

“Now I Know What It Means to Be a Donbas Child’s Mother”: Ukrainian, Western and Russian Media Representations of the ICC’s Arrest Warrant Against Maria Lvova-Belova and Vladimir Putin

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This article analyses media representations of Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia’s Commissioner for Children’s Rights, in light of the ICC arrest warrant issued for her and Vladimir Putin over the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children. Using discourse analysis across Ukrainian, Russian, and selected Western (UK/US) media, it examines how gendered narratives shape understandings of female agency, political violence, and motherhood.

Drawing on feminist and poststructuralist theories, the article explores how Lvova-Belova is framed differently across contexts: Ukrainian media depict her as a key perpetrator of a genocidal campaign, emphasizing her autonomy and casting her as a monstrous mother. Western outlets often downplay her role, portraying her as subordinate to Putin. Russian state media, meanwhile, presents her as a humanitarian saving orphaned children.

These gendered framings reflect broader ideological divides and serve political ends. The article highlights how femininity and motherhood are strategically deployed to construct narratives of blame, innocence, or legitimacy during war.

Keywords: *Maria Lvova-Belova; Vladimir Putin; Ukraine; Russia; International Criminal Court (ICC); gender roles; kidnapping; media reports and representation*

“Now I know what it means to be a Donbas child’s mother. It is difficult, but we definitely love each other.” Maria Lvova-Belova thanks Vladimir Putin for making it possible for her to adopt a Ukrainian teenager from Mariupol. (Coles and Sivorka 2023)

When the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin and Russia’s Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova for the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children, it was well-reported by the world’s media.¹ Putin and Lvova-Belova are accused of “bearing individual criminal responsibility” for the deportations and “for having committed the acts directly, jointly with others and/or through others” (ICC 2023). This warrant represents an important development for several reasons. It is either a momentous case for the court (Sarkin 2023), a mere symbolic gesture, or an important step toward accountability and justice (Wolff 2023). For scholars of gender, it is one of the few instances where a high-profile woman politician stands accused of war crimes. Importantly, the warrant specifies that the target of this deportation campaign is children. The common trope of “womenandchildren” (Sylvester 1998) as the “innocents” of war is challenged by the media highlighting the role Lvova-Belova plays in the perpetration of these crimes.

We follow Ehrenreich’s (2004) argument that “a uterus is not a substitute for conscience” and ask what gendered frames are employed by the Ukrainian, Russian, and “Western” (represented by the UK and US) media to make sense of Lvova-Belova’s role in the abductions of Ukrainian children. These very different contexts provide important insights into how existing biases and gendered narratives shape public perception, and how national discourses can reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes about women and violence.

In the discussion on wars and war crimes, Russia’s war in Ukraine not being an exception, women’s representation remains distorted. Women’s perspectives and voices are still often missing and read

1. According to Selvarajah and Fiorito (2023), “the ICC’s primary mission is to try the highest political and military leaders responsible for mass atrocity crimes to prevent future crimes, provide redress for victims, and ensure accountability, thereby bringing about peace and reconciliation.”

through the lens of war victims (Boberg 2022). Reporting mainly focuses on sexual violence and the suffering of refugee seekers. Our work does not question the gendered aspects of war trauma. Yet, we acknowledge that uncritical framing of women as automatic victims deprives their agency. This not only creates a context in which women's contribution to active resistance is overlooked (Oyeleye and Jiang 2023) but also diminishes the atrocities committed by women during wars (Smeulers 2015). Therefore, analysing how Lvova-Belova's actions are framed allows us to further explore the intersection of gender and politics during wartime. Our research uncovers not only how she is framed and represents herself, but also how other aspects of the conflict follow the gendered logic of reporting.

This article contributes to academic debates on women perpetrators of political violence. While scholarly works increasingly examine representations of women perpetrators (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Sharlach 1999), Lvova-Belova represents more than just another case study of a politically violent woman. The nature of her ongoing war crimes against Ukrainian children, her proximity to Vladimir Putin, and the active Russian propaganda campaign on these topics make her actions and agency harder to make sense of. Second, a comparison of reporting aimed at Ukrainian, "Western," and Russian audiences provides a complex picture of different readings of a woman accused of a genocidal campaign, this time primarily targeted at children. As others have noted, the Russian war on Ukraine is a gendered war, partly defined by Russia's proclaimed defense of "traditional" and "family" values (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan 2023).

Our discussion proceeds as follows. We first discuss existing literature on the portrayal of women perpetrators of violence, highlighting the themes of motherhood/"womenandchildren" and the agency often denied to politically violent women. This discussion is followed by the empirical section, where we analyse three cases: Ukrainian, UK and US, and Russian media portrayals of Lvova-Belova's actions. We then discuss our findings and conclude with recommendations for future research.

Women (and Children), Mothers, Monsters, Genocidaires

Scholarship on women and war increasingly challenges the stereotype of women being mere victims or bystanders in conflict situations. Interdisciplinary research reveals that women have demonstrated violent

agency in conflicts worldwide. Examples include the mobilization of Rwandan women—predominantly Hutu—during the 1994 genocide (Sharlach 1999; Brown 2014; Brown 2017) and the high-profile International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) case against Pauline Nyiramasuhuko (Keyse 2023; Krulisova 2020); women prison guards during the wars in the Former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) case against Biljana Plavšić (Subotić 2012; Simić 2018); the perpetration of sexual torture against Iraqi men in Abu Ghraib by, among others, Lynndie England (Holland 2009; Gronnvoll 2007); and women Nazi concentration camp guards (Mailänder 2015).

Women perpetrators of violence often attract media and popular culture attention that denies their agency and sensationalize their crimes, often at the same time. Women's violence not only transgresses societal and ethical norms (in the same way as men's violence does) but also challenges nearly universal gendered norms (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). While men appear to possess a monopoly on violence, women are expected to be caring and giving — be they givers of life or love. Much of the existing retelling of the infamous Nazi women prison guards relegates them to “partners (in crime) of powerful men, rather than perpetrators themselves” (Ellison and Szablewska 2022, 1496). At the same time, their extreme cruelty, such as the stories of Irma Grese having lampshades made for her out of the skin of killed prisoners, continue to fascinate audiences (Rowland 2011). Similarly, Lynndie England's sexual and romantic relationship with Charles Grayner, her superior and co-accused, was often used to question her agency and autonomy in the perpetration of sexual torture at Abu Ghraib (Holland 2009). Pauline Nyiramasuhuko's ordering of and presence at the mass rape campaign became key foci of her trial (Drumbl 2013) alongside her (twisted) motherhood. Biljana Plavšić was dubbed ‘female Mengele’ or ‘Miss Necrophilia’ (Jain 2024, 7), while the nature of her relationship with warlord Arkan was speculated upon, further demonstrating this framing of violent women.

We conceptualize agency from a poststructuralist feminist perspective. This somewhat challenges the way that “conventionally foundationalist concepts of agency and political violence always already presume a subject, a ‘doer behind the deed’” (Shepherd 2012, 4). We follow Hirschmann's (1989, 1241) questioning of whether “all responsibilities are assumed freely.” Hirschmann (2004, xi) argues that “choices and the selves that made them are constructed by context,

discourse, and language; such context makes meaning, self-hood, and choices possible.” Butler (1999, 181) explains that “the ‘doer’ or the subject holding the presumed agency emerges in and through their specific set of discursive conditions and environments, in other words that “the ‘doer’ is variously constructed in and through the deed.” Butler (1999, 107) further notes that agency as “not related to a theory of the self but is an effect of the operations of discourse-power through which subjects are produced.” Åhäll (2012, 290) analyses the discursive construction of agency through discussing the “ways in which subjects are positioned with agency in various discursive practices, and, more importantly, the meanings attached to such representation of agency.” In this case, the deed is not only the act of proscribed political violence but, more importantly, the expression of one’s agency based on their gendered performance and how that is made sense of in different national and political media reporting.

Sjoberg and Gentry’s (2007) work represent one of the most comprehensive analyses of the representation of female violence in the media. Their discussion groups popular discourses on politically violent women into three categories: “mothers” as women who are fulfilling their biological destinies; “monsters” as women who are pathologically damaged and therefore drawn to violence; and “whores” as women whose violence is inspired by sexual dependence and depravity (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 12). While the narrative of sexual depravity does not apply to representations of Maria Lvova-Belova in the discourses we study, the motherhood and monster frames are traceable in our dataset.

Motherhood does not necessarily concern itself with actual pregnant women or mothers but rather concentrates on the stereotypical idealization of the female body with its life-giving capacities. The “natural” association of a female body with bearing and rearing children leads to the creation of an ideal-typical gender role for every woman. Giving life is then placed into stark contrast with taking life (Ruddick 1989). Mothering and motherhood become what Weber calls an unconscious ideology, one that is not formally named and is difficult to identify, as it is considered common sense (Weber 2005, 7). Thus, motherhood appears to be a universal, natural, and purely empirical fact of life that precludes women from becoming violent. Women’s political agency is thus read through the lens of motherhood.

Monster narratives follow the logic of “Othering.” Violent women’s actions are shocking and abject and therefore challenge the idea of what “natural” femininity is or should be. Framing violent women as

somehow “unnatural” or flawed in their biology serves to take “away not only [their] agency, but their very humanity by stripping of rational thought,” for in this narrative “women are involved in political violence for personal reasons that are obsessive or pathological in nature” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 41).

For our reading of Lvova-Belova, we link the motherhood and monster frames. This enables us to read the different representations of her actions across the three contexts through a spectrum of good, bad, and monstrous motherhood. The protective motherhood framing serves to legitimize and humanize her actions whereas the monstrous motherhood symbolises the depravity and cruelty of the powerful and violent “Other.”

Methodology

The study closely examines media discourses from Ukrainian, British, American, and Russian news outlets that were published on the topic of Maria Lvova-Belova and the International Criminal Court arrest warrant ruling between March 17, 2023, and March 17, 2024, with a broader reference to Lvova-Belova’s accused activities leading up to these dates. We entered the search term “Maria Lvova-Belova” in the respective news sites and identified all news articles from this period that reported on Lvova-Belova and the International Crime Court (ICC) ruling. We then conducted a content analysis to determine prominent messages, slogans, narratives, and themes used when discussing the ICC’s decision. This process allowed us to separate simple mentions of Lvova-Belova and the ICC ruling from meaningful coverage, including newer insights, description, and analysis with reflections, quotes, and opinions. In our analysis, we focused not only on the prominent themes but also on how the discussions around these themes were shaped and structured.

Though scholars who use the concept of discourse fail to agree on a neat definition, we define the term discourse as a form of “social practice” intended to uphold versions of “reality” that are created within a social context (Fairclough 2010). These versions of reality can be written, spoken, performed, and symbolic. We focus on written discourse in the media, a domain with “signifying power” because of its ability to frame particular events or stories to manipulate audiences (Hassan 2018). We chose our case studies, and the respective news sites, to explore whether the different social contexts in which they are created

(Ukrainian, British/American, Russian) would provide different perspectives on the ICC ruling. Discourse analysis is a popular analytical tool for exploring social phenomena and knowledge that has been discursively constructed (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002). It not only allows researchers to examine what message the source is trying to perpetuate, but also to trace where this message originated and how prominently it features in discursive spaces. Examining language is important in discourse analysis because language builds narrative and contributes towards discursive constructions of perceived reality. Gee (2014, 2) argues that language “allows us to take on different significant identities.” In doing so, we build our identities by assigning ourselves to a particular group and distinguishing ourselves from others. In the process of distinguishing oneself or something from another, the person or thing establishing the discourse has also established an order (Glynos et al. 2009). Neumann (2008) argues that discourses “are ordered and scaled in relation to one another,” and therefore, when examining discourses, we must not only consider what is being said but also what it is being compared against.

Discourse analysis is therefore an appropriate methodological approach in this research. Some scholars within the field of International Relations Feminist Theory, including Locher and Prügl (2001), Berkowitz et al. (2010), and Lorber (2018) argue that gender is a descriptive category in which “gender is the expected characteristic associated with perceived membership in those categories, understood as ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’” (Sjoberg and Tickner 2013, 4). Sjoberg and Tickner (2013) note that in most instances where definitions of femininity and masculinity are used, they are almost always unequal. “Masculine” discourses promote ideas of power, rationality, and activity, whereby “femininity” tends to be framed as weak, emotional, irrational, and passive. A woman’s political agency is often linked to her perceived feelings and emotions and to her “private” life. Importantly, motherhood, whether actual or symbolic, becomes one of the few frames through which a woman is read and can represent herself. Consequently, when a woman is accused of violence, the historic discursive framing of women as life-giving mothers makes it shocking that this woman may have acted violently, and certainly more shocking than if a man had committed the same violent act. Utilizing the same logic, some violent women invoke their actual and symbolic motherhood to deny wrongdoing and represent themselves as caring. Examining the media representations relating to Lvova-Belova and Putin’s

ICC arrest warrant through the use of discourse analysis with the application of a gendered lens will allow us to uncover underlying biases, understand the role of gender in shaping public narratives, and highlight the intersection of gender and politics in media portrayals of international justice by different sides of an ongoing full-scale invasion.

Discourse analysis was also chosen as a methodological tool for this research because it allows us to focus on media outlets' representation and framing of the ICC's arrest warrant ruling against Lvova-Belova and Putin. Media discourse refers to the use of language, narratives, themes, and representations of stories and people by media outlets. Media discourse analysis examines the "presence or bias of ideology in language, or the problematising of power relations in society" (Cotter 2015, 797). Though media, particularly with the advent of the internet, is more immediate, media discourses nevertheless are "not ad hoc or spontaneous" and therefore add to and present particular messages about the subject that have already been defined or are aimed at telling a story and spreading a message in a specific way (O'Keeffe 2013, 441). The media's presentation of the ICC ruling in Ukrainian, "Western" and Russian media outlets differ because the media sites in each of those places have different values, motivations, and ownerships. We chose a combination of state-owned and independent media outlets for each regional case study and compare their messages and discourses. We found that state-owned media sites publish state-sanctioned stories that uphold the state's reputation and power. Independent news sources, by contrast, act as the "fourth estate." This includes navigating the relationship between the state and society, both praising and criticising the state depending on the state's actions and position on issues and at times, educating society about political matters (Renz 2006).

Mass Media's Role in Times of War

As a "citizen's window to the world" and the "fourth pillar" of society, the media in democracies is expected to report events in a free and fair way while helping to build public opinion (Sharma 2010, 10). With this expectation, media information has turned into the "dominant force in the question of legitimacy" (Blank 2017, 92). However, against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, this study deals

with the unique context that Ukrainian and Russian media domains face. Their role, at least in part, is to provide legitimacy for their governments' actions, in the case of Ukraine, to protect the country's integrity and independence, and in the case of Russia, to continue a resource-draining war with a neighbour. Each context has distinct implications for media freedom, government control, and public perception. The way these war crimes are reported—or manipulated—can shape international understanding, justify political decisions, and impact global responses to this war.

Consequently, when conducting a media discourse analysis, it is vital that we consider the extent of media freedom in each of the countries as this was an important factor in explaining variations in the portrayal of Lvova-Belova's case. In Russia, the media is largely an instrument for the Kremlin and its domestic and foreign policy. As of 2024, Reporters Without Borders (n.d.a) place Russia very low in the press freedom index: 164 out of 180 countries. Since the large-scale invasion, the Kremlin banned almost all private media and blocked such Western media as Euronews, France 24, and the BBC; remaining media have to follow orders issued by the president's office and engage extensively in self-censorship (Reporters Without Borders n.d.a).

While Ukraine has a better climate than Russia when it comes to press freedom (ranking 61/180 in the press freedom index and moving up 18 places since 2023, Reporters Without Borders n.d.b), the safety of journalists and press freedom has been shrinking under martial law as the atmosphere of trust between the state officials and independent media has deteriorated (IPI 2024); furthermore, in 2023, 78 percent of Ukrainian journalists participating in a survey by the Zmina research center reported the increase of self-censorship since the start of the full-scale war (Bondarenko et al 2023).

This is to say that the media landscapes particularly in Russia and Ukraine remain fraught. While media freedom in Russia was already limited prior to the invasion, access to non-Russia media sources has shrunk considerably for ordinary Russians, further restricting closing information space. While Ukraine's media landscape is remarkably free in comparison to Russia, the war has created a context of increasing self-censorship and distrust between government officials and independent media sources. It is therefore unsurprising, given the context, that the Ukrainian media reports negatively on Lvova-Belova, while the Russian media depicts her in a positive light.

Case Studies

Ukraine

This discussion analyzes the media discourses from two of the most visited Ukrainian online media outlets as of 2023: *Ukrainska Pravda* (63.1 million visitors in the first quarter of 2023) and *Censor.Net* (63 million visitors in the first quarter of 2023) (Institute of Mass Information 2023). The next most-visited Ukrainian online media outlets had notably less reach, with 45 million visitors or fewer. The search terms used for the study included Maria Lvova-Belova's name, and the phrases "kidnapping of children" and "International Criminal Court" in Ukrainian and Russian. The vast majority of the readers of *Ukrainska Pravda* and *Censor.Net* reside in Ukraine (72 percent and 81 percent, respectively), so these media outlets target domestic audiences. Both are privately owned yet, according to the Institute of Mass Information, their materials mostly meet professional standards of journalism; in 2022, *Ukrainska Pravda* received the IPI-IMS Free Media Pioneer award presented to organizations, meeting the demands of the moment through innovative models of journalism, media, or press freedom defense. Both media outlets can be seen as examples of independent news reporting. Since the selected outlets are striving to follow professional journalist standards, their reporters tend to use neutral adjectives and definitions and stick to factual descriptions of (at least some of) the events rather than giving a judgement.

In addition to the data collected between March 2022 and 2023, the Ukraine case study includes two additional entries from earlier in 2022 when the topic was being discussed in the country. While it cannot be included in the comparison across the cases, it is important to highlight it here for better contextualization of the case. This decision is justified by the fact that it was the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that called for the international community to recognize the crime of the Russian Federation kidnapping Ukrainian children; the Ministry also called for Ukrainian law enforcement agencies to "open a criminal proceeding against Russian citizen Lvova-Belova." Therefore, we analyzed the discourse around Lvova-Belova and her actions from that point until March 2024. The search discovered 276 mentions of Lvova-Belova in *Ukrainska Pravda* and 257 in *Censor.Net*. After the initial examination, 30 and 25 textual entries respectively were selected as meaningful discussions of Lvova-Belova; the texts that were excluded from analysis

only contained a factual mention of the ICC ruling and Lvova-Belova's name in its regard. The selected texts were analysed and coded manually, with the distinction of four main themes discussed further.

UK and US

We selected British and American media outlets to represent a “Western” framing of Lvova-Belova. While this is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the representation of this case in the “West,” our analysis of the coverage of this story by the BBC, *The Guardian*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* nevertheless reveals trends in Western reporting on Lvova-Belova's public and private life, the arrest warrant, and her alleged crimes. The BBC is a public service broadcaster with a large online readership.² *The Guardian* follows the BBC as the next most read non-tabloid publication in the UK. In the US, *The New York Times* is the most-read newspaper followed by *The Wall Street Journal*. The search term “Maria Lvova-Belova” applied to these four media outlets produced a total of 150 results between March 15, 2023 and March 17, 2024.³ Mentions before March 2023 did not produce any significant results. The majority of mentions in *The Guardian* did not provide a meaningful discussion of Lvova-Belova or her actions but simply reported on the issuing of the arrest warrant.

There are several key moments in reporting on Lvova-Belova and her alleged crimes. The first one is the announcement of the warrant itself in March 2023 (e.g., “International Criminal Court in Hague Issues Arrest Warrant for Putin” 2023). This was then followed by her video conference appearance at an Arria-Formula meeting of the United Nations Security Council in April 2023, which triggered a walkout by several diplomatic teams (“Let her answer in The Hague: UK blocks Russian Children's Rights Commissioner from speaking at UN Security Council” 2023). There are also sporadic mentions of Lvova-Belova in relation to stories about specific Russian or Ukrainian children, Ukrainian parents' efforts to locate and return their children, or

2. According to Statista, in “December 2023, the BBC had a total of 37.9 million monthly visits in the United Kingdom.” This was followed by *The Sun*, *Mail Online*, *The Mirror* and *The Guardian*. *The Guardian* was therefore selected for analysis alongside the BBC as tabloids were not analysed by this study.

3. 14 results for the BBC; 46 for *The New York Times*; 79 for *The Guardian*; and 11 for *The Wall Street Journal*.

documentaries and works of art about the deportations (see, for example, Pohorilov 2023).

Russia

The section on Russian media discourses focuses on those media published in *RIA Novosti* between March 17, 2023, and March 17, 2024. Mentions prior to these dates largely relate to the threat of the ICC bringing charges against Lvova-Belova and Putin, with the newspapers belittling the ICC and noting its lack of jurisdiction over Russia. The search terms used to conduct this research included “International Criminal Court” or “ICC.” We chose *RIA Novosti* as a data source as it is a leading news agency in Russia, and a competitive media outlet in former Soviet countries and more globally (Kulshmanov and Ishanova 2014). It has been part of the Russian government-owned news agency *Rossiya Segodnya* since 2014.

Ukrainian, Western and Russian Representations of Maria Lvova-Belova

Ukraine: Genocide, Russification of Ukrainian Children and Russian Propaganda: Motherhood and Agency of Women-Perpetrators

Early mentions of Maria Lvova-Belova appeared in Ukrainian media in September – October 2022. First, she was mentioned in an article, “Children Kidnapped in Mariupol ‘Fell in Love’ with Russia,” published on September 29, 2022, on *Censor.net*. The article describes Lvova-Belova’s report to the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation about 30 Ukrainian children taken to Moscow oblast during the large-scale invasion who initially “spoke negatively about the president [Vladimir Putin], said nasty things, sang the anthem of Ukraine” but as they were moved close to Moscow the “integration began to take place,” and negative attitude to Russia turned into love. The article also mentions the number—2000— of children kidnapped by Russia during the full-scale invasion.

The next mention appeared in *Ukrainska Pravda* almost a month later, on October 27, 2022, concerning the Comment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine from the same date. The Ministry initiated a case before the law enforcement agencies of Ukraine against Lvova-Belova and called on the international community to “strongly

condemn the ongoing crimes committed by Russia and its officials against children in the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2022). This article, titled “Russian Ombudswoman Took a Child Kidnapped from Mariupol,” quoted text from *Russia Today* (referring to it as to “Russian propagandistic outlet”) dated October 27, 2022, which discussed the press conference where Lvova-Belova spoke about the adoption of a child she saw when she “was evacuating a group of 31 children from Mariupol.” There is one more mention of Lvova-Belova afterward in the period between the “adoption” in October 2022 and March 2023, when the ICC issued its ruling. After the ICC issued the arrest warrant, Maria Lvova-Belova was mentioned regularly not only in the article that discusses her in detail but also in short news updates on kidnapped children.

For the Ukrainian side, stressing the role of Lvova-Belova in the crimes taking place on occupied territories is crucial for challenging the discourse prevalent in some Western circles on “Putin’s war against Ukraine,” which implies that Russian society shares no responsibility for the war. On November 27, 2023, Sergiy Kyslytsya, Permanent Representative of Ukraine at the UN, commented on his official × account on an article in *The New York Times* about Russian women protesting long deployments for soldiers in Ukraine. He emphasized the importance of this article in showing that Russian women are not against the war of aggression. He posted:

So don’t get misled! It’s not just putin’s war, it’s the war of millions of men and women in russia - mothers, wives, daughters, sisters. . . . It’s also regrettable that the @nytimes has failed to highlight it, reducing the reporting to just one aspect of the problem. Nevertheless, it does collaterally brings you to the above conclusion even if it’s not perhaps intended by the authors. (Kyslytsya 2023)

A journalist investigation in *Ukrainska Pravda* stresses that the crimes committed in occupied territories are “not only [committed by] Lvova-Belova” (2023) but also about a dozen named persons, both men and women.

The following discourse analysis of selected Ukrainian media texts shows that, indeed, the agency of Lvova-Belova is never denied by any of the articles; she is never portrayed as a mere puppet of Putin. Nevertheless, the texts on Lvova-Belova are gendered, and gender roles and stereotypes play an important role in the portrayal of the Russian “Ombudswoman” (Ombudsmenka), as Ukrainian media calls her. In

what follows, we apply discourse analysis to highlight several main themes that can be traced in the portrayal of Lvova-Belova in Ukrainian news: female agency, perverse motherhood, genocide, and the Russification of Ukrainian children.

“A Woman Responsible for the Genocide of a Whole Generation of Ukrainians”: Media Portrayal of Female Agency

As the previous subsection discussed, one of the key messages of the Ukrainian political discourse targeting external and domestic audiences was to stress the collective guilt of Russians as opposed to the perception of the large-scale invasion as “Putin’s war.” This may explain why, in the discussion of the ICC ruling in Ukrainian media, Maria Lvova-Belova plays the central role and is not seen as merely following the orders of her president. The media present her as the mastermind behind kidnapping Ukrainian children, a “bad woman” responsible for a crime as grave as genocide. For example, on March 6, 2023, *Censor.net* quoted a group of cyber hackers who published information online about the family of Lvova-Belova:

A woman commits genocide of the whole generation of Ukrainians because she is stealing our children. So, we are stealing her data that will allow us to bring the occupant to account and return children to Ukraine. (“Cyber Resistance’ Has Published Documents from the Family of the Russian ‘Children’s Ombudsman’ Lvova-Belova” 2023)

Ukrainska Pravda, publishing the commentary of national and international criminal law expert Gyunduz Mamedov on the ICC ruling on March 17, 2023, refers to Lvova-Belova as “the representative of the President of the Russian Federation for children’s rights, [who] *directly implements Russia’s policy regarding the deportation of Ukrainian children and their adoption on the territory of Russia*” [emphasis added] (“Will the International Criminal Court arrest Putin?” 2023). Another source quoted by the outlet states that “the process [of abducting Ukrainian children] is controlled by the Russian commissioner on children’s rights Maria Lvova-Belova” (Lozovenko 2023).

The choice of adjectives used by Ukrainian media to refer to Lvova Belova herself and her actions carry both political and gender weight. On the one hand, Ukrainian media refers to the Russian rhetoric around the kidnapping of the children as yet another case of Russia’s political propaganda; at least half of the analyzed articles refer to

statements of Lvova-Belova or the Kremlin regarding the kidnapping and refute them as a lie and manipulation of facts. For example, on March 17, 2023, *Ukrainska Pravda* quotes Lvova Belova:

It's wonderful that the international community has recognized the work we do to help *the children of our country*, that we do not leave them in conflict zones, that we evacuate them, that we create good conditions for them, surrounded by loving and caring people . . . [emphasis in original] ("Kremlin on Putin's Arrest Warrant" 2023)

The outlets stress Lvova-Belova's use of unlawful references to Ukrainian children, such as describing them as "the children of our country" and to unlawful actions that she or other Russians have taken such as, "Maria Lvova-Belova informed Putin that she 'adopted' a child abducted from Mariupol" ("Ukrainian intelligence on ICC decision" 2023). When using evaluative adjectives to refer to Lvova-Belova's statements, media outlets tend to use words like "cynical" or "cold-blooded." This is consistent with the practice of presenting Russia's narratives as manipulations and propaganda while also portraying Lvova-Belova as the main female villain. These references to Lvova-Belova's words and actions are often combined with the discussion of the Ukrainian genocide (through abduction and Russification of Ukrainian children) and the discussion of instrumentalized or "perverse" motherhood, which is the second central theme.

Instrumentalization of Motherhood as a (Political) Strategy

According to Yuval Davis (1998), women's reproductive function becomes crucial in ethnic and national discussions of the nation project; women are seen as bearers of the nation, the ones responsible for producing new members of the nation and raising them as members of the collective; in this context, the construction of the "Other" is crucial for defining the national "Self." Thus, the discussion of how Lvova-Belova presents herself domestically and internationally as a mother, biological and adoptive (of Ukrainian abducted children) is used in Ukrainian outlets to achieve several goals. First, to reveal to the public Lvova-Belova's strategy of instrumentalizing motherhood as opposed to the sufferings of the real families of abducted children; second, to shed light, once again, on Russia's propaganda and use of fake information; and, finally, to complete the image of the "Other" and emphasize that the Russian empire is trying to destroy Ukrainians (to carry out genocide).

Media outlets often mention the allegedly adopted son of Lvova-Belova from Mariupol, presenting the story as a crime where Lvova-Belova uses motherhood as a justification for her crimes:

Children's "ombudsman" from Russia Maria Lvova-Belova thanked Putin for her "son" from Mariupol . . . "Now I know what it's like to be the mother of a child from Donbas. It's difficult, but we definitely love each other," the official said cynically. ("Thanks to You" 2023)

In addition, Ukrainian journalists see Lvova-Belova as using access to abducted children to Russify them, to brainwash them with a Russian narrative of the war, and, in this way, to contribute to the destruction of the Ukrainian nation. It is frequently stressed that Lvova-Belova mentions Ukrainian nationalism and describes Ukrainian children as influenced by "anti-Russian propaganda." In an often-cited interview, Lvova-Belova recounts that her "adopted" son initially was threatening to "eat" her children calling them "small Moskals," a derogatory word historically used by some Ukrainians towards Russians:

[Quoting Lvova-Belova directly:] "I can't say that . . . everything is without difficulties. It's hard to react when your child runs after younger children and says, 'Let's eat the small Moskals'. *Still, I understand that it's not about him, it's about the propaganda he was exposed to at eight years old, which was anti-Russian propaganda in the territory of Mariupol* [emphasis added]. But we love each other now. My son started calling me mom." (Roshchina 2023)

The media tries to trace the destinies of the kidnapped children in Russia and refers to the situations in which they were Russified by force:

Russian Children's Ombudsman Maria Lvova-Belova recounted how 30 children from Mariupol, who were deported to the Moscow region during the full-scale invasion, allegedly stopped singing the Ukrainian anthem and grew fond of Russia . . . She explained that foster parents supposedly abandoned the children in basements, after which Russians found and transported them to the Moscow region, where they were placed with foster families. According to the Russian official, initially, the children "spoke negatively about the president [of Russia, Vladimir Putin], said all sorts of nasty things, sang the Ukrainian anthem." However, in the Moscow region, "integration began to take place," and the negative attitude towards the aggressor country supposedly "turned into love for Russia." ("Children Kidnapped in Mariupol 'Fell in Love' with Russia" 2022)

Lvova-Belova's motherhood is presented as a perverted one, a strategy to conduct her genocidal mission. Quoting Ukrainian human rights commissioner Dmytro Lubinets, *Ukrainska Pravda* writes that "Russia

tries to deliberately Russify the children kidnapped in Ukraine by telling them about ‘an artificial country’ and ‘Nazis’ [reference to the Kremlin’s justifications of the large-scale invasion and Putin’s claims that Ukraine is not a real country]. (“Russians Tell Kidnapped Children About ‘Nazis’ and ‘Artificial Country’” 2023)

The US and the UK: Putin’s Puppet or Genocide Mastermind?

The majority of the texts we analyzed that discuss the ICC’s arrest warrant focus mainly or entirely on Vladimir Putin. Headlines such as “Putin Arrest Warrant: Biden Welcomes ICC’s War Crimes Charges” (Armstrong et al 2023) and “Arrest Warrant from Criminal Court Pierces Putin’s Aura of Impunity” (Landler 2023) demonstrate the relative lack of interest in Lvova-Belova. The text of the articles themselves devotes considerable attention to the importance of the warrant being issued against Putin with Lvova-Belova relegated to a side note (e.g. Hancock 2023). For example, *The Wall Street Journal* starts their report by noting that the ICC issues a warrant “for Russian President Vladimir Putin *and another senior Kremlin official*” (Michaels and Bravin 2023, emphasis added). Other stories note that Lvova-Belova is accused “alongside” Putin (“The Guardian View” 2023) or “in addition” to Putin (“The ICC is the Wrong Way to Beat Putin” 2023). This is even though the ICC clearly states that both Putin and Lvova-Belova “bear individual criminal responsibility” for the abductions. Lvova-Belova is often introduced as “Putin’s commissioner” or “his commissioner” (Bubalo 2023; Andersson 2023; Rainsford 2023; Gall et al 2023). Others label her as his “aide” (Borger 2023). *The New York Times* describes Lvova-Belova as “the public face of the Kremlin-sponsored program” of deportations (Hernández 2023; Santora and Bubola 2023). Such framing paints Lvova-Belova as lacking in agency and simply following Putin’s lead. This is perhaps not surprising for several reasons. First, Russia’s political system is largely seen as being controlled by Putin. Second, Putin has long been represented and is widely understood as the “bad man” of international politics. The narrative of “*Putin’s*” war on Ukraine which has prominently featured in analyses of the causes of the war (Edinger 2022; Galeotti 2022) and the reporting on the Russian war on Ukraine reflects this (e.g., Reid 2022; Cohen and Heitmann 2023; Trofimov 2024) bears this out. The ICC’s comparison of Putin to Milosevic strengthens such understanding (Cranshaw 2023; “The Guardian View” 2023). Furthermore, Putin’s carefully

curated hypermasculine image evokes a strong leader with a tight grip on Russia's political apparatus (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan 2023). At the same, violent women are often read as influenced by men in their vicinity. In this way, women's violent agency, especially when this violence is committed against children, tends to be downplayed and denied. Labelling Lvova-Belova as the "public face" of the deportation suggests this lack of agency and implies that she is being merely used by Putin.

Not all the British and American media examined, however, sees Lvova-Belova as lacking in agency. *The Wall Street Journal* ("The ICC is the Wrong Way to Beat Putin" 2023) notes that she "oversees" the deportations. *The New York Times* published two articles during the period we examined that focus on profiling Lvova-Belova: one shortly after the arrest warrant was announced (Hopkins 2023a) and the other focusing on her own account of the situation (Hopkins 2023b). These put her in the center stage of the deportations, calling her "the official leading the relocation effort" (Pronczuk and Hopkins 2023) or "using her authority" to transfer children from Ukraine to Russia (Hopkins 2023a); the reporting also identifies Lvova-Belova as "one of the most highly involved figures in Russia's deportation and adoption of Ukraine's children, as well as in the use of camps for 'integrating' Ukraine's children into Russia's society and culture" (Hopkins 2023a). Lvova-Belova is represented as having full control of the policy that includes "coercion, deception and force" and "re-education" (Hopkins 2023a).

The process of the deportations as well as re-education is core to the reporting for all outlets. It is often noted that Lvova-Belova openly speaks about the Russian efforts to indoctrinate Ukrainian children taken to Russia (Radford and Gardner 2023) and is quoted complaining that children removed from Mariupol "spoke badly about [the Russian President], said awful things and sang the Ukrainian anthem" (Hancock 2023; Radford and Gardner 2023). She is also quoted echoing Russian propaganda by describing the deportations as a humanitarian operation; for example, one *New York Times* piece that discusses the fate of Ukrainian "stolen" children notes: "Ms. Lvova-Belova wrote about the children and posted photographs of them on social media in June. 'These guys, who until recently were hiding from shelling in the basements of Mariupol, are now on real summer vacation,' she said" (Gall et al 2023). Lvova-Belova is quoted saying that the transfer of the children has been "legal and appropriate" and that Ukrainian forces were shooting at the children in the occupied Donbas region (Hopkins

2023b). The BBC notes that “The Telegram channel of the children’s ombudswoman is full of videos showing her escorting groups of Ukrainian children across the border, where bewildered youngsters are greeted by Russian foster parents with gifts and hugs as the cameras roll.” This invokes the Beautiful Soul trope—an image of a naive woman who is unaware of the consequences of her actions and realities of the war (Elshtain 1982).

Yet, alongside her desire for publicity, Lvova-Belova is accused of using deception. Hopkins (2023a) notes that:

Ms. Lvova-Belova has also been criticised for organising a network of children’s summer camps, where families there were promised a two-week summer vacation in Russia for their children as a break from the hostilities [. . .] many of the children had not been able to leave the camps and were still stranded there.

Her perceived naivete is challenged by portraying her as politically savvy and power hungry. Hopkins’ (2023a; 2023b) reporting breaks from Putin-centered stories and focuses on trying to trace Lvova-Belova’s private and political life. Lvova-Belova is said to have met her husband in the church choir; she studied conducting and worked as a music teacher before co-founding an organization that helped orphans to socially adapt (Hopkins 2023a). This led to her entry into politics, where she quickly rose to the upper echelons of Putin’s United Russia party (Hopkins 2023a). Lvova-Belova is presented as someone who started with good intentions and reputation, before a turning point that made her “cuddle up to hard power” to get money and influence (Hopkins 2023a).

Good, Bad and Monstrous Motherhood and Parenthood

Throughout British and American reporting, mothering and motherhood take center stage. This is for several reasons. First, Lvova-Belova’s actual and symbolic motherhood is discussed, albeit only in *The New York Times* articles that profile her. Hopkins (2023a) describes Lvova-Belova as “a conservative, deeply religious mother to a large brood” who at the time of her appointment “told Mr. Putin that she had nine children, five biological and four adopted, while fostering 13 more.” In her later profile piece, Hopkins (2023b) notes that in Russia, Lvova-Belova “is portrayed as the archetype of women revered in Mr. Putin’s Russia: a mother to 10 children, half of whom are adopted; and a priest’s wife whose focus is on children’s care.” Combined with her background in

social services and a political career built around support for children and people with disabilities, Lvova-Belova's actual and symbolic motherhood and mothering is often central to the articles that discuss her past. Yet, it is her actions since she took the Commissioner role that define her too.

One of the most often noted facts is Lvova-Belova's adoption of a teenage boy from Mariupol (Nazarova 2023; Coles and Sivorka 2023).⁴ Lvova-Belova is said to have personally thanked Putin for making the adoption possible in a televised interview (Coles and Sivorka 2023; Borger and Sauer 2023) and was quoted saying: "Now I know what it means to be a Donbas child's mother. It is difficult, but we definitely love each other" (Coles and Sivorka 2023). Lvova-Belova also said that the boy "had been homesick at first and even attended a demonstration supporting Ukraine. He was yearning for the house in which he grew up, friends and his dear Mariupol", she wrote on Telegram. But the children soon come to appreciate their new home, she said" (Bubola 2023). The boy speaks in a documentary *Ukraine's Stolen Children*, where "[h]is enthusiastic and complimentary interview takes place in the presence of Lvova-Belova's press officer" (Nicholson 2023). Lvova-Belova presents her benevolent and protective motherhood in line with Russian traditional gender roles and expectations; her adoption of a Ukrainian child makes her a role model for all Russians. Yet, all of this is only possible due to Putin's patronage of the deportations program and is heavily staged and controlled by Russian propaganda.

The second reason for placing mothering and motherhood in a central place in media analysis is that Lvova-Belova's adoption of a Ukrainian boy is often linked to the change in Russian adoption law, again enacted by Putin. Lvova-Belova's remark to Putin, "Of course, Russians have big hearts and are already queuing up to take care of these children. What do you think?" is presented as the inspiration for Putin's decision to remove legal obstacles from giving the children Russian passports (Hopkins 2023a). Lvova-Belova welcomes the confused children with a traditional loaf of bread and salt noting: "We welcome you like this [. . .] because now you are *ours*" (Hopkins 2023a, emphasis added). The narrative of Russian "ownership" of Ukraine's children has been prominent

4. In the majority of the reporting, he is not named. In some reports he is named as Filip (Nicholson 2023). Gall et al (2023) name him as Filip Holovnya.

where Russian sources are quoted; Lvova-Belova sees the arrest warrant as a “recognition of her efforts ‘to help the children of our country’” (Coles and Sivorka 2023). Here, the monstrous motherhood narrative links Lvova-Belova to other Russian women adopting Ukrainian children. This is particularly visible in the story of Bogdan Yermokhin, a Ukrainian teen who faced being conscripted into the Russian army when he turned 18; he is represented by Lvova-Belova as “[a] very positive boy, he had helped our military, he was so pro-Russian” (Nazarova 2023), or the deportation of a two-year-old Ukrainian child named Margarita who was taken to Russia by Inna Varlamova, wife of prominent Russian politician Sergey Mironov. The children who underwent Russian re-education camps recount not only the Russification campaign but also being told that “their parents did not want them” (Gall et al 2023). Lvova-Belova is not only lying to the children, leading the “Russification” campaign, but her policy may result in some of these children being sent to fight against their own country.

Finally, the stories of Ukrainian parents and relatives (mostly mothers) of the abducted children are juxtaposed against the Russian deportation and adoption campaign. There are a number of articles that emphasize Ukrainian efforts to recover the children (e.g., Rainsford 2023; Koshiw 2023; Gall et al 2023). They focus on the difficulties of traveling to Russia in terms of finances and distance (Koshiw 2023) and the resilience of Ukrainians, mostly women, who undergo the journey. Coles and Sivorka (2023) show the dangers Ukrainian women face when travelling to Russia:

A Ukrainian woman who went to retrieve her godson and two other children from Russia was recently detained and deported after being accused of working with Ukrainian security services. A grandmother died during the journey to get her grandchildren back, leaving them stranded.

Rainsford (2023) profiles two Ukrainian mothers, Tetyana and Alla, who managed to retrieve their children from Russia:

“They kept us like cattle, separate from anyone else. Fourteen hours with no water, no food, nothing,” Alla described being held by Russia’s FSB security service at a Moscow airport. “They kept asking us what military equipment we had seen, they checked our phones a million times and asked about all our relatives.”

The bravery and sacrifice of Ukrainian women starkly contrasts with the monstrous motherhood of Lvova-Belova and other Russians who are adopting these “stolen” children.

Russia: Russian Citizens . . . with a Big Heart: "Humane" Kidnapping of Ukrainian Children

Russian policy circles and the media did not focus on Ukrainian children affected by Russia's invasion until the early days of March 2022. Though not referred to as a problem resulting from Russia's invasion only three weeks earlier, when the press did mention the issue of children in newly occupied territories, *RIA Novosti* reported that the Kremlin was making steps to give "temporary guardianship" to orphaned children in the Donbas, regardless of their citizenship. On March 9, 2022, *RIA Novosti*—quoting Lvova-Belova—stated that 1,090 orphans from Donbas had arrived in Russia and that "Russian citizens . . . [were] . . . of course, with a big heart . . . already lined up to take children. And if you will allow me, I will continue their work" ("Lvova-Belova: Russians are Ready to Take Orphans" 2023). Similarly, another story published the same day by *RIA Novosti* did not refer to the orphans as Ukrainian or Russian, instead calling them "orphans from the Donbas." In this coverage, *RIA Novosti* highlighted Lvova-Belova and Putin's joint work in applying for a legislature that would accommodate the orphans. Putin said the legislation would apply to every orphaned child in the region, despite citizenship, "in this situation, first of all, it is necessary to think of the interests of the children" (Putin Promised to Change the Legislation 2022). Citizenship remained an obstacle to Lvova-Belova's plans to move children from Ukraine to Russia under the guise of them being orphaned, but media and Kremlin reporting on the topic of the children's citizenship was aimed at establishing a sense of ambiguity, while presenting the image of a Russia that would overlook citizenship in the name of the child's safety ("Lvova-Belova: The Issue of Guardianship of Orphans" 2022). *RIA Novosti* officially documents that Ukrainian children can be "adopted" by Russian families from April 1, 2022. Though already at this point, the media outlet has said that 1,560 children had arrived in Russia—but it is not clear where they were housed. On April 1, 2022, *RIA Novosti* reported that 222 children without Russian citizenship or legal representation from institutions (orphanages) could "be transferred to families for upbringing" ("Lvova-Belova Allowed the Transfer of Orphans" 2022). Although Russian families are already adopting these children, legislation on offering temporary guardianship stands in the way. Finally, *RIA Novosti* reported on the first ten families in Moscow taking on twenty-five children in the week commencing April 20, 2022. They quoted Lvova-Belova stating, "it

is necessary to make efforts to find the relatives of these children. But if there are no such opportunities, then Russian families will be able to give these guys the warmth and care that is required” (“Ten Families of the Moscow Region Will Take Custody” 2022).

Russian media discourses changed quite suddenly when referring to the movement of children from Donbas. *RIA Novosti* framed the transferral of children to Russia — in line with the rhetoric of the Russian state — as a “humanitarian” mission, thus elevating it from being a project in the interest of the children themselves to one that should concern humanity (“United Russia Proposed to Place Orphans” 2022). The scale of Russia’s “evacuation” of children from the Donbas grew exponentially in a three-week period. By April 21, 2022, *RIA Novosti* reported that more than 150,000 children had now been “evacuated” from the Donbas to Russia, noting that these numbers include children from families and institutions. Again, this exercise was presented as a form of “humanitarian assistance” (“More Than 150 Thousand Children Were Evacuated” 2022). Alongside the movement of children from the Donbas to Russia, the Russian state reestablished orphanages in newly occupied regions (“Lvova-Belova Announced the Partial Return” 2022). In addition, several articles in *RIA Novosti* in May 2022 highlight Russia’s “humanitarian projects” that seek to ensure access to medicines and aid (“Lvova-Belova Spoke About Helping Children” 2022; “The Campaign ‘In Children’s Hands’ collected 18.5 tons of aid” 2022;⁵ “‘Circle of Kindness’ is ready to provide medicines to children from Donbas” 2022). In June 2022, the United Kingdom sanctioned Lvova-Belova “for the forced transfer and adoption of Ukrainian children.” In response, *RIA Novosti* quoted Lvova-Belova’s response: “Thank you to the British for the attention they have drawn to our mission to help in Donbas. . . . The humanitarian mission will continue, and everyone can become a participant in it. Like-minded people, join us” (“Lvova-Belova Thanked the British Authorities for Including Them” 2022). Following the EU’s sanction against Lvova-Belova, the children’s ombudsman doubled down on her June response

5. Established by Lvova-Belova in April 2022 but officially launched on June 1, 2023, the “In Children’s Hands” campaign website outlines the project’s mission as aimed ‘at creating a comfortable and safe environment, support, assistance, rehabilitation, medical and psychological support for children and families with children from the new constituent entities of the Russian federation.’ (“Humanitarian action ‘In Children’s Hands’” n.d.)

that the sanctions signalled that the Russian state was “going the right way” (“Lvova-Belova Commented on the Inclusion” 2022).

By March 2023, the Russian state and state-supportive outlets like *RIA Novosti* were continuing to discuss the movement of children from Ukraine to Russia as a humanitarian mission and doubled down on this messaging in the aftermath of the ICC’s arrest warrant ruling. Mentions of Lvova-Belova are simply repetitions of her statement made in the wake of the ruling, outlining the international community’s recognition of her important work. An *RIA Novosti* article from March 17, 2023, for example, notes: “Lvova-Belova, commenting on the situation, noted that in this way the international community appreciated her work in helping children who are being taken out of the combat zone and creating good living conditions for them. She expressed her readiness to continue working in this direction” (“The International Criminal Court” 2023).

Just as with everything else in the kingdom of crooked mirrors that is modern Russia, inhumane crimes are portrayed as humanitarian feats. One of them is child abduction. Not even trying to hide behind the classified orders . . . Russia boasts about its conduct in Ukraine for the world to see, and to record. (Fedosiuk 2023)

Fedosiuk (2023) refers to the smoke screen created in the Russian media and political discourses by reframing the abduction of Ukrainian children as a humanitarian rescue mission and questioning the “normal” and “humane” action to take in instances when children are unsafe. In this process, Russian media and politicians do not acknowledge that the children’s condition was the direct result of Russia’s invasion. They also counter claims that the transportation of children was forced by portraying the deportation as a humanitarian rescue mission in which Russia takes on the role of the savior (Fronek et al. 2023; Muelrath 2024).

The Russian media’s conceptual framing of Russia’s deportation of Ukrainian children as an humanitarian mission is not surprising, particularly when considering how humanitarianism—when applied to instances of crimes committed in war—has become a normalized discourse that centers on “presumed universal humanity, rooted in the collection of practices of aid and care that are driven by a neutral desire to ‘do good’” (McCormack and Gilbert 2022, 180; see also Gurd 2006; Jahren 2013). When justifying action on humanitarian grounds, there is the implication that the other side is either producing the humanitarian

crisis or does not care to provide a safe haven. This is particularly clear in stories published by *RIA Novosti* that quote Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova: “Who would have thought 15 years ago that in the West, caring for children, saving them, and treating them would become criminally punishable” (“Zakharova Commented on the ICC Decision” 2023; “Here Is Our Historical Storehouse” 2023). As Sahraoui and Tyszler (2021) note, “Humanitarian actions and humanitarian discourse are key tools of governance toward those deemed in need of saving and rescue . . . [and create a reliance on] a hierarchical relation of victim and saviours.” In Ukrainian, Western and Russian media depictions, Ukraine’s youth are victims. However, the idea that Russia is the savior of children is only seen in the discourses of the Russian media, political circles and in their international supporters (“Gryzlov Accused the West of Double Standard” 2023).

Finally, the concept of victimhood is vital to claims of humanitarianism and continues to be explored by feminist International Relations scholars. The term itself is gendered and is often mobilized through the myth of protection that individuals and states use to justify action. Women, children and the elderly are commonly defined as vulnerable and in need of protection and therefore become the targets of this “protecting the victims” narrative (Sjoberg and Tickner 2013). In the case of Russia’s media and political discourses on the topic of children in Ukraine, the youth are clearly marked as victims and vulnerable in the context of the war. Radio Sputnik, for example, notes Lvova-Belova’s depiction of the ICC ruling, that the removal of Ukrainian youth is a “normal and human approach to caring for disadvantaged children” (“Lvova-Belova: The ICC Decision Proves” 2023). However, contrary to traditional portrayals of men as the protectors, Lvova-Belova presents herself and is presented by others in that role (“The Priest Commented on the ICC Accusations” 2023; “White Angels’, Grey Wolves” 2023). On May 12, 2023, *RIA Novosti* quoted Lvova-Belova speaking about her work in the occupied regions of Ukraine: “Russia has never abandoned its children, neither in Syria nor in Ukraine. We will always stand guard and protect them. We will save children, and no sanctions or arrest warrants will stop us” (“Sergei Kratsov Spoke About Assistance” 2023). Yet, even in taking on the masculinized role as the protector, the Russian media maintains Lvova-Belova’s femininity. In response to EU sanctions brought against her in 2022 on the issue of deporting children, Lvova-Belova is quoted as saying: “look into the

eyes of those children who are now coming to Russia, who had been sitting in bomb shelters for a long time, dreamed that they would be taken to Russia by loving parents, and where were their (the EU's) efforts when they were under fire in the Donbas for eight years" ("Lvova-Belova Commented on the Inclusion" 2022). The Russian media therefore presents Lvova-Belova through the lens of motherhood, as nurturing and caring—particularly when the media story either mentions the ICC or includes direct quotes from Russian officials questioning the level of care or concern shown by the ICC and other countries about children in war zones. On February 19, 2024, *RIA Novosti* quoted Lvova-Belova who noted that Ukraine is on a “myth-making” mission against Russia on the topic of children in occupied spaces and that Ukraine continues to [imitate] care for children (“Lvova-Belova Told How Ukraine” 2024).

The power of the Russian media's use of humanitarian discourse relies on asking questions about the ICC's own values. By presenting the deportation of Ukrainian children as a humanitarian mission, the state is claiming a form of moral superiority. The Russian media, through its quotations from Russian officials including Lvova-Belova, presents the ICC's ruling as irrational and nonsensical—as a distortion of the Russian response to a humanitarian crisis—and in so doing, feminizes the ICC. Though the media depicts Lvova-Belova as having agency, she still maintains her femininity through her emphasis on humanitarianism and concepts of care.

Discussion: Maria Lvova-Belova: Humanitarian, Genocidaire, Monster-Mother

The above analysis of the depiction of Lvova-Belova and her actions in the different media contexts shows the importance of applying a gender lens to discourse analysis. The question of agency linked to ideal/monstrous motherhood becomes central to all three contexts we studied.

When examining *how* the media refers to Putin and Lvova-Belova in the case of the ICC's arrest warrant, Putin remains a central focus in both the UK/US and Russian narratives, particularly in the immediate weeks following the announcement. The marginalization of Lvova-Belova, particularly in initial reports of the ICC's arrest warrant ruling, is not surprising. Though research on the representation of male and female political elites in the media centers on political representation, elections and the representation of men and women in leadership roles,

work on this topic by, for example, Ette (2017), O'Neill et al. (2016) and Verge and Pastor (2018) demonstrate that women are often sidelined or receive less coverage than their male counterparts. Yet, Lvova-Belova and Putin are not counterparts: he is the President of Russia, and she is a part of the Presidential commission working on children's rights. Their power is therefore unequal, and this is reflected in the degree of attention that Putin is afforded in these media discussions on the arrest warrant. Would the topic of the arrest warrant have been awarded such attention if Putin was not also listed as a recipient? The fact that previous sanctions against Lvova-Belova received little attention around the time that the sanctions were decided suggests that they would not, although we cannot provide a definitive answer to this question.

The majority of the early UK and US media reports deny Lvova-Belova agency and represent her as a mere extension of Putin's policy. She is predominantly framed as the "public face" of the deportation. She is afforded more monstrous agency in the very few articles that profile her and as more information about the realities of the deportation and Russification campaign come out. This contrasts with Ukrainian reporting on Lvova-Belova. While Lvova-Belova herself is rarely central in the Ukrainian reporting, which focuses on the genocidal nature of the deportations and Russification, her agency is never diminished when she is discussed. This is an important finding as it shows the clear challenge to the "Putin's war" discourse that is common in the Western media. Unsurprisingly, the Russian media affords Lvova-Belova the agency of a symbolic good mother to the collective "adopted" Ukrainian children and a leader of the "humanitarian" campaign to save them.

Lvova-Belova's femininity and motherhood are central to her representations, albeit in ways that are different from the representations of other women perpetrators in the literature (Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; Åhäll 2012). Some of the reporting from the US focuses on her traditional and conservative mother image, but it is mainly her "adoption" of the boy from Mariupol that becomes symbolic of the wider importance of the deportations in all three contexts. In Ukrainian discourse, Lvova-Belova is the ultimate monstrous mother stealing Ukrainian children in order to Russify them and turn them against their own country and people. In the Russian context, the deportations campaign is presented as humane and humanitarian, and Lvova-Belova becomes the womanly face of the "protective" Russian nation. In the UK and US context, the brave motherhood of Ukrainian women is juxtaposed against Lvova-Belova's actions and Russia's power. Importantly, Lvova-Belova employs

the motherhood frame to posit herself as protective and innocent of any wrongdoing.

Conclusions

Ukrainian, British, American and Russian media portrayals of Maria Lvova-Belova in the context of the ICC's arrest warrant ruling against her reveal complex and multifaceted narratives shaped by national and ideological perspectives. This analysis of Lvova-Belova's case contributes to academic literature on discourses about women as perpetrators of violence and enriches scholarly debates on gender, agency, and political violence.

First, this article highlights the critical role that gender plays in the media representation of politically violent women. Lvova-Belova's portrayal varies significantly across different national contexts, with Ukrainian media emphasizing her direct responsibility and agency in committing war crimes, countering the often simplistic narrative that Russia's war against Ukraine is only "Putin's war." By naming her as a key perpetrator rather than a mere puppet, Ukrainian media underscores the broader narrative of collective Russian responsibility for the invasion and associated atrocities. This portrayal serves to dismantle the stereotype of women as passive and inherently peaceful, illustrating instead a complex image of female agency in the context of severe political violence. In contrast, Russian state media presents the act of deporting Ukrainian children, which is described by the ICC as a war crime, instead as a humanitarian rescue mission. The Russian media frame the act as the "normal" and "humane" duty-bound action of removing children from sites of warfare. In Russian media portrayals, Lvova-Belova is an active participant in the "humanitarian mission." While media discourse on the ICC arrest warrant story does not give as much emphasis and attention to Lvova-Belova as it does to Putin, this is understandable given his status as president. The article poses the question although does not provide a definitive answer: Would the ruling have amassed as much media attention if Putin had not been included?

Second, the gendered discourse surrounding Lvova-Belova often intersects with themes of motherhood and monstrosity, echoing Gentry and Sjoberg's (2015) categorization of violent women in media narratives. Ukrainian media, for instance, contrasts her role as a "protector of children" with her actions of deporting Ukrainian children, framing her as a "perverse mother" who subverts the nurturing role traditionally ascribed to women. This duality not only intensifies the perceived

gravity of her crimes but also challenges the deeply ingrained societal expectations of women's roles in conflict. Lvova-Belova proudly defends her active role in the deportation of Ukrainian children. Though her own role as a mother only appears in the discourse in relation to her adoption of these children, the references to Lvova-Belova's care and concern for children's well-being keeps her femininity central to media discourses on the deportations.

Moreover, the media analysis illustrates the ideological underpinnings and motivations for the different portrayals of Lvova-Belova. In Ukrainian media, the emphasis is on victimization and resistance, depicting Lvova-Belova as a central figure in Russia's genocidal policies. In contrast, Western media, while acknowledging her crimes, often integrates her narrative within the broader context of international law and justice, sometimes downplaying her individual agency in favour of focusing on systemic issues and the symbolic significance of the ICC warrant. Meanwhile, Russian state-controlled media portrays her in a defensive or even sympathetic light, framing the ICC's actions as politically motivated attacks on Russia.

The use of discourse analysis as a methodological tool in this study allows for an in-depth exploration of these narratives, revealing the power dynamics and ideological struggles that shape public perceptions. By examining the language, themes, and representations in media reports, this approach uncovers how gender and politics intersect to construct specific images of agency and culpability.

In conclusion, the case of Maria Lvova-Belova and the ICC arrest warrant serves as an example of the complexities involved in the portrayal of women in relation to political violence. It challenges existing stereotypes and enriches the academic discourse on gender, agency, and international justice. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of gendered narratives in conflict and call for a more nuanced approach to analysing women's roles in political violence. There is abundant scope for further research to continue to explore these intersections, considering how different cultural and political contexts shape the representation of female perpetrators and the broader implications for gender and justice in international relations.

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