

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Geopolitics of Gender

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October 24, 2023

Ballroom A, UMass Boston

**Chris Bobel:**

Alright, folks, we're going to get started. I have a little bit of housekeeping to do, and then I will introduce Cinzia, Professor Solari, as our speaker. First, good afternoon, to those in the room, and good morning, good afternoon, good evening to those joining us on Zoom. We have people joining us from all over the world, so this is truly a global event, which is really exciting.

My name's Chris Bobel and on behalf of [the Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights \(CGSHR\)](#), I'm really pleased to welcome you to this exciting hybrid event. Today's talk by Dr. Cinzia Solari is being run as a hybrid, and it will be recorded, and it will be on the [YouTube channel](#) for the Consortium as well as the [website](#) for the Consortium. So, there will be two places you can access the recording.

I'm going to read a really beautifully written and considered acknowledgment statement and I'm asking that you all really pay attention to the language of this. I think this is very well done.

“UMass Boston and surrounding communities are based on the unseated homelands of the Massachusetts, Pawtucket and Nipmuc people, and we want to honor the diverse, indigenous peoples, enduring relationships with their traditional territories, and to acknowledge that the ways lands passed from indigenous to non-indigenous control is through a violent history of genocide and forced removal. The violent trauma of land being stolen from indigenous people, and the death, dispossession, and displacement of countless individuals and communities, all processes which remain ongoing today.

We'd also like to emphasize that land acknowledgments by themselves are not enough. They are only one small step in supporting indigenous communities and need to be followed by action building solidarity by combating the ongoing structural and physical violence directed toward indigenous peoples and by supporting the [Land Back movement](#).”

While folks are still joining the Zoom, I'm going to take just a few moments to explain how things are going to go. In terms of structure, after Dr. Solari's talk she'll take questions from both people in the Zoom, and you're welcome to put your questions in the Q&A, and also from folks in the room. I will circulate the microphone so that you can speak your question into the microphone so that the people on Zoom can hear it as well. For folks on the Zoom, you do have access to the chat right now during this introductory period, and at the end of the webinar, so please feel free to offer thoughts, resources, links, whatever you think would be useful to strengthen and expand this conversation.

When you leave the webinar, folks on Zoom, there will be a quick pop-up survey that we ask you to take a few moments to fill out. Those of you in the room also have an opportunity to offer feedback. You have a form on your chair, so please take a few moments at the end to offer your feedback, and where would folks turn those in? Right here – the angels over here at the table who are making this event happen today.

Before I introduce our speaker, I want to acknowledge the many UMass Boston departments that contributed to this event. As we know, no event happens in a vacuum. No event is a solo endeavor. So, thanks to all those that are supporting, and I also want to acknowledge the people here that are supporting the event as well as the Consortium's director, Dr. Carol Cohn, who's sitting here in the front row and is nothing less than invaluable.

Now the fun part - I get to introduce Cinzia. Cinzia Solari is an Associate Professor of Sociology at here at UMass Boston. She's been studying the former Soviet Union since the third grade when she read a biography of Catherine the Great. She's a first-generation college student of Italian immigrant parents. She earned a BA in history and Italian studies from Brown and a PhD in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley and she trained at Berkeley's Post-Soviet Center, and has studied the region for the last couple of decades. It's a long time.

Her first book, an ethnographic study conducted in three languages, Russian, Italian, and English, and three countries, Ukraine, Italy, and the US, is titled [\*On the Shoulders of Grandmothers: Gender, Migration, and Post-Soviet Nation-State Building\*](#) exposes the production of new gendered capitalist economics and nationalisms that precariously place Ukraine between Europe and Russia with implications for the global world order. It is a must read and it's interesting in the larger context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Her second book, impressively, which is co-authored, is titled [\*The Gender Order of Neoliberalism\*](#) and it's just coming out today! That's exciting! This is a doubly exciting and auspicious event with Polity Press. This brand-new book places three world regions in conversation; the US, the former Soviet Union, and South and Southeast Asia. The book reveals the ways that gender is foundational to making the neoliberal global order work. And I expect that this will be a real game changer.

Dr. Solari's current work also includes exciting grant funded research, focusing on non-binary and transgender students to better understand how they navigate high school. I know our students are going to be interested in that.

On a personal note, I had the pleasure of meeting Cinzia when she first joined the UMB faculty and immediately I found her brilliant, wise, kind, innovative, and fiercely feminist. So, of course, she immediately became a part of my heart. She has proven to be over her years here, a beloved and trusted teacher and mentor. She's a talented and high impact scholar, and she's committed to making UMB the best version of itself. We are really very fortunate to have Cinzia Solari as a member of our UMass Boston community. And today she's going to talk to you about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the geopolitics of gender – Cinzia, welcome.

**Cinzia Solari:**

Hey everyone! Well. Thank you for that really lovely introduction. And I want to thank Carol Cohn for inviting me and Katherine Susich for all her deft organizational work.

As I begin here, I feel I must first acknowledge that the world's gaze is now focused on the violence in the Middle East, and so many of us have been painfully impacted.

Now, since my area of expertise is the former Soviet Union and specifically Ukraine, my talk today is titled "[The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Geopolitics of Gender](#)." I am going to argue that even though most Americans have never even heard of Ukraine before Russia's invasion last February, and that the war Russia is waging on Ukraine feels like it has been going on forever, with no end in sight, that we ignore this violence at our peril.

The humanitarian catastrophe of the war, the mass displacement of people, the horrific war crimes, the food shortages caused by Ukraine's inability to get grain out to the World Food Program, which feeds folks in more than 120 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. All of these are very concrete reasons for continuing to care about what's going on in Ukraine, and these are gendered issues.

I must tell you up front that I'm not going to show you violent images of the devastation in Ukraine. We're all getting enough violent images on the news and in our social media feeds.

In fact, my goal today, precisely because American audiences really know so little about Ukraine, except that Russia is attempting to recolonize the entire country, is to give you some background information about Ukraine, and place the violence that Ukrainians are experiencing in a broader context, which is, of course, what sociologists love to do.

To that end, there are also significant, discursive reasons that I think we should all care about as well, and by discursive, I mean those narratives that shape our collective imaginations about what kinds of actions are possible, legitimate, or desirable. When bombs are falling, talking about collective gendered imaginings might seem frivolous. I will argue that these gender discourses are crucial to understanding the geopolitics of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and that both the Russian and the Ukrainian state also find them very important, even as the bombs are falling.

So, I'm going to try and convince you that thinking about nationalism, gender and modernity is vital to both understanding the violence that is happening on the ground and what the global implications are. I argue that the gendered lens reveals that Russia's war on Ukraine plays a significant role in producing what I call an "oppositional modernity of manliness".

Despite Western media representations of Russian President Putin as a lone dictator who might be mad, Putin is actually offering the world an alternative world vision that appeals to many in disparate locales, including some on the political right here in the US. That's my punchline: We must understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine as part of a geopolitics of gender and sexuality that offers the world a modernity of manliness in opposition to a Western modernity that has centered empowered women and increasingly LGBTQ rights.

Before I support that statement, let me back up and tell you something about my research. Since we are an interdisciplinary group, I think it's helpful to explain how, as a sociologist, I approach this topic.

I am a global ethnographer. And I spent about ten years researching and writing a book about Ukrainian nation-state-building called *On the Shoulders of Grandmothers*. For that book, I spent several years doing participant observation with Ukrainian migrants in Italy and in California, who were working as domestic workers because that was the job most available to them. I also spent time in L'viv, Ukraine, a city you might have heard about on the news, because it's about 40 miles from the Polish border, and has been an important transit point for large numbers of internally displaced people looking to cross into Poland. There I conducted interviews with the family members of migrant workers, mostly young adult children.

I found that Ukrainian migrants, in my research sites, were mostly middle-aged women in their forties, fifties, and sixties. Most grandmothers, young grandmothers by US standards, all with professional work, histories as engineers, economists, and teachers. It is unusual to uncover a grandmother-led migration. Based on years of ethnographic work and over 160 interviews in Russian with migrant women, a few migrant men, community leaders in Italy and California and adult children back in Ukraine, I concluded that these migrant grandmothers were building the new Ukraine transnationally from the outside in.

One day, early in my field work in Italy, I went to the Garbatella. This is a large parking lot about an hour outside of Rome's city center, where courier vans that carted goods and women workers between Ukraine and Italy congregated every Sunday. A participant I call Tanya brought me, and we stood on this elevated platform overlooking the Garbatella, and she turned to me and she said in Russian, "Do you see all those women down there? They carry Ukraine on their shoulders and don't think they don't know it. And I don't think they are happy about it either."

So, I set about trying to uncover what it meant to carry Ukraine on the shoulders of grandmothers. These women had Soviet upbringings and others looked at them and said, "oh, they're migrant care workers". I, too, had originally set out to study the global care industry. After all, my participants were doing cleaning and caring labor for the elderly. But that's not what they thought was important about their migration. They told me that they were using their time as domestic workers abroad to help build the new Ukraine by learning how to be capitalist and European, as opposed to Soviet. They were sending not just money from their wages back to Ukraine, but they also sent back to Ukraine this information, what migration scholar call social remittances, so that they could help their children, those young adults that I met in L'viv, learn how to gain honor, status, and economic security in a capitalist system, as well as learn how to build European institutions.

Isn't that incredible? I still think that's pretty remarkable. Here's a quick example of what that looks like. One interviewee, Inna, explained it like this: "Cinzia. Imagine that one day you wake up and everything you used to know about what you should do to be a good person, a successful person, has changed. How do you help your children? Ukraine will join Europe. Working here will help my sons learn what that means."

What I found when I interviewed the adult children of migrant women back in Ukraine is that the cultural information about what it means to be European and capitalist, received from migrants like Inna was a motivation for participating in Ukrainian pro-Europe revolutions. The Orange Revolution in 2004, and the Euromaidan uprising in 2014.

I'm going to circle back and tell you what those are. The Russian military war on Ukraine did not start last year, but nine years ago, when Russia occupied Crimea in 2014. Crimea is Ukraine's southern region. It's the one with the stripes on the map and the big arrow. The lead up to Crimea included two revolutions inside Ukraine. Now it might seem like I'm going off on a tangent. But you'll just have to trust me that I really am setting up my argument that we must understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine as part of a larger geopolitics of gender.

I am going to remind you, or tell you for the first time, what these revolutions were about soap opera style in attempt to keep your attention. Here we go:

The Orange Revolution was a showdown between a pro-West presidential candidate, Viktor Yushchenko and the pro-Russia Viktor Yanukovich. November election results declared Yanukovich, the pro-Russia guy, the winner. However, evidence of fraud led to mass protest in Kiev's Independent Square, where orange flag protesters - orange was Yushchenko's campaign color - camped out for weeks. A new round of voting was ordered in January 2005, and this time Yushchenko wins. Yushchenko declared that the peaceful Orange Revolution showed the world "a genuinely different Ukraine, a noble European nation, one that embraces democratic values." But five years later, Yanukovich comes back and wins the Presidency in 2010. So, the debate about whether Ukraine should be closer to Europe or Russian rages on.

In early 2014, Yanukovich refused to sign an economic agreement with the EU and took money from Russia. Instead, mass protests erupted once again in Kiev, known as Euromaidan - *maidan* means center city square. The protesters ousted President Yanukovich, who fled to Russia.

Now, the Russian elites were none too happy. Putin describes Ukraine as an "artificial" entity with lands given to it by Russia and the USSR, and a "failed state" that needs Russian oversight. Russia then occupied the southern Ukrainian territory of Crimea just weeks after President Yanukovich was ousted. The occupation of Crimea is the first land grab in Europe since World War II. And the international community just let Russia keep it so far.

Who was in the streets protesting during Ukraine's revolutions? Inna's sons and the adult children of other migrant Ukrainian grandmothers like her. This group of older women, so often discounted or invisible to us, I found were key actors in producing the new post-Soviet Ukraine from the outside in. Not only did they structurally alter what Ukraine looked like, but they changed what was collectively imaginable through transnational networks with their friends and families in Ukraine.

I argue in *On the Shoulders of Grandmothers* that these migrations made Ukraine both structurally and discursively look more like Europe than like Russia. I show that Putin and the Russian elite were well aware of the transformative power of migration. In the Western media, Russia's invasion last year was reported as the surprise actions of a man who has possibly

become unhinged. But in the conclusion of my book, I note that it makes sense that Russia felt threatened as Ukraine moved closer to Europe and further from Russia, in part through these transformative migrations. Russia had already occupied Crimea, and I warned about the possibility of an escalated Russian invasion. And that's not because I'm psychic, but because everyone who knew anything about this region was concerned about this possibility.

My point for this talk, then, is that discourses about Ukraine becoming European, supported by these migrant grandmothers as transnational nation-state building actors, adopting Western modernity discourses, and consciously sending them back to Ukraine, shaped practices, including those that strengthened ties with Europe. One of Russia's legitimating narratives for last year's military invasion, I already noted, is that Ukraine is not Europe, but has always been part of the Russian Empire, but also that Russia must save Ukraine from a West that has been corrupted by "gender ideology" and has embraced queer rights which poses a national security risk for Russia itself.

Being viewed as modern is central to the global status of nation-states moving up the global geopolitical hierarchy and is tied to both material and political resources. The production of a legitimate modernity requires the drawing of boundaries that separates us from the "barbaric other". This constructs the foundation for nationalist and imperial ambitions that can forge alliances between and across nation states unified by the same ideologies.

Putin cannot invade a peaceful country all by himself and Ukraine cannot resist all by itself. It turns out that the need to protect women and LGBTQ rights can mobilize Western governments to send money and weapons to Ukraine, and the need to protect your nation from depravity and "unnatural gender inversions" can motivate large groups of Russians to send their children to war.

Putin's Russia is part of a global trend of increasing right wing radical movements led by populist strongmen. This includes folks like Lukashenko in Belarus, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Berlusconi in Italy, Modi in India, Erdogan in Turkey, and Trump in the US, just to name a few, and they all seek to re-masculinize their national identities.

Now this creates a problem for making modernity claims. How does the global community decide which countries are modern? Since the 1970s, nation-states have made claims to being modern by answering the question, how do you treat your women? Having empowered women is a requirement for claiming to be a modern nation, and nation-states care about this designation a lot because it is tied to political resources and can be used to justify violence around the world.

For example, after 9/11, the US state used images of supposedly oppressed women in burqas, juxtaposed to supposedly empowered women in the US to justify US military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Global institutions have developed many indices that seek to measure how empowered your women are. But more recently, nation-states have been asked, how do you treat your LGBTQ citizens as a proxy for how modern their nation state is.

In our book, *The Gender Order of Neoliberalism*, Smitha Radhakrishnan and I argue that masculine projects of anxious nationalisms elevate the international arena as a site of status

competition as they seek to redefine the modernity claims by which all nation-states should be judged. They reject the logic of “women's empowerment” as *the* indicator of modernity. Instead, this oppositional modernity re-centers men and manliness as “modern” and promotes “traditional values” as the framework that will save civilization from western degeneracy. These new modernity claims in global politics challenge the postwar global hierarchy of nations.

There is a grain of structural truth to the lament that men have become irrelevant in modernity discourses. Since the 1970s, global economic restructuring and, in the US, deindustrialization have squeezed men out of middle-class jobs, particularly in manufacturing, where men without university degrees could previously earn middle class wages and be the breadwinners in their families. A decrease in middle class jobs was accompanied by an increase in low status, low paying service jobs, such as housecleaning and childcare, that are considered for women. These are part of the structural forces that shaped the decisions of Ukrainian migrant women to fill that global labor niche. So, despite the relative undesirability of these jobs at the lowest rung of the economic ladder, conservatives in disparate locales around the globe have spun a narrative that claims women have been empowered at the expense of men.

In this narrative, women have told men that to be honorable they must financially support their family, but then women have stolen their jobs. Thus, while modern women can now have it all, a family and a career, if they just lean in, men are irrelevant in current modernity discourses and irrelevant in their families since the breadwinner ideal is increasingly unattainable for most men. If men cannot be breadwinners, and if, in an earlier moment, men were supposed to save women, but now empowered women are supposed to save themselves, what are men needed for?

The crisis of masculinity literature reveals a surprising convergence in men's narratives of gendered pain and anxiety. As men find their pathways to honorable manhood narrowing, they search for other markers of successful masculinity to stabilize their identities and gain a sense of respect and dignity. We propose that the competitive terrain of manliness and modernity has shifted from work and family that focused on men as breadwinners in the postwar era, to the terrain of nationalism and community, where men are offered the more attainable ideal of manly protector of their ethnic or national community. In the global arena the “manly protector” ideal uses nationalism to confirm the superiority of the nation by comparing it to other nations which are deemed to be masculine yet inferior in their expressions of manliness.

For example, a quick Google search will turn up images that juxtaposes Putin's manliness with former US President Barack Obama's supposed femininity, such as this one here. Putin, shirtless on his Siberian horse, placed next to Obama on a bicycle, wearing a helmet and mom jeans, or Putin petting a tiger while Obama holds a white poodle.

Whereas American masculinity and the Marlboro man, that cigarette guy, signaled ideal masculinity in Russia during the 1980s and 90s, beginning in the mid 2000s, a new image of the Russian *Muzhik*, or real guy, came to signify that the Russian nation is more manly than the US. Interestingly, a Russian *Muzhik* values the protection of the nation over breadwinning in determining manliness.

So, for Putin, Trump, Modi, and others, this is a project of remasculization that amplifies narratives of national exceptionalism. This strategy represents something globally visible and systematic, an “oppositional” understanding of modernity that counters liberal values and the US. and Western Europe's moral hegemony since World War II.

What does this oppositional modernity, spearheaded by Putin, but advanced by other authoritarian dictators around the world, look like? In the book we draw in examples from three regions, the US, South and Southeast Asia, and the former Soviet Union to suggest remasculinization projects constitute an oppositional modernity that has three tenets: First, it claims superiority to the West and Euro-American neo-imperialism. Second, it asserts a discourse of freedom and modernity that doubles down on biological determinism, what Putin, but also Trump and others, call “traditional values.” Third, it offers a new nationalist ideal for men who no longer have to be breadwinners to be considered real men but can aspire to the new ideal of manly protectors.

You might be wondering: how can traditional values be modern? Since freedom is a central discourse within neoliberalism, this oppositional modernity asserts freedom as its central feature. Oppositional modernity projects assert the freedom of people to be who they are, as determined by biology. In the former Soviet Union, this discourse is particularly powerful because of the recent experience of the Soviet gender order. Although Western publics view the collapse of the Soviet Union as resulting from the economic victory of capitalism over communism, within the region the failure is viewed in large part as a failure of communist gender politics that produced effeminate men and masculine women, largely because women were considered to be “too” empowered under the Soviet system. Doubling down on biological determinism, and the binary gender system thus appears modern compared to a Soviet past in which the supposed true nature of men and women was distorted by gender egalitarianism. US-European liberalism, the argument goes, has gone too far, and freedom must be taken back by the groups who naturally deserve power as the dominant racial, ethnic, and gender groups of the nation. So oppositional modernity is appealing to dominant groups who perceive a loss of power in these three regions and elsewhere. Homophobia, along with misogyny, is key to producing a modernity that re-centers manliness.

I mentioned that nation-states, from the 1970s, signaled their modernity by answering the question, how do you treat your women? Post-1989 nation-states are increasingly asked, how do you treat your LGBTQ citizens? LGBTQ inclusion has become a marker of European or Western advancement and superiority, vis-a-vis, intolerant and backward others who mistreat or exclude these communities.

Now Ukraine has been knocking on the European Union's door. Despite the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan that asserted Ukraine's European identity, political opinion polls found split decisions about Ukrainians desire to join the EU and the EU was not that eager to welcome Ukraine either. One of the things that has changed since the Russian invasion is that the invasion has achieved what Ukrainian nationalists could not, and that is to unite Ukrainians around the idea of Europe. Also, EU member countries, after insistent Ukrainian lobbying - we saw the videos, President Zelensky from bomb shelters begging the EU to let Ukraine in, have now



finally granted Ukraine official candidate for accession status, and they did three months into the war.

To that end, Ukraine is spending a significant time thinking about how it treats LGBTQ folks. In December of last year, ten months into the war, Ukraine adopted a law that prohibits anti-LGBTQ hate speech. Just few months ago in March, even as the bombs were falling, Inna Sovsun, a Ukrainian lawmaker, introduced a bill that, if passed and President Zelensky's government has promised to pass it by the end of 2023, would legalize same-sex civil partnerships. In an interview, Sovsun said that what is happening in Ukraine is a direct consequence of Putin's actions, she said, quote “because Putin made homophobia such a big part of his political agenda and Russian national ideology, people automatically associate him with homophobia. So if we Ukrainians are different from him, then we should be different in that area as well.” The Russian invasion has galvanized Ukrainians to advance LGBTQ rights in ways that were unthinkable a year ago.

There has also been lots of media coverage inside Ukraine of LGBTQ soldiers on the battlefield, and its positive coverage of them defending Ukraine like patriots. These moves are part of how Ukraine signals “We are modern, we are European, and therefore Europe and the US should keep sending us weapons and putting pressure on Russia to end this war, because we look like you.’

I am not saying Ukraine, Western Europe, or the US are bastions of LGBTQ inclusivity. I am saying there is a struggle over the criteria the international community should use to mark which nations are modern and which are backward. And this is shaping the international terrain of competition and challenging the current global hierarchy of nations.

Russia has answered the question, how do you treat your LGBTQ citizens, by passing laws that criminalize pro LGBTQ speech as propaganda aimed at corrupting youth. Europe and Ukraine respond by saying, “see, Russia is backwards”, but Russia says “No Gay Europe”, shortened to “Gayropa.” In Russia, we are redefining what it means to be modern. The legitimating discourse goes “Gayropa is a national security threat that seeks to undermine Russia's historic values, keep ethnic Russians from reproducing and undercut the state.” Post 2013, Russia has positioned itself as the defender of so-called “traditional values.” This has allowed for a revival of Russia's Messianic idea, which goes like this: Russia is a stronghold of Christianity, and Russia will save Europe and the world from its own depravity, characterized by sexual immorality and the disillusion of the natural gender order. We need to defend the right of women to be women, and, especially, of men to be men. So, this iconic image of Putin being a manly man, a *Muzhik*, that values the protection of the nation above all else is the antidote to the post-Soviet version of the crisis of masculinity.

20 years before Trump and MAGA, Putin told Russians, humiliated by Soviet collapse and Russia's loss of international status, that he was going to make Russia great again. I just love it, that Trump stole that from Putin. Putin's popularity is attributed, then, in part, to this modernity of manliness project which is used to create a positive Russian collective identity and traditional values that, enacted through misogyny and homophobia, have come to signify Russianness.

In Putin's 2022 speech announcing a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and later that year the annexation of four more Ukrainian regions, Putin railed against Western Imperialism, who's supposed undermining of traditional values by embracing LGBTQ rights, feminism, multiculturalism, and atheism, all foreign to Russia's values, he says, posed a national security threat to Russia. Russia, Putin said, is invading Ukraine to save Ukraine and Russia from the West. Putin denounced a West that, he says "brazenly divides the world into their vassals, into the so-called civilized countries and into the rest, [so that] Western racists add Russia to the list of barbarians and savages." You can hear his outrage.

Here is one quick example of how gender and sexuality can be used to translate to the public the imperial relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Europe in the cartoon on the bottom is represented by Conchita Wurst from Austria, so Wurst's drag persona invites audiences to accept gender variance. The Eurovision Song Contest in 2014, is a mega cultural event. You might know about it from the Will Ferrell movie called the Eurovision Song Contest. It is a big deal in Europe and Russian politicians suggested that Wurst's win proved that European integration threatened Ukraine with moral decay. An image of Wurst in front of an EU flag with the text, "Ukraine, you want to go to Europe, Conchita is waiting for you" circulated widely, and Wurst as the bearded lady became a symbol of this struggle over the meaning of modernity. One of Putin's advisors tweeted, "If Conchita is a woman, then Ukraine is a country," implying, of course, that neither is true.

Remember the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests in which Ukrainians asserted a European identity? The narrative in the Russian media is that the Orange Revolution was created by LGBTQ activists sent by the West to create a gay revolution that would spread to Russia and throw it into chaos. Euromaidan was dubbed "Gayromaidan" in the Russian media, which argued that the protests were organized by LGBTQ activist traders acting as proxies for US or European imperialism. The Russian media linked the supposed demasculinization of Ukraine as a threat to the remasculization of Russia.

This also has a transnational reach. The oppositional modernity that Russia spearheads facilitates alliances with post-colonial Global South states where there is a perception that LGBTQ rights have been forced on the Global South by Western states and international institutions. The Russian State supports transnational, pro-family civil society organizations, such as the World Congress of Families (WCF), which was co-founded by Russian and US conservatives in 1997, and the US-based ultra-Catholic C-FAM, which has ties to the Trump administration. WCF and C-FAM issued a statement supporting Russia's 2013 law banning homosexual propaganda, segments of the White supremacist movement in the US and Europe, transnational evangelical organizations, and many far-right politicians in the West; Trump in the US, Le Pen in France, both Berlusconi and Salvini in Italy, Abascal in Spain, Orban in Hungary. They all see Putin as the international leader in the defense of traditional values and the fight against gender ideology. So now you know why conservatives who were anti-Russia and rabid anti-communists during the Cold War, now embrace Putin's Russia.

To conclude, from where I sit, we cannot understand the Russian violence in Ukraine without placing Putin's Russia in a larger global trend of the increasing number of masculine projects of

anxious nationalism that redefine the competitive terrain of modernity and are forged in transnational networks that have Putin's Russia at the helm.

The geopolitics of gender matter, even when the bombs are falling. Gendered discourses mobilize and legitimate Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but also shape Ukraine's claims to being worthy of Western support. Russia's modernity of manliness is appealing to many groups, not just within Russia, but in the Global South, in parts of Asia, and also in the US. Trump has continued to praise Putin, even after the invasion, and conservative politicians in the US and Europe have argued that we should support Russia and traditional values instead of Ukraine, and “Gayropa”. And, if we ever get a Speaker [*of the House*], this is what the fight is about.

If we simply say, this is Putin's war, the actions of a madman, then we ignore the appeal of this modernity of manliness at our peril. It is on these terms that the Russian violence in Ukraine must also be considered. Thank you very much.

**CB:**

Now is the time for questions and comments. We have two places, we have those in the room, I'll bring you the microphone, and we have those on Zoom. Do we have any on Zoom yet? Okay, Zoomers, we really encourage you to leave your questions, comments are welcome too, in the Q&A box. Is there anything in the chat? No, okay. So, we'll see who has a question – great. Why don't you tell Cinzia who you are?

**Q1:**

[Unclear]. My question is that I know you've been reporting on Russia and things since you were [unclear]. I was just curious, what keeps you motivated [unclear]. What are some self-care tools that you use to keep you motivated?

**CS:**

Okay, great. Thank you for that question. Where did you find that third grade story? Okay, it is true that in the third grade I had a teacher who gave me this really awesome assignment, and the assignment was, pick a famous person from history, read a biography, and then pretend they are alive with you, sitting at your kitchen table and write out what your conversation would be. Isn't that an incredible assignment? So, I picked Catherine the Great because she was a woman whose last name was “the Great”. And I read a biography of Catherine the Great, and then I sat down at my kitchen table and argued with her to release the serfs. That was what pulled me in to thinking about this region.

And one of the things that keeps me interested and motivated is I actually think this is pretty high stakes. And I think that when we think about violence and how geopolitics work, we usually count up how many pieces of military equipment one country has as opposed to the other, how many trained soldiers they have, and all of that is important. And I think being able to see how it is that we shape possibilities through our collective understandings is really exciting and interesting. And it also means we can maybe think our way out of some of these binaries.

Right now, we've got empowered women - which actually nobody really likes that, that much right? It's "empowered women", it's been absolutely reduced to just economic opportunities, "you've got choice," and it turns out like nobody was paying attention to how good the choices were and they actually sort of suck. And so, you're empowered because you can either be a migrant wife or a domestic worker. Also, for women at the higher end of the labor market, it turns out that in order to be an empowered woman, you have to do everything. You have to make organic baby food, you have to work. If you're not working for a pay, you have to be running your local PTC, you have to be entrepreneurial. You have to be sexy when your husband comes home, no matter how tired you are. Women have to do everything, and it turns out that this discourse is not just appealing to men - there's a large segment of pretty exhausted women who were like, bring it on, just give me a man to take care of me, I'll buy it. And that's what women in the former Soviet Union are saying. And quite a few women in the US, too. It's exhausting. These two discourses, "manly protector", or "empowered women", I think, might be a false choice.

Feminist theorists spend a lot of time thinking their way out of binaries, and this is one of the binaries I would like us to think our way out of. In sociology, our sort of "founding folks", Marx and Durkheim, they thought about modernity and progress as linear. The world is moving, countries can be plotted on a line of progress. Some are modern and some are backwards, some are only 50 years back, they might catch up right. This kind of discourse is what we need to think our way out of. I think we might have a couple of tools for thinking our way out of that.

Anybody ever heard of Harriet Martineau? She was around at the same time as the founding fathers of sociology but doesn't get much play. She was super famous in her time. Everybody knew her name, but she's been erased from our disciplinary history, and she has some different ideas that might help us think our way out of this linear progress, modernity, these two binaries that we're stuck in. She suggests instead of judging nations by how empowered your women are, or by how manly your men are, maybe we change the standard and think about the ideals that a nation sets for itself, whether or not we reached them, and then study that gap. Because in that gap, there is domination. If we can identify the gap and close it, that would be an improvement, and it's one way to think ourselves out of this binary box that we're that we're in right now.

**CB:**

We actually have three questions in the Q&A on Zoom. Oh, okay, I see one. We're going to take one of those.

**April Koeberle:**

The first one is from Elizabeth Wood, and she asked "What are the goals of Ukraine grandmothers today as war [unclear]."

**CS:**

So, the question is from Elizabeth Wood, who is asking what the role of Ukrainian grandmothers is today? That is a great question. When I touch base with my folks who are still in Italy, their role is to receive refugees. We no longer have sort of the very set migration patterns that were there before Russia invaded. There are now folks fleeing. They're in all countries. Ukrainian

grandmothers in Italy, for example, who before had left their families at home, now have to run Ukrainian schools because their kids and families are joining them in Italy or in the US.

There's also a slight discursive shift. When I was in the field, the migrant grandmothers did not want their children to leave Ukraine, did not want it. "I am abroad working so that they can stay in Ukraine, build the new Ukraine, get an education, have a career." They absolutely did not want their kids to leave. Now, of course, everyone wants to be safe, right? Everyone wants their family with them, trying to keep folks safe. So, things are changing.

They're also very active in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which is a big important institution in the Ukrainian diaspora. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has a lot of experience maintaining Ukrainian language and culture in exile so they're also doing a lot of work with their churches, and they're going back into that mode again. When Russification happened, and Ukrainian priests were the only ones who remembered Ukrainian because they left the country - that sort of preserve our culture, really remember what our practices are, doubling down on making sure that that that's not lost.

**CB:**

Should we take another Zoom-based session? Or should we put it to the room up [unclear]?

**Q2:**

CGSHR@umb.edu: I don't know if you'll understand my question properly, but I read that we were talking about [unclear] provide women, would you say that was also an illusion that they were seen as [unclear] and overall [unclear].

**CS:**

The question from the room is, I'll paraphrase: You said that the Soviet Union had a gender egalitarianism project. Were they really empowered under the Soviet Union? And that's a great question, and lots of folks spend a lot of time trying to figure that out. And here's what I'll say about that: during the Cold War, when the US was competing with the former Soviet Union around all kinds of things, we got very nervous that the Soviet Union's women might be more empowered than ours. We got very worried about it, and one of the reasons why we got worried about it is that the former Soviet Union had women into the labor market at very high rates. They embraced mass education so that their population was super educated compared to the US. And the patriarchal head of the family was removed. So, men really were displaced a bit, and the state became the head of that family. There are some things that looked better. Childcare was socialized. Women were freed from what they called "the tyranny of the frying pan", because you had collective mess halls. On the other hand, if you were a disabled woman in a worker state, that wasn't looking great for you. It also turns out that the men were displaced in their families, but they didn't actually pick up any of the childcare or the housework, so that fell to women as well.

I think it's a mixed bag and there are some things in terms of the policies that the Soviet Union passed that really did push the US to do better. And there were some things like, in 1972, there was a Universal Childcare Act. This is hard for us to believe, but Democrats and Republicans both agreed the US should have universal childcare to support working families, and then it got

to Nixon's desk and he said, "it will look like the Soviet Union is right. We can't pass it." And it got vetoed. Lots of what our world looks like today actually was shaped in dialogue with the Soviet Union. Great questions.

**CB:**

Thanks, Cinzia. We have a Zoom-based question. And I think Carol is going to read or [unclear]? Oh, you have your own questions. I'll let the director of the CGSHR ask her question.

**Carol Cohn:**

First of all, thank you for that [unclear] talk. One of the things that really interests me about it is that [unclear], among other things, [unclear] that if anyone is trying to understand [unclear] or the global rise of authoritarianism, [unclear] feminist analysis [unclear]. That makes me wonder, have you brought this talk, or some version of this talk, into our conventional national security contexts, international security think tanks, into rooms with people who think about these things without any sort of gender analysis, feminist analysis, and if so what is [unclear].

**CS:**

Okay, the question is preceded by a comment that this talk sort of really convinces Carol Cohn that gender - she was convinced before - but that gender is really important, even in these "when the bombs are falling" contexts. And she's wondering if I've ever brought this conversation to a National Security Council or folks who don't usually think about war in this way. And, Carol, I haven't. I just haven't had that kind of access. But if folks have contacts, I would be willing.

**AK/Q3 01:06:00**

Zoom question from Myra Marx Ferree. "Great talk. The general argument about oppositional modernity, [unclear] wondering if the focus on economic change might be misplaced and family relations are changing at least as much, making the West no longer insist on men and women having different responsibility there, ergo, LGBTQ responsibilities are logical and easy to accept, and the responses of other countries that are with Western liberalism are often focused on polarized imperialism, and instead a mission of difference is inferior, barbaric, uncivilized. How do Ukraine migrant women talk about change? In other words, the real traditional values was that women were inferior, but now is the difference is especially important."

**CS:**

Hi, Myra, thank you for coming to my talk. We cite Myra all over the book. I think the question is: is there a change in family? Can you repeat the last part?

**AK:**

"In other words, the real traditional values was that women were inferior. But now, in difference, it is especially important."

**CS:**

I think the question is about changing families, right? And there's always been a division of labor. And is the justification changing? Does that sound right to you? And in the book, we actually do talk about families quite a bit. Part of the neoliberal order requires, we argue, a

division of labor in which *someone* is staying at home doing the labor for free. But it doesn't necessarily have to be the woman, which is why it becomes flexible. We can accept gay marriages as long as *somebody* is doing the unpaid labor, but we can't accept polygamous marriages or other forms of labor sharing in the family.

In the Soviet Union, the family changed quite a bit for the Soviet order. There was an extended family with a grandmother at the head, and in the former Soviet Union, women had early retirement ages, 50 or 55, depending on how dangerous your job was. The expectation was that grandmothers would be the primary caregivers to children so that young women could be in the factories working, and that's part of the labor model.

As the Soviet Union collapses, not just Russia, but all over the former Soviet Union. They have looked around and they said, wait a minute. We provide free childcare. We provide mess halls. That's expensive. They look around and they say, well, the West just has women do this work for free. That's definitely a better deal. So, all of those responsibilities have devolved back onto the shoulders of women. Yes, women still had primary responsibility for them, but the state really did take some of that burden off of women.

So, the changing discourse for women is: "Under the former Soviet Union, I was forced to work. Now I am free to choose to stay home and I can have a man support me." In the book we set up an architecture for what the gendered neoliberal order looks like, and then we play with the places in which it is flexible, that allows some variation, while still maintaining a system that allows us to explain convergences in radically different places, with different histories that all sort of land on some similar discursive ground.

**CB:**

Thanks, Cinzia. We have time for one final question. I am going to privilege the room because [unclear]. Don't be shy, students. And I also think this opportunity to remind you to fill out a great feedback form and the folks on Zoom may even say [unclear].

**CS:**

Folks on Zoom, there is a feedback form or a little survey. If you could please fill that out, the organizers would be grateful.

**CB:**

And we do have a final question on Zoom.

**Katherine Susich/Q4:**

[Unclear] how in a room, how decisions are being made, [unclear] how Putin interacts with leaders in the West [unclear] and how leaders who identify as [unclear] members of the LGBTQ community [unclear] or at an interpersonal level if that makes.

**CS:**

For the Zoom folks, the question is about how some of these ideas might play out, interpersonally, when Putin is maybe, in a meeting. I don't have a lot of data on interpersonal contacts, but I can tell you that Berlusconi, for example, for his last birthday, read a note that

Putin sent him with some alcohol that Berlusconi was very excited about, and he used words like, “we're just such close friends” and “Putin is so thoughtful.” And so, I think the kinds of relationships - you know that image with Putin hugging like a bunch of other populist strong men - I think that one of the things we don't keep in mind is the degree to which these men talk to each other. There really is a transnational network here and these ideas really lay foundations for them to build relationships.

**CB:**

I think that concludes the webinar, and I want to thank especially Cinzia, for a really rich and illuminating talk. As feminist theorists we need more conceptual tools on our toolbox and thinking about gender as geopolitical is really powerful. Thank you for that. Thank you to the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights for organizing this event, and the angels that are doing the behind-the-scenes work, and especially to its director, Dr. Carol Cohn. I want a special thanks to my students for being present and engaged. Thank you so much. And to everyone on Zoom, thanks for being a part of this conversation, it really is exciting to be able to talk about these issues in a global setting. So, thanks to everyone.