of weakness or strength, which tend to evoke "matrimonial and familial relations", according to the political objectives of its leaders (Agius, 2024; Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023; Tickner, 2001). Indeed, when a country is the victim of an invasion or a humiliating defeat, it tends to be represented as a violated female body. These attacks are often described as rape, as in the so-called *The Rape of Belgium* — the German incursion into Belgium in 1914, at the beginning of WWI (Agius, 2024). As well as in the German (and Soviet) invasion of Poland in 1939, marking the start of WWII (Tickner, 2001). This phenomenon also occurred during the Cold War through the USA's representation of the USSR as a rapist, that is, as an invading force, led by "frustrated" masculinities, who, with their army, aggressively penetrated the vulnerable countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992).

Even the USA's War on Terror after 9/11 exemplifies how militarized practices interact with masculinity. Scholars argue that the American response to 9/11 was marked by a desire to "remasculinize" the nation, especially after this attack demonstrated its vulnerability to "penetration by foreign men". In this manner, President Bush's forceful military response was due to, among other factors, his desire to establish a

hypermasculine image of himself and reinstate the country's masculinity (Peterson, 2010; Włodkowska, 2023). It can be considered then, that the connection between masculinity and violence is built with the specific purpose of justifying war (Ferguson, 2021), whether the conflict in question is direct or indirect, as in the case of the Cold War, creating a vicious cycle: "soldiering is related to and inseparable from masculinity, where masculinity is proved by soldiering, which is reliant on preexisting (assumed) masculinity" (Via, 2010, p. 44).

In effect, in climates of conflict, the adversary tends to be seen as the "other", feminized or racialized, not corresponding to the assumptions of militarized and hegemonic masculinity (Meger, 2016). Representations created to humiliate the enemy nation or justify the actions of its aggressors. This phenomenon is considered particularly relevant for Meger (2016), who applies it to European imperialism, suggesting that the representation of imperial domains as feminized was one of its foundations. For Cohen (1973), imperialism is defined as a political, economic, and ideological relationship of domination and control, direct or indirect, formal or informal, between one nation, the center, and another, the periphery. Moreover, in accordance with Meger (2016), Peterson (2010) argues that colonized and dominated people are often characterized and represented as feminine (weak, passive, or irrational), so as to justify the military interventions of imperial powers, which present themselves in masculine terms (strong, respectable, or rational). Accordingly, feminization is affirmed as an inherent reduction of the legitimacy, status, and value of a country, entity, or individual, both ideologically and materially, normalizing the marginalization or subordination of subjects and values that are not "correctly" male, while anchoring the "naturalness" of masculine privilege (Meger, 2016; Peterson, 2010; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011).

In the case of states, even a country's consistent neutrality in times of conflict is gendered. Neutrality is connected to a feminine gender representation because it translates a country's decision to avoid and reject violence in the international arena. This association with peace represents, in hypermasculine terms, weakness and emasculation (e.g., "national sterilization") and can thus generate concerns about an "overly feminized" image of the nation (Agius, 2024). For example, this desire to

strengthen a state's masculine image and avoid feminization is evident among many world leaders, including Vladimir Putin, who appears to fear the loss of authority related to such an "humiliation" (Peterson, 2010; Włodkowska, 2023). Włodkowska (2023) further explores how the negative connotations of feminization are present in major political alliances, such as the relationship between the USA and the EU, where the USA is viewed in masculine terms, as the strongest (military-wise) and the most "aggressive" of the two, while the EU is frequently feminized, owing to its military dependence on the USA and focus on soft power.

Femininity can also be securitized as a deviation from the masculine ideal, through its portrayal as something dangerous to society. For Gaufman (2023), in a militarized society, femininity can be seen as a threat, namely in the case of women who refuse to assume traditional or heteronormative roles. In these cases, the masculine is defended as the norm and the feminine as a deviation, benefiting hierarchically and discursively "macho" actors. Above all, feminization often serves as a tool to underline the "otherness" of an enemy, constructing the idea of femininity as dangerous to the point of emasculation (Gaufman, 2023). Even beyond warzones — where female fighters are often marginalized or hierarchically devalued (Gaufman, 2023) — women who do not conform to the status quo and defy stereotypes are deemed unnatural or problematic. While men are faced with constant pressure to "prove" their manhood and taught to conform to roles that feature aggression and control (e.g., Elshtain's "Just Warrior"), denying themselves vulnerability for fear of being feminized and consequently sidelined (Elshtain, 1987; Peterson, 2010; Sjoberg & Peet, 2011).

According to Włodkowska (2023) and Eichler (2009), the role of masculinity in the reproduction of military violence is undeniable and is explained by a state's need to gain legitimacy via the waging of war. Because of this, the success of one's own troops tends to be framed as a function of men's and women's adherence to specific militarized gender roles. The men who benefit most from this gender order and the men who pay the most are not the same: the infantry at the frontlines of a war or the homosexual men who are not even allowed to enlist, for instance, do not share the circumstances of the men who hold positions of political and military leadership (Connell, 2005).

Nevertheless, most men gain from the preponderance of hegemonic and militarized masculinity. They benefit from the patriarchal dividend allotted to them by this structure, creating a system where many privileges go unquestioned. The advantage gained from the subordination of women encourages men to partake in a relationship of complicity with this asymmetrical gender order (Connell, 2005).

2.2. Literature on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Russia and Ukraine are both characterized by high levels of societal militarization, which, as contended by Włodkowska (2023), is a significant driver of armed conflict. For this author, Russian militarization is the outcome of sustained policy initiatives by its leadership, while Ukrainian militarization developed primarily in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Building on Fedorchak's (2024) analysis, the 2014 to 2022 period of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be analytically segmented into three distinct phases, each reflecting underlying shifts in the confrontation's dynamics. The initial phase, spanning 2014 to 2015, encompassed Russia's annexation of Crimea and the escalation of separatist tensions in the region of Donbas, marking a rapid transformation from political unrest to military engagement. The subsequent period, from 2016 to the beginning of 2022, is often characterized as a "frozen conflict", with active hostilities largely subdued, yet unresolved tensions persisting. This interim facilitated Russia's preparation for renewed large-scale operations, that distinguish the final phase, which commenced with the 2022 invasion and continues to the time of writing.

On another note, as observed by Kotliuk (2023) and Włodkowska (2023), the Russian Federation, even after the end of its empire and the fall of the USSR, maintained a "paternalistic attitude" and an imperialist penchant, which are often excluded from Western postcolonial analyses. In effect, this inclination is visible throughout the presidency of Vladimir Putin, who assumes his imperial aspirations, manifested before the invasion of Ukraine in the two Chechen Wars (1994-1996; 1999-2009), the invasion and occupation of part of Georgia (2008), or the annexation of Crimea (2014). Violent

actions that had few international consequences for Russia, something that may have fueled its territorial aspirations (Kotliuk, 2023; Shand, 2022).

A year before the invasion of Ukraine, Putin (2021) published an essay entitled: *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, where he described his view of the history between the two countries, classifying the current Ukrainian government as an integral part of an "anti-Russia project", linked to an "aggressive anti-Russia policy" of the West, while claiming that Ukrainian history, language, and culture are artificial. Therefore, Putin (2021) argues that Ukrainians and Russians constitute a single people. He considers that Ukraine was only created as a republic distinct from Russia during the Soviet period and as such, occupies what he calls historically Russian lands (Brunk & Hakimi, 2022; Knott, 2023) — "All the subterfuges associated with the anti-Russia project are clear to us. And we will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia" (Putin, 2021). More specifically, this denial of Ukrainian nationhood is perpetuated by the imperialist myth of the "three triune nations" — Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus — based on which Ukrainians are just "little Russians" and, thus, have no separate national identity (Kotliuk, 2023; Putin, 2021).

Indeed, soviet imperialism sought to erase Ukrainian identity and reinvent it as Russian. Russia's current policies in Donbas, such as mandatory instruction in Russian and changes to schoolbooks (Human Rights Watch, 2024), can be seen as the direct successor of the USSR's narrative of Russian supremacy (Kotliuk, 2023). This logic also permeates President Putin's official justifications for the invasion of Ukraine. The first being that the Russian Federation, as a nuclear superpower, has a "right" to a buffer zone[5] in Eastern Europe, so the countries it borders should not be allowed to align with the West. The second, as per Putin's (2021) essay, is that Ukraine is not a "real country" but an integral part of Russian civilization and, as a result, a rightful territory of the Russian Federation. Lastly, there is the need to "de-Nazify Ukraine" — i.e., rid Ukraine

[5] The buffer zone or zone of influence doctrine, defended by countries like the USA, states that nations classified as great powers have a "special status" and, as such, a right to an exclusive "neighborhood" under their influence — this doctrine is a product of Cold War rivalries (Delanty, 2023).

of its “Nazi government”. A justification that resonates deeply with Russian history, since in WWII (called the “Great Patriotic War”) — which has a fundamental place in Russian collective memory and pride — Ukrainian nationalists joined forces with the Nazis to resist the country’s incorporation into the USSR (Delanty, 2023).

This invasion is, as a result, considered by numerous academics and political figures an “imperialist” war, with Moscow being accused of expansionist tendencies (Fediunin & Richard, 2024). However, as Russia has unique characteristics, Fediunin and Richard (2024) argue that it is more accurate to think of it as a power with an “imperialist policy”, which claims the right to exert its influence over the geographical area it sees as its legitimate “neighborhood”. Owing to this, the conflict can be interpreted as anchored, above all, in an exclusivist and “aggressive” Russian nationalism, which professes control over the national course of countries within its sphere of influence, repudiating their integration and rapprochement with the West, materialized in organizations such as the EU or NATO (Rojek, 2022).

In this way, the refusal of Ukrainians to accept the status quo defined by Russia undermined the relationship between the two countries, with Ukraine’s newfound “closeness” with the rest of Europe being seen as a “a pro-Western civilizational choice” and a direct threat to Russian dominance in the region, another condition that led to the 2022 invasion (Kotliuk, 2023; Meleshchenko, 2021; Tolz & Hutchings, 2023). In addition, Gaufman (2023) suggests that Russian propaganda effectively “feminizes” and “slutshames” Ukraine, rhetorically representing the country as a sex worker, exploited by the West. A narrative that is in accordance with Russian hegemonic masculinity, as it denies Ukraine’s agency and builds a hierarchical relationship between the two countries, affirming Russia’s superiority (Gaufman, 2023).

In Russia, since the USSR, military service has been mandatory for male citizens, establishing a firm link between masculinity and the military, considered to be an institution of male socialization. Conversely, from the late 1980s — specifically after the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) — there have been increasing difficulties with draft evasion and a loss of the military’s prestige. Despite attempts to represent soldiers as “patriotic heroes” or “male role models”, social norms have evolved, and both

societal support for the military and men's willingness to serve have declined, with draft evasion becoming more socially condoned (Eichler, 2009; Włodkowska, 2023).

This is partly due to the activism of the Russian Soldiers' Mothers' Movement, who, leaning into essentialist notions of mothers as protectors of life, have denounced the harsh treatment of military recruits, refusing to support their sons' mandatory enlistment — "prominent groups in Moscow and St. Petersburg have challenged patriotic motherhood and militarized masculinity by publicly opposing conscription" (Eichler, 2009, p. 20). Nevertheless, following Putin's rise to power, these grassroots organizations have seen their influence in society decrease, with pacifism being ostracized by the government (Eichler, 2009, 2011; Fürst, 2024).

More concretely, in her study of the role of masculinity in the Chechen Wars, Eichler (2009) found that, after the fall of the USSR, Yeltsin's decision to send Russian troops to Chechnya, beyond being both unpopular and unconstitutional, had a gendered subtext. President Yeltsin seemed to believe that creating a hypermasculine ("macho") image of himself, by becoming a "war hero", would allow him to raise his approval ratings. His reasoning illustrates the gendered assumption that waging war can offer leaders the opportunity to gain public support via the display of their masculinity. Although the lack of funds, proper training, and planning led instead to a negative image of both the soldiers and the president. In contrast, as Yeltsin's successor, Putin represented a robust Russian masculinity, weaponizing Russian patriotism and fear of emasculation to institute, with popular support, greater state control and an army with a more central role in society (Eichler, 2009, 2011).

2.2.1. Feminist Movements in Russia and Ukraine

A feminist framework is essential for understanding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict's often "invisible" gender impact. Masculinities and femininities are invoked in the construction of both Russia's and Ukraine's geopolitical identities, while women are systematically excluded from critical processes, including ceasefire negotiations (Wright, 2022). Most mainstream discourse on the war often neglects these gender dynamics, reducing women's roles to stereotypical ("Beautiful Souls") or deviant (sex workers). Ukrainian

women, for example, are still frequently depicted as “passive victims” of war crimes or poverty (Shand, 2022; Włodkowska, 2023).

Following the onset of the war, Ukrainian feminists published *The Right to Resist* manifesto (The Feminist Initiative Group, 2022), which challenges the “abstract pacifism” traditionally linked to Western feminism and advocates for the decolonization of its approaches to militarism. In this manifesto, Ukrainian feminists stand in favor of Ukrainian nationalism, contending that support for their country’s right to self-defense and mass rearmament is vital for its survival. Thereby reframing feminism within the context of the country’s national liberation and resistance against Russian influence (I. Lysychkina & O. Lysychkina, 2023; Kratochvíl & O’Sullivan, 2023; The Feminist Initiative Group, 2022).

Additionally, as remarked by Zherebkina (2024), Ukrainian feminists tend to disagree with Western feminism’s view of nationalism as an inherently patriarchal and misogynistic ideology, arguing that this accusation is only applicable to former colonial powers, not colonized territories, whose nationalism was essential to independence movements and, hence, emancipatory. In this sense, Ukrainian feminism is generally linked with postcolonial and decolonial lenses, echoing Global South perspectives and emphasizing issues such as Ukraine’s sovereignty, Russian imperialism, and Western “academic paternalism” (The Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Shchurko & Suchland, 2022; Zherebkina, 2024).

The ongoing conflict has accelerated a range of emancipatory developments advocated by the Ukrainian feminist movement, especially in terms of women’s increased participation in defense. As mentioned by Kotliuk (2023) and Darden (2023), empirical data indicates that approximately 60.000 women are currently volunteering in the Ukrainian armed forces (UAF), constituting about 15% of the military’s overall personnel. Notably, around 5000 of these women are serving on the front lines (Kotliuk, 2023). This substantial representation marks a radical shift in the gender dynamics within Ukraine’s military, and Commander-in-Chief Victoria Arnautova (2021), the Gender Adviser of the UAF, as cited in Darden (2023), asserts that women’s integration into the army demonstrates their capacity to defend the nation on equal terms with

men. In contrast, the Russian armed forces (RAF) report a lower proportion of female soldiers, estimated at roughly 40.000 or nearly 5% of the total personnel (Darden, 2023). Importantly, Russian legal frameworks, while permitting female volunteers and the conscription of women in wartime, exclude them from serving on the frontlines (Eichler, 2009; Włodkowska, 2023). This discrepancy not only illustrates both countries' divergent national policies regarding gender and military participation but also reveals how both states instrumentalize women's roles and visibility within their defense structures.

Furthermore, the Ukrainian government's efforts to mobilize its citizens for war are deeply gendered. Women can volunteer to serve in the army but are largely exempt from conscription, even though, since 2021, some professions require all women practitioners to register for a possible draft (Darden, 2023). Contrarily, men have less agency in the matter, as they are obliged to enlist. Yet to men's service is ascribed a greater social value and recognition than to women's. The mobilization of women is also frequently viewed as temporary, with women being framed as substitutes for absent men — those who manage to leave the country or are unable to participate in combat (Darden, 2023; Włodkowska, 2023).

On the other hand, if both sides of the conflict want to reach a durable peace agreement, they should involve women in the negotiations. As previously stated, their contributions tend to ensure a more lasting peace (J. Krause et al., 2018; Włodkowska, 2023), and data from the Peace Research Institute of Oslo indicates that, in 2022, 43% of Ukrainians supported the participation of women in their peace delegation (Darden, 2023). Irrespective of this, in the 2022 Istanbul peace talks, the near absence of women in the Russian and Ukrainian delegations was noticeable, given that reports of rape and mass displacement of women were already widely known (Włodkowska, 2023; Wright, 2022).

As evidenced by Martsenyuk and Shevtsova (2024), as well as Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan (2023), there is also a widespread fear on the part of feminist groups that the Russian invasion will succeed and impose on Ukraine a type of subservient femininity, rooted in the "traditional values" of Moscow's patriarchal and authoritarian structures. For the CEE's academia, a clear link can be established between the hegemonic masculinity of

the Russian patriarchy and war (e.g., Kotliuk, 2023; Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023; O'Sullivan, 2019; Pavliuc, 2025; Rogstad, 2022; Shand, 2022). A phenomenon that can also be seen as an obstacle to the sustainable resolution of the conflict.

Nonetheless, peace movements are, in this case, more prominent in Russia, with anti-war protests being systemically led by women. The aforementioned Russian Soldiers' Mothers' Movement, in particular, emerged during the years before the dissolution of the USSR and was instrumental in uncovering the widespread abuse of conscripts through *dedovshchina*[6]. Their efforts contributed to the loss of the military's prestige, as it was found that this hazing system included many abuses, such as the stealing of personal belongings or the soldiers' salaries, as well as sexual violence (Eichler, 2009). According to data from 1990, around 15.000 soldiers died between 1985 and 1989 because of hazing or avoidable accidents caused by a superior's neglect (Fürst, 2024). To discredit this movement and the credibility of the mothers' findings, Russian military leadership feminized them, describing these women as "unbalanced", "too emotional", and "fueled by female hysteria", highlighting that they had no legitimacy to discuss military affairs (Eichler, 2009).

However, until Putin's rise to power, the committees of the Soldiers' Mothers' Movement were powerful independent organizations that openly challenged both the state and the military, while being widely supported by the public (Fürst, 2024). But most of these committees remained silent when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke out. Even though President Putin had to resort to a general mobilization in order to fuel the war effort (Fürst, 2024). A reaction that, for Fürst (2024), may stem from the repression of Putin's government or the current lack of public support for their cause. For the author, it appears that younger women are now the ones carrying this movement, using social media to fight for the return of their husbands and partners. In fact, despite the harsh repression, there have been protests by mothers and wives — as well as overtly feminist groups, such as the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (Sharova, 2022) — with

[6] *Dedovshchina* is a ritualized form of hazing, inflicted on younger recruits or between the different ethnic groups in the RAF (Fürst, 2024).

women's general level of trust in Russian politics remaining low (Fürst, 2024; Sharova, 2022).

In general terms, Russian feminism has made few postcolonial critiques of the country, but it is often anti-authoritarian and anti-militaristic, strongly advocating pacifism. It tends to focus on domestic oppression and the internal resistance of Russian women, rather than sovereignty issues, as is more prevalent in Ukraine. Nonetheless, this movement condemns the invasion of Ukraine and opposes Putin's government, seen as the nation's "primary patriarchal oppressor" (Esquerda.net, 2022; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003).

As mentioned, there is a link between high levels of violence against women and more aggressive policies toward other nations (Hudson et al., 2008), as is evidenced by the parties at conflict. As noted by Włodkowska (2023), Putin's self-representation as a "macho" man "translates into Russia's policy, which is dominated by the need to […] subjugate the weaker" (p. 102). In effect, not only has Russia ignored the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (2011)[7], but, as indicated by women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), from 2011 to 2019, over 12.000 women died because of domestic violence in the country (around 1500 every year). On the other hand, in Ukraine, this issue is also salient, with data from the UN showing that at least 600 Ukrainian women die from gender-based violence every year, figures with particular incidence in the eastern part of the country, the one most affected by the war (Włodkowska, 2023).

As highlighted by Cohn (2013), armed conflicts ought to be studied beyond what is immediately thought of as the war zone, making it fundamental to consider phenomena such as peace delegations, gender equality legislation, or domestic violence. All in all, Ukrainian feminists see feminism as inseparable from their struggle for "decolonial

[7] The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (known as "the Istanbul Convention") is based on the understanding that violence against women constitutes gender-based violence. Acknowledging that this violence is widespread, the convention requires that its parties address and prevent gender-based and domestic violence, protecting victims and prosecuting perpetrators (Council of Europe, 2011, n.d.).

emancipation", interpreting the war through a decolonial and liberationist perspective (Zherebkina, 2024), whereas Russian feminists often focus on pacifism and view the war through an anti-authoritarian lens (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2003).

3. Methodology: Sources and Discourse Analysis

This qualitative study applies the conceptual and analytical framework of feminist discourse analysis, visuality, and Searle's *Speech Act theory* (1969) to investigate the relationship between masculinity, war, peace, and emasculation, using the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as a case study. As previously observed, the research's primary contribution lies in analyzing how militarized and hegemonic masculinity, cultivated in wartime contexts and modeled by many actors in the international system (e.g., Russia), may hinder conflict resolution and the achievement of sustainable peace. The methodological framework is outlined in this section, specifying the core principles of the discursive and visual analysis applied, which allow for the interpretation of meanings embedded in texts, speeches, images, and videos. This framework offers a comprehensive lens for analyzing Putin's and Zelenskyy's discourses regarding the conflict and their constructions of gender within wartime rhetoric.

Accordingly, the analysis is structured around the research question: How does militarized and/or hegemonic masculinity, as represented by most states in the global arena, influence peace negotiations in international conflicts?

Furthermore, I present as central analytical propositions for the case study:

- Both Russia and Ukraine represent male actors.
- Masculinity is a factor that generates difficulties in negotiating peace.

My aim is then to understand the distinction between the leaders of Russia and Ukraine in terms of how they represent their gender. In addition, I seek to examine masculinity and the fear of emasculation in the selected texts and media to illustrate whether they could influence peace negotiations in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, as well as how these issues are externalized and represented in IR. To achieve these objectives, the analysis

involved multiple rounds, interpreting statements from both countries' leaders to identify recurring themes, keywords, and patterns in language use related to masculinity, power dynamics, justifications for war, conditions for peace, and gender representations.

Based on the research question, its objectives, and the analytical propositions presented, the themes considered relevant to the analysis of the speeches of both presidents, chosen using purposive sampling, were compiled together in one document and organized in two analytical tables, one for each country (equal in structure, as shown in Annex 1), to identify any discursive or consequential patterns within the data. This methodological option sought to ensure that the data collected and interpreted was sufficient and adequately representative of the phenomenon examined.

3.1. Sources and Research Data

For analyzing the case study, the following sources were consulted: journalistic articles, publications of NGOs (among which *Human Rights Watch*), speeches, press conferences, and statements made by Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy, the UN Charter, and UN Resolution 1325, as well as international treaties, more concretely, the Istanbul Convention and the Budapest Memorandum. To these sources were added official media outlets, such as the newspapers *Esquerda.net*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, and *The Moscow Times*, as well as the websites of *Al Jazeera,* the BBC, CNN, DW, and TASS. These newspapers and media channels originate from multiple countries and regions, and were selected due to their comprehensive coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian war, as well as their more academic penchant, as is the case with *Le Monde diplomatique*, or their broad political positioning on the conflict, with: the BBC, CNN or DW being pro-Ukraine, *Al Jazeera and The Moscow Times* critical of Putin's regime, and *Esquerda.net* and TASS, more markedly pro-Russia.

To this material were also added the official websites of the UN and UN Women, as well as those of the Russian and Ukrainian Presidencies. These last two are available in English and were chosen for their relevance in the selection of official speeches and statements by the countries' Presidents, as they allow for the consultation of transcripts.

Lastly, I use quantitative data from the organization OVD-Info, the Russian Levada-Center, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Bank, as well as other sociological surveys and statistics regarding the countries at war.

The geographical scope is, therefore, deliberately restricted to the countries directly involved in the conflict, namely Russia and Ukraine, with the analysis conducted at the state level. Temporally, the study is confined to the period spanning the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, through to December 2025, after the "failed" Alaska Summit between Presidents Trump and Putin (Sexton & Jones, 2025) and in the midst of more intense peace talks, with Trump and Zelenskyy meeting in Florida (on December 28) to express "that a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine is close" (Al Jazeera, 2025). While this temporal delimitation allows for an in-depth and current analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, it necessarily excludes perspectives from other affected regions or actors, as well as potential shifts in discourse outside this timespan. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted considering the limitations imposed by this focus.

The search yielded a total of 96 speeches, 70 of which were selected for analysis. In this selection, the following criteria were adopted: relevance, considering only the speeches addressing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict; accessibility, opting for those publicly available in English on official government websites or news sources; and, as mentioned, a temporal restriction, with only statements issued between February 2022 and December 2025 being considered. More specifically, after several rounds of analysis, 39 of these speeches were chosen for the case study in Chapter 4. Of these, 18 pertain to Russia's president, while the remaining 21 were delivered by the Ukrainian head of state. Having selected these textual materials and accompanying images or videos, essential for this study's visuality component, discourse analysis was applied, focusing on socio-ideological narratives of the war and its gendered constructions. This sought to facilitate a relevant and up-to-date comparison of the actors' postures throughout the conflict, as well as their speech patterns and ideological frames.

3.2. Discourse Analysis

As previously addressed, feminist scholarship argues that states continue to base themselves on bipolar gender constructions, privileging masculinity over femininity in the constitution of their state identities, especially in matters of security and the legitimization of war (Rogstad, 2022). In this manner, feminist theory was chosen for the analysis given its usefulness in challenging discursive structures of domination and its particular interest in the biases of conventional approaches to the study of war (Sjoberg, 2010; Tickner, 2001), as well as its compatibility with a decolonial perspective on PSS, often invoked by CEE scholars. According to Tickner (2006), many feminists prefer to refer to methodology as an "epistemological perspective" to indicate that its goals and/or orientation seek to produce knowledge that challenges gender as a system of power. Significantly, "[f]eminists claim no single standard of methodological correctness" (Tickner, 2006, p. 21). In IR, feminist methodology tends to fall upon postpositivist frameworks (Tickner, 2006), such as discourse analysis (applied in this research). An overall popular method in social sciences, as discussed by Quivy and Van Campenhoudt (2005), who defend its usefulness in the treatment of complex information.

The focus of this study lies in how societal constructions of masculinity, represented by countries worldwide, are intertwined with the institution of war, affecting peace negotiations in international conflicts. In this sense, a feminist perspective was considered appropriate, with the concept of masculinity, both hegemonic and militarized, being used as an investigative tool in the analysis of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This conflict was chosen because it points to the way in which militarized and hegemonic masculinity can override diplomacy or peace negotiations, foregrounding a clear disregard for the prohibition on the use of force, as evident in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which forbids the use of force against another state's territorial integrity, including its forced annexation (Brunk & Hakimi, 2022; UN, 1945). Indeed, the wars conducted by Russia since the end of the Soviet period seem to be based on a militarized, state-fueled hypermasculinity (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023) — it is

apparent in political speeches that the country perceives war as a male domain, in which soldiers protect the (often feminized) nation.

3.2.1. CDA in the Study of Political Speeches

Quivy and Van Campenhoudt (2005) define methodology as an instrument for generating information, suitable for testing theoretical assumptions. In this research, I employ a qualitative methodological approach that applies thematic and structural content analysis, as well as visuality (discussed below), to political speeches. Thematic content analysis is used to identify and interpret social representations, recurring topics, and value judgments expressed within the discursive data, while structural content analysis focuses on the organization and sequencing of the discourse to reveal its underlying patterns (Quivy & Van Campenhoudt, 2005). Through this combined approach, the study examines the messages, terminology, frequency, and arrangement of terms, as well as the construction and progression of the speeches, in order to generate knowledge about both the speaker and the broader social and political contexts in which their discourse is produced.

Foucault (2002) describes discourses as social practices performed through language and organized in power relations, further referring to them as “practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 2002, p. 54). Discourse might then be seen as the complex set of relations and ways people communicate with each other, including how discourses of power by institutions or figures can be “internalized” (Fairclough, 2010; Filardo-Llamas & Boyd, 2018). As cited in Walcott (2025), Foucault’s (2002) view of power relations interprets “meanings” as unstable and contends that a strategic use of discourse is crucial in the negotiation of these relations or the resistance against them.

According to Tickner (2001), discourses are systems of signification structured “in terms of binary oppositions that establish relations of power” (Tickner, 2001, p. 144), which define which subjects are authorized to speak and which practices are considered legitimate. Discourse analysis is particularly effective for examining dominant or hegemonic discourses and their connection to the legitimation of those in positions of

authority, in the broader system of power (Tickner, 2001). Feminist analysis is pertinent in this context given that, like discourse, gender is deeply intertwined with language. As mentioned in *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999), basing herself on Lacanian thought, posits that women are systematically excluded from the male default and objectified as "other" by language, due to its patriarchal structure. As highlighted by Irigaray (1985), who also develops this argument, language is biased. Women are completely excluded from representation in it, because masculinist and phallogocentric language is so prevalent that it renders women silent, that is, "unrepresentable": "the feminine "sex" is a point of linguistic absence" (Butler, 1999, p. 15), and "a hole in men's signifying economy" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 50).

Thus, feminist discourse analysis, informed by the contemporary precepts of critical feminism, is a perspective that allows for the investigation of how gender dynamics and representations, as well as the asymmetries of power on which they are based on, shape political discourses and state ideologies, in more or less subtle ways, and are reflected in language (Coates & Pichler, 2023; Lazar, 2018). With this method, I seek to examine how the selected statements reiterate a posture of hegemonic and militarized masculinity, entrenching patriarchal social constructions and traditional gender narratives.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as formulated by Fairclough (2001, 2010, 2018), is a "dialectical reasoning" that emphasizes ideology and the search for the underlying power in discourse, i.e., how individuals with power shape the social order and control the spreading of views distinct from their own (Fairclough, 2018). Feminist approaches constitute an important part of research using this methodology, since a focus on gender can be conflated with an analysis via the main tenets of CDA (van Dijk, 1993). Effectively, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) was introduced in the early 2000s by scholars such as Lazar (2005, 2014, 2018), who focuses on how gender ideologies and power asymmetries are discursively entrenched as "common sense":

> FCDA is a critical analysis of discourses which sustain a gendered social order in which some people, by virtue of being "men," are accorded privileges systemically, and others, by virtue of

> being “women” are routinely disadvantaged, excluded, and not taken seriously. (Lazar, 2014, p. 184)

Moreover, FCDA examines how power and dominance are discursively produced, resisted, and counter-resisted, while defending that many social practices are gendered and not “neutral,” as is commonly assumed, so that even if gender is not always the most salient social identity, it remains relevant in every interaction (Lazar, 2014). Notably, van Dijk (1993, 2018) asserts that CDA concentrates on abuses of power and identifies the method’s prevalent macro levels of analysis: “power”, “dominance”, “hegemony”, and “gender”, among others. Fairclough (2001, 2010, 2018), meanwhile, classifies the various approaches of CDA according to the level of detail afforded by the analysis itself. However, they both posit that power relations are discursive, and, consequently, those who attain power can control dominant discourses — used to influence people’s actions and beliefs (Tutar & Bağ, 2023).

For the analysis, it is also relevant to mention intertextuality, which refers to the way texts incorporate elements from other texts — i.e., speakers often place fragments of earlier discourses into their own, whether through direct or indirect reference, or contradictions (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Interdiscursivity, on the other hand, is a form of intertextuality, connected with the wider situational, socio-cultural, and historical contexts that define a text (Filardo-Llamas & Boyd, 2018). Specifically, political discourse is about stating public propositions, with discourse being used to affect politics, aiming to legitimize and justify politicians’ power, emphasize political attitudes, or shape public opinion, as well as the perception of policies or events, so that the main narratives align with the speaker’s goals and ideology. That is, political speech serves to maintain social order and persuade audiences to accept the speaker’s ideas (Dylgjeri, 2017; Savchuk, 2025).

CDA aims to reveal the implications of the speaker’s intentions (Tutar & Bağ, 2023; van Dijk, 2018). Thus, this method entails an examination of their linguistic structure and wording to understand whether they reproduce or restructure the existing social order and with what consequences, as well as the relationship between speakers (when there are many) (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Therefore, the time, place, perspective, and

participants, as well as their intentions and/or knowledge, are fundamental (van Dijk, 2018). The main elements of discourse analysis are, in this way, “speech analysis, political power relations, institutional connections, and discourses” (Tutar & Bağ, 2023, p. 50), which highlight the “cultural codes” and views of elites, providing legitimacy to their actions. Conflict in the context of CDA is seen as being profoundly shaped by language, with the way leaders talk about war having a significant impact on whether violence is continued or resolved (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025).

Discourse during the Russia-Ukraine war reflects each side’s national perceptions and myths, as well as their intended audiences. Powerful nations, such as Russia, have more influence on global narratives, so they seek to frame the conflict and its interpretation in accordance with their interests, even if their preferred narrative is not unquestioningly accepted by the international community (Walcott, 2025). That is, political speeches reinforce a country’s official perception of events, impacting the audience’s insight. Dominant discourses are made to appear natural; their language is powerful because they render other discourses invisible or inaccessible, affecting a country’s actions on an interstate level (Coates & Pichler, 2023; Fairclough, 2010; Savchuk, 2025; Walcott, 2025).

3.3. Speech Acts

According to *Speech Act Theory*, speech acts are defined as “locutions” or “utterances” performed by a speaker, with their meaning often determined by context and intent. This theory, grounded in the foundational work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), as cited in Dylgjeri (2017), delineates three levels of speech acts: the locutionary act, which involves producing a meaningful utterance and focuses on the literal meaning of words; the illocutionary act, concerned with the speaker’s intended meaning, including making a promise, issuing an order, or posing a question; and the perlocutionary act, which pertains to the effect of utterances on the listener, more concretely, it encompasses the outcomes of illocutionary acts, among which persuading or inspiring the audience (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025). Searle (1969) further refines this framework by classifying speech acts as commissives, expressives, declaratives, assertives, or

directives, according to their intended function (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025; Fatima et al., 2024).

Commissive acts entail the speaker's commitment to future actions, including intentions, offers, warnings, threats, or promises. Expressive acts convey "the speaker's psychological state or emotions", comprising shows of empathy, apologies, regrets, or compliments (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025; Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022). Declaratives consist of statements or propositions that alter reality by bringing about new situations, such as changes in policies, institutions, or states of affairs. Examples include political nominations or declarations of war (Fatima et al., 2024; Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022). Assertives are used to present information the speaker regards as factual, reflecting their state of mind or beliefs about the world (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025). Lastly, directives are utterances intended to prompt action, encouraging the audience to behave in a specific manner. This category is especially relevant for discourses of authority, as it encompasses instructions, commands, requests, or obligations (Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022). Overall, speech acts are designed to produce changes in the audience that benefit the speaker (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025; Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022). This study will apply speech act typology by categorizing the various acts employed in the selected statements, seeking to understand their intended functions and how they influence their audience.

In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, these acts anchor the progression of the conflict and its global perception (Walcott, 2025). The different speakers essentially exchange speech acts that convey meaning while evaluating the validity of the other's claims or demands. During a conflict, a type of "war discourse" is then adopted to underline the clashes between nations and their opposing narratives, which are overwhelmingly repeated (so the audience will interpret future events through the same "narrative frame") and perceived differently by international and domestic listeners, as well as by different groups of countries, depending on their political alliances, shaping policy implications and responses to the conflict (Savchuk, 2025).

3.4. Visuality

Images evoke emotional reactions that differ from those elicited by written media. Photographs of traumatic events, such as natural disasters, provide news audiences with emotional insights that written accounts may not communicate as successfully. Visual representations are especially effective in conveying pain or anguish and play a central role in shaping public perceptions and responses to crises or conflicts. The widespread belief that photojournalism, and photographs in particular, are authentic and neutral when documenting events or individuals further strengthens this dynamic (Bleiker, 2018). For example, in an image depicting a child amidst the rubble of a bombing, the positioning of the child in the frame and its visible expression of despair among shattered surroundings guide the viewer's emotional and cognitive response, compelling an engagement that written descriptions might not achieve.

Building on Mirzoeff (2011), who based himself on Foucault's conceptions, visuality is the naming and classification of the visible, but it is not solely about images. It relates to the practice of "seeing", the capacity to see and be seen, and how visions of the world are connected with its power relations (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). As Sturken and Cartwright (2018) posit, power is "enacted in ways that privilege the visual" (p. 22). That is, power encompasses what/who can be seen and who is able or allowed to look. Likewise, invisibility is not a sign of unimportance. In effect, the suppression of visual representations altogether can carry a deeper meaning than the images themselves, as was the case in the killing of Osama bin Laden, where the absence of photographic evidence in the media spurred the creation of numerous conspiracy theories (Bleiker, 2018; Sturken & Cartwright, 2018).

Feminist scholars critically examine visual representations of gender, making a feminist perspective particularly well suited for a pictorial analysis, including what is visible or invisible and how meaning is constructed through images (Schlag, 2019; Sturken & Cartwright, 2018). Nevertheless, Kearns (2017) points out the need for greater attention within feminist conflict research to the intersection between gender, securitization, and visuality. The visuals and symbols used in representations affect what audiences know

and how they interpret certain phenomena, creating “dominant ways of seeing”, which can be distinct from actuality (Dück & Tiroch, 2025; Schlag, 2019). But images can also challenge dominant positions; for instance, Kearns (2017) mentions that feminist studies on the war in Afghanistan (2001) (e.g., Khalid, 2011; Shepherd, 2008; Weber, 2005, as cited in Kearns, 2017) have exposed the gendered logics behind the visual representation of Afghan women as liberated from the Taliban, via the USA’s intervention. This situation highlights how gendered imagery can facilitate certain political responses while rejecting alternatives.

FCDA is also used to identify recurring visual signs that convey meanings to their intended audience: portrayals of female soldiers, where they challenge traditional gender roles by being presented as defenders of the nation, or images of wounded male soldiers, that give prominence to their fragility, go against dominant gender conceptions and can be strategically used to emphasize a country’s position on gender in the international arena — this is evident in Ukraine’s media coverage of the war (Dück & Tiroch, 2025; Kearns, 2017).

Visuality is an important analytical tool. In this research’s case study, images often accompany written discourses or transcripts of speeches, whose context and visual entourage seem to be given detailed thought. Of all speeches selected, those given at large events and gatherings, such as conferences, celebrations, or parades, had their images or videos (when readily available) taken into account.

4. Case Study: Analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

This chapter comprises the FCDA and is organized as follows: it begins with an exploration of the background of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, followed by the analysis of several of Zelenskyy’s and Putin’s addresses from 2022 to 2025, divided by topic and detailing the main arguments and visual representations of both leaders. To conclude this chapter, a brief section traces the points of convergence and divergence between the two heads of state.

4.1. Historical Context and the Breakout of Hostilities

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is justified by Putin via the nationalist concept of "Russian World", whose narrative comes from the religious ideal "Holy Rus". This is the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome, which is nurtured by the Orthodox Church (Vagramenko & Fernández, 2023), advocating a repudiation of the West's values and models, and the creation of an alliance with other post-Soviet states to ensure Russia's great power status (Jach et al., 2023; Prokop, 2023). Owing to this, the integration with the post-Soviet area and the protection of its Russian-speaking diaspora (around 25 million people) have established themselves as important objectives for Russia (Bishara, 2022; Prokop, 2023). From its perspective, relations with Ukraine got more strained after the nation deepened its relations with the EU and the rest of the West, while implementing measures to strengthen the status of the Ukrainian language, which Russia considered an attack on the country's Russian-speaking minority and used as one of its justifications for the 2022 invasion (Kotliuk, 2023; Prokop, 2023).

In fact, Russia considers the area of the former USSR as its sphere of influence, which is why it views the expansion of the EU and NATO eastwards as a personal threat to its territorial integrity (Prokop, 2023; Rojek, 2022). Indeed, to stop Russia's offensive, Putin demanded that Ukraine be banned from NATO membership, that NATO capabilities be withdrawn from various regions of the CEE, that Ukraine recognize the annexation of Crimea and the independence of the Russian-speaking Donetsk and Lugansk Republics, and that it constitutionally ensure its neutrality and demilitarization. Demands that Ukraine rejected as unacceptable (Fedorchak, 2024; Prokop, 2023).

Regarding Ukraine, ever since its independence in 1991, the country has faced major internal divisions: most of the Russian-speaking population, located in the East, supported tighter relations with Russia, while the more nationalist Ukrainian-speaking population, located in the West, preferred a deeper integration with Europe (Prokop, 2023). In 2014, as stated in the Introduction, President Yanukovych's pro-Russian regime refused to sign an association agreement with the EU in favor of further cooperation with Russia, leading to the pro-EU Euromaidan protests, which called for his removal

and greater independence from Russian influence, contributing to the deepening of the population's divisions (Blackburn, 2024; Fedorchak, 2024; Prokop, 2023). During this episode, President Yanukovych used violence against the protesters, killing more than a hundred and, following this repression, fled the country, with Russia annexing Crimea soon after (Fedorchak, 2024; Hrycak, 2022; O'Sullivan, 2019).

Years later, in 2020, Zelenskyy's government released a National Security Strategy that named Russia as its main threat and made NATO membership a priority (Prokop, 2023). Zelenskyy also expressed his administration's desire to bring Crimea back under Ukrainian control, policies that worsened the country's already fraught relations with Russia (Blackburn, 2024; Türkeş-Kılıç, 2024).

From Russia's perspective, after the aforementioned lackluster reaction of the international community to its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty during the annexation of Crimea, it had grounds for assuming it could invade Ukraine with impunity (Allison, 2024; Shand, 2022). The Federation preemptively prepared its recognition of the separatist republics in Donbas, with the issue being discussed in the Federal Assembly, which called on the president to recognize them and sign ten-year "agreements" of friendship and mutual assistance with them, making the invasion a request from its new "allies" (Allison, 2024). To further support his actions, Putin also mentions their validity in comparison with other interventions unsanctioned by the UN Security Council, such as those in Kosovo in 1999 and in Iraq in 2003 (Allison, 2024; Delanty, 2023).

Moreover, this invasion appears to have been at least partly prompted by Russia's desire to return to the Cold War's balance of power (Ferraro, 2024). In effect, many soviet thinkers considered the weakening of the USSR as a crisis of masculinity (in line with Hollander's (2014) "victimized masculinity", mentioned in Chapter 2), leading the government to concern itself with men's supposed emasculation, confirmed first by an increase in military draft evasion, followed by the Union's dissolution (Eichler, 2009; Gasviani, 2023). Due to the fear of emasculation, the Russian state's "nationalization" of masculinity persisted after the end of the USSR, reinforcing essentialist notions of gender that connect masculinity with patriotism and military service, and, in this sense,

justify the many wars Russia has fought since the establishment of its “democracy” (Gasviani, 2023; Shapovalova, 2025).

The general opposition of former Soviet states, such as Georgia or Ukraine, to greater Russian influence was then perceived and defined by Putin as a form of Western intervention, which included the import of the West’s emasculating liberal values. Effectively, Russian propaganda promotes an image of the West as “Gayropa”, claiming feminism and homosexuality are at the essence of the “European way of life” (Gasviani, 2023; Gaufman, 2023), to make the EU less attractive to former Soviet states. Regarding Ukraine’s EU candidacy, Russia made concerted efforts to pressure Ukraine into abandoning this path, spreading disinformation and interfering in the country’s democratization measures and legal reforms. Efforts that, after the Euromaidan, proved largely unsuccessful, with the popularity of the EU increasing as Russia’s measures became more aggressive, notably after the annexation of Crimea (Hrycak, 2022; Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024).

Subsequently, Russia’s full-scale invasion triggered broad reactions of resistance and defiance. Ukrainians have responded by opposing everything they connect with Russia, weaponizing language or religion, with a rise in nationalistic sentiments even in regions previously pro-Russia (Wanner, 2024). The invasion also led to growing support for gender equality, with a new openness to women and LGBTQIA+ people serving in the army, partly in an effort to reject the traditional gender roles preached by the “Russian World” (Martsenyuk, 2024).

These positions lead to diverging representations of masculinity: hypermasculinity, from a militarized and hegemonic perspective, can be connected to the Russian president, while the complementary notion of protective masculinity, from a militarized but non-hegemonic position, can be linked to the Ukrainian president (Jang, 2025; Misman, 2025). This is the masculinity of the “head of the family”, who presents himself as a protector, while demanding subordination and obedience, as well as gratitude, from those he protects (Włodkowska, 2023; Young, 2003a, 2003b).

At the time of writing, both sides of the conflict still have the capacity to endure combat, and despite claiming to be invested in the pursuit of peace, neither Russia nor Ukraine seems willing to compromise (Delanty, 2023). Regardless of this, civilians in both countries seem to share a growing desire for peace and serious negotiations. The level of support for the army in Ukraine remains high, but the Russian public does not want an escalation of the war, with the Levada-Center finding that, in 2025, more than half of Russians supported peace talks, the highest number since the start of the invasion (Hartog, 2025; Levada-Center, 2025).

4.2. Discursive Analysis of the Russian and Ukrainian Cases

During times of war, leaders' discourse influences public opinion. Therefore, the rhetoric of a country's political leader is an act of power that allows them to persuade a target audience of determined ideas or goals (Morini & Chiapponi, 2026). This propaganda can be seen as both deceptive and protective, depending on which side of a conflict one is on (Tutar & Bağ, 2023).

Zelenskyy built his popularity on television, acting, and performing on talent shows, such as *Dancing with the Stars*, and from the beginning of the invasion, his popularity has only risen (Lysigakis, 2026). His speeches emphasize the nation in the plural, portraying him as a citizen who is part of a larger collective (President of Ukraine, 2023c, 2024d). Visually, Zelenskyy is often photographed with other world leaders, flanked by Ukrainian flags, or surrounded by patriotic symbols, in historical landscapes, international organizations, and foreign parliaments (e.g., Mojo Story, 2022; NBC News, 2022; President of Ukraine, 2022c, 2025d, 2025e), foregrounding the international support Ukraine receives. He discarded his suit after the beginning of the hostilities and wears mostly military clothing, which is one of his standout markers. Notably, on February 22, 2022, he delivered his last address in a suit (President of Ukraine, 2022a; Mojo Story, 2022), switching from a politician's usual formal attire to military gear (e.g., President of Ukraine, 2022b). This style is consistent throughout his addresses, except for when he wears a *vyshyvanka*, a traditional Ukrainian shirt, usually worn on national holidays (e.g., President of Ukraine, 2025e).

Perhaps due to his acting background, he has a compelling grasp on rhetoric, evident in how he tailors some of his speeches to foreign audiences, portraying Ukraine's resistance as rooted in Western ideals, while recalling each nation's significant historical experiences or tragic events (e.g., the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Prague Spring), so that they might better identify with Ukraine's situation and accede to its requests (Cichosz & Kozierska, 2023; Lysigakis, 2026; Morini & Chiapponi, 2026). Zelenskyy's wartime discourse is also marked by directive speech acts, expressing explicit requests for support, as well as assertive accusations, and commissive acts that translate expectations and intentions, with speeches for Ukrainian citizens usually being more pragmatic and centered on reporting news on the country's situation. In contrast, as mentioned, speeches for foreign audiences combine factual appeals with more emotionally charged rhetoric — for example, using statistics from the frontlines to shock the audience (Lysigakis, 2026; Morini & Chiapponi, 2026).

Conversely, Putin's speeches are centered on assertive and directive speech acts that present his statements as factual and give instructions or commands. He also uses commissive acts to refer to the country's future actions, such as the pursuit of the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine (D. O. Fafiyebi & O. F. Fafiyebi, 2025). Furthermore, Putin often refers to Europe and Ukraine's leadership condescendingly, questioning their credibility and/or threatening their governments (President of Russia, 2022a; Walcott, 2025).

Putin cultivates his image extensively, as this practice started long before the invasion, a staple being his summer holiday photographs. In these pictures, he is often shirtless, performing traditionally masculine hobbies, including fishing or horseback riding, seeking to prove to the audience his undoubted hypermasculinity, while placing it as aspirational for other Russian men (Foxall, 2013). During his speeches, Putin is always in formal attire and speaks mostly by himself, in ornate rooms and conference halls, surrounded by patriotic symbols or flanked by Russian flags. When decorating soldiers, the ceremony is in a grand conference room, with the official photographs highlighting its great overhead chandeliers, white marble, gold fixtures, and large depictions of the

Russian coat of arms, as well as the great number of guests and journalists attending (President of Russia, 2022c, 2025f).

In effect, as theorized by Foxall (2013), Russia's regime is marked by Putin's representation of militarized and hegemonic masculinity, features that have transcended the president, passing onto Russia's actions on the international stage. After Putin's first presidency, a more state-centric and nationalist vision of the country developed, making it a stronghold for traditional values and anti-liberal attitudes, which idealize the country's past and present the "special military operation" as having existential significance (Blackburn, 2024). Putin successfully securitized the West and Ukraine, creating an idea of "besiegement", that is, the perception that Russians are surrounded by enemies, who are used as a scapegoat for Russia's internal issues, boosting Putin's popularity and image as a "strong leader" (Ferraro, 2024; Young, 2003b).

4.2.1. The Feminization of the Enemy: A Strategy of Delegitimization

Months before the invasion, the Kremlin downplayed Western leaders' concerns about escalations in Ukraine, describing them as hysterical, too emotional, and exaggerated (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2021; Guy et al., 2022). Russian political figures, such as President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, repeatedly feminized the West, similarly accusing it of acting hysterically or out of control (Hartog, 2025; TASS, 2025; Wood, 2024; President of Russia, 2025a, 2025d). All the while, Ukraine is represented as a female figure in need of Russia's protection (Dück & Tiroch, 2025; Gaufman, 2023; Włodkowska, 2023; Misman, 2025). As formerly noted, Russian media has portrayed Ukraine as a "slut" or an ex-wife who betrayed Russia in favor of the West's decadent lifestyle, essentially reducing democratic aspirations to hysteria, corruption, and self-indulgence. This feminization strips Ukraine of its agency, rendering it in need of liberation, a framing that allows Russia to justify its military intervention, alluding to its obligation to defend "a damsel in distress", shielding Ukraine from the West's influence (Bishara, 2022; Gaufman, 2023).

This gendering is further evidenced in Putin's use of the motherland/fatherland dichotomy when representing Russia, since he employs the term motherland when speaking about protection or love, and fatherland when referring to duty, aggression, or loyalty (Misman, 2025; Winterbotham, 2023). In this line, directive speech acts are used to, for instance, instruct Russians to honor the motherland's legacy and traditions: "Sincere love for our Motherland gives our lives a deep sense of purpose, while determination to make our own contribution to protecting its sovereignty, security, interests, and freedom of development has become a matter of honour" (President of Russia, 2024c).

Therefore, as argued by Wood (2024), Russian politics is deeply gendered, allowing for the usage of sexist language and the creation of leadership structures based on militarized and hegemonic masculinity. Russia's conflict rhetoric is, in a similar manner, laden with misogynistic tropes that ignore and negate the agency of other states. In fact, Russia accuses Ukraine of being a "puppet of the West", of doing its bidding, a position that not only ignores Ukraine's efforts in establishing its independence, but also attributes its resistance solely to the West, robbing Ukraine of any active choice in the process.

For the Russian head of state, the operation in Ukraine is humanitarian, as it focuses on stopping the genocide of millions of Ukrainians, while defending Ukraine from Western interference, with Putin claiming that his country still views Ukraine as "a brotherly people" (President of Russia, 2025a). This paternalistic discourse negates Ukraine's control over its actions, with Moscow asserting that the West is infringing on Ukraine's interests and taking it hostage, while supporting the neo-Nazis in control of the country (President of Russia, 2022a, 2023a). Ukraine is continuously denied its autonomy, with its government not being viewed as legitimate, mentions of a peaceful settlement being solely directed at the USA, and the invasion being portrayed as a penetration (Agius, 2024; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; President of Russia, 2022a).

Likewise, Putin opposes Ukraine's membership in NATO, proclaiming to understand that Ukraine should guarantee its own security but that it should not come at the cost of the security of others, namely Russia's: "every country has the right to choose its own

system of ensuring its security. […] including Ukraine. But this also means that the security of one side cannot be built at the expense of the security of another party" (President of Russia, 2025b).

In December of 2025, Putin accuses Ukraine of lying for claiming to control part of the city of Kupyansk: "Kupyansk has been effectively under our control for several weeks, completely and in its entirety. I think the Ukrainian leadership appears focused on issues other than the situation in the active combat zone" (President of Russia, 2025e). In this manner, Putin represents Ukrainian leaders as liars, condemning them for twisting reality and not being aware of the conflict's developments, while pleading with the West for more support: "Perhaps, travelling and begging for money leave little time for dealing with current domestic matters, either in the economy or on the frontline" (President of Russia, 2025e). As authors like Kotliuk (2023) and Gaufman (2023) have shown, Ukraine is, once again, feminized, being portrayed as frivolous or deceitful, for seemingly knowing nothing of the advances on the front. Additionally, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, this characterization extends to the EU, due to its commitment to fighting discrimination and promoting gender equality, which Putin views as a sign of moral decline and a threat to Russia's traditional values (Gasviani, 2023; Jang, 2025; Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b; Włodkowska, 2023).

Regarding this subject, the Russian president maintains a portrayal of Europe as hysterical for considering Russia a threat, claiming it is imagining any menacing actions on Russia's part (President of Russia, 2025a). He reinforces a masculinized perception of political action, undermining Europe's concerns and accusations, which he calls ridiculous, false, and "complete nonsense" (President of Russia, 2025d). This feminization is also evident in Putin's comparison of European politicians to swindlers and "not sane" individuals:

> It is simply that there are individuals there – I believe they are either not entirely of sound mind or are a certain type of swindler – who seek to gain from this by publicly telling their population, their citizens, that Russia is preparing to attack Europe and that they must urgently strengthen their defence capabilities. Either they are serving the interests of the defence industry and private companies, or they are attempting to bolster their domestic political ratings against

> the backdrop of the dire state of their economies and social spheres. It is difficult to say what motivates them, but from our point of view, it is complete nonsense (President of Russia, 2025d)

Despite promising that he does not intend to attack Europe, Putin suggests that Russia is working on retaliatory measures in case Europe confiscates Russia's frozen assets (President of Russia, 2025d), repeating that Russia is not going to war with Europe, while simultaneously claiming that if Europe wants to go to war with it, Russia is combat-ready: "We are not planning to go to war against Europe. I have said that a hundred times. But if Europe wants to wage a war against us and suddenly starts a war with us, we are ready" (President of Russia, 2025e). These statements are quite contradictory and further intensify the continent's concerns, supporting Ukraine's claims that "mad" and "evil" Russia cannot be trusted to keep its promises (President of Ukraine, 2025a, 2025e).

On the Ukrainian side, these gender stereotypes are reaffirmed in the traditional wartime hero narrative. Regardless of the increase in the UAF's female soldiers, Zelenskyy tends to promote an idealized version of militarized masculinity, centered on the military's assumption of a protector role (Włodkowska, 2023). In addition, Zelenskyy defines Ukraine as a motherland that has raised Ukrainians and must now be protected by them, while underscoring that both Ukrainian men and women are fighting to protect their homeland. In this sense, even with the army being mixed gender, the nation is feminized, portrayed as vulnerable and in need of defense, while the state and the military, two predominantly masculine institutions, are positioned as its main protectors (President of Ukraine, 2022b).

Zelenskyy repeatedly emphasizes Ukrainians' support for the army, especially highlighted in his speech on the Day of the Armed Forces in 2025, where he is shown standing in front of an old building, on whose side there is graffiti of a Ukrainian pilot — an image of support for the UAF. The official video focuses on a new practice in the country, painting memorials of soldiers on the sides of residential buildings, as well as renditions of symbols of peace, such as white doves, represented alongside women or symbols of faith, reinforcing as well the stereotypical link between women and peace (as per the WPH), while presenting Ukraine's fight as morally and religiously superior.

For example, the video shows a graffiti of a group of women praying to the coat of arms of Ukraine (President of Ukraine, 2025d).

In February 2025, Zelenskyy made a cutting speech at the *Munich Security Conference*, whose central argument was the need for the creation of a united European army to guarantee Europe's safety from Russia. He claims that to ensure sustainable peace, "Europe must have a seat at the table when decisions about Europe are being made" (President of Ukraine, 2025a) and establishes that the panic, paranoia, and hysteria that Putin accuses Europe of are perfectly justifiable, given Russia's previous actions. In this way, he markedly rejects Russia's attempt at feminizing and delegitimizing Europe, placing himself in full accord with his allies. However, his discourse insinuates that he is establishing Ukraine as Europe's protector, alleging that his country is the only one that can hold Russia back from extending the war to others, a position that is in agreement with his general performance of protective masculinity (President of Ukraine, 2025a). Zelenskyy restates this outlook in December 2025, claiming to share Europe's concerns, because he considers Putin's repetition of "We're not going to attack you" a warning of the opposite (President of Ukraine, 2025e).

4.2.2. Heroism and the Imposition of Militarized Masculinity

In February 2022, at the start of the invasion, the Ukrainian president delivered a speech aimed at Russian citizens (President of Ukraine, 2022a; Mojo Story, 2022). In it, he asks them whether they truly want to suffer through another war and tells them they can prevent that suffering by taking a stance. In this manner, he draws on protective masculinity to incentivize Russians to side with the Ukrainian people, framing resistance against the government as their moral duty. He also foregrounds Russia's role as an occupier, as well as Ukraine's separate statehood and culture, to emphasize Ukraine's hopes for an independent future (President of Ukraine, 2022a, 2022b).

Zelenskyy's speeches often seek to motivate the UAF, appealing to their emotions with expressive speech acts, used to rally the soldiers' militarized masculinity, telling them that in spite of the harshness of the circumstances, they are a great country and a great people, who are capable of winning: "And behind you, Ukrainian Warrior, are millions

of people who know exactly what they live for. With you, Warrior, in the trenches is our entire state, everything that we have and that is so dear to us" (President of Ukraine, 2022b). Zelenskyy also expresses faith that Ukrainians' courage will inspire the world, exhorting soldiers and civilians alike to have faith in themselves, since Ukraine has already rallied unprecedented support and alliances (President of Ukraine, 2022c; NBC News, 2022). Commissive speech acts, for instance, are employed in this context to promise that Ukraine will protect everyone who fights for it and that its victory will be dedicated to its people, with the president using directive acts to instruct the military to endure this threat and push back those who encroach on its territory (President of Ukraine, 2022b).

Moreover, Zelenskyy continuously affirms his pride in all Ukrainian warriors, as well as his confidence in their ability to win, claiming they will not forget nor forgive Russia's actions, reiterating his dismissal of negotiations when faced with the possibility of victory (President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2023b). This is in line with Zelenskyy's reminders that Ukrainian warriors cannot afford weakness and must be stronger and more active, constructing a discourse in which strength is valued above all, commanding those in the UAF, independently of their gender, to strive for masculine qualities, so as to avoid being presented as passive and emasculated on the battlefield (President of Ukraine, 2023d). The president uses commissive speech acts to emphasize Ukraine's intentions, threatening Russians with retribution on their territory, focusing on revenge instead of peace:

> And no matter how many missiles the enemy fires, no matter how many shellings and attacks – vile, ruthless, massive – the enemy carries out in an attempt to break Ukrainians, intimidate them, knock Ukraine down, drive them underground, we will still rise. Because the one who brings hell to our land will one day see it from his own window. (President of Ukraine, 2023d)

In fact, in 2024, he asserts that "justice" came for Russia with Ukraine's counterattack. Addressing the UAF, Zelenskyy declares: "you paid the occupiers back, […] And the one who sowed evil on our land received it on their own. In the Kursk region and in other places where our response, our justice, came this year" (President of Ukraine, 2024e). For Zelenskyy, Ukrainians have proven that they are strong, and that Russians are

“imposed weeds” on their land (President of Ukraine, 2024e), stressing that Ukraine has suffered greatly and that, to honor those it has sacrificed, it must withstand further conflict, with directive speech acts being used to instruct Ukrainian soldiers to remain strong and dignified: “Thousands of our guys and girls have not faded into oblivion. They are with us, they are by our side, always, they are watching over us from the heavens. And we have no right to let them down” (President of Ukraine, 2024e).

In August of the following year, the Ukrainian president spoke at the *VIII International Veterans Forum*, giving prominence to Ukrainian veterans’ perseverance and strength. Zelenskyy places the conflict as Ukraine’s independence war, stating that it made militarism a necessity, turning its warriors into heroes, both men and women. He also mentions that Ukraine needs more soldiers, if it wishes for a swift but just end to the war, claiming that Ukrainians “are doing everything to ensure that it ends not someday far away, but as soon as possible. […] it must end with real security for our children, our grandchildren. But it must also end justly” (President of Ukraine, 2025b). To Zelenskyy, the members of the UAF are heroes who embody all of Ukraine’s virtues: “everyone who defends our skies, all those who, with deep strikes, send evil back home – to Russia. All our military branches. We are proud of all of you. Every single person who, every day in every direction, defends Ukraine” (President of Ukraine, 2025d). Besides them, he also commends the thousands of volunteers who have joined the country’s military, describing them as remarkable and fearless, while contrasting them with Russian soldiers — he praises Ukrainians’ masculinity, meant to protect and help others, but criticizes the masculinity of Russians, whom he associates with destruction and cruelty.

This patriotism is further underscored by the images the president’s website publishes of medal ceremonies and events dedicated to veterans, where the Ukrainian president is sanctimonious, making a point of decorating female fighters and highlighting the presence of those with visible war wounds, such as amputated arms. Depictions of soldiers with disabilities are absent from Russia’s visual narrative, which might also contribute to Zelenskyy’s dedication to their recognition, as he generally takes a moment to speak with them after presenting them with medals (President of Ukraine, 2022b, 2025b).

New Year's Eve speeches have a different presentation, with Zelenskyy repeatedly focusing on the year's accomplishments, while the official video switches between shots of Zelenskyy speaking and images of the major events of the year. These addresses stress the destruction Russia has brought upon Ukraine, with photographs of bombed buildings or emergency workers running toward wreckage, but also the army's successful counterattacks, with the weapons they have received from allies. Zelenskyy foregrounds as well Ukrainian civilians doing volunteer work and supporting the UAF, showing images of aid received domestically and from abroad (President of Ukraine, 2022e). There are also images of how the country's economy hasn't stopped, showcasing how Ukraine is increasing its arms production, as well as stressing the president's diplomatic accomplishments, notably his visits to EU countries and to the USA, as well as his successful prisoner exchanges with Russia (President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2023d, 2024b).

On the other hand, Putin's discourse is marked by criticism of the West, which he accuses of designating Russia as an enemy and spreading, in territories that amount to Russia's historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" sentiment, which is why Russia faces a permanent threat from Ukraine (President of Russia, 2022a). In connection with this sentiment, the Russian president employs expressive speech acts to show contempt for the West and to encourage Russians, particularly men, to take a patriotic stance and perform their military duty with courage — "You are fighting for our Motherland, its future, so that nobody forgets the lessons of World War II" (President of Russia, 2022b). Putin further clarifies that Russia intends to fully demilitarize Ukraine without occupying its territories, warning against foreign intervention in the conflict, while using commissive acts to threaten those who wish to stand in Russia's way (President of Russia, 2022a). In this manner, Putin's lexical choices support his performance of a militarized and hegemonic masculinity, patent as well in Russia's response to perceived threats, as it continuously warns that no one attacks it without massive retaliation (President of Russia, 2025c, 2025e).

The president underscores how Russians must fight for their motherland because they owe loyalty to their fatherland, and paying homage to WWII veterans, he declares:

“The well-being and security of their Motherland was their top priority in life. Loyalty to our Fatherland is the main value and a reliable foundation of Russia’s independence for us, their successors” (President of Russia, 2022b). In this way, militarized masculinity, emulating Putin’s ideal, is rewarded with titles, such as that of “Hero of Russia”, which applies to those who inspire others to go beyond their duty, “working hard for the sake of their nation, their homeland, who are worthy successors of the centuries-old history of accomplishments by our people” (President of Russia, 2022c). These statements are also in line with Putin’s hypermasculine performativity, in which sacrificing oneself for the motherland is glorified, reinforcing military enlistment as a man’s duty and obligation, expressing that a “heroic man” is a man who defends his nation and protects his motherland, with Putin emphasizing as well how Russians’ love for their homeland is exacerbated in times of conflict (President of Russia, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e, 2025c): “those who die while defending the interests of their Fatherland, their Motherland, their people, those who receive injuries – they are the strongest. […] they are heroes” (President of Russia, 2022d).

With commissive speech acts, Putin clarifies Russia’s defensive intentions, attributing them a territorial penchant at the end of 2022: “This is what we are fighting for today, protecting our people in our historical territories in the new regions of the Russian Federation” (President of Russia, 2022e). In December 2023, when presenting soldiers with medals, he praises their strength, establishing them all as heroes of whom he is proud — along similar lines to the Ukrainian head of state — while claiming Russian troops are already amply supported, but should also be perceived as an example and emulated by all Russians (President of Russia, 2023b, 2023c): “all heroes of our country uphold honour, duty and selfless love for the Fatherland above all else. These values are paramount today, setting the highest standard of responsibility for each of us” (President of Russia, 2023b).

In his addresses, President Putin frequently employs assertive speech acts, as they contribute to his image as a decisive leader. He uses these acts to continuously restate that the main thing that unites Russians is the fate of the motherland: “This kind of generational kinship and love of one’s home fosters devotion to the Motherland”

(President of Russia, 2023c). Similarly to Zelenskyy, he places extreme importance on national unity, with his discourse centering on both citizen control and the invulnerability of the (head of) state, tenets of militarized masculinity. Russia also alleges that, via this conflict, it will liberate the world from neo-Nazism and "international terrorism" (President of Russia, 2024a; Michael Rossi Poli Sci, 2024), reiterating that this fight is both humanitarian and vital for its national interests, with Putin affirming that the country is getting back its historic lands, while taking action to make life better in these regions (President of Russia, 2025c).

In December 2025, Putin once again decorated "Heroes of Russia", honoring soldiers whose service in the "special military operation" kept up their "forefathers' legacy" and "set a lasting example" (President of Russia, 2025f). Putin awards medals to his combatants, sometimes even posthumously, but unlike in Ukrainian decorations, none of the soldiers have visible injuries. When giving out state honors, Putin shakes hands with the combatants, who are wearing ceremonial uniforms, and awards them their medals, adding a level of formality not always present in Ukrainian decorations (President of Russia, 2025f). According to Putin, Russian troops are paying homage to Russia's (masculinist) tradition of military glory, presented as an essential part of its historic legacy, with the love Russians bear for their country being placed at the root of their strength and military prowess. Putin wishes, likewise, "Glory and eternal memory to our fallen comrades" (President of Russia, 2025f), presenting the RAF as exclusively male, while stressing the militarized and hegemonic notion of masculinity that he actively encourages Russian men to emulate — and that he himself performs.

This performance is evident in Russia's Victory Parade, held every year on May 9, to celebrate the country's triumph in WWII. In the videos provided by the Kremlin's website, the parade begins with a general, usually the Minister of Defense, General Sergei Shoigu, passing through the Red Square, where thousands of soldiers in ceremonial uniforms are assembled. He then salutes Putin, who is standing next to a podium, on the square's central stage. Afterward, Putin is shown greeting WWII veterans and their families (a minority of whom are women), whom he talks to as a marching band plays in the background. Once the music ceases, Putin begins his 20-

minute speech (President of Russia, 2022b, 2023a, 2024a; Michael Rossi Poli Sci, 2023, 2024). In practice, the Victory Parade is a dramatic and opulent display, meant to show Russia's military might and superpower status, intimidating enemies while reassuring allies, especially since foreign leaders, such as Belarus's president, are frequently present in the festivities.

4.2.3. Peace as Emasculation: The Search for Peace Without Compromise

One common point between Russian and Ukrainian leadership is their unwillingness to compromise. Owing to this, unless either side wins, which seems unlikely, this conflict will remain at a stalemate, turning into a war of attrition, particularly given the lack of agreement between both sides on what winning the conflict will mean (Delanty, 2023).

In Zelenskyy's speech addressed to Russian citizens, delivered on the eve of the invasion, he appeals to unity, declaring that, similarly to Russians, Ukrainians want peace (President of Ukraine, 2022a; Mojo Story, 2022). This antiwar message permeates Zelenskyy's earlier speeches, where he distinguishes ordinary Russians from Putin's regime, pleading with them to resist their government's demands. However, after the Bucha massacre (March 2022), Zelenskyy started ascribing greater responsibility to the RAF, as well as to the Russian citizens who chose to remain complacent with the invasion (Kim, 2025). This posture contributed to an increase in the dehumanization of the enemy, with Pavlenko (2024) claiming Ukrainians have stopped perceiving Russians as people, referring to them as "orcs" — the meanest creatures of Ukrainian folklore — and rejoicing over the growing Russian casualties. This is despite many academics having advised Ukrainian authorities against identifying all Russians with Putin's regime, as they believe a Ukrainian victory requires a broad anti-Putin alliance with Russian (and Belarusian) activists, a possibility Ukrainian politicians seem to have abandoned (Zherebkina, 2024).

Russia, too, has dehumanized Ukrainians (Honcharova, 2025). Russia's official news agencies, such as TASS or RIA, align themselves with the Kremlin (Oleinik, 2025), reporting on the conflict as being "us" versus "them" (Shapovalova, 2025). Ukrainian soldiers and civilians are not portrayed as individuals; they are referred to collectively,

while pro-Russian Ukrainians and Russian soldiers are individualized. News agencies focus, both visually and discursively, on the heroic feats of the RAF and the territories they have conquered. Likewise, most discussions of peace do not directly mention Ukraine, which is repeatedly sidelined by Putin, who makes it clear that serious negotiations with Ukraine's current administration are not viable. Besides this, the regime has also detained several activists, journalists, and members of the opposition, who sought to divulge perspectives outside of the Kremlin's official narrative. Until December 2022, more than 20.000 people had been detained for affirming an anti-war stance (OVD-Info, 2022; Ferraro, 2024).

Moreover, the conflict's attrition might be affecting the parties, as discourses from 2024 and, particularly, 2025, include more references to peace and negotiations than those from 2022 and 2023, when both countries seemed to believe themselves more capable of winning. But both leaders still treat concessions as a representation of weakness, betrayal, or failure to fulfill their goals. As feminist IR argues, these notions increase the cost of de-escalation because they make displays of strength the anchor of a leader's authority, devaluing alternate expressions of power (Enloe, 2014; Tickner, 2001, 2004, 2006). Even when material conditions (e.g., significant infrastructural damage) might favor negotiation, both actors' militarized discourse hinders any prospect of conciliation. Zelenskyy's protective and often subversive masculinity suggests that the issue is not just the performance of hegemonic masculinity, but the continued definition of military superiority and victory over the enemy as the ideal for security and long-term peace, effectively marginalizing approaches that prioritize cooperation and stability. If both countries engage in negotiations only while awaiting the possibility of a military victory, then a peace agreement becomes untenable.

Ukraine repeatedly highlights that it does not wish for further destruction, only to define and build its own history independently. To be more precise, Zelenskyy affirms that Ukraine is doing everything to maintain peace and is open to negotiations but employs commissive speech acts to warn that it is also ready to fight. Assertive acts are, in this line, used to uphold the position that Ukraine does not pose a threat to Russia, reminding its aggressor and the international community that its security is dependent

on the guarantors of the Budapest Memorandum (1994)[8], one of which is Russia (President of Ukraine, 2022a; Mojo Story, 2022; UN, 1994). Nevertheless, Zelenskyy believes peace is something Russia must be forced to accept, just like it must pay for the war crimes it is committing. In saying this, he avoids any language connected with compromise, prioritizing a military solution over any concession that could bring about a settlement. Once again, considering victory is within Ukraine's reach, he implicitly delegitimizes diplomatic negotiations (President of Ukraine, 2022b).

Additionally, Zelenskyy describes Russia as "evil", "barbaric", unreasonable, and intrinsically militaristic, while defending that Ukraine is only militaristic because it must protect itself from Russia (President of Ukraine, 2022c, 2025d; NBC News, 2022). At the end of 2022, Zelenskyy visited the USA, where he made an address to Congress, emphasizing how President Biden supported Ukraine's peace initiative and the creation of a peace summit, while claiming that Russia is a "terrorist state" not willing to negotiate, even though Ukraine has already sent it its Peace Formula as a proposal. In spite of this reference to a negotiated settlement, Zelenskyy asks for the USA's help to win the war, underlining the importance of defeating Moscow on the battlefield. He is welcomed by applause, speaking at the Congress' central podium, in front of Nancy Pelosi and Kamala Harris. Notably, Zelenskyy receives a standing ovation several times throughout his 20-minute speech, especially after pointing out Ukraine's role as the underdog in the conflict. He compares Ukraine's fight with Russia to the USA's fight against the Nazis, mobilizing directive speech acts to ask Congress for more artillery, and commissive acts to promise that Ukraine will never surrender (President of Ukraine, 2022c; NBC News, 2022). Zelenskyy finishes speaking by presenting the Congress with a Ukrainian flag, signed by "our heroes who defend the world at the cost of their lives",

[8] Ukraine relinquished its nuclear arsenal after the collapse of the USSR, accepting non-nuclear status in return for security guarantees from the USA, Russia, and the United Kingdom, as set out in the Budapest Memorandum. This memorandum stipulated that these countries would recognize the sovereignty of Ukraine's existing borders and would not use force against its territorial integrity, guaranteeing their assistance should Ukraine be attacked by another state (UN, 1994; Prokop, 2023).

affirming it represents Ukraine's victory and the unity between the USA, Ukraine, and the "entire free world" (President of Ukraine, 2022c; NBC News, 2022). By drawing several parallels between the USA's defense of freedom and Ukraine's fight for its independence, the Ukrainian president frames victory as the only acceptable outcome. He rallies the support of an important partner via his emphasis on war as a means of protection, a discourse that reflects his protective masculinity, reinforcing militarized understandings of leadership by tying it to defense.

As Zelenskyy continuously states, Kyiv was told to surrender, to make concessions and compromises, but chose to go against this advice — "millions of us made a choice. Not a white flag, but a blue and yellow flag. Not escaping, but meeting. Meeting the enemy" (President of Ukraine, 2022e) — remaining firm in its goal to join the EU and NATO, on which it is not willing to compromise, since it views these organizations as guarantees of the country's security and development (President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2024b, 2025a, 2025d): "we believe that the core of any security guarantees for Ukraine must be NATO membership. Or if not that, then conditions that allow us to build another NATO right here in Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2025a).

Hence, the Ukrainian head of state reiterates that for there to be peace, Ukraine needs justice and calls for the creation of a Special Tribunal for the crime of aggression "so that those, whose heads this terror was born in, are brought to responsibility" (President of Ukraine, 2023a). He also insists that peace cannot be negotiated without Ukraine and urges the reconsideration of the Peace Formula, stressing that Ukraine's Formula is the only realistic peace plan and that there will be no reliable, successful deal without it. In this way, he uses some conciliatory language, insisting on the application of the Peace Formula, but still focuses exclusively on Ukraine's goals, limiting the space for diplomatic interventions. Nonetheless, he affirms peacemaking and negotiations as something that goes beyond the great powers, contending that every country should cooperate and take part in Ukraine's peace process (President of Ukraine, 2023a, 2024b, 2024c): "And it is not a dialog between the so-called "great powers" […] that can guarantee us all the new no-wars-era, but open work of all nations for peace" (President of Ukraine, 2023b).

The President of Ukraine also argues that the conflict is a black-and-white fight between good and evil, where evil will be defeated, and Ukraine will be victorious: “All our warriors of light. Guardian angels of Ukraine, who prove to us every day: good will prevail, light will prevail, one must have steadfast spirit, and strong faith” (President of Ukraine, 2023c). Zelenskyy reiterates his designation of Russia as an enemy and a “terrorist state”, while highlighting Ukraine’s desire for victory and peace on its own terms, as well the large endorsement these terms have received (President of Ukraine, 2022c, 2022e, 2023b, 2023d): “The Ukrainian Peace Formula, which has already been endorsed by 80 countries. Security guarantees for Ukraine, which have already been acceded to by three dozen countries” (President of Ukraine, 2023d). For Zelenskyy, Putin is a “mad” aggressor whom Kyiv must stop, even in the face of its unfavorable odds, using commissive speech acts to remark that Ukraine does not intend to let Putin’s madness succeed: “We all must change to the extent that the madness that resides in this man’s head or any other aggressor’s head will not prevail” (President of Ukraine, 2024a).

Furthermore, Ukraine incites its partners to increase sanctions in order to force Russia to make concessions, bringing forth a just and stable peace, by which it means Putin’s defeat: “Putin must regret. We need him to lose. We need to finally dispel the notion that global unity is weaker than one man’s hatred” (President of Ukraine, 2024a). Zelenskyy maintains the view that a peaceful resolution entails a Ukrainian victory, to be imposed on Russia through international pressure rather than through negotiations. Essentially ignoring Russia’s demands — since he views it as the sole responsible for the conflict — while claiming he wishes for peace more than anyone else (President of Ukraine, 2024a, 2024c), as he restates in his 2024 New Year’s speech: “Behind all of us stands Mother Ukraine. And she deserves to live in peace. […] as the President of Ukraine, as well as a citizen, I will do everything to achieve it in the coming year” (President of Ukraine, 2024e).

In 2024’s year-end address, Zelenskyy seems to be standing on the roof of a high-rise building with a large statue behind him. The video on the president’s website opens with the statue becoming illuminated with the Ukrainian colors. As in previous New Year's

addresses, the video features footage of important events throughout the year, such as children learning online or underground, and the UAF's offensive in Kursk. But halfway through the speech, the statue behind Zelenskyy changes colors, exhibiting those of the USA's flag, as images of America's support are displayed. These pictures are followed by those of the EU's support, showing Zelenskyy with European leaders, namely Macron, Meloni, and Von der Leyen. These images of international support are exhibited as the statue's colors change to those of other allied flags, with the EU flag being the last shown (President of Ukraine, 2024e). This underscores the importance the country accords to its partners' support and to its path toward EU membership, which the president associates with the country's path toward peace.

Nevertheless, by emphasizing sacrifice and duty, Zelenskyy reinforces a narrative in which resistance, instead of negotiation, becomes the primary pathway to peace. Zelenskyy mentions his country's increasing weapons production, affirming that Ukraine has managed to become a world leader in drone warfare (President of Ukraine, 2024e, 2025a). He believes that now that Ukraine produces its own weapons, it has more arguments for a fair peace, foregrounding how its allies, such as the USA, are involved in brokering peace, because "Putin cannot win. Ukraine will prevail" (President of Ukraine, 2024e). This evidences Zelenskyy's seemingly warped notion of peace, as he believes an increase in Ukraine's strength and offensive capabilities will make it easier to force Russia into a settlement, effectively defeating it. As a matter of fact, Zelenskyy proudly states the country's intention of opening arms exports due to its growing defense production (President of Ukraine, 2025c).

At the end of September 2025, the Ukrainian president spoke once again at the UN General Assembly, where he underscored that if a nation wants peace, it has no international guarantees aside from friends and weapons, reiterating as well that there is no ceasefire because Russia refuses to accept one (President of Ukraine, 2025c). To strengthen his claims that Russia is not preparing for dialogue, he employs assertive speech acts, affirming that Russia is planning to create 15 new divisions in its army, meaning Putin cannot be trusted to uphold Ukraine's right to security (President of Ukraine, 2025a, 2025c). In December 2025, on the Day of the Armed Forces, the

president promises that Ukraine has won the right to live in peace: “everywhere, where people speak different languages, but freedom sounds the same. […] Where it is acknowledged: in this war for independence, Ukraine – the state – has won its right to live” (President of Ukraine, 2025d).

Concluding 2025, Zelenskyy’s New Year’s Day address begins with several inquiries: “Do we want the war to end? Absolutely. […] Can Russia end the war? Yes. Does it want to? No. Can the world force it to do so? Yes” (President of Ukraine, 2025e). From this, it’s evident that Ukraine believes Russia does not wish to end the war and that only a collapse of Russia’s economy, which feeds its war machine, would lead to a just truce. For Ukraine, Russia is lying when it insists that a withdrawal of the UAF from Donbas would end the war, making it impossible to trust its apparent commitment to a peaceful settlement. Irrespective of this, Zelenskyy asserts that negotiations are moving forward but repeats that any agreement must be approved by Ukrainians, who, despite wishing for an end to the occupation, will only sign a strong agreement — “A Budapest-style piece of paper will not satisfy Ukraine. […] Signatures under weak agreements only fuel war” (President of Ukraine, 2025e). In addition, Zelenskyy does not want to undermine his credibility, adding that if Ukraine compromises, it will do so with dignity, and it must retain its independence (President of Ukraine, 2025d, 2025e):

> What does Ukraine want? Peace? Yes. At any cost? No. We want the end of the war – not the end of Ukraine. Are we tired? Extremely. Does that mean we are ready to surrender? Those who think so are deeply mistaken. And clearly, over all these years, they still have not understood who Ukrainians are. (President of Ukraine, 2025e)

On the other hand, Putin mentions the military operation as a necessary measure prompted by the USA’s attempts at “taking over” the post-Soviet space. To Putin, Ukraine was the one that unleashed the war in Donbas in 2014. Therefore, he declares that the West’s efforts to arm Ukraine are only going to prolong the conflict, since Russia also has the funds for further military investment, and, eventually, both parties will have to sit down to negotiate: “In short, we will do our best to end this, and the sooner, the better” (President of Russia, 2022d). For Russia, the roles are reversed, and Ukraine is the aggressor that does not wish for a settlement: “though they call us aggressors, […]

they are aggressors in relation to Donbass, too. We are countering aggression, not the other way around" (President of Russia, 2022d).

The general absence of conciliatory language in Moscow's addresses parallels those of Kyiv and contributes to the warring parties' consistent prioritization of strength over compromise, making victory the desired outcome, while negotiation is accepted but implicitly feminized and, consequently, delegitimized (President of Russia, 2022d). In fact, Putin asserts that the country will not retreat from its offensive in Ukraine (President of Russia, 2023b,2024b) — "We believe in victory and will not retreat" (President of Russia, 2023b) — using commissive speech acts to promise that all the goals of the military operation will be attained: "I have no doubt that we will certainly achieve all the goals we have set for ourselves" (President of Russia, 2023b). Conversely, directive acts are employed to instruct Russians to honor the country's heroes and unite in defense of the motherland.

During a press conference in December 2024, Putin did not answer inquiries into a date for the end of the conflict, or even if he estimated it would be in 2025, conveying uncertainty about the prospects for a settlement. In this conference, he reiterates his previous warnings, employing commissive speech acts to declare that if Russia is attacked, it will promptly counterattack: "we always respond in kind. If certain weapons are used against us, we employ the same in return" (President of Russia, 2024b). Russia further warns that it has no intention of allowing Ukraine to become part of NATO, affirming the country's desire to accommodate the wishes of Ukrainian territories that want to join the Russian Federation. Putin devalues Ukraine's agency and, in mentioning peace, leaves little room for concessions, assuming those must come solely from his adversary's end. It is also notable that for Putin, as it is for Zelenskyy, peace is associated with winning, with accomplishing the objectives Russia defined for itself, rather than negotiating with Ukraine. In this manner, diplomacy is viewed as the option of the weaker party, that is, the one that cannot continue waging war. This understanding narrows the space for negotiation, particularly in Putin's case, as any deviations from his usual performance of masculinity risk undermining his authority (President of Russia, 2024c).

Notwithstanding this perspective, peace negotiations finally gained momentum in August 2025, and at the Anchorage peace meeting, Putin spoke at a joint news conference with President Trump. In this speech, he avoids directly mentioning Ukraine's leadership, highlighting that Russia's and the USA's commitment to peace will produce results. He reiterates that Moscow is interested in ending the conflict, and that the understanding it has reached with the USA takes Russia's concerns into account and will bring them closer to peace: "We hope that Kiev and the European capitals will take the current developments constructively and will neither try to put up obstacles nor attempt to disrupt the emerging progress" (President of Russia, 2025a).

Putin alleges that Russia has never ruled out the possibility of meeting with Zelenskyy — "If a meeting in question is well-prepared and may potentially lead to positive results, we can have it" (President of Russia, 2025b) — sustaining, nonetheless, that since his term has ended, he is not a legitimate leader, making negotiating with him politically meaningless: "there are no provisions for extending the powers of the president of Ukraine, none at all. The president gets elected for five years, and five years later the term is over" (President of Russia, 2025b). Regardless of this, Putin believes "an acceptable option for ending this conflict can be agreed upon" (President of Russia, 2025b) and emphasizes that Russia wishes to achieve all its goals but is open to doing so by peaceful means. However, this position once again disregards any compromise on Russia's part, while believing that an agreement is possible. In this way, commissive speech acts are used to restate the operation's humanitarian intentions, and to warn that Moscow will never allow its legitimate security interests to be overlooked (President of Russia, 2025b).

At the end of November 2025, Putin reaffirms his intentions to keep working on a peace plan with the USA, as a list of 28 potential points for agreement was formulated with its mediation, but repeats that Russia will not make arrangements with the current Ukrainian regime because its leader is "illegitimate", making any agreement between them fruitless: "of course, we want to work out a deal with Ukraine, but doing so right now is practically impossible, legally impossible" (President of Russia, 2025d). Russia also affirms that it wishes for the recognition of the territories it has liberated, though it

does not want this recognition from Ukraine, but from the international community: "Without a doubt, we need recognition, but not from Ukraine as things stand today. I hope that in the future we will be able to work out a deal with Ukraine as well" (President of Russia, 2025d).

Furthermore, the Russian president insists that if Ukrainian troops left their positions on the battlefield, the conflict would end, clarifying that Russia will only cease hostilities when Ukraine does, a position that further narrows the possibility for negotiations: "We are still receiving proposals about ceasing hostilities there, there and there. When the Ukrainian troops leave the territories they occupy, then the hostilities will cease. If they do not leave, we will achieve it militarily" (President of Russia, 2025d). Nonetheless, Putin places himself on the side of a concession-based peace, contrary to previous speeches, agreeing with those in the West who prefer the prompt restoration of peace, while criticizing those who wish for Kyiv to fight "until the last Ukrainian dies" (President of Russia, 2025d):

> Those in the West who understand the implications of all this are the ones insisting on ceasing the fighting as soon as possible, even if it requires concessions from the Kiev regime. They understand: the front will begin to crumble in several directions, and then the Ukrainian armed forces will completely lose combat capability (President of Russia, 2025d)

Contradicting this apparent commitment to concessions, Putin confirms that Russia is prepared for a long war if Europe and Ukraine refuse to accept peace, effectively equating peace with a full Russian victory. In this manner, war is paradoxically entrenched as the means to peace, and directive speech acts, for instance, are used to instruct Russians to be ready for an increase in weapons production, while commissive acts reiterate that Moscow does not threaten other countries but is ready to respond to any aggressive actions (President of Russia, 2025d).

4.2.4. The Inclusion of Women as a Performance of Legitimacy

The *UN Security Council Resolution 1325* (2000) admonishes the exclusion of women from official decision-making processes, calling attention to women's particular outlook and conflict-related experiences, and defending the importance of their participation in

efforts to promote peace, as well as their intervention in peacebuilding (Aharoni, 2017; Security Council, 2000).

Concerning the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Ukraine has been publicly consolidating this resolution via a 2021 to 2025 National Action Plan (NAP) (Martsenyuk, 2024; O'Sullivan, 2019), moving away from more stereotypical gender narratives, through greater representation of women in national institutions, or the due prosecution of war crimes, including those related to gender-based violence (Security Council, 2000; Martsenyuk, 2024). More concretely, since the beginning of the conflict, Ukraine has ratified major international treaties on equal rights between men and women, nominally the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011). Prioritizing the most visible areas, such as increasing the participation of women in political decision-making (Johnson, 2023), actions likely driven by the country's bid for EU membership. Indeed, women's political participation has increased. For example, even though women still hold only around 20% of the seats in the Ukrainian parliament, this number has nearly doubled, indicating a clear trend toward greater representation (I. Lysychkina & O. Lysychkina, 2023). In Russia, these initiatives are viewed as unnecessary. As stated in Chapter 2, the country hasn't ratified the Istanbul Convention, and Putin's inner circle is overwhelmingly male, with studies indicating that, in 2020, men accounted for more than 90% of Russia's political elite (Council of Europe, 2011, n.d.; Johnson, 2023; Snegovaya & Petrov, 2022; Wood, 2024).

Nevertheless, Ukraine's visual narrative evokes feminism in a manner that might appear exploitative or disingenuous, as it uses depictions of its female soldiers to emphasize the importance accorded to gender equality in its army, placing itself as the ultimate defender of "European values" (Dück & Tiroch, 2025; Kotliuk, 2023). And while this emphasis makes strategic sense, given the opposing (wartime) narratives that both countries have constructed, it does not necessarily reflect reality: male vulnerability is portrayed, but it is juxtaposed with Zelenskyy's protective masculinity (Dück & Tiroch, 2025). Irrespective of this, Ukrainian accounts of the war reveal a growing presence of emancipatory gender norms, as Kyiv's current efforts to promote gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights seek to oppose and differentiate Ukraine from Russia, while affirming

its desire to move closer to the EU. In fact, Zelenskyy has produced wartime propaganda that runs counter to traditional gender discourses, accentuating women's active combat roles, while discrediting Russia's conservatism as antagonistic to the "European way of life" (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023; Winterbotham, 2023).

In spite of glorifying the resistance and sacrifice of the Ukrainian people, Zelenskyy goes outside the bounds of hegemonic masculinity, underscoring the importance of women's contributions to the UAF, which, as he explains, mirror those of men (President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2023b). The Ukrainian president acknowledges both "guys and girls" when invoking soldiers, portraying combat as a responsibility undertaken by both, a point he continuously reiterates: "The war, unfortunately, separated families, took away sons and daughters, and at the same time united us into one big family" (President of Ukraine, 2023d). In this sense, the presence of women on the battlefield is discursively and positively recognized, with Zelenskyy priding himself on the progress made in women's military integration, explicitly naming female soldiers in prominent positions and their contributions to Ukraine:

> The first female commander of an artillery unit. A sniper who eliminated dozens of occupiers. A machine gunner who went to the front at 19. Ptashka. Taira. Ksena. Ruda. And dozens, dozens of thousands of brave girls and women in the Armed Forces. All of them who had their own pursuits – but chose one: to defend their homeland. (President of Ukraine, 2025d)

Despite these efforts, it is notable that in Zelenskyy's many enumerations or examples, men tend to come first: "For all fathers, husbands, brothers, grandfathers to come back. Mothers, wives, sisters. To return victorious" (President of Ukraine, 2023c). Even though he seeks to go against traditional gender codes and distinguish his army from Russia's, it is evident that militarized masculinity is prevalent, with men being given primacy in most of Zelenskyy's discursive enumerations. Although Zelenskyy broadens his gendered representations, there are addresses where he still employs some of the traditional gender roles Kyiv claims to have abandoned, positioning men as active combatants, while women are conceived as grieving mothers or wives: "the moment you hand over awards posthumously. You see the eyes of a mother, a wife, or a child of a warrior who gave their life for Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2024e). This reflects the

persistence of gendered biases within wartime discourse, with attempts at more inclusivity remaining embedded within an intrinsically militarized and masculine structure.

In contrast to Ukraine, Russia's military recruits are explicitly referred to as male, with women appearing in mostly two roles: the military nurse or the mother of a soldier (President of Russia, 2022e; Shapovalova, 2025). Russian media often highlights that Ukrainian women are forced to fight on the frontlines, taking on masculine roles, a situation viewed as proof of Ukraine's moral decadence. To discredit the UAF, Russians depict female soldiers as "puppets of the West" and "victims of circumstances", claiming they have to compensate for the lack of male soldiers (Honcharova, 2025; President of Russia, 2022e). Regardless of reports, present since 2023, that Russia has started discreetly recruiting women for active military roles, as snipers or drone operators (Mathers, 2026), specifically migrants and incarcerated women, who are offered a legal pardon in exchange for their service:

> The current, modest, increase in the numbers of women in uniform, including the women from Central Asia looking for a way to avoid lengthy prison sentences, is just one aspect of Russia's efforts to ensure a steady flow of new soldiers for the war effort. The approach that Russia has taken to the war in Ukraine treats soldiers as disposable, low-value assets. (Mathers, 2026)

Notwithstanding these reports, Putin criticizes the West, which he alleges has sought to destroy Russia's traditional values and force on the country "false values," which, in going against binary gender roles, are contrary to human nature (President of Russia, 2022a, 2023a). More specifically, Moscow has sought to naturalize these gender dynamics, portraying war as the exclusive domain of men, who have the "sacred duty" to serve in the army, while relegating women to passive roles, such as that of mourning the soldiers who have died on the frontlines (President of Russia, 2024c). Meaning that the "special military operation" is also being fought to foreground Russia's view of masculinity and femininity as correct, making gender an explicit point of contestation (Kratochvíl & O'Sullivan, 2023).

In accordance with the government's conservative ideology, Putin establishes an explicit gender hierarchy in his speeches, where masculine forms continuously come first: sons

come before daughters, fathers before mothers, and husbands before wives (President of Russia, 2023a; Michael Rossi Poli Sci, 2023). When speaking of those who fought in the "Great Patriotic War", it is only grandfathers and fathers who are mentioned by the president (President of Russia, 2023a), erasing the contributions of Soviet women, who played a crucial role during WWII, where female fighters amounted to numerous combat units (Darden, 2023; Delanty, 2023; Włodkowska, 2023). Notwithstanding this erasure, the RAF comprises female combatants. In Putin's Victory Day addresses, as the camera shows the several thousand soldiers in the Red Square, it makes notable the presence of female battalions, in spite of their apparent absence from combat in Ukraine (President of Russia, 2022b, 2023a, 2024a; Michael Rossi Poli Sci, 2023, 2024).

4.2.5. Convergence and Divergence in the Discursive Analysis

The discursive patterns of both Putin and Zelenskyy frequently intersect in form and content, acting as mirrors of each other. Both leaders mention being on the right side of history and accuse the other of Nazism/Fascism. They both present themselves as the sole investor in the peace deal, while discrediting one another, with Zelenskyy accusing Putin of being "evil" and Putin considering Zelenskyy an "illegitimate" leader. Both presidents make statements in the media that are entrenched in their own ideological context, creating an us-versus-them narrative that effectively "others" the enemy as undeserving of empathy or consideration (Savchuk, 2025; Tutar & Bağ, 2023).

Even so, in their rhetoric, Putin and Zelenskyy underscore different things: one emphasizes his distance from the audience, while the other seeks to reduce it. Putin presents himself as above the people, surpassing them, and Zelenskyy as one of the people, an ordinary citizen (Cichosz & Kozierska, 2023). Putin focuses on notions of great power or destructive capabilities, and men's duty to serve their homeland, while Zelenskyy adopts a more protective discourse, emphasizing self-defense or the existential danger faced by Ukraine, placing the country as a democratic beacon of resistance against Russia's autocracy. Moreover, while Putin highlights Russia's self-reliance, even in partnerships, Zelenskyy openly calls for the help of the West and the support of the international community, accentuating Ukraine's victimhood (Tutar & Bağ, 2023; Włodkowska, 2023).

The masculinities performed by Zelenskyy and Putin actively reproduce the conflict. This is because both leaders rely on gendered narratives: they equate strength with conflict and weakness with compromise, thereby limiting the legitimacy of peace talks. In this sense, both discourses employ performances of militarized masculinity, but Putin's is hegemonic and hypermasculine, while Zelenskyy's is "softer" and protective, given that he often frames men as responsible for defending the nation's vulnerable people (Young, 2003a, 2003b). Although Putin and Zelenskyy perform distinct masculinities, their logics of conflict are not entirely antagonistic. Putin favors dominance, security, and the projection of invulnerability, whereas Zelenskyy prioritizes justice, emotional honesty, and moral superiority. It is also important to note that since the beginning of the invasion, all of Zelenskyy's speeches mention the conflict, but that is not the case for Putin, who often makes public addresses without mentioning it. Zelenskyy also uses more metaphors, symbols, and parallels than Putin (President of Ukraine, 2022b, 2022c, 2023c, 2024a, 2025a, 2025b, 2025e), seeking to make his rhetoric more impactful, convincing, or appealing.

Putin's discourse aligns with hegemonic masculinity, which, as theorized by Connell (2005, 2016), is maintained through performances of strength, delegitimizing concessions, whether territorial or political, as a form of emasculation — i.e., a show of weakness that would undermine both Putin's authority and the identity he has constructed for Russia. Putin's refusal to concede can be understood as both a strategy and a necessity, tied to his political goals but also to the preservation of his prestige and credibility as a ruler.

On the other hand, Zelenskyy's leadership is less bellicose, placing emotions at the forefront of his addresses. Nevertheless, Zelenskyy's discourse continues to tie political legitimacy to military action and active resistance (Sjoberg & Via, 2010a, 2010b), with his emphasis on endurance and heroism reinforcing the notion that peace must be achieved through strength. Essentially, Zelenskyy turns continued resistance into a moral imperative, likening concessions to a betrayal of Ukraine and the Ukrainians who are defending it. Likewise, his narrative constructions seek to present him as masculine, due to his heroic fight for his country (President of Ukraine, 2022c, 2022e, 2023b,

2023d), while creating a clear dichotomy between good and evil, intended to garner support in the West and delegitimize Russia's actions. He adopts a distinct rhetoric, opposed to Putin's, embracing stereotypically feminized qualities by referring to personal feelings and experiences, focusing on emotional appeals, while constructing Ukraine as a vulnerable entity (Włodkowska, 2023; President of Ukraine, 2022b, 2022d, 2023c, 2024d, 2024e). Via his emphasis on defending civilians, he positions himself, the government, the military, and, more indirectly, his allies, as the nation's protectors.

Nonetheless, he still employs an aggressive rhetoric when addressing Russia. In 2022, on the Day of Defenders of Ukraine (October 14), President Zelenskyy, several months into the war and having lost confidence in Russian protests against the regime, began describing Russia as a fascist aggressor, guilty of war crimes (President of Ukraine, 2022b). On New Year's Eve 2022, he declared that the invasion had led Ukraine to decide to create its own victory, withstanding threats and difficulties, which united its people — "We fight as one team – the whole country, all our regions" and "We are all one family. One Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2022e), a metaphor also common in Putin's discourse. The same sentiments persist in 2023, when, in May, Zelenskyy spoke at the opening of the Summit of the Council of Europe, establishing that the difference between Russia and Ukraine is that Russia wants to kill, while Ukraine wants to protect: "Russia is trying very hard to improve its ability to kill. We are trying very hard to improve the protection of our people" (President of Ukraine, 2023a).

Additionally, at the UN General Assembly, in September 2023, the Ukrainian president accused Russia of provoking Ukraine's food and energy shortage, weaponizing the rise in prices to make other countries reticent about denouncing Russia's behavior. Zelenskyy mentions Ukraine's case against Russia in the International Criminal Court, affirming that in continuously violating international law, Moscow's actions are akin to those of a terrorist group. More concretely, Ukraine accuses Russia of kidnapping Ukrainian children in occupied territories and deporting them to Russia, where they are "indoctrinated" against Ukraine, actions he considers an act of genocide (President of Ukraine, 2023b).

It is also interesting to note that Zelenskyy makes many religious appeals, requests, and prayers to God. For instance, he emphasizes that good/light will prevail over evil/darkness — "We did not fade away in the darkness. The darkness did not engulf us. We defeated the darkness" (President of Ukraine, 2023d) — and that Ukraine's goal is to defeat Russia with "the power of faith, the power of truth, the power of law, the power of justice, the power of our Ukraine" (President of Ukraine, 2023c). Unlike these commissive speech acts, directives are used to instruct Ukrainians to unite and create their own miracle, that is, to make their own way to independence: "as we defend our land and our souls, we are making our way to freedom. The way to gaining comprehensive independence" (President of Ukraine, 2023c). Assertive speech acts are, conversely, repeatedly employed to state that, unlike Russia's claims, Ukraine has a long history, exemplified by the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra monastery[9], from where the Ukrainian president gives his 2023 New Year's address (President of Ukraine, 2023d).

Zelenskyy also refers to Ukraine as a motherland ("Mother Ukraine"), which is proud of Ukrainians' achievements against Russia's "evil" (President of Ukraine, 2025a). He asserts that although the war separated families, it united Ukrainians, whom he calls "one big family", classifying Russia's actions and drive for more territory as "barbaric", while specifying that all the regions Russia has occupied are still Ukrainian (President of Ukraine, 2023d, 2024a, 2024c). He also reiterates the need for Ukraine's participation in the establishment of peace, as well as its desire to build its own future as decidedly European, based on the principle of "equal dignity of each country" (President of Ukraine, 2024b), according to which every nation deserves the right to security and to determine its own fate: "We must uphold the UN Charter and guarantee our right – Ukraine's right – to territorial integrity and sovereignty, just as we do for any other nation" (President of Ukraine, 2024c). He promises that Moscow will not break Kyiv's

[9] The Kyiv Pechersk Lavra is a monastery founded in 1051, which has been listed in UNESCO's World Heritage since 1990. This site has experienced numerous upheavals and hardships: it has been plundered, burned down by Mongolian invaders, besieged by foreign armies, and bombed during WWII, but it has never been fully destroyed and is always promptly rebuilt (Kyiv Holy Dormition Caves Lavra, n.d.).

spirit but underscores that both civilians and soldiers feel the pain of this war, expressing his gratitude to those who support his Peace Formula — the only one that can end the war (President of Ukraine, 2024c).

In Zelenskyy's last address of 2024, he insists on the need for more negotiations, complimenting the USA on its peacemaking efforts, while criticizing the UN for its inability to stop or mediate the conflict, affirming, nonetheless, that Ukrainians have now realized that only strong alliances and weapons guarantee their security: "This is all about collapse of international law and the weakness of the international institutions. And so, it's about the rise of weapons. Weapons decide who survives" (President of Ukraine, 2025c). In this sense, Zelenskyy employs commissive speech acts to fearmonger European countries into viewing Russia as an imminent threat: "Is this Russian force in Belarus meant to attack Ukraine? Maybe. Or maybe not. Or maybe it's meant for you" (President of Ukraine, 2025a). He tells Europe to become self-sufficient, to develop a common foreign policy and a joint armed force, and to further expand joint weapons production, so as to avoid becoming Russia's next target (President of Ukraine, 2025a, 2025c).

On the other hand, Putin and Zelenskyy both agree that international law does not apply if you have powerful friends, because international institutions have become weak. At the start of the war, on February 24, 2022, the Russian president made a speech explaining the reasoning behind the invasion of Ukraine. For Putin, the USA's behavior and policy of exceptionalism have recurrently gone against international principles and ethics, and therefore, Russia, which remains one of the most powerful nuclear states, is also exempt from having to respect them. The conflict in Ukraine is presented as unavoidable, with Putin claiming that since the West is neglecting Russia's interests, Russia will not abide by its rules, as it cannot passively observe while NATO keeps getting closer to its borders. Furthermore, as Putin repeatedly remarks, Russia's actions are in accordance with international norms, given that it was the aspiration of the people of Donbas that led Russia to recognize the two republics' independence, as was the case in 2014, with Crimea and Sevastopol, which freely chose to become part of "their historic homeland" (President of Russia, 2022a).

In May 2022, on the anniversary of the USSR's victory in the "Great Patriotic War", Putin enunciated the date as a memory of fundamental historical importance, presenting the defense of the motherland as sacred (President of Russia, 2022b, 2022c, 2024c). He uses this speech to further underscore how "The moral and historical truth is on our side" (President of Russia, 2022e) and accuses Ukraine of starting the animosities, on account of its government's marginalization of the Russian language and culture (President of Russia, 2022d). Putin uses commissive speech acts to convince his audience that the goal of the operation is to protect the people of Donbas, inisting that Russia will keep doing so, while ensuring its own security (President of Russia, 2022d, 2023a; Michael Rossi Poli Sci, 2023): "we had no other choice than the actions we took late last February. Yes, that was the logic shaping the developments, but our primary goal is to protect people that […] feel like they are part of our nation" (President of Russia, 2022d).

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Putin reasserts that Russia is fighting for human rights: "we are fighting not so much for territories as for human rights – for the right of people living in these territories to speak their native language, to live within their culture" (President of Russia, 2025b). The president foregrounds how this fight is fundamental for both the Federation's future and its defense of historical Russian lands (President of Russia, 2022e, 2024c). In this way, Russia states, mirroring Ukraine, that it is fighting against "international terrorism", adding that the fault of the war lies with the West, presented as Russia's enemy: "Western globalist elites keep speaking about their exceptionalism, pit nations against each other and split societies, provoke bloody conflicts and coups, sow hatred, Russophobia" (President of Russia, 2023a).

In 2023, on the anniversary of the "Great Patriotic War", Putin highlights the Nazi revanchism of Ukraine's government and claims that, having defeated Nazism once before, this battle is decisive for the fate of Russian statehood, inciting Russians to remain united in their beliefs and support for the regime, just as Zelenskyy does when addressing Ukrainians. In May 2024, Putin's Victory Day speech once again focused on the conflict in Ukraine, explicitly commemorating the soldiers who had died since the beginning of the hostilities and the civilians killed during Ukraine's offensive in Kursk, described as "barbarous shelling and terrorist attacks committed by the neo-Nazis"

(President of Russia, 2024a). Additionally, the President of Russia continuously states that if Ukrainian territories wish to join Russia, he has no choice but to accept their aspirations, as per the UN Charter and international law (President of Russia, 2025b). Hence, on September 30, 2025, Moscow celebrated the Day of Reunification of the Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic, as well as the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, with Russia. Putin defends that these territories were liberated during the "special military operation" and freely chose to join the Federation (President of Russia, 2025c, 2025e):

> Three years ago, in referendums held in Donbass and Novorossiya, millions of our compatriots freely and independently chose their future. They fulfilled a dream cherished for many years and made a momentous, historic decision: to be with their Fatherland, with Russia, to return to their native family of which they had always been a part. (President of Russia, 2025c)

All in all, both leaders exhibit a strong desire for a military victory, but the visual and discursive differences transmitted by them are notorious: one is more grounded and effusive, whereas the other is imposing and distant. Zelenskyy seeks to show the closeness between himself and "his people", underlining Ukrainians' support for the army, and decorating the categories of soldiers more sidelined in Russian narratives. Putin cultivates an air of untouchability, displaying a less effusive patriotism and decorating only model soldiers in lavish ceremonies. Nevertheless, the masculinized narratives of the Russian and Ukrainian leaderships play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the war, as both leaders disregard the need for mutual compromise, claiming to be invested in negotiated approaches to peace, while pursuing a military victory, hindering any productive discussions on conflict resolution.

5. Discussion

This chapter comprises the discussion of this dissertation and is divided into three sections. Firstly, the main findings of the analysis, along with its limitations, are presented, followed by a discussion on the need to revise certain tenets of IR's feminist theory. Subsequently, literature on peace and security is discussed, with a feminist lens

being applied to the research's conclusions and their implications for peace in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Focusing on the socio-ideological and gendered constructions of the case study, in this section I return to the central research question — "How does militarized and/or hegemonic masculinity, as represented by most states in the global arena, influence peace negotiations in international conflicts?" — underscoring that performances of militarized and hegemonic masculinity have a negative effect on peace negotiations, prolonging them and diminishing their effectiveness, as well as the fairness of settlements.

5.1. The Research's Findings

Taking the analysis's central argument into account — that Zelenskyy's and Putin's masculinities constrain the space and acceptability for negotiating peace — and according to the statements reviewed, it is notable that peace is important for both Ukraine and Russia. However, they both think of it in different terms, with Ukraine prioritizing justice and Russia prioritizing security (President of Russia, 2024c, 2025b; President of Ukraine, 2023a, 2024b). In addition, they are both fighting for different reasons, "Ukraine is fighting for the right to exist and to maintain its right to determine what that existence should look like" (Knott, 2023, p. 46), while Russia is fighting for a version of Ukraine that is subservient to it, claiming Ukraine's culture is simply a variation of Russia's, and therefore, the country should rejoin its "historical homeland" (Knott, 2023).

Furthermore, the previous chapter's FCDA indicates that both heads of state believe they can still win, and because of this, they are not willing to fully engage in negotiations and make relevant compromises. There is little conciliatory language in their addresses, with victory being placed as an ideal within reach, although negotiations start acquiring a larger importance after 2024 (President of Russia, 2025b, 2025d; President of Ukraine, 2024c, 2024e). For Ukraine, Putin is at fault for the failure of all previous attempts to achieve peace, but for Russia, the opposite is true. As Bahinskyi and Zaiets (2023) contend, both states appear to be holding negotiations simply to buy time as the

violence continues to escalate, with Russia seeking to reduce its level of international criticism and Ukraine seeking to secure the support of important allies, while still pursuing strategic advantages on the battlefield.

Zelenskyy's speeches are consistently shorter than Putin's, with him repeatedly highlighting messages of unity. He galvanizes the unity of Ukrainians, their general heroism, and their strength, portraying the Ukrainian people as a collective hero (Cichosz & Kozierska, 2023; Włodkowska, 2023). Despite his aforementioned protective masculinity, President Zelenskyy embraces stereotypically feminized qualities, focusing on emotional appeals and frequently referring to personal feelings or asking for help, while nevertheless reinforcing a gendered logic in which political legitimacy is derived from the ability to wage war, even if in a defensive manner. Compromise is mostly absent from his discourse, with Zelenskyy alluding to peace in connection with victory or resistance, instead of diplomacy (Wanner, 2024; Włodkowska, 2023; President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2024e).

Zelenskyy's "man of the people" (Gaufman, 2023; Shand, 2022) leadership opposes Putin's aggressive and authoritarian style by making a point to address both Ukrainian men and women, particularly when discussing the military, praising the country's defenders, while giving prominence to the women in the UAF, effectively constructing a "gender war" against Russia's traditionalist discourse (I. Lysychkina & O. Lysychkina, 2023; Winterbotham, 2023). Nonetheless, the Ukrainian president continues to operate within a militaristic and masculinist canon, with the country's warriors being hailed as flawless heroes who ought to be immortalized (President of Ukraine, 2023c), simultaneously ignoring discussions on issues such as domestic violence committed by veterans or sexual harassment in the military, which would go against the government's narrative of unity (Strelnyk, 2024).

The Russian head of state also anchors his speeches on messages of unity and support for both the government and the RAF (President of Russia, 2023b, 2023c), but contrarily to Zelenskyy, embodies militarized and hegemonic masculinity: Putin presents himself as strong, cold, pragmatic, and uncaring for political correctness. Indeed, he promotes a form of hypermasculinity rooted in gender stereotypes, which has garnered him great

domestic popularity and laid the groundwork for the support of his recurrent military actions (Gasviani, 2023; Shand, 2022). As a matter of fact, the Russian leader presents the invasion of Ukraine as unavoidable, affirming that concessions must come solely from Ukraine's end (President of Russia, 2023b, 2025d), a narrative Ukraine mirrors, refusing to concede, while demanding that Russia be forced into peace (President of Ukraine, 2022b, 2023b). Furthermore, Putin explicitly considers Zelenskyy an "illegitimate" leader (President of Russia, 2025b, 2025d) and contends — albeit in a frequently contradictory manner (President of Russia, 2022e, 2025d) — that the primary goal of the military operation is humanitarian rather than territorial, as the Federation seeks to safeguard the region from the West's influence and "false" liberal values (Donskikh & Akopov, 2025; Gaufman, 2023; Potapova & O'Sullivan, 2024).

Notwithstanding their differing narratives, due to wartime mobilization, both countries constitute militarized societies that normalize existing gender roles and sexist nation-building, while intertwining political leadership with militarism (President of Russia, 2022c, 2025f; President of Ukraine, 2022b, 2025b). The persistence of the conflict may then be linked less to a single form of masculinity than to the way political legitimacy is built, as power is communicated not only through language but also through symbols, pictures, or gendered performances that shape how security and peace are understood. These visual performances of masculinity tend to normalize militarization or portray it as desirable, while establishing peace as unreachable. Both Putin's and Zelenskyy's visual performances center the country's supposed military identity, with Russia hiding the suffering of soldiers and civilians alike, while Ukraine highlights it, emphasizing its people's trauma and the country's victimization (Markussen, 2024).

Putin's distance from his audience, conveyed through the usage of long tables, large ornate halls, and carefully staged appearances (where he is the main focus), reinforces Russia's hierarchical power relations, much like the omnipresence of Russian national symbols. Putin's marked stoicism, formality, and restrained demeanor, which contribute to his visual representation of hegemonic masculinity, further underscore his dominant position over the country. Whereas Zelenskyy, opposing this visual style, constructs a more accessible and emotional masculinity, opting for military-style clothing and an

informal appearance, prioritizing selfies or self-made video addresses (from wartime settings), without masking his emotions, creating a sense of authenticity and solidarity with ordinary citizens that has become an identifiable part of his iconography (Markussen, 2024).

Hegemonic militarized masculinities are, in this sense, obstacles to peace, since they idealize the continuation of hostilities until a military victory, prolonging the war, and leaving little room for compromise, portrayed as the failure of the parties to achieve their own goals (Gasviani, 2023; President of Russia, 2023b, 2025b; President of Ukraine, 2024b, 2024c). A situation worsened by the crescent dehumanization and emasculation of the enemy, as discussed in the Case Study, which is present in both Russian and Ukrainian narratives (Gasviani, 2023; Honcharova, 2025; Pavlenko, 2024; Shapovalova, 2025).

Concerning negotiations, they have been mostly carried out by third-party intervention, with Türkiye's or the USA's mediation, neither of which has produced any significant results, except for the deal on the safe export of Ukrainian grain, the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which has since been suspended (Bahinskyi & Zaiets, 2023; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2022; Jordan & Jackson, 2026). It is also notable, as mentioned in Chapter 2, that it was overwhelmingly men who sat at these negotiation tables (Shand, 2022; Wright, 2022), despite studies showing that women's participation increases negotiation speed and generates greater support for equalized outcomes (Hudson et al., 2008; Sapiano et al., 2024).

In this manner, returning to the initial analytical propositions, the analysis suggests that the textual and visual material examined provides interpretive support for both propositions. More specifically, regarding the first, the analysed discourses construct both Russia and Ukraine as masculine actors, albeit through distinct performances of masculinity. Regarding the second, the analysis indicates that (militarized) masculinity may constrain the possibilities for negotiating peace, by linking political legitimacy and authority to the maintenance of masculine-coded power and military strength. These sentiments are patent in Russia's and Ukraine's refusal to concede, their dismissal of

diplomacy, and their insistence on brokering an armed victory instead of a negotiated compromise.

5.2. Feminist Theory: The Need for Revision?

Though generally encompassed by the tenets of IR's feminist theory, the research's results shed light on some areas in need of further exploration or reform, especially considering that Zelenskyy's and Putin's speeches reinforce rather than challenge structures of domination. Ukrainian and Russian discourses on gender and war are mutually constitutive, opposing each other while further entrenching their divergences (O'Sullivan, 2019; President of Russia, 2023a, 2024c; President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2023b). A notion illustrated by Ukrainian feminists' militaristic refusal to participate in the meetings and actions of feminists from Russia and Belarus, even if they support Ukraine and are against their countries' authoritarian regimes (Zherebkina, 2024), much like Palestinian feminists refuse to cooperate with Israelis, in this case, after failed attempts at establishing common ground (Farr, 2011).

This lack of cooperation also creates and further exacerbates an increase in nationalist sentiments, with many Ukrainians, for example, contrasting themselves against the "evil" Russians, who commit war crimes, thinking they are more "civilized" and, therefore, better than their adversary (Pavlenko, 2024; Shmatko & Rachok, 2024; Wanner, 2024). A phenomenon accompanied by a similar rise of nationalism in Russia, as Putin directly observes, claiming Russians' love for their motherland is intensified in times of conflict (President of Russia, 2022d).

On the other hand, feminist theory ought to place a greater focus on the CEE region, whose voices have been absent from mainstream discourse and knowledge, in spite of Western feminism's ignorance of the region's numerous particularities (O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023; Manoilenko, 2024; Santoire, 2023). The CEE does not identify itself with the Global North/Global South binary, existing between the two realities and preferring more local designations, among which CEE, Central Europe, or Southeastern Europe (Müller, 2020). This situation leaves this part of the world undertheorized, ignoring that, unlike the Global North and the Global South, it includes both colonizer and colonized,

namely due to the actions of the Russian Empire and later the USSR (Kislenko, 2026; Manoilenko, 2024; Müller, 2020; Santoire, 2023). Indeed, many feminists from the CEE highlight the need to establish a new epistemological understanding of their region, so as to amplify its nuanced perspectives on Russian imperialism and the debate surrounding feminism's pacifism (briefly mentioned in Chapter 2), avoiding, in this manner, Western feminism's tendency to reproduce, in other regions, the same epistemic practices that it criticizes in other disciplines and theories (Kislenko, 2026; O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023).

In fact, for scholars such as Olaitan (2025) or Shchurko and Suchland (2022), to best represent Ukraine, feminism must be combined with a decolonial perspective[10]. Specifically, since, as Fediunin and Richard (2024) argue, Russia has an imperialist policy, with its behavior seeking to reassert Ukraine's subordinate status. To circumvent such notions, it would be beneficial for international bodies to support the adoption of a feminist vision of peace in conflict resolution, anchored in collaboration, dialogue, and compromise, and complemented by a decolonial perspective, which would allow for the defense of violent resistance against an oppressor, consistent with Ukraine's actions (Lazic & Stavrevska, 2024; Potapova & O'Sullivan, 2024).

5.2.1. The WPS Agenda and Women's Presence in Peace Delegations

The push for women's greater participation in peace negotiations, which sought to have a positive effect on outcomes, is not entirely without flaws, as it relies on a simple numerical increase in the representation of women, assuming that their inclusion, without any other alteration in the process and mechanism of negotiations, will bring about a common "gender perspective", benefiting all women affected by the conflict (Sapiano et al., 2024). Even though Ta-Johnson et al. (2022) affirm that a bilateral representation of women increases the likelihood of a settlement, and Hudson et al.

[10] Decoloniality analyses systems of privilege, challenging imperialism's reinforcement of the subordination of those outside the Global North, especially regarding knowledge production, recognizing the plurality and validity of other regions' perspectives and systems of thought (Farr, 2011; Olaitan, 2025).

(2008) show that states with higher levels of sex-based equality are less likely to rely on military force, gender reform in peacebuilding cannot be reduced to what Huber and Hudson (2019) define as the "just add women and stir" method. Although increasing women's representation relative to men's is essential, this isolated action can lead to an overestimation of women's impact on the success of negotiations.

This presumption is also patent in several WPS resolutions, which, despite their theoretical relevance, prioritize a binary understanding of gender, while ignoring the intersectionality of distinct categories of women, who, due to their race, ethnicity, or sexuality, face different degrees of gender-based marginalization, and so are not affected by conflict in the same manner (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). The WPS agenda seems to largely uphold the heteropatriarchal world order, rather than seeking to alter or reform it (Wright & Achilleos-Sarll, 2025), pushing for a greater inclusion of women and for the effective handling of "women's issues", without considering that women should have a representation equal to that of men, independently of their contributions to these areas (Sapiano et al., 2024; Tickner, 2001, 2004).

In the post-Soviet space, the WPS mandate translates into inward-looking NAPs (Santoire, 2023). These policy plans are useful tools for states that wish to prove their commitment to gender equality, fundamental in EU accession processes, which is why many CEE countries have adopted them. Ukraine has taken on two NAPs — the first from 2016 to 2020, and the second from 2021 to 2025 (as mentioned in Chapter 4) — utilizing them to address the effects of armed conflict on women and girls, as well as their crucial role in conflict prevention and resolution. Nevertheless, little commitment is usually demonstrated to them, especially regarding the inclusion of women and civil society representatives in official peace talks, with, for instance, only two women having participated in the 2016 Minsk Agreements, which created a stalemate in the Donbas (Santoire, 2023; Strelnyk, 2024). These plans are also criticized for further militarizing the WPS agenda and, conversely, for focusing on women as victims, instead of recognizing their active combat roles, which are fundamental in the case of Ukraine (O'Sullivan, 2019; O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023; Prügl et al., 2019).

Likewise, the focus of PSS's literature tends to be on the inclusion of women into existing mechanisms, as opposed to the transformative potential of gender inclusive initiatives and perspectives, or more equitable instruments for negotiating peace (Farr, 2011; Prügl et al., 2019). Notably, grassroots actors, civil society, and women's groups are crucial agents in conflict resolution (J. Krause et al., 2018; Prügl et al., 2019), which ought to have a greater role in both IR feminism's conceptualizations of peace and mainstream negotiations, ensuring a platform for marginalized voices.

5.2.2. IR Feminism and the Study of Militarized Masculinity

The research's findings support the feminist theory's idea that the international system is structured through gendered norms that are upheld via power relations and privilege militarized and masculinized leadership (Cohn, 2013; Tickner, 2001). As foregrounded, the exclusion of women from positions of power, such as peace delegations, is superimposed, making it unnatural (Connell, 2005; Enloe, 2014). However, in both Putin's and Zelenskyy's discourses, political legitimacy is naturally tied to masculine performances of militarized strength or resistance, particularly influencing their governments' investment in diplomacy. Through a feminist lens, it is clear that masculinized expectations of authority continue to shape the dynamics of war and peace, prolonging hostilities and hindering negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

Notwithstanding these notions, the study's findings complicate IR feminism's connection of militarism with hegemonic masculinity, as well as its distinction between hegemonic masculinity and protective masculinity, or other masculinities considered alternative to the hegemonic ideal. This is because while Putin's discourse reflects a militarized hegemonic masculinity, Zelenskyy's shows that other forms of masculinity can also be complicit in the reproduction of militarized logics. That is, militarized masculinity is not limited to the overtly hegemonic forms it is most associated with, and even "softer" masculinities, outside of hypermasculine notions, adopt "toxic" qualities, sustaining conflict, as opposed to challenging the association between masculinity and war.

IR's feminist theory must be more flexible and account not only for the destructive potential of aggressive masculinities but also for that of other forms of militarized masculinity, namely emotional, moralistic, or protective forms of militarization, as well as their visual representations. In this case study, both heads of state derive at least some credibility from gendered expectations of leadership, independently of the differences in their governing styles, perpetuating simplistic narratives of good versus evil (Gasviani, 2023), instead of seeking out non-violent solutions to their antagonism.

Overall, feminist IR should place greater focus on masculinities outside the hegemonic model, studying how they perpetuate militarism, whether in peacetime or wartime contexts. By acknowledging that militarism has several facets and can encompass performances stereotypically thought of as feminine, it would be possible to shed further light on the different mechanisms that allow for the prolongation of violent conflict and how they are managed by societies. It is still hard to define what a militarized femininity could entail, as performances like Zelenskyy's tend to simply join masculinity with some elements of femininity. Nonetheless, this issue requires further theorizing, primarily since the number of female political leaders worldwide is increasing. To study their foreign policy without falling into the WPH's essentialism, IR cannot assume that they will be invariably less militaristic than their male counterparts.

5.3. Feminist Literature on Peace and Security

Feminist scholars contend that conventional understandings of security are deeply gendered, privileging forms of strength-based authority and military action, while marginalizing civilian initiatives and diplomatic methods of conflict resolution. Enloe (2014) and Peterson (2010) believe that approaching the military–industrial complex from a gendered standpoint will reveal that men are reluctant to challenge the securitized assumptions of militarized masculinity for fear of emasculation — which would entail the loss of their identity and, crucially, their authority or political standing — and instead perpetuate militarism and the patriarchal status quo. In this regard, it can be considered that the dominant paradigm inscribes peace within the existing order, defining it as the mere absence of unrest while ignoring the systems of oppression

(re)produced by that hegemonic order (Aharoni, 2017; Farr, 2011). Traditional conceptualizations of peace claim a universal scope yet coexist with the very structures of power that cause violence and war (Lazic & Stavrevska, 2024).

In contrast, focusing on notions of positive peace that aspire to enduring transformations, Addams' (1906) book, *Newer Ideals of Peace*, is foundational. In this work, she critiques peace as a universal and static ideal, defending the need to establish peace beyond the absence of violence, defining this change as an active process, rooted in the readjustment of a society's values and structure. For Addams (1906), building peace is equated with dismantling the militarized ways of organizing society, creating an alternative social and institutional order where peace's focus is on welfare. This author also argues that peace requires more of war's idealized attributes, such as heroism and patriotism, so that peace becomes not only desirable in principle but also in practice, making war unnecessary (Addams, 1906; Bargués, 2025):

> We continue to found our patriotism upon war and to contrast conquest with nurture, militarism with industrialism, calling the latter passive and inert and the former active and aggressive, without really facing the situation as it exists. We tremble before our own convictions, and are afraid to find newer manifestations of courage and daring lest we thereby lose the virtues bequeathed to us by war. (Addams, 1906, p. 217)

The aforementioned notions of peace are markedly different from those of Ukraine and Russia. In Ukraine, peace is linked to its victory against the "imperial aggressor", a stance supported by Ukrainian feminists, who mirror Zelenskyy's defense of continued resistance (Potapova & O'Sullivan, 2024). For Russia, peace is also equated with victory, but one that guarantees its security, which is not anchored in independence, as it is for Ukraine, because its sovereignty is presumed to be unchangeable. To be precise, for Russia, security is based on geopolitical control and deeply connected with the military's power. This is the result of the policies of a hypermasculine state that places masculine identity as attainable only through militarized masculinity — i.e., through serving in the RAF and sacrificing oneself for the motherland (Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024; Potapova & O'Sullivan, 2024).

Moreover, the gendered structure of international politics limits peace, and, for IR's feminism, current peace negotiations are still constrained by masculinized norms, evident in leaders' prioritizing prestige, victory, or territorial gains over more sustainable approaches, anchored on either compromise or the broadening of state security beyond the military sphere. In Chapter 4's analysis, sustainable and lasting peace is proclaimed as a mutual objective, supported by both Russia and Ukraine (President of Russia, 2022d, 2025b; President of Ukraine, 2023a, 2024c). But that is not what negotiations transpire, since understandings of security focused on military victory or territorial dominance are still accorded greater emphasis by both delegations. Feminist approaches would prioritize instead the experiences of civilians and human security in general (e.g., civilian displacement or food shortages), points only briefly addressed by Ukraine.

The visual dimension of Russian and Ukrainian discourses also reveals the dominance of a militarized understanding of security. In both cases, visual performances tie legitimacy to military symbolism and displays of strength, creating expectations among their respective audiences and trapping both Putin and Zelenskyy within performances of intransigence, as compromise is inconsistent with their wartime narratives. Putin cannot appear weak or emasculated, and Zelenskyy cannot abandon the resistance he has insisted on. In this way, the conflict's visual discourses sustain military endurance as a crucial marker of security, in lieu of humanitarian recovery or diplomatic engagements.

As suggested, the gendered dynamics identified in the previous chapters' analysis have negative implications for the outcome of negotiations, since they reproduce the conflict's masculinized security frameworks. This does not mean that employing feminist notions of peace would purge the world of conflict, but rather that these would alter the terms through which security is generally understood. Security cannot be reduced to the protection of a state's sovereignty and territory — states can be "safe" while their populations endure tremendous suffering. Consequently, the focus of negotiations should be the protection of civilian communities and their welfare, or the reconstruction of infrastructure — an issue often emphasized by Ukraine — as opposed to military objectives, thereby expanding the political space for compromise.

In matters of diplomatic negotiations, PSS underscore that in a peace process where women are sidelined, and the gap between the needs of ordinary people and the goals of political elites is significant, the negotiated result will have little positive impact on those most affected by hostilities (Farr, 2011). As Farr's (2011) analysis of the conflict between Israel and Palestine concludes, it appears that until the fundamental inequalities and divergences in power between Ukraine and Russia — which is currently occupying a part of the former's territory — are addressed, a lasting peace will be very difficult to attain. Therefore, this study calls for a broader inclusion of gendered analysis in IR and a shift in the standard thinking of peace, emphasizing voices typically silenced in its theorizing, while striving for the mainstreaming of feminist and decolonial perspectives — perhaps underway in some Ukrainian discourses but absent from Russian ones.

5.3.1. Implications for Peace

Taking the Case Study into account, successful conflict resolution would require the transformation of gendered norms in international political negotiations, rejecting hypermasculinity and gender binaries, as well as their corresponding hierarchies (Huber & Hudson, 2019). Through human security-based negotiations, advances in peace talks might be possible but would require bridging the warring parties' incompatible logics of sovereignty (i.e., Ukraine is fighting for the independence that Russia denies). Effectively, Putin's discourse constructs a hierarchical relationship that casts Russia as dominant over Ukraine, making Kyiv — which claims to want peace more than anyone else — unwilling to offer Moscow any major compromises (President of Ukraine, 2024c).

Ukrainians seem to be focusing on ways to re-negotiate their relationship with Russia (and the West) through their armed resistance to the invasion, in which the military and civil society appear united, disregarding attempts to foster dialogue between ordinary Russians and Ukrainians as unproductive to the war effort. In this sense, many attempts at dialogue-based conciliation between the parties are opposed by Ukrainians or viewed with distrust (Potapova & O'Sullivan, 2024). In response to this posture, several non-Ukrainian scholars, such as Mac Ginty (2024), content that "It is very difficult to stand up for peace in relation to Ukraine" (p. 445), stressing the difficulty of finding nuance

amidst the binaries of good versus evil propagated by both Russia's and Ukraine's leadership, which tend to dismiss diplomatic efforts seeking coexistence or reconciliation (Bargués, 2025).

In this conflict's peace talks, representatives of civil society and women's organizations, for example, are markedly absent (Manoilenko, 2024; Strelnyk, 2024; Wright & Achilleos-Sarll, 2025), just like women in general (Darden, 2023; Shand, 2022). As previously argued, their involvement could prevent militarized elites from reproducing militarized outcomes by focusing instead on civilian protection and the reduction of suffering. Peace processes are more durable when broader social groups are included, as they tend to challenge the notion that compromise equals weakness, a point fundamental for this conflict's resolution. Indeed, priorities must be set that are in accordance with the reality on the ground, knowing that the greater inclusion of women would allow for the understanding of their value as citizens, equally affected by the conflict (Farr, 2011; Ta-Johnson et al., 2022; Włodkowska, 2023), whose insights and prospective solutions are vital, as advocated by Resolution 1325 (Security Council, 2000).

Nevertheless, as emphasized above, feminist scholars caution that merely increasing women's representation within peace delegations or international institutions is insufficient if the underlying logic of militarized and hegemonic masculinity remains unchanged (Huber & Hudson, 2019). It is also important to acknowledge that security must go beyond its militarized biome and recognize invisible forms of violence, including lack of access to food, healthcare, or shelter. In this manner, a gendered bottom-up approach to peacebuilding might lead to more effective negotiations (Prügl et al., 2019).

In the realm of visuality, the gendered conditions that reproduce the Russia-Ukraine war are also reflected, demonstrating how masculinity functions not only through political rhetoric but also through visual performances. Taking this into account, it is essential to challenge the notion that only a military victory produces legitimate security, underscoring the need for a larger focus on the well-being of those most affected by the conflict. A topic that Ukraine, in its domestic addresses, concerning civilian evacuation or reconstruction, has briefly discussed, with Russia, conversely, focusing almost

exclusively on the return of war prisoners. Addressing these considerations could alter the discursive logic of the war's peace talks, reframing compromise not as emasculation but as a legitimate political tool for the creation of stability and reduction of the human cost of violent conflict. In effect, as long as negotiations remain structured through performances of militarized and hegemonic masculinity, with neither country being able to forget nor forgive — as the President of Ukraine (2022e, 2023b) has previously stated — diplomacy will be largely overridden, and peace efforts will remain constrained, leaving the conflict at a standstill.

The reflections advanced in this work allow for a deeper understanding of the current state of international politics. Artificial gender hierarchies still shape the security of individuals, with their leaders being governed by the fear of emasculation, which contributes to their lack of conciliation. Russia and Ukraine are not the only cases of unchecked masculinity and militarization constraining peace, principally when considering conflicts with significant power asymmetries. For instance, these notions also apply to Israel's actions in Palestine. Israel is likewise a heavily militarized society, which has occupied Palestinian territories, portraying itself in masculinized terms, while being unable to reach a lasting settlement with Palestinian authorities (Aharoni, 2017).

In sum, today's major international conflicts seem to stem from the pursuit of militarized and hegemonic masculinity, privileging military action over non-violent solutions at the cost of great suffering for civilians, soldiers, and the stability of the international system. To confront this, a gendered approach to peacebuilding is needed, recognizing that embracing diversity allows for greater resistance to conflict escalation. Gender and other axes of difference can be used for peace, since establishing and sustaining it requires the participation of a wide range of people and institutions, local efforts, and a bottom-up approach (Prügl et al., 2019).

6. Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to examine how, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Putin and President Zelenskyy perform masculinity in their political discourses and visual appearances, as well as how these performances affect diplomatic negotiations and the conflict's prospects for peace. Through FCDA, this study has focused on the connection between performances of militarized and hegemonic masculinity and PSS. Rejecting the WPH's essentialist association of men with violence and women with peace, it is nonetheless underscored that femininity is tendentially devalued, being connected with weakness or dependency, while masculinity is hierarchically overvalued and connected with strength (Butler, 1999; Prügl et al., 2019).

As institutionalized masculinist leadership and militarized power hierarchies still dominate how countries act and portray themselves on the international stage, it becomes crucial, for works such as this, to deconstruct the linkages between masculinity and militarism. Regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, both countries defend their use of force as legitimate, while actively feeding their population dehumanizing narratives about the "enemy" that will likely perpetuate a sense of hostility between them. A notion worsened by Russia's continued unaccountability for its imperialist policy in relation to Ukraine and the CEE in general. In establishing war as a greater harbinger of justice than peace, Ukraine and Russia maintain that only outcomes equal to those brought about by military force can justify their serious involvement in negotiations, placing absolute demands on peace that make it difficult to establish any common ground between them.

Due to the parties' incompatible perceptions of sovereignty, only by transforming the existing rapport of power, heavily anchored in masculinist notions of gender and security, could sustainable peace be achieved. It is then imperative to highlight the importance of gendered approaches to peacebuilding and the crucial role of civil society actors in conflict resolution. But the general perception of insecurity in "Russia's neighborhood" also reveals the complexity of finding lasting solutions for the region, divided between what have been described by Putin and Zelenskyy as polarized "ways

of life", the EU's and Russia's (President of Russia, 2022a; President of Ukraine, 2023a). FCDA reveals that both states employ gendered logics — through rhetoric and visual representations — to justify their actions, pushing for unity, obedience, and loyalty as requirements for facing the enemy. The weapons buildup and the mobilization of the military are markedly gendered responses that portray governmental institutions as citizens' masculine protectors (Donskikh & Akopov, 2025; Young, 2003a, 2003b), essentially subordinating men to the demands of the war effort.

Feminist IR scholarship (as presented in Chapter 2) illustrates how peace and conflict are inextricably linked with gender relations and hierarchies, although distinctions between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities, and their respective contributions to militarized frameworks, are less straightforward. As suggested in Chapters 4 and 5, Zelenskyy's protective non-hegemonic masculinity also perpetuates militarized security, meaning that the persistence of conflict can be attributed not just to Putin's posture but to Zelenskyy's as well. As a matter of fact, their discourse frames any possible points for conciliation as politically emasculating, a factor that contributes to peace negotiations being continuously conducted within militarized frameworks, centering on issues such as territorial control, while both nations still perceive a victory on the battlefield as attainable.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, dialogue has thus far alleviated human suffering via prisoner exchanges or exports of grain (FAO, 2022; President of Ukraine, 2022e, 2024b). A human security perspective, however, could fully shift the focus toward refugees, reconstruction, or healthcare, as well as long-term stability between the parties, potentially reframing compromise as a leader's political responsibility toward their citizens, rather than as a form of emasculation. As underlined in the Discussion, by attributing more importance to dialogue, namely intersectional dialogue, a more balanced pluralistic representation would be ensured, accounting for the segments of society most affected by the war. Thus, feminist understandings of security and leadership that subvert the current bias toward masculinity are needed in mainstream institutions and mechanisms, both in theory and in practice.

To establish and maintain peace, the deployment of peacekeepers, the involvement of international actors in the settlement (e.g., the UN), or transitional justice measures (e.g., war reparations or reconstruction aid) are all viable possibilities, employed, with varying degrees of success, following other violent conflicts (Hutchings, 2026). In the case of Russian peace activism, for instance, the instrumentalization of gender roles — as exemplified by the amply supported Russian Soldiers' Mothers' Movement (Fürst, 2024) — is another solution for peacebuilding, allowing women to benefit from their stereotypical association with motherhood by using it to advocate for women's greater participation in the peace process, thereby contributing to the effectiveness of negotiations.

For Russia and Ukraine, only a bottom-up approach that goes beyond the absence of direct conflict, or the usual elite implementation of peacebuilding, could bring forth a stable peace. That is, the building of a relatively harmonious relationship between the two countries, fundamentally involving citizens, local actors, and civil society (e.g., the Russian Soldiers' Mothers' Movement).

6.1. The Study's Limitations

It is crucial to note that this study has some constraints, as the interpretative nature of the FCDA employed can allow for multiple readings and interpretations of the analyzed statements. The same is true for the usage of the official English translations of Putin's and Zelenskyy's speeches, as there could be sentiments lost in translation or even purposeful mistranslations of their content. In fact, in their analysis of Putin's humor, Donskikh and Akopov (2025) noted instances where some of Putin's more homophobic or sexist jokes had been omitted from the English-language versions of his statements, as published on the Kremlin's website.

In addition, the critical use of the concepts of masculinity and femininity may inadvertently reinforce binaries and essentialist notions of gender, reducing their complexities to the traditional concepts of "man" and "woman". Indeed, as scholars such as Duncanson (2019) highlight, the focus on the interconnection between masculinity and militarism can lead to the strengthening of the same gendered

dichotomies it wishes to challenge. This is why, in accordance with Spivak (1988a, 1988b), this study has strived to use a "strategic" essentialism, that is, the instrumentalization of essentialist concepts, which allows for the critical study of different ideologies or gender stereotypes, as well as the consequences they generate.

More specifically, essentialism assumes that certain groups have one or several defining features exclusive to all members. Due to this, essentialism is rejected in feminist theory, as it denies the real diversity of women's intersecting characteristics and socio-economic identities (Gandhi, 2015; Stone, 2004). However, to organize women's mobilization and academic work in the feminist arena, theorists tend to advocate a strategic use of essentialism, where the purported essentialism is recognized to be false, but is passed as true to further common political purposes and scholarly goals (Stone, 2004). For example, via the focus on formerly colonized women in the Global South, Spivak (1988a, 1988b), who established this concept, describes it as a beneficial but impermanent form of "identity formation". Spivak's (1988a, 1988b) strategic essentialism defines women as frequently "othered", meaning it can be used to put aside their specific differences and forge a sense of collective identity, particularly relevant as society tends to view women as a unitary group (Gandhi, 2015).

As a result of this study's main focus, other aspects that might impact Russia's and Ukraine's actions and attitudes toward negotiations have been left underdeveloped, such as the militarization (and instrumentalization) of Orthodoxy. This is the case in Russia's "Russian world" ideology, mentioned in the Case Study, which mixes religious, nationalist, and imperial narratives and is supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, which claims Russia is destined to lead, politically and spiritually, the post-Soviet world. As in Russia, in Ukraine, the war has strengthened the state's oversight of religious institutions, primarily the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (from the Moscow Patriarchate), which has remained pro-Kremlin and is considered by the government as a threat to national security, with several of its priests having already been investigated or prosecuted (Vagramenko & Fernández, 2023).

Finally, this work is Europe-centered, as the countries at war define the study's geographical limitation. Regardless of this specificity, it is included in a wider context,

nominally through its main research question, which has a more general focus. In theory, the rapport between masculinity and militarization, and its influence over peacebuilding efforts, appears more malleable than often assumed, so it is hoped that despite the interpretative nature of the method employed, this study's findings and structure can be replicated and applied to other regions and conflicts.

6.2. Final Considerations

Ultimately, the association between peace and emasculation needs to be rethought. A peace process ought to go outside the bounds of (militarized) masculinity, whose tenets only narrow understandings and have critical consequences for both soldiers and civilians. Yet major contemporary conflicts are being dictated by leaders' need to perform gender in a fashion that allows them to maintain their hold on power and label it as rightful. In this way, I seek to underscore that there are gendered dimensions of conflict that cannot be overlooked. For instance, negotiators, diplomats, and mediators should recognize that their leaders may face political constraints arising from their gendered performances, which they will not disavow.

This work has sought to bring forward a nuanced perspective on the relations between masculinity and militarism in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where both leaders are masculinized in a manner that creates further obstacles to the conflict's resolution: Putin cannot afford to fail in his wartime goals if he is to keep his grip on power, and Zelenskyy cannot give up the heroic resistance he has preached since the beginning. This makes a resolution of the diplomatic kind seem implausible without fundamental changes in perspective, leadership, or negotiators. Consequently, the broader acceptance of negotiating approaches anchored in human security concerns, as well as a large-scale adoption by major international actors of more values connected with femininity, such as compassion or cooperation, should lead to more efficient methods of conflict resolution and a greater preponderance of diplomacy.

Although not within the scope of this study, it is essential to acknowledge the intricacy of gender beyond the masculine/feminine binary and how deeper insights into these dynamics, considering non-binary or fluid gender performances, might complexify the

gendered framing used in this study. Indeed, as the conflict is ongoing, deeper research is also needed into new models of masculinity and femininity — as well as militarism — that could evolve from the warring parties (Martsenyuk & Shevtsova, 2024), especially Ukraine, which seems to be making more changes in this realm.

This research further illustrates the importance of performances of masculinity, as opposed to femininity, in the construction and persistence of violent conflict. Intransigent performances of hegemonic and/or militarized masculinity are detrimental to peace talks, given that the fear of emasculation halts leaders — whose entire legitimacy depends on this "act" — from approaching peace negotiations from a position of equal compromise. For example, Russia and Ukraine are negotiating asymmetrical gains and not an equitable peace agreement, because their leaders' masculinity blinds them to paths for conciliation where they would have to sacrifice their own objectives. Masculinity prolongs conflicts and contributes to making diplomatic efforts more demanding, pushing for settlements where there is still a clear winner, instead of a surrender by both parties.

Masculinity is deeply entrenched in international political discourse. Therefore, the challenge during peace efforts is not merely the inclusion of more women or civil society actors in negotiations, but to modify the reasoning through which peace is imagined and discussed, so that masculinity is effectively demilitarized, no longer anchoring the warring parties' political statements, visual representations, and behavior in peace talks. Beyond a diplomatic settlement, sustainable peace must start with the confrontation of the gendered assumptions that continue to shape how leadership, security, or victory are recognized and understood.

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Annexes

Annex 1 – The FCDA Analytical Table

Date, Title, and Length of Statement	Main Themes Discussed and Concepts Used	Key Argument(s) Made	Speech Acts: Assertives, Commissives, Declaratives, Directives, and Expressives	Visuality (When Applicable)	References to Peace and/or Peace Negotiations	References to Masculinity and/or Gender (Direct and Indirect)	Audience Takeaway	Others