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Ukraine, feminists on the alert. After the war, there is a risk of a ban on abortion

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Veteran Marta Chumalo speaks: Ukraine in demographic crisis, possible boom of the radical right.

Kyiv: 'This war is like a lens that magnifies the best and worst of human behaviour. On a train carrying displaced people away from Ukraine you can see people elbowing each other for a seat, and others offering hot drinks at the station without asking for anything in return'. These words, uttered with calm resignation and a meek smile, are the star of **Marta Chumalo, one of the founders of the 'Women's Perspectives' Centre in Lviv**. Marta is a psychologist, an expert on gender issues and the first Ukrainian woman to receive the prestigious **Olof Palme Prize**, an international award for those who distinguish themselves in the protection of human rights, which she collected wearing a traditional *vishvanka* shirt embroidered with floral motifs.

Her organisation has been active since 1998 and runs seven shelter homes throughout Ukraine, facilities that provide accommodation for women of age who are victims of domestic violence. Since 2014, and particularly after [Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine](#) on 24 February 2022, Chumalo has focused on **women displaced in the conflict tearing apart Europe's eastern borders**. She is now Truskavetz, a spa in the Ukrainian Carpathians also popular with Hungarians and Belarusians, where her Internet connection comes and goes.

"At the end of February last year **we were planning the feminist march** in Lviv, the first after the Covid restrictions. We were printing T-shirts,' she says on video call, her hair coloured purple and the bitterness of someone who fears that the role of women organisers like her will be debased after the war. Immediately after the invasion, **Lviv became a crucial transit point**, with women and children who did not have the privilege of going abroad settling in hundreds of makeshift shelters. Then, those who were unable to settle abroad also returned. The conditions offered by the city close to the Polish border, however generous, were still harsh: gyms, basements, semi-underground, hundreds of people lying on mattresses, 20 or more in a room. So Chumalo created new shelters for **vulnerable women, elderly women, women with more than three children, and women victims of violence**.

In Lviv, where daily life has remained relatively undisturbed throughout the 500-odd days of war, especially compared to Kyiv and Odessa, many women of all ages, from the most diverse corners of the country, have reintegrated, found temporary work or enrolled their children in school. But after working in this particularly nationalist centre of Ukraine, Chumalo realised that another danger was looming over the lives of militants like her: 'After the next elections, there will be a parliament packed with men from the army, the military, veterans and the radical right,' she explains. "And **this puts Ukrainian democracy, and more specifically women, at risk.**"

A similar situation had already occurred in 2014, says Chumalo, **after the [EuroMaidan](#) uprising**

that led to the resignation of the then pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovych: a founding event for that part of the pro-European and progressive side, it nevertheless contained dark aspects such as possible false flag attacks carried out by the subversive right, the clearing of the Galician-type ultranationalist mythology (the Lviv region) **and attempts to steer public opinion in a pro-NATO and pro-EU direction** carried out with the fundamental help of various Western NGOs. Chumalo recalls: 'EuroMaidan was not a nationalistic event. I was there. It was against the violation of human rights. It was against systematic corruption'. At the same time, that struggle for emancipation from the Russian-centric world, shared by millions of Ukrainians, led to the further emergence of various demons hostile to feminism.

She fears a Handmaid's Tale-style scenario, whichever way this conflict turns out: 'I really think **politics will try to outlaw abortion**,' she says. "We have already had signs these days. There are unhealthy ideas in the air. Like the one that says that the Ukrainian nation is depopulating, dying, and women must churn out children, without a peep." Is this possible dystopia in an increasingly martial nation, where propaganda posters look like something out of a video game advertisement, television information continues to be concentrated in a single pro-government channel, or is it the paranoia of a militant who dislikes a uniformed society? What is known today is that **90 per cent of post-invasion Ukrainian emigrants are women and children**, and of these millions will not return. 'Children will have to go to school, women will look for work, especially when they have lost their homes in [Ukraine](#),' [Chumalo explains](#). A country that had a population of 50 million after independence in 1991 and now a third less, will face a dramatic problem of ageing, depopulation, and lack of skilled labour. Chauvinist anger might suggest primitive solutions to some.

"Not only the radical right will want to outlaw abortion, but **also the clergy, which has always been represented in parliament**," says Chumalo, thinking of the Pan-Ukrainian Council of Churches, a powerful congregation that includes Christian churches of various denominations, but also various religious organisations, and has been fighting for years much more vehemently than Papa Bergoglio against gender ideology and the re-discussion of the traditional family. And against abortion, of course. It also fought against the ratification of the **Istanbul Convention**, which defines violence against women as a very serious violation of human rights and shifts the context more in favour of survivors, by Zelensky's Ukraine [in](#) 2022.

The dilemma that afflicts many Ukrainian feminists in a country engaged in an existential war, mutilated, impoverished and at the same time hyper-modern, is a dilemma that afflicts intellectuals in every war: to remain true to oneself **or to sacrifice oneself for the cause**? A doubt that has been resolved for years without hesitation by Chumalo as well as by other groups of his allies, who are not intimidated by the need to rally around the flag. Not least because the hostility of certain groups precedes the conflict with Russia: 'I have been attacked by the radical right for twenty-five years, ever since I started my work in western Ukraine. **My first 8 March march in Lviv, in 2008, was opposed by fascists**'. Now, however, Chumalo points out, radical narratives have expanded to the East. For a very simple reason: Russian aggression. 'Many of the displaced women from the [Donbass](#) we meet have more nationalistic ideas than even western Ukraine. A certain ruthless iconography has spread among ordinary people. Those who have lost their homes or been forced to flee have been pushed in that direction'.

Feminism has always been a struggle, laughs Chumalo: the difference is that after EuroMaidan certain issues close to her heart have entered more into public discussion. 'But the obstacles were never lacking: with the pandemic they took away our permission for marches, and now there is the war. **In the beginning there was a peculiar phenomenon**: the police almost reprimanded women who denounced, saying: 'why do you denounce? Your husbands are our heroes, they serve the nation'. But then it ended with the violent men being served conscription papers when the police

visited the house and sent to the front. Paradoxically, the war freed many women of their oppressors. The other side of the coin is that so many more women only ended up being exploited, trafficked, forced into prostitution’.

War has entered the home of the Ukrainian women. Not only, of course, in terms of a disrupted routine in some areas, of deadly daily bulletins, of an extra burden of anguish, but also in terms of the impact on the family psyche of men who, having returned as veterans, are no longer what they were when they left. "There are those who find grenades in the bedroom, resting on the bedside table, or guns left by absent-minded husbands on the kitchen table while the children play at home. Such incidents are countless’. And then **there are the abuses dictated by fear: one man took three of his children, three children from three different women**, and took them across the border to try to escape general mobilisation after the outbreak of war. Now, however, the story is reversed, and wives can take children abroad to escape the war even without their husbands’ consent.

In the *Women’s Perspectives* shelters, no meals are provided, but at most, basic foodstuffs if needed. Then it is up to the tenants to decide what to cook. Feeding people, says Chumalo, takes away their control and power over their lives. The way the shelters are organised wants to encourage women to take back control of their lives as quickly as possible, to be able to make decisions, to make plans: ‘We don’t just offer housing, but also an established system of psychological **and cultural** support. We want people to be independent.

How do you imagine the post-war period? ‘I dream of organising demonstrations again, **I dream of a country free from the grip of nationalism**’. However, Chumalo is fully aware of the serious challenges Ukraine will face once the Russian assault is over, especially if the result should not satisfy the most conservative and those in power. ‘There is a risk that domestic violence will increase as men return from the war zone. We have to think in advance about how to deal with the situation,’ Chumalo warns.

‘It will be impossible to avoid nationalism,’ he admits. ‘**The language issue was one of the first justifications used by Putin for the invasion**. And that is why we will have a lot of initiatives against the Russian language.’ She hopes for a great period of reflection. "It is so important to have platforms to discuss, and at the moment we don’t have any: neither to talk about the language issue, nor to address the different problems that will plague us, including the mistreatment and humiliation of women. But it is possible to foresee the challenges facing Ukrainian society, Chumalo reminds us, and to begin to respond.

Paolo Mossetti is an economic anthropologist, writer and journalist who has worked for years with Italian and international publications. He published in Spanish, for Akal, an essay on Italian national-populism, *Mil Máscaras*.

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