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research article

The geopolitical competition of ideas: gender mainstreaming and the Ukrainian women's movement

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This article explores the interplay between geopolitical influences, domestic factors, and the efforts of Ukrainian women's organisations to advance gender equality. We do so by using the adoption/ratification of the Istanbul Convention (IC) as a reference point. Despite Ukraine signing the IC in 2011, its initial ratification attempts failed. Drawing on Wimmer's domains theory and interviews with women's organisations, our study highlights how Ukraine's European aspirations clash with historical path dependencies and external anti-European influences. Women's organisations illustrate that their efforts in support of the IC were impacted by deep-seated societal stereotypes rooted in Soviet-era legacies, insufficient female political representation, and institutional resistance from conservative, nationalist, and Russian-backed gender-essential narratives. The research underscores the persistent advocacy of Ukrainian women's groups in navigating these geopolitical and local contexts, achieving piecemeal legislative success but struggling to embed gender equality into the wider cultural fabric.

Keywords civil society theory • Ukraine • women's movement • domain theory

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Introduction

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, unanimously agreed upon at the Fourth UN Conference on Women (United Nations, 1995), are often credited with

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'inventing' gender mainstreaming (GM) (Bunch and Fried, 1996; Levenstein, 2018). This set 'a globally accepted policy strategy that promotes the assessment of institutions, legislation, policies, and programs to determine their potential or real gendered impacts, with the ultimate goal of advancing gender equality' (Hankivsky and Salnykova, 2010: 631). Despite this unanimous adoption, GM and its attendant concepts – gender equality and gender rights – remain politically contested (Moser and Moser, 2005). As such, its diffusion and adoption vary across contexts and nation-states. Diffusion processes are also shaped by the geopolitical competition of ideas (Shevtsova, 2020) and play out around competing political power centres, what Wimmer (2021) calls 'domains'. Each domain – consisting of one or more nation-states, or subdivisions thereof – ascribes to or promotes a set of ideas and/or policy prescriptions, which Wimmer (2021) calls templates of legitimacies or templates. Across a domain, specific 'templates' will be more dominant, and ascribing to these templates by adjusting national legislation signals domain alignment/membership.

The speed, shape, and outcome of idea or 'template' diffusion and adoption are determined by factors beyond the context itself (Wimmer, 2021). Adopting a 'template' or 'idea' via international treaties or legislation does not necessarily change culture or practice *in situ* (Shevtsova, 2020). Specifically, when local actors draw on, or mobilise ideas that might alienate others, this can create new or exaggerated points of contention. The resulting discord and polarisation (Shevtsova, 2020) shape diffusion/adaptation at the local level and, in turn, influence the activities, practices, and experiences of civil society or social movement actors therein.

In this article, we add to the literature on diffusion by examining how it is experienced within civil society and by social movement actors. Specifically, we focus on Ukrainian civil society and social movement actors engaged in advancing gender equality. We use their reflection on the ratification process of the Istanbul Convention (IC) for Gender Equality as a point of reference for our exploration (see Appendix A for a list of countries that signed the IC as well as those that ratified it). In so doing, we highlight the role supra-territorial factors play in shaping their experience. We therefore ask how civil society and social movement actors experience and influence the diffusion and adaptation of such templates of legitimation. In so doing, we shed light on how changing priorities at the nation-state level impact on an actor's ability to shape, and experience of, advancing templates and ideas. We do this by exploring the interaction of geopolitical influences and local/domestic factors such as power configuration and cultural/organisational models (Wimmer, 2021), and the role played by civil society actors therein.

Ukrainian women's movement

Ukrainian women's organisations provide a relevant context to explore our research question. Hankivsky and Salnykova (2010) and Hankivsky (2013) highlight the limitations of GM in the Ukrainian context (before 2022) and the disconnect between 'laws on the books' and the absorption of gender equality practice within Ukraine's society and culture (Barrett et al, 2012; Vijeyarasa, 2012). This dovetails with the experience of women's organisations in other post-Soviet context, such as Armenia and Georgia, which also experienced contextual challenges to GM (Jenderedjian and Bellows, 2021). In Ukraine, although women's organisations have played important roles in mass-mobilisation events (Onuch, 2014;

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Onuch and Martsenyuk, 2014; Martsenyuk and Troian, 2018; Pop-Eleches et al, 2022) – the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity/Maidan protests (2014) – they are often seen as peripheral 'invisible revolutionaries' (Nikolayenko, 2020: 451), rather than core or pivotal agitators. Further, Ukraine's unique geographical position and history have put it at the centre of East/West geopolitical rivalry and competition in Europe. This has shaped its institutional development and concept of national identity since its independence in 1991. In this process, the 2014 Maidan protests highlighted an explicit 'European turn' (Onuch, 2021), and research shows continuing and widespread support for democratic governance (Onuch, 2022). It also highlights Ukraine's clear pivot towards the geopolitical domains that align with liberal and democratic orders. The adoption and ratification of the IC thus would manifest/manifests a signal of membership in this domain. Russia's military aggression since 2014 and illegal full-scale invasion in 2022 is therefore an attempt to forcefully pull Ukraine away from its European turn. In this article, we draw on the Ukrainian women's organisations' experience of promoting and establishing gender equality following the adoption and aiming for ratification of the IC. We operationalise narrative interviews with representatives from broker/umbrella organisations (Melville, 2010; Stadtler and Karakulak, 2020), collected in the autumn of 2021, so just before Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, to examine the experience of civil society actors of working to diffuse ideas of gender equality.

Although the Ukrainian women's movement has a long history pre-dating the Soviet times (Martsenyuk, 2023), the Ukrainian women's movement after 1991 emerged partly from Soviet-era women's organisations, such as the Communist Party's Women's Councils, which promoted state-defined equality while limiting independent feminism. Following independence, activists reoriented women's mobilisation toward nationalism, civil society development, and democratic reform. During the 1990s and 2000s, organisations focused on domestic violence, trafficking, labour inequality, and political participation, often supported by transnational donors. As noted, the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, and Russia's invasion further transformed Ukrainian women's organisations into a more visible civic and anti-authoritarian movement, linking gender equality with national sovereignty, militarisation, and human rights (Rubchak, 2009; Phillips, 2012; Onuch and Martsenyuk, 2014). Thus, Ukrainian women's organisations/movement are not homogeneous (Martsenyuk, 2023). However, broker/umbrella organisations, at the heart of our study, play vital roles in maintaining movement ecology and infrastructure, such as providing access to physical spaces, leading advocacy efforts, but also support less formal practice of civic engagement (Krasynska, 2026).

Our findings provide an insight into Ukrainian women's organisations before the 2022 Russian invasion and the interplay of the experiences, perception, discourses, and their impact as social movement actors. We highlight that, while the IC was not initially ratified, respondents had success in making changes to the legislative framework. However, the attendant gender equality that should follow in practice, that is local incorporation of this template, has been more difficult to realise. Thus, we first turn to Wimmer's (2021) domain theory to set the theoretical frame for our research. As we illustrate in the following section, domain theory encourages a holistic view of diffusion and local incorporation, providing a structured way to understand the influences thereon.

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Domains theory: explaining diffusion and local incorporation

In his 2021 article, Wimmer (2021) poses the relatively intriguing yet straightforward question of how ideas like 'gender equality' or 'neoliberalism' spread around the world. To explain this, he uses the dual concepts of domains and templates. He defines domains as broad areas of social life where specific types of social relationships occur (for example, politics, economy, family). Domains can also be geographical spaces or geopolitical blocks, with various interconnections, be they colonial ties, former Soviet ties, membership in multinational organisations, or others, that diffuse ideas between them. Templates are the patterned, culturally shared models guiding behaviour and interaction within each domain. Together, they structure how people interpret roles, norms, and boundaries in society. They also provide models of belonging and behaviour – such as citizenship, national identity, and loyalty – shaping how people perceive themselves and others as members of a national community. The pace and extent of idea diffusion are determined by templates, which are in turn adapted and shaped according to context.

Within each domain, templates emerge, are encouraged and diffused, and then locally (at the nation state level and sub-national state level) incorporated (Bail et al, 2019; Wimmer, 2021). These templates can be ideas/ideals, for example gender equality (Levitt and Merry, 2009), but also specific policies, for example approaches to regulating nongovernmental organisations (Glasius et al, 2020). Their adoption and diffusion are signals of domain alignment, particularly when a domain is not associated with a specific institutional/organisational set-up. In Ukraine's case, this would be aligning with EU templates, with a view to closer association and eventual membership.

For Wimmer (2021), both domains and competition between domains shape and impact the diffusion and adaptation of templates at the local level. Concepts such as gender equality – the focus of this article – are more likely to diffuse within domains (that is geopolitical blocks) of countries aligned with liberal democratic ideals than within those aligned with authoritarian ideologies that draw on traditionalist values for regime maintenance (Bail et al, 2019). Focusing on domains also provides insight into the temporal adjustments of templates. Shifts in power relations/constellations or changes in domain alignment can change the templates that domain members (that is nation-states, for example) ascribe to. The IC is a good example. While most European countries were early adopters of the IC, it was the ratification process that became more contested over time (Berthet, 2022). The IC was often presented as an international human rights framework that impinged on national sovereignty (Ketelaars, 2019; Ebetürk and Tokhi, 2025). It also became a target of broader anti-gender debates and movements (Shevtsova, 2020; Krizsán et al, 2025). There is no better illustration of this contestation than in Turkey itself. Having facilitated the IC as host nation, Turkey first signed and then ratified it before many liberal democracies across Europe (for example, the UK did not ratify the IC until 2022 (Council of Europe, 2024b)). In 2011 (Signature) and 2012 (Ratification), Turkey was in the middle of accession negotiations with the EU (Grigoriadis, 2006; European Commission, 2024), and this provided a strong signal of domain alignment with the values and norms of being an EU member. However, in signalling domain realignment away from the EU toward a more authoritarian gender-essentialist domain, Turkey has become the only country to denounce and leave the IC in 2021 (Council of Europe, 2024b).

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Justifications for this withdrawal were framed around the incompatibility of native Turkish versus European values (portrayed as incorporated in the IC), but also aligned with populism and resistance to gender equality more broadly (Ebetürk and Tokhi, 2025) in authoritarian contexts (Waldner and Lust, 2018). Thus, local level contextual influences, power configuration, path dependencies, past-diffusion experiences/processes, and established cultural/organisational models, all shape diffusion and local incorporation templates and their adjustment during local inclusion (Wimmer, 2021). Thus, even within domains, there are variations in the diffusion and local incorporation of templates. For example, across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), domestic factors and respective paths toward EU membership have shaped distinctive institutional development patterns with regard to civil society (Kamerade et al, 2016; Meyer et al, 2020) and diffusion and associated local incorporation of templates of legitimacies. Within the context of Ukraine, the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 was a watershed moment for democracy and cultural change (Krasynska and Martin, 2017) and signalled the clear pivot and alignment of Ukraine with what can be characterised as a Western European domain; democratic governance regimes, EU accession and membership, and NATO membership. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support of militant separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk in response reflected the Kremlin's disapproval of this pivot.[1] This pivot to the West and domain alignment led to changes in institutional templates, such as legislative changes supporting gender equality. In drawing on macro-level structures (domains and domain alignment), meso-level dynamics (for example legislative changes at nation-state level as a way to diffusion templates), and micro-level experiences (the experience of civil society actors), in this article we provide insight into the layered nature of diffusion and local incorporation and the role of civil society and social movement actors therein. To do this, we operationalise data from seven women's organisations in Ukraine, with differing organisational identities, remits, and geographical reach, with their own perceptions of the IC ratification process. However, before we present our findings, we review the approach to our research study below.

Research study

As with all social movements, the Ukrainian women's movement or Ukrainian women's organisations is/are not homogeneous (Martsenyuk, 2023). Past literature highlights that Ukrainian women's organisations can be divided into two broad groupings: those with a more maternalistic focus, and those with a more feminist outlook (Hrycak, 2006; Orr, 2008; Phillips, 2012; Martsenyuk, 2023). Although boundaries between these groupings can be blurry, as both work with and for women, they do so from different ideological standpoints; ideas of motherhood drive the former, women's empowerment the latter. Thus, these groupings capture the heterogeneous nature of women's organisations in Ukraine engaged in a range of activities such as service provision or advocacy (Martsenyuk, 2023; Martsenyuk et al, 2024). Nonetheless, the diffusion and local incorporation of gender equality impacts both types of organisations. Rather than focusing on the coherence of the movement or similarity of experience, in the article we explore how specific organisations experience and navigate the ebb and flow, and cumulative diffusion and local incorporation, of the IC. This enables us to illustrate the interplay of domain-level trends and local influences, such as power configuration and cultural/organisational

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models, to provide an insight into how both aspects shape social movements and civil society within a specific context. To this end, we focused on broker or umbrella organisations, that is those types of organisations that are often pivotal actors at the centre of wider networks within the social movement or the institutional context, and/or support the work of other actors (Melville, 2010; Stadtler and Karakulak, 2020), as well as have their own dedicated women-focused activities, such as running a shelter. Thus, the dynamic nature of the Ukrainian context and our article's focus on experiences required a grounded theory-inspired qualitative approach to our study, the details of which are illustrated below.

Data collection

Our primary data for this article draws from semi-structured interviews with organisational leaders of broker/umbrella organisations. In recruiting such organisations, a purposive approach was used (Siggelkow, 2007) in order to capture the heterogeneous nature of ideological approaches – maternalistic and feministic (Martsenyuk, 2023). The focus of the data collection process was to establish the activities and practices of women's organisations, how decision makers' perceptions shape them, and the context in which they operate. To that end, we drew on assistance from the Institute of Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University to identify potential organisations and respondents. The geographical focus of this purposive approach (Siggelkow, 2007) was the capital city, Kyiv and the largest city in western Ukraine, Lviv. Historically, these cities and their associated regions have had the highest ratio of non-governmental/non-profit organisations to population (Kuzio, 2010) and a study mapping women's organisations in Ukraine highlighted higher concentrations of such organisations in the Kyiv and Lviv regions (Melnychuk et al, 2021). Furthermore, Kyiv as Ukraine's capital represents the centre of political power, with Lviv a key cultural centre of Ukraine. Therefore, both provide relevant geographical locales to examine the diffusion and adoption of cultural and organisational templates.

Following the initial identification of potential participating organisations, each was contacted by one of the authors, assuring anonymity to both individuals and organisations. We recruited seven organisations in total, all of which were active members of the women's movement as well as seen by others as broker/umbrella organisations (see Appendix B), that is these organisations also connected and assisted a range of other women's groups and organisations located in their city/region. While this data gives strong insight into the views of pivotal women's organisations and their experience of IC ratification, we do not claim that the data is representative of the totality of Ukraine's women's movement. Instead, it should be viewed through the domain lens, that is respondents and their organisations being in two geographical areas of Ukraine that lean towards Europe and eventually EU membership (that is the liberal democratic domain).

In developing the interview protocol, we used ethnographic interview techniques with open-ended, non-leading questions to capture everyday organisational activities and respondents' perceptions of context (Spradley, 1979). This created a semi-structured interview protocol with questions focused on the role of the participant in their respective organisation and the structure therein, funding sources, organisational activity and, crucially for this article, their approach, prioritisation of, and success

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in influencing policy, policy change, and policy implementation. This facilitated a conversation-like approach during the interviews (Tello-Rozas et al, 2021), where the base set of questions was used to facilitate discussion alongside additional follow-up questions to probe responses and to add further insight.

We conducted in-depth interviews with organisational leaders/directors only, lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. This interview approach provides the most suitable way to support a discursive and probing approach to data collection and thus enabled us to gather more nuanced insight into experiences, processes, and interpretations of key dimensions of norm diffusion by respondents. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian by one of the authors, a native speaker. Each interview was recorded, with supplementary notes taken alongside. Where more than one respondent at an organisation agreed to take part, interviews were undertaken in a group.[2] Organisational documentation (publicly available as well as internal documents when supplied by organisations) was then used to triangulate and validate interview responses and observations (Miles and Huberman, 1999).

Data analysis

Following the fieldwork, all the interviews were anonymised, with each organisation being referred to as WNGO 1–7 throughout (see Appendix B for an overview). The anonymised interviews were then translated and transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription to capture respondents' narratives and statements, while avoiding excessive repetitions (McMullin, 2021). To ensure coherence between the study's research focus and approaches to transcription (McMullin, 2021), translation and transcription were done by the author, who also conducted the interviews in the field. Once all interviews were transcribed, another research team member began coding the data into first-order codes (Gioia et al, 2013) with initial codes covering topics such as 'engagement with state agencies', 'perceptions of legislative changes' or 'commentary on geopolitical context'.

As coding progressed iteratively, these first-order codes were consolidated into more abstract and theoretically relevant second-order themes to identify core categories and narratives the organisations experience in the diffusion of gender equality and associated ideas. Such experience (often) reflected the organisation's engagement in policy influence. This approach also helped us refine our coding procedures and understand our findings. It allowed the authors to code more systematically for respondents' commentary on the IC, which emerged from within narratives on gender equality, for example statements such as: 'Unfortunately, we have stereotypes that are very difficult to break. It's easier to just say: don't vote for the Istanbul Convention because it's about LGBT' (WNGO1), the issue of 'laws on books vs practice' (example statements such as: 'Our rights are more or less equal, but the level of action is still behind' (WNGO7)), and illustrations of contextual factors (that is cultural and organisational templates (Wimmer, 2021)). Our continuous iterations between reading and coding different parts of the dataset and rereading already coded parts of the dataset facilitated the consolidation of key insights around Wimmer's (2021) concept of diffusibility.

Beyond coding, we also used constant comparison to identify differences and similarities in data segments and respondents' narratives. For example, by comparing one organisation's account of Soviet legacies in shaping gender equality, we could

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detect similarities and differences in the role of legacies in the diffusion of gender equality. Furthermore, our analysis process was assisted by triangulating interview insights with other parts of the dataset, such as observations and interview notes. In presenting our findings, we draw on the respondents' narrative focus on (failed) IC ratification and path dependencies to explore factors that support or limit local diffusion of ideas around gender equality, and how the respondents perceived the role of geopolitical tensions and dynamics in this process. We do so by using excerpts from and commentary from interview participants as 'illuminating examples' (deVaus, 2001: 240). In so doing, we take a semi-history approach to draw on respondents' personal perceptions, their reflections and references to past and present issues when illustrating gender equality.

Contested ratification: diffusion of gender equality in Ukraine

Our respondents' experiences illustrate local incorporation of the IC, that is laws on the books were relatively simple, but the diffusion of cultural and economic changes accompanying the adoption of the IC has been more challenging. Ukrainian women's organisations have succeeded in advocating and advancing piecemeal changes to the legislative framework (the IC was finally ratified in November 2022). However, the legislative developments that improved women's rights were adopted not due to bottom-up pressure but because Ukraine became a signatory to international treaties and ambitions to join the European Union. As a result, as the extant literature also illustrates (Barrett et al, 2012), respondents' perception was that new laws on prosecuting and preventing domestic violence and criminalising trafficking have made little difference to women's lives. Despite this, narratives of respondents in our study – both those representing feminist and those representing maternalist organisations – often referred to the IC as a catalyst for some progress, as the following statement illustrates.

> The city, in collaboration with us, has developed a program aimed at tackling domestic gender-based violence; this program will have one coordinating, state-sponsored structure, namely, the Centre for Social Services for Families of Children and Youth. In particular, for cases of violence, they have a mobile team, where a woman can call when there is a violent situation, then a woman calls them. They then either urgently call a police unit that deals with these issues or go on location themselves, investigate the situation, and if there is a need to remove the victim from there, they will contact us or other agencies that already operate in the city. (WNGO5)

The IC aims to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe, 2024a). To do so, it aligns with and draws on the basic principles and ideas of gender and human rights set out in the European Convention of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2011). The IC process can be broken down into two parts at the nation-state level: signature and ratification (United Nations Treaty Section, nd). Step one is the signature, which signals a (non-binding) commitment to comply with the relevant treaty. Step two is ratification, which then results in a binding commitment to the applicable treaty and adherence to its requirements and

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governance mechanisms. The former encourages nation-states to adjust legislative frameworks, and all the groups in this study acknowledged that this took place:

> As for the legislation, we are moving forward in this regard – our rights are more or less equal. But at the level of action, we are still behind. (WNGO 4)

> I would say that perhaps now we do have equal rights for men and women, but the opportunities are different. That is, we are not talking much about rights now, but about equal access to opportunities for men and women. (WNGO 7)

However, legislative changes, even if not within the framework of an international treaty, require oversight and governance mechanisms and thus enforcement of the law on the books, which WNGO 4 and others perceived as lacking. Thus, it is not surprising that once Ukraine signed the IC in 2011, women's organisations, specifically those that consider themselves 'feminist', saw support and promotion of IC ratification as important, as this would speed up the establishment of enforcement mechanisms. However, the ratification of the IC was not straightforward as it 'split our society, surprisingly' (WNGO 4). For respondents this came as something of a surprise because, despite a *'consensus for ratification*' (WNGO2) and a 'big information campaign for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention' (WNGO1), the experiences of WNGOs in Ukraine indicated not only local contextual challenges illustrating that 'people oppose it, don't have the slightest idea what they are actually opposing' (WNGO4), but also referenced macro/domain level factors impacting diffusion and adaption. WNGO4 observed an 'enormous interest in the "*Russki mir* [Russian world]" that is being transplanted here from outside' influencing the IC ratification process and thus the local adaptation and diffusion of its ideas as well as governance mechanisms.

> As soon as we signed it, well, signed it, did not ratify it – two very different things – here comes a massive campaign, with leaflets, that gender is another word for homosexuality, that it is the taking away our children, that it means adoption of children by gay couples, that it is an imposition [from outside], all kind of nonsense in there. (WNGO4)

In turn, the ratification of the IC turned into an issue of confrontation and conflict beyond the convention's focus on violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe, 2024a) – areas that both feminist and maternalist respondents agreed required addressing – to wider cultural and identity issues.

The emergence of counter-movements to templates that represent a change to the status quo is not unusual, however (Pichardo, 1995). Yet with regards to the diffusion of the GM template within the post-Soviet space, it takes the shape of as a clash between traditionalist/nationalist/Soviet and thus against the IC, versus liberal/western/EU values and thus for the IC (Shevtsova, 2020; Jenderedjian and Bellows, 2021; Mos, 2023). This is also illustrated by commentary from WNGO2: 'At the same time, the conflicts that we face are usually with very marginal groups, right-wing radical groups, but sometimes they have the resources to enlist the support of a local MP or the Department of Education, and then our activists begin encountering

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harassment.' Traditionalist orientation and narratives – a bit like ideas of nationalism (Wimmer et al, 2025) – is a template often promoted by authoritarian-oriented domains and contexts such as Russia, Hungary or, more recently the second Trump administration. In the case of Ukraine, right-wing populists and/or the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (which cut ties with the Russian Orthodox Church in 2018 (Ketelaars, 2019)) have drawn on the idea of patriarchy and traditional values to construct a national identity discourse and value system that sought to conflate gender ideology with gender equality (Shevtsova, 2020; 2023). In constantly seeking to extend and/or reaffirm its sphere of influence, Russian proxies within Ukraine (Ketelaars, 2019) advanced such narratives to shape local implementation and diffusion of their own template; in this case the opposition to IC ratification (Ferguson and Hast, 2018; Jenderedjian and Bellows, 2021; Sasunkevich, 2021). WNGO4 recognised this, stating 'well, one of the most pertinent things right now is our continual search for some Western practices that can support certain initiatives in the country', to provide a strong alternative template to challenge these influences.

However, not all actors opposed to IC ratification sought alignment with the *Russki mir*, but rather a national identity that is distinctly *non*-Russian but also not European (Ketelaars, 2019; Channell-Justice, 2020). The experience and perceptions of women's organisations in our study points to how broader supranational influences, Ukraine's geopolitical position between Europeanisation, national identity building, and Russian aggression, shaped the experiences of actors involved in diffusion and local incorporation. At the nation-state level, Ukraine signalled domain alignment by signing the IC; however, the lack of diffusion of associated principles through ratification (that is templates) illustrates the contested nature of such alignment at the local level. Thus, domain alignment at the nation-state level, without associated shifts in power structures and cultural and organisational templates (which is a longer and slower social process), limits incorporation and support from within the institutional order and state structures (Banaszak, 2010). So, when WNGOs attempt to engage with officials, their perception was not one of a warm welcome, as illustrated by WNGOs 1, 2 and 3.

> I can't say our MPs, who work with the Department of Social Protection, on issues of social protection, fully understand what a gender approach is, or the purpose of the Istanbul Convention. (WNGO1)

> The conflicts that we face are usually with very marginal groups, right-wing radical groups, but sometimes they have the resources to enlist the support of a local MP or the Department of Education, and then our activists begin encountering harassment. (WNGO3)

> We do not always a positive experience, sometimes, and with some institutions, we arrive and look at the closed doors. (WNGO2)

From the perspective of women's organisations, developments under the Zelenskyy administration, which came to power in 2019, are more promising. As one representative explained, 'Istanbul Convention ratification is [back] on the agenda … the president promised to ratify, but they can't get enough votes' (WNGO4). Nevertheless, the contested ratification process points to geopolitical domain influences on local diffusion and the diffusibility of templates itself (Wimmer, 2021). For Wimmer (2021),

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the diffusibility of a template depends on the template's compatibility with the local context, which is shaped by issues of value and norm contestation (as outlined above) but also historical legacies and path dependencies (that is structural-institutional factors). Thus, we now turn to explore such structural-institutional factors in light of the respondent's experience vis-à-vis gender equality.

Contra compatibility: path dependencies and ignorance

Gatsova and Gatsov (2016) argue that Soviet legacies have acted as a drag on, and thus shaped, the development of civil society within Ukraine. This similarly applies to concepts such as feminism and gender equality as 'the [old] stereotypes have not vanished, in the world overall, and much less in Ukraine' (WNGO3) and 'they have prejudices against the formulation and formation of feminist values' (WNGO1). These stereotypes go back to the Soviet period when, under Stalin, the problem of gender equality was officially declared as 'resolved'. Martsenyuk (2023) highlights that the tradition of feminism as part of an organised women's movement in Ukraine pre-dates the Soviet period. However, it was the experience and impact (on individual women) of the resolved gender equality or pseudo-equality during the Soviet period (Denisova, 2010) that has left challenging legacies for contemporary women's organisations (Gatskova and Gatskov, 2016) and created animosity towards discourses of equality and formalised (women's) organisations (Martsenyuk, 2023).

At first glance, the Soviet legacy (that is the experience of equal rights on paper) suggests the existence of cultural and organisational templates that should facilitate the diffusion of gender equality (Wimmer, 2021). However, the experiences of Ukrainian women during the Soviet period and following its collapse instead left cultural and institutional legacies that encouraged circumspection of (on paper) gender equality as well as of social organisations promoting such causes (Phillips, 2012). Hence, for 'my generation of women association with [feminism] some kind of bourgeois monster, because the Soviet ideology instilled in people this hatred, contempt, well, I would even say repulsion [of it]' (WNGO4), and thus there remain 'many stereotypes about the concept, the very perception of this term, and everyone understands only what they had heard somewhere because they did not try to thoroughly understand it' (WNGO1). Such legacies create challenges for women's organisations when it came to mobilise support for the ratification of the IC but also respondents' perception of engagement with institutional structures and decision-making bodies: 'as XXXX mentioned earlier, if 92 per cent are men, what kind of decisions will they make? Gender-sensitive decisions? Absolutely not' (WNGO1). Limited female representation in key institutional decision-making roles (Poretskova et al, 2024) also meant that Ukrainian WNGOs lacked natural allies within the institutional set-up, something that is key for social movement organisations to garner support, build coalitions, and exploit political opportunities (Soule et al, 1999; Banaszak, 2010). Instead, they had to convince 'the old guard, with old habits' (WNGO1) to prioritise gender policy and practice.

This societal rejection/ignorance also dovetails with Martsenyuk's (2023) insights that during the 1990s WNGOs remained marginal actors within Ukraine's emerging civil society. Despite this marginality, respondents' perceptions dovetailed with insights from other research (Anderson, 2017) that Ukrainian society 'differs notably from the rest of the post-Soviet space, because it is women who make all important

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purchasing decisions [in the home]' (WNGO7). Further, women's organisations (and self-organising) were also key actors in mass-mobilisation events such as the Maidan (Onuch and Martsenyuk, 2014; Nikolayenko, 2020). This was, however, in support of a broader frame of Ukraine's European pivot than specifically about gender equality, with research illustrating a gendering of roles during the Maidan protests themselves (Krasynska and Martin, 2017; Martsenyuk and Troian, 2018). Nonetheless, the Maidan was a key inflection point in Ukraine's political, cultural and societal institutional evolution (Onuch, 2021), though not vis-à-vis attitudes on gender equality (Pop-Eleches et al, 2022). For WNGOs, the Maidan protest not only 'asserted that a woman can [do anything]' (WNGO3) but also highlighted the importance of seeing 'a woman is a leader, but a woman-leader is a mother' (WNGO6) – hence, both feminist- and maternalist-focused organisations see women as active citizens and an understanding of women more aligned with a liberal geopolitical domain template. It also reflects Rubchak's (2009) observations that the maternalist/motherhood focus of WNGOs has always had a feminist slant. Thus, for maternalist organisations, women require protection and the advancement of women's/mothers' rights due to their centrality in childrearing. Paradoxically, it is the maternalistic ideals underlying such WNGOs that indicate the existence of template compatibility with regard to gender equality in Ukraine. However, as the experiences of WNGOs in this study shows 'there is still a lot of work to be done to develop women's organisations and bring them to the level where they can advocate for feminist values' (WNGO1) and thus overcome some of the structural institutional path-dependencies that they have encountered to advance gender equality and the IC.

Conclusions

In this article we examine the experiences and perceptions of Ukrainian civil society and social movement actors in advancing gender equality. We did so to illustrate the influence that supra-territorial domains play in shaping the opinion, experiences, and abilities of civil society actors when facilitating local diffusion of geopolitical templates. In so doing, we focused on the challenges civil society/social movement actors faced in pushing for the IC's ratification and affecting the cultural, political, and economic change that flows from this. The experiences of Ukrainian women's organisations in our study indicate why the initial IC ratification in 2016 failed (it was ratified in November 2022). This mirrors wider experiences of similar nation-states with regard to gender equality across post-Soviet spaces (Jenderedjian and Bellows, 2021). While women's organisations drew on the template of gender equality, they faced a powerful counter-movement that drew on the Soviet experience and nationalist ideologies. These counter-movements framed the IC as antithetical and in opposition to (re)establishing national identity and cultural heritage (Shevtsova, 2020; 2023; Jenderedjian and Bellows, 2021; Sasunkevich, 2021), reflective of contestation around IC in other contexts. Limited female political representation within the legislature, both real but also perceived by women's organisations, also meant that the women's movement lacked institutional embeddedness and insider connections and coalitions (Soule et al, 1999; Buchter and Lobbedez, 2026) that would enable it to work the spaces of power (Newman, 2012), and/or create allies to change or counter opposing narratives. Instead, the

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perception of WNGOs was that 'dinosaurs remain[ed]' (WNGO3) in charge and, as a result, culture change at the institutional and policy level stalled, leading to the initial failure of IC ratification.

Although this article drew on respondents' narratives around the IC as a focal point, their perceptions and experiences speak and reflect wider historical, cultural, and political complexities that shape the diffusion of templates of legitimation and trajectories of civil society development in fledgling democracies. For Wimmer (2021), the diffusion of templates of legitimation is primarily a struggle for the dominance of (cultural) ideas within a set context. The experiences of Ukrainian women's organisations vis-à-vis the IC illustrate two levels of contestation and their impact: that which takes place as new templates diffuse and the localised nature of their experience, but also the impact that geopolitical domain competition has on these processes. In this case, the experiences were shaped not only by reflecting the drivers of contestation around the IC observed in other contexts, specifically narratives around gender/heteronormative/human rights (Berthet, 2022; Krizsán et al, 2025), but also by geopolitical domain competition driven by Russia's desire to prevent Ukraine's pivot toward the liberal democracy domain. So, while the Ukrainian women's movement drew on domain-specific templates (that is GM), counter-movement actors also drew on processes and practices beyond national boundaries and the issue of gender to oppose them (Pichardo, 1995). With actors coping/finding inspiration in terms of rhetoric and action from 'abroad' (Shevtsova, 2020; 2023; Jenderedjian and Bellows, 2021; Sasunkevich, 2021), template diffusion thus reflected a localised playing out of geopolitical competition. The resulting contestation was as much a reflection of local factors (power constellations, compatibility of templates (Wimmer, 2021)) as it was a reflection of the geopolitical competition in which Ukraine found/finds itself.

In a world where social movement and civil society actors encounter challenging contexts across both authoritarian and democratic domains, the Ukrainian context, which has been in a rotating perma-crisis mode since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, illustrates both the adaptability and fragility of such actors. Although the IC was not initially ratified, it did facilitate institutional change via some legislative developments, which WNGOs perceived as a positive, though not sufficient, step. It is here that policy makers could support the diffusion of templates of legitimation to complete a domain pivot/alignment at the local levels. In the case of Ukrainian women's organisations, policy makers need to become more open to collaboration with such organisations and environments where advocacy and representation by social movement and civil society actors of all stripes is viewed as constructive/welcome and not easily dismissed by 'dinosaurs'.

The resilience, adaptability, and situational response of Ukrainian women's organisations in our study highlight their pragmatic interaction with a complex institutional environment to drive 'renewal in light of structural and historic constraints' (Farjoun et al, 2015: 1799). Such actor behaviour also speaks to arguments that challenge the idea of the weakness of civil society across Central and Eastern European countries (Baća, 2022). In emerging democracies, such as Ukraine, social movements and civil society cannot be solely assessed by the number of organisations, but rather it comes down to their agency and agentic power, ability to contribute, and impact on shaping the public sphere (Habermas and Burger, 1996). The experiences of WNGOs in this study demonstrate that understanding realities on the ground

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and assessing civil society and social movements require attention to the experiences, perceptions, and actions of those involved, as well as the dynamics between them. The case of Ukrainian women's organisations also demonstrates the need to further consider the impact geopolitical competition has in shaping the dynamics of civil society actors' local environment and their ability to influence and shape it themselves. Thus, our article argues for bringing in meta/supra-territorial structures and dynamics that lead to and shape tangible constraints for civil society actors.

Our findings in this article should be considered in light of this study's limitations. Primarily, our respondents come from a small cross-section of organisations that self-categorise as women's organisations located in western Ukraine. A wider sample and a sample that compares groups across eastern Ukraine may yield different results. Further research should also take a comparative approach to compare experiences of GM/gender quality diffusion across independent Soviet successor states. Some scholars (see, for example, Jenderedjian and Bellows (2021)) have looked at how actors in other former Soviet Union states have adopted GM internally, but the impact on GM across this geographical space, in particular vis-à-vis cultural change, has received less attention. Finally, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, values and norms vis-à-vis women, women's rights, and gender equality are likely to have changed to substantiate Ukraine's pivot to the European domain. Ukraine's ratification of the IC in November 2022 and subsequent legislative adjustments can be seen as evidence of this. Many WNGOs will hope it leads to substantive, positive changes in institutional practices.

Notes

[1] Russia's full-scale illegal invasion in February 2022 and the ongoing war can thus be considered as an attempt to forcefully reverse this pivot and align Ukraine with a Russia-dominating authoritarian domain.

[2] It should be noted that this data does not reflect adaptations such organisations will have likely made since the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022 and during the ongoing war since. However, the data highlights responses to events that preceded the war, such as the annexation of Crimea and rising hostilities in the Donbas in 2014, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the role of such organisations during Ukrainians key mass-mobilising events: the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2014).

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SL and JC wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript. SK collected the empirical material and contributed to its analysis as well as providing comments on the draft of the article. JC, SL, SK conceptualised and designed the study. SR, YE, RF and BH designed the study. JC conducted data analysis and interpretation, with contributions from SL and SK.

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Data availability statement

The authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the analysis.

Research ethics statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee at University of Edgehill and permission to conduct the interviews for the purposes of this research was obtained from all participants, who were fully informed about the purposes of this research and how their responses would be used and stored.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A: Istanbul Convention

Status	Country	Signature year	Ratification/Entry into force year
☑	Albania	2011	2013/2014
☑	Andorra	2013	2014
☑	Austria	2011	2013/2014
☑	Belgium	2012	2016
☑	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2013	2013/2014
☑	Croatia	2013	2018
☑	Cyprus	2011	2017/2018
☑	Denmark	2013	2014
☑	Estonia	2014	2017
☑	European Union	2017	2023
☑	Finland	2011	2015
☑	France	2011	2014
☑	Georgia	2014	2017
☑	Germany	2011	2017/2018
☑	Greece	2011	2018
☑	Iceland	2011	2018
☑	Ireland	2011	2019
☑	Italy	2012	2013/2014
☑	Latvia	2016	2024
☑	Liechtenstein	2016	2021
☑	Luxembourg	2011	2018
☑	Malta	2011	2014
☑	Monaco	2011	2014/2015
☑	Moldova	2017	2022
☑	Montenegro	2011	2013/2014
☑	Netherlands	2012	2015/2016
☑	North Macedonia	2011	2018
☑	Norway	2011	2017
☑	Poland	2012	2015
☑	Portugal	2011	2013/2014
☑	Romania	2014	2016
☑	San Marino	2014	2016
☑	Serbia	2012	2013/2014
☑	Slovenia	2011	2015
☑	Spain	2011	2014
☑	Sweden	2011	2014
☑	Switzerland	2011	2017/2018
☑	Turkey[1]	2011	2012/2014 (withdrew 2021)
☑	Ukraine	2011	2022
☑	United Kingdom	2012	2022

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Status	Country	Signature year	Ratification/Entry into force year
⚠	Armenia	2018	—
⚠	Bulgaria	2016	—
⚠	Czech Republic	2016	—
⚠	Hungary	2014	—
⚠	Lithuania	2013	—
⚠	Slovak Republic	2011	—

Note: [1]Turkey ratified early (2012) but withdrew in 2021.
Source: Table adapted from Council of Europe Chart of signatures and ratifications of Treaty 210 (Council of Europe, 2024b).

Appendix B: Participating Organizations

Self-categorization	Description	Pseudonym	Interviewee profile
Neutral	Formed in 1997 Entrepreneurship/incubators/skills training Policy influence – 'equal rights not gender' EU funding/overseas funding	WNGO 1	Senior-level, Female
Feminist	Formed in 2014 Social entrepreneurship/training Cooperation with local authorities Active protest – rallies/marches Collective decision making Use volunteers	WNGO 2	Senior-level, Female
Neutral	Founded in 1997 Overseas funding Entrepreneurship – rural/farming/condo project Women's leadership program – training Board structure – registered organization	WNGO 3	Senior-level, Female
Feminist	Co-ordinates 70 NGOs/groups Difficult relationship with State – work within the 'Civic Council' structure Work on policy issues – quotas, trafficking, prostitution, economic engagement/labor rights Training/support for affiliated organizations	WNGO 4	Senior-level, Female
Neutral	Formed in 2006 Crisis center/shelter – to accommodate up to 20 women Social enterprise – bakery for women/fund raising Overseas funding Don't involve volunteers Organized through collective decision making	WNGO 5	Senior-level, Female
Maternalist	Formed 1991 Membership organization 1500 approx. members; 7 branches Engage in education, social entrepreneurship Maidan activism, co-ordinate with government Highly structured/formal	WNGO6	Senior-level, Female
Feminist	Private foundation working on women's issues Charity Overseas donors Training/education/advocacy on women's issues Overtly feminist Leader-driven	WNGO7	Senior-level, Female

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