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It's not just about gender equality

Why a feminist foreign policy should be part of Ukrainian diplomacy

The current understanding of the concept of 'feminist foreign policy' in Ukraine remains quite limited, being mostly narrowed down to the issue of gender equality in the diplomatic service. Meanwhile, an increasing number of European countries adopted their own versions of feminist foreign policy (e.g. Sweden, France, Germany and Spain), suggesting a trend that is gradually gaining momentum. In addition, several of these countries – especially EU members – are also making gender policies and issues a precondition for providing aid to third countries. This covers both humanitarian assistance and development aid, as well as conflict resolution, impact management and even arms trade. Gender equality components have also long been part of the conditions to provide grant support to civil society organisations.

Despite Ukraine still being at war, now is the time to start to think about a feminist foreign policy. Gender-balanced and anti-discrimination policies in various spheres should also become a precondition for cooperation with international partners in the context of Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Introducing such standards in entrepreneurship and socio-economic development programmes, integrating gender issues in sectoral policies, monitoring, evaluation and reporting should all be an important part of the process.

Defining feminist foreign policy for Ukraine

Feminism and feminist foreign policy are not just about gender equality. Feminism refers to a set of values tied to rebalancing unequal power dynamics, which include gender but also other aspects such as race, class and sexuality. Among other things, feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as non-state actors, in a manner that prioritises peace, gender equality and environmental integrity, enshrines the human rights of all, seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures

and allocates significant resources to achieve this vision.

As an active participant in European processes and as a recipient – now and potentially in the future – of significant European assistance, Ukraine should understand what exactly this concept encompasses, what varieties of feminist foreign policy interpretations exist and which best practices should be implemented. In fact, for Ukraine, this means aligning internal processes, including those of the diplomatic service, with external relations, as well as positioning itself in the international arena. While international development has focused on the rights of and services for girls and women as a pathway to social and economic development for some time, foreign policy is just catching up.

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In the fall of 2022, the Foreign Policy Council 'Ukrainian Prism' conducted research and interviews with female Ukrainian diplomats and civil servants to try and answer the question: 'is Ukraine ready for a feminist foreign policy?' Ukrainian diplomats note that a stronger focus on gender issues and ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women have been a key trend of the past few years in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)'s internal policy. This has brought significant positive results within a relatively short time. The gender audit conducted in 2019 facilitated this process. However, some diplomats voice concern that the current institutional capacity of the MFA and other government bodies may be insufficient to make these accomplishments irreversible, regardless of who the next minister will be.

On the one hand, it is obvious that the generational change in the MFA leadership has played an important role in this positive transformation, making Ukraine's foreign policy younger and more feminine. On the other hand, in recent years, institutional changes have been cemented in legislation and a number of strategic documents to ensure continuity of the reform.

Challenges and opportunities

Despite all the positive changes in recent years, most female diplomats still point to a stereotyped perception of the role of women in the diplomatic service.Among other things, this includes the matter of

distribution of duties or thematic areas of work. Women in the diplomatic service mostly occupy posts in culture, public diplomacy and the media. A particular difficulty lies in the attitude of the older generation of diplomats and the stereotypical perception of the capabilities and challenges faced by female diplomats. It is strange when there are no women on the Ukrainian side of a negotiation.

The effort to ensure equal opportunities for men and women in the diplomatic service should also consider the difficulty of maintaining a life-work balance for women.Female diplomats face double pressure as they combine professional and family roles and often meet reluctance from higher-ranking officials to hire them as senior diplomatic staff in diplomatic offices abroad because of their children – as they might allegedly distract women from work. Employment opportunities for a diplomat's spouse in the country of posting also remains a problem in many countries.

The importance of understanding the priorities of a feminist foreign policy and applying some of its elements in Ukraine should be looked at from several perspectives; as compliance with democratic values; a guarantee of Ukraine's successful European and Euro-Atlantic integration; as a tool of war diplomacy and restoration of justice; a prerequisite for international development aid and Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. It should also be viewed as an element of Ukraine's soft power and thus also as a model for the successful transformation of other countries as well as a nation-building tool.

Gender equality and inclusion principles should be part of Ukraine's post-war recovery programmes.

Given modern global trends and the priority issues faced by Ukrainian diplomacy, it would be helpful to consider declaring Ukraine's feminist foreign policy as one that pays attention to human rights protection, inclusion, gender equality, combating sexual and gender violence, protecting marginalised groups, combating systemic inequalities and harnessing the transformative power of diplomacy. Gender equality and inclusion principles should be part of Ukraine's post-war recovery programmes. At the same time, gender equality and women's rights protection should also be considered when Ukraine itself provides development aid to third countries.

Given Ukraine's international image as a country that is fighting for democratic values and freedoms, it is important to develop and articulate

Ukraine's position on the protection of women's rights in Iran, Afghanistan and other cases of brutal violation of human rights more clearly (within Ukraine's current limitations and strategic interests).

Despite the difficulties, Ukraine can present itself as a country that has already accomplished successes in gender policy and is willing to share its expertise with other countries – e.g. on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the initiation of strategic document design in gender policy. For Ukraine, it is important to use the elements of feminist discourse to communicate with international partners through public diplomacy and image policy. Among other things, this would help build a positive image of Ukraine as a country of strong and successful women in the army, diplomacy, politics, civil society, entrepreneurship and more.



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