RESEARCH ARTICLE

Localising WPS in the Post-Soviet Space
Reconfigurations, Copy-Pasting and Conceptual Gaps

Henri Myrttinen

Gender Associations International Consulting

Abstract

The localisation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda has been a growing trend over the past years. Its aim is to turn the often somewhat abstract aims of WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) into tangible 'on-the-ground' activities; to allow for broader and more diverse participation; and to expand the issues covered by NAPs, focusing on local needs. Localisation has taken different forms, ranging from more heavily 'top-down' to mainly 'bottom-up' approaches, and combinations of these. Based on an analysis of WPS processes in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine, I examine the different approaches taken, hurdles encountered, and emerging re-configurations of WPS. Using these five case examples, I examine to what degree the high hopes placed in localisation have materialised, and where potential future entry points lie. As the massive 2022 escalation of the Ukraine War occurred during the revision process, it will only be reflected upon briefly.

Keywords: Women; Peace; Security; Localisation; Post-Soviet

Introduction

In this article, I focus on efforts to localise the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plans (NAPs) in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine. Although they are often not given much prominence in global debates on WPS, a number of the countries emerging out of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) have been actively working on WPS issues, especially over the past decade. Since the passing of Georgia's first WPS NAP in 2012, numerous other countries of Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia have followed suit, in particular those seeking a closer integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Kyrgyzstan passed its first NAP in 2013, Tajikistan in 2015, Ukraine in 2016, Moldova in 2018 and Armenia in 2019, and both Georgia and Kyrgyzstan are by now on their third NAP.

All of the NAPs in the region are "inward-looking", meaning they are focused on achieving WPS aims within the country's borders. This is in contrast to for example most donor-country WPS NAPs which are only "outward-looking", focusing on what the country is doing abroad in terms of promoting WPS. All countries, as discussed further below, are also implementing their NAPs in a context of conflict or outright war. A further key feature in all of the five countries, which I focus on here, has been the pioneering of different approaches to localising their NAPs through different approaches.

In terms of the structure of this article, I will first discuss the methodology and the context of the research. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of localisation, and how it has been theorised and put into practice in the WPS policy sphere. Then, I give an overview

of WPS NAP processes in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine with a lens on localisation. I then discuss some of the key findings and end with more general conclusions.

Methodology

This article draws on a review of key documents from the five countries as well as semi-structured research interviews conducted with key informants, both in person in 2019 and online in 2021. Some Interviews were also followed up with e-mail questions. The key documents reviewed included all of the WPS NAPs themselves, evaluations and assessments of their implementation where these were available, and relevant 'grey literature' from NGOs, think-tanks and international agencies, such as UN Women. These were available to differing degrees, with more information being available on the Georgia and Ukraine NAPs, and especially the Armenia NAP having little in the way of secondary information on its implementation. For the NAP analysis, English translations from the LSE WPS Centre NAP database (https://www.wpsnaps.org/) were used. The NAPs analysed were Armenia NAP I (2019), Georgia NAPs I-III (2011, 2016, 2018), Kyrgyzstan NAPs I-III (2013, 2016, 2018), Moldova NAP I (2018), and Ukraine NAP I (2016, amended in 2018), using a basic content analysis approach, with a particular focus on localization.

The qualitative research consisted of two distinct phases, an in-person field research phase in the second half of 2019, and on-line, zoom and e-mail-based, research in 2020-2021. The 2019 field research was part of a broader study on WPS NAPs in the OSCE region, which covered Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine, in which localisation was one of the thematic focus areas among others (published as OSCE/LSE 2020). The interviewees for this phase, 26 in Kyrgyzstan, 20 in Moldova, 22 in Ukraine, were from national and local level government, local civil society organisations working on WPS, academia and think tanks, international organisations such as UN Women and OSCE, as well as international NGOs (see References below for a list of interviewed organisations). These interviews were semi-structured and the questions depended on the area of expertise of the interviewee, and not all of them pertained to localisation, given the broader overall remit of the research. All interviews were anonymised and verbal consent was given.[1] The interviews were either conducted in English or in the respective local language through a translator, and handwritten notes were taken. The interviewees had been selected by the respective OSCE mission as key interlocutors on WPS issues. The second, on-line, phase of the research for this article was focused solely on experiences of localisation, and consisted of seven online interviews (two with international NGOs working on WPS NAPs in the region, one each with either the national UN Women office or OSCE office)[2] as well as approximately a dozen e-mail exchanges with staff from civil society organisations and international organisations working on WPS NAP implementation and localisation in the five countries.

The research for this paper faced several limitations. The Covid-19 pandemic limited access to local actors for the second phase, but also led to a lack of implementation of local level activities, especially in the cases of Armenia and Moldova. In the case of Armenia, the re-escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh War and subsequent political crisis in 2020 also put a hold on many planned NAP activities. Furthermore, as became evident in the national-level interviews, national actors often lacked an overview of activities at the local level, and thus struggled to collate data and assess the effects of localisation. Gauging the impact of localisation efforts was also beyond the scope of this research, as the reporting on localisation efforts was almost exclusively focused on activities and outputs (e.g. number of

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[1] As the interviews did not cover vulnerable populations, the research did not go through an IRB.
[2] The international actors were chosen due to ease of external access during the pandemic and as I was mostly seeking follow-up information on localisation

workshops or plans developed) rather than how these had an impact in the lives of women and girls.

The research for this article also preceded the 2022 escalation of the Ukrainian War, which has had an immense negative impact on Women, Peace and Security at all levels in the country, but I have added references to the new phase of war where relevant.

Regional context

In spite of important differences between them, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine also share several important traits which are pertinent to the implementation of their NAPs. Given their shared history as former constituent republics of the USSR, all these countries inherited similar state administrative and governance structures upon independence. All five countries have further had to build their own national security and justice sector institutions by drawing on, as well as restructuring and reforming the ones from the Soviet era. The institutional culture of Soviet-era bureaucracy in these structures was one which in many ways was diametrically opposed to the spirit of the WPS Agenda: obsessed with state security and secrecy, undemocratic and non-participatory, untransparent and hierarchical. The USSR was also highly militarised, with key areas of civilian life such as the economy and education also harnessed into maintaining a position of military strength vis-à-vis external enemies, and the internal security services geared towards rooting out internal opposition.

Notably, all five countries are conflict-affected to some degree, ranging most dramatically from the ongoing all-out war in Ukraine, over a briefer war in Armenia in 2020, to border conflicts as between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, or "frozen" conflicts such as Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. In the case of Georgia, the frozen conflicts re-erupted in 2008 in the 11-day Russo-Georgian War. Both Georgia and Tajikistan also experienced civil wars in the 1990s. Security concerns in the five countries are often framed in terms of geopolitics, and WPS has been seen by some of the governments as a way of increasing their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e. being closer to NATO and the European Union. This has arguably been especially the case for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and there has been mutual co-operation as well as exchanges between state and civil society representatives of the three countries on WPS NAPs' development, implementation and monitoring (UN Women Ukraine 2018). This connection between promoting gender equality and seeking Euro-Atlantic integration, one Ukrainian civil society interviewee noted, was seen by some as also leading to a geopolitical backlash:

> *"The resistance to gender equality, against the so-called "gender agenda" in the media and social media, that is part of Russia's hybrid warfare against us."*[3]

Lastly, even if they have broken with it, all five countries share a history of having been part of the USSR with its own gendered socio-economic and political legacies which shaped local gender norms and dynamics (see for example also Handrahan 2001; Usha 2005; Bureychak 2012; Jojishvili 2021). The USSR officially promoted gender equality and launched campaigns to root out "backward" traditional patriarchal practices, such as polygamy, child marriage or the use of the veil, especially among the non-Russian ethnic minorities. Women's participation in the economy and in academia was high, but political participation was low (Usha 2005). Soviet society, in spite of celebrating women's empowerment, remained largely patriarchal and especially the security sector and political decision-

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[3] Interview, Kyiv, October 2019. It should however be noted that some of the anti-gender equality voices in the five countries are also anti-Russian. On Russian anti-gender foreign policy, see also Edenborg (2021)

making remained mostly male domains (Alexievich 2017; Usha 2005). In the post-Soviet era, political decision-making has largely remained a male-dominated space, although in particular in recent years women have gained more political prominence in the five countries covered here, to differing degrees. While gender equality is nowadays arguably embedded into society and politics more deeply than during the Soviet era, the immediate post-Soviet era saw rollbacks in several countries in terms of socio-economic gains that had been by women under Soviet rule. "Gender" as a term and concept has also become a highly politicised in the five countries, with Orthodox Christian and conservative Muslim religious actors as well as nationalist political groups arguing in all five countries that it undermines national culture and 'the natural order of things' (see also Wilkinson & Langlois 2014; Heinrich Boell Foundation 2015; Edenborg 2021).

These legacies and dynamics have shaped the possibilities for the implementation of and the resistances faced by the WPS Agenda, as local administrative structured and security sector institutions have often remained wedded to what several of the interviewees for this study called "the old way of thinking".

The Promises of Localisation

The localisation of WPS NAPs has been increasingly explored in a number of countries through a variety of approaches, and is a topic that is gaining increasing attention from national and international actors. These have included the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), UN Women and the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), the latter of whom has published a toolkit on the issue (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos 2018). Localisation has been promoted as a key pathway for ensuring a more meaningful and participatory implementation of the WPS Agenda, for example in the UN Women (2015) Global Study on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. As I explore further below, there are many hopes that have been projected on to localisation: that it ideally makes WPS NAPs more concrete in terms of their impact, that it better responds to lived realities and human security needs, and that it increases women's diverse and meaningful participation. It also allows, in theory at least, for a formulation of more tailored responses to the particular gendered security risks and needs faced by different parts of a country (e.g. the different needs in rural vs. urban settings or in border areas).

Localisation is often seen as a key pathway towards addressing the gap between WPS policy and lived reality, and are seen as a way of delivering tangible results based on locally articulated needs, as outlined for example by Amling & O'Reilly (2016), Babic-Svetlin et al. (2016) and Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos (2018). Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos (2018, p. 15) see localisation as a way of overcoming gaps in implementing and delivering concretely on the promises of the WPS Agenda, ideally 'guarantee[ing] leadership, ownership and participation of local communities.' They also see localisation of the agenda (as opposed to the localisation of a NAP) as an alternative peacebuilding and conflict prevention tool in contexts where there is no NAP.

For Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos (2018, p. 18-19) outline the key objectives of localisation are local-level awareness-raising on the WPS Agenda, identifying local WPS concerns, fostering local ownership and commitment to delivering on WPS, developing new legal and policy instruments for local-level WPS implementation and increasing accountability and co-ordination between various actors. Amling & O'Reilly (2016) further see localisation as a means to address structural barriers to diverse women's participation in peace and security processes, as well as increasing flexibility and more thematic diversity in WPS action plans.

Respondents to the interviews tended to see localisation as a positive step in theory, and echoed many of the arguments outlined above:

> *"Through localisation, we can address the different WPS needs of women in different parts of the country. This here is a port town, close to the border – our needs are different from a rural area or from Kyiv."*[4]

> *"The local level consultations with women across the country allowed us to capture the different needs across the country and link the local level women with the national process."*[5]

> *"Ideally, localising the NAP will make the activities more concrete on the ground, make WPS more meaningful to women."*[6]

However, many were sceptical of its implementation and efficacy in practice, as will be discussed further below. A key concern across all countries was a lack of centrally collated data on LAPs and their implementation. This made it difficult for those working on the WPS Agenda at the national level to get an understanding of what was actually happening locally in terms of the LAPs beyond what plans had been shared with them.[7]

Pathways of Localisation

Localisation of NAPs has been understood and approached in different ways in the countries where it has been implemented.[8] International actors also have differing approaches. GNWP for example focuses on the local formulation of WPS Action Plans developed by civil society with decentralised local authorities, even independently of a NAP (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos, 2018). OSCE and UN Women, on the other hand, also include the local implementation of centrally designed and mandated plans. Based on the research conducted for this paper, I expand the framework we had developed in the OSCE/LSE (2020) study, identifying seven different pathways for localisation:

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[4] Civil society representative, Odesa, October 2019

[5] Civil society representative, Bishkek, October 2019

[6] Representative of international organization based in Tbilisi, online interview, June 2021

[7] This was also a challenge in as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia where I also conducted research on the issue in 2019. Data collection, monitoring and evaluation on NAP activities were however not only challenges in terms of localised activities. Even solely central government-level NAPs struggle with collating relevant data across all implementing ministries and civil society, an issue that goes well beyond the countries covered here.

[8] Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos (2018) list Armenia, Burundi, Colombia (which has no NAP), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Kenya, Liberia, Moldova, Nepal, the Philippines, Serbia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Uganda, and Ukraine, in addition to which there is at least also Kyrgyzstan

Table 1 – Pathways of implementing localisation

Pathway
1. Developing a WPS local action plan (LAP) "from the ground up" independently of a NAP based on localised gender and security analysis
2. Local level actors develop a LAP within the parameters of a NAP but based on their own local gender and security analysis
3. Locally implementable activities by local-level actors are integrated into national level plans
4. Local actors (e.g. local government) copy activities from NAPs directly, adapt these and implementing them locally
5. Top-down implementation of a NAP through the local structures of national ministries or security sector institutions
6. WPS-relevant issues are integrated by local authorities into existing or broader local gender equality implementation plans (e.g. municipal gender equality action plans)
7. Implementing individual projects with relevance to WPS issues but which are not directly tied to a national action plan

Source: Author's elaboration

These seven pathways are not mutually exclusive and often happen in parallel. In the five cases covered here, all NAPs integrate elements of pathway number five, for example through the local level implementation in a local police precinct of national guidelines on gender in policing or other WPS guidelines from a Ministry of the Interior. For the purposes of this article, I will not examine pathways six and seven in much detail, as gathering data on these was beyond the scope of my research. Charting pathway six would require a systematic mapping of gender equality-relevant action plans by various local administrative structures at the municipal, county and provincial/district levels. Localised activities under pathway seven, meanwhile, are almost by definition not captured by national level WPS actors unless they are specifically informed about them. Many of my respondents highlighted however that, to differing degrees in the countries, there may be a substantial number of activities by local civil society and local government structures that would fall under this category. These would for example include the local level Women's Resource Centres in Kyrgyzstan or local NGOs' anti-human trafficking work in Ukraine (OSCE/LSE 2020).

The geographical scope of localisation varied between the countries studied here, with Ukraine seeking to implement it across the whole of the country, and the others only in select regions, at least for the moment.

Overview of the NAPs country contexts and localisation processes

In this section, I will give an overview of the NAP processes in the five countries, listed in alphabetical order, with a particular focus on localisation processes.[9] As mentioned above in the limitations, the available data is unevenly spread, with little secondary data available on the processes of localisation in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova, and a more substantial documentation of the processes in Georgia and Ukraine.

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[9] The countries are listed in alphabetical order rather than following a historical trajectory of when the NAPs were introduced, as the latter would have required jumping between country contexts for those countries which have implemented several NAPs, or, in the case of Ukraine, undertaken an amendment at mid-term. There is however a degree of interplay between at least some of the countries, as experiences and good practices from NAP implementation in one country has influenced NAP development in other countries.

Armenia

Armenia's first WPS NAP covers the period 2019-2021 (Republic of Armenia, 2019). The localisation agenda was supported during the design phase by outside actors, including GNWP (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos, 2018). Nonetheless, as with many of the other NAPs covered here, what I have termed the fifth pathway of localisation (i.e. local implementation WPS guidelines of a central-level ministry by subordinate entities) remains the main modus of localisation in Armenia in the plan. However, the implementation plan does include one specific objective under the participation pillar that explicitly outlines a role for local authorities as well as civil society, working together with three national level ministries.[10] The cope of this is limited geographically to the border areas: "Support the social adaptation of wives to the soldiers in military units of border settlements". The relevant measure is specified as being "Collaboration with national institutions, local self-governing bodies, non-governmental organisations on the issues of social integration of wives to the soldiers" (Republic of Armenia, 2019, Objective 7). Similar to Georgia, there is a direct link between the localisation activity with a national level strategic security objective, in this case border security and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Unlike the bottom-up, locally rooted approaches championed by Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos (2018), the localisation was more top-down.

Based on interviews with global and national actors, the implementation of this objective was severely hampered by three simultaneous crises during the period of implementation: the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War as well as the ensuing political crisis in Armenia. The outcomes and impacts of this limited localisation activity thus remain unclear.

Georgia

Georgia has been an early pioneer of WPS NAPs in the region and has been very active in sharing its experiences both with neighbouring countries as well as further abroad, e.g. in the West Balkans. The current WPS NAP (2018-2020) is the country's third (Republic of Georgia 2018).[11] While 'pathway 5' localisation through national level ministries is part of the plan, the NAP also prominently includes localisation as a way to better meet the needs of women internally displaced persons (IDPs)[12] and in communities along the administrative border lines (ABL) with the break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Localisation was already included in the previous 2016-2017 NAP, but this was viewed in an external evaluation of the plan as being one of its weak spots (Women's Information Center 2017). The review concluded that 'it was not possible to decentralize the process and involve the local self-government in development and implementation process of the NAP' (Women's Information Center, 2017, p. 13). It further recommends to embed localisation more centrally, "to provide development, approval and budgetary provision" for localisation, strengthen co-operation and co-ordination on this between central and local administrative structures, and bring in civil society actors into the process (Women's Information Center, 2017, p. 73).

The critique and recommendations with regards to localisation were picked up upon in the development and implementation of the third NAP. In particular, a coalition of three civil

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[10] These are the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, and Ministry of Defence.

[11] At the time of writing in 2021, the development of the fourth NAP from 2020 is still on-going due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

[12] These IDPs were displaced from Abkhazia and South Ossetia during 1991-1992 (South Ossetia War), 1992-1993 (Abkhazian War) and during the 2008 war (from both Abkhazia and South Ossetia)

society organisations (CSOs), the IDP Women's Association "Consent", Women's Information Center and Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sokhumi" launched a NAP localisation project with support from UN Women and the U.S. Department of State.[13] The project aimed at strengthening the capacities of the regional and local administrations in the localisation and implementation of the NAP as well as to enhance the participation of IDP, conflict-affected and marginalised women in ten municipalities of Georgia.[14] These are mostly, but not exclusively, municipalities bordering the ABL with either Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

Within the framework of the project, the coalition of three NGOs approached localisation by working together with the municipal authorities, organising town hall meetings which led to the establishment of localisation working groups. These included representatives from the local government, civil society organizations and grass-root women, which then developed roadmaps for the localisation of the NAP together with the municipalities concerned. The NGOs' coalition continued to give technical support to these working groups throughout, and support them in advocating for the inclusion of identified priorities into the local budgets for 2020. In the case of Zugdidi, the local action plan development was led by the municipality itself, and activities were funded from the municipality's budget. Other municipalities allocated funds from their local budgets to fund some of the WPS issues identified during the localization process.[15]

In parallel to the WPS NAP implementation process, a localisation of the Gender Equality National Action Plan was also underway in 62 municipalities from 2018 onwards. These municipalities, which were spread out across the country, developed local gender equality action plans and established Gender Equality Councils. One of the concerns by national WPS actors was to ensure that these gender equality LAPs also reflect WPS concerns and commitments. The new Gender Equality Councils are also potentially mechanisms for increasing women's diverse participation, addressing the needs of IDP and conflict-affected populations and further advocate for these needs to be included in relevant local policies, programs, and budgets.[16]

As a result of the WPS localisation pilot project, in eight of the ten pilot municipalities, amendments were made to the gender equality LAPs relating to the rights of IDP and conflict-affected women and girls. Zugdidi municipality went the furthest, with its own stand-alone WPS LAP with targeted awareness raising for those living adjacent to the ABLs and IDPs on the rights of women and girls, as well as available health and social services available. The municipality also ensured broader participation of CSOs working on women's rights, as well as women community leaders in their councils and commissions, including on Gender Equality. Municipal funds were further allocated for local CSO projects supporting socially vulnerable groups and families; roads, gas, water supply, public transportation and kindergartens in the villages adjacent to the ABL were improved; and financial support and transport subsidies were provided to IDP and conflict affected families.[17]

The working group meetings within the municipalities and joint national conferences helped improve coordination between the authorities and civil society, but also among the central, regional and local governments. UN Women was also involved in supporting and monitoring the NAP localisation process. This is set to continue in municipalities adjacent

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[13] The full name of the project is 'Strengthening the Capacities of the Regional and Local Administrations in the Processes of Localization of the National Action Plan (NAP) UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and Enhancing the Dialogue and Participation of Women, including the most Marginalized in those Processes'
[14] These are Dusheti, Gori, Kareli, Kaspi, Khashuri, Sachkhere, Stepantsminda, Tsalenjikha, Tskaltubo and Zugdidi
[15] These were Tsalenjikha, Gori, and Sachkhere municipalities
[16] Interview with UN Women Georgia, 2021
[17] Online interviews, 2021

to the ABLs as well as in municipalities with IDP populations in the coming years under the fourth WPS NAP which is still being formulated at the time of writing (UN Women Georgia, 2021).

The localisation process of the WPS NAP in Georgia thus followed multiple pathways, in particular the second, third, fifth and sixth ones. The bulk of the localisation efforts was in border areas and focused on IDPs and conflict-affected women, and in part linked to the broader Gender Equality NAP localisation process. While, as in Armenia, the localisation process thus also served to highlight national-level security concerns, the process of designing and implementing the activities was a more participatory one, and had strong civil society and municipal input, rather than going through state institutions only.

Kyrgyzstan

At the time of writing, Kyrgyzstan is on its third WPS NAP, which was planned to be in force 2018-2020 (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2018). A form of localisation was already included in its design and development process through a round of consultations that was organised in the seven regions of the country. These consultations were organised with local self-government bodies and women's rights activists and organisations, who shared their views on what the priorities should be for the NAP. These were then collated and developed into an implementation roadmap by the Forum of Women Deputies. Three of the key issues raised, according to interviews, were including combatting radicalisation and violent extremism in the NAP, paying special attention to security concerns of communities in border areas as well as developing local security plans.[18]

Much of the input from across the country was reflected in the WPS NAP, including increasing "women's participation and support for women's initiatives, including at the local level, to reduce the risks of radicalization leading to violent extremism and terrorism" (Objective 1.2), as well as preventing conflicts, strengthening GBV prevention measures and addressing the gendered impacts of conflict and other crises and disasters at all levels, including locally (Objective 2). The development of local security plans is encouraged (Objective 3.2.2.), as are contingency plans for border areas (2.3.3.). Furthermore, two conflict management pilot projects were foreseen, one in the north and one in the south of the country (Objective 2.1.1.). The plan also calls for "increasing women's representation in local council and local government bodies" (Objective 1.1.). The NAP specifically names local government bodies as implementers of the plan in addition to national level ones, and encourages close engagement with civil society. As with the other NAPs covered here, it also includes "pathway five" localisation through local level entities of national ministries, such as in disaster risk reduction. The plan also calls for more coordination between different government levels.

Furthermore, several LAPs have been developed independently in Kyrgyzstan, in part by copying the NAP for use at the local level, and the NGO Women's Support Centre has also been working with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on a pilot project on strengthening the capacity of women's committees and Public Prevention Centres in ten "newly built neighbourhoods" (*novostroyki*) surrounding Bishkek. The focus of this project has been on increasing women's participation, prevention of gender-based violence, and crime prevention more broadly (OSCE 2020).

The implementation capacity of local administrations was seen as being one of the bottle-necks of the localisation process in Kyrgyzstan, though similar sentiments were also echoed in Moldova and Ukraine:

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[18] Interviews with state and civil society representatives, Bishkek and Osh, 2019

'The local and municipal administrations are really struggling – they keep on getting more and more action plans from the national level to implement, and to report on, but they do not have the capacity or resources to do so, and do not necessarily understand the aim of the policies.'[19]

Civil society interviewees also highlighted wider resistance to gender equality among some male members of local administrations, hindering effective localisation efforts (OSCE/LSE 2020).

Moldova

Moldova is at the time of writing in its final year of its first WPS NAP, which runs from 2018 to 2021 (Republic of Moldova, 2018). The central actors for the implementation of the NAP are national level ministries and agencies, as well as their subsidiaries. Thus, by far the main pathway of localisation has been the fifth one, namely the local-level implementation of activities through entities under the control of national ministries. The one concrete local level activity that is articulated in the plan is on raising public awareness on increasing women's participation in the security sector, on reducing harmful stereotypes and on WPS more broadly (Republic of Moldova, 2018). Nonetheless, there have been initial attempts at WPS localisation, in part with the support of the Austrian Development Agency. These have included workshops on promoting WPS and women's participation, including in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (OSCE 2020). Further implementation of the localisation plans was however put on hold due to Covid-19. However, what was noticeable in the interviews with national-level actors in Chisinau and subsequent follow-up attempts to find out more about these localisation efforts was a lack of centralised data on them among national actors, beyond those activities which were implemented along the fifth pathway, i.e. through national institutions (cf. OSCE/LSE 2020).

Ukraine

The situation in Ukraine as covered here pertains largely to the situation prior to the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, which, in addition to the immense suffering caused, has up-ended the situation with respect to WPS.

Ukraine published its first WPS NAP in 2016, and it remained in force until 2020 (Cabinet of Ministries of Ukraine, 2016). The NAP is the most ambitions of the five countries covered here in terms of localisation. Localisation of the NAP has been written into the national plan and all *oblast* (regional) governments have been tasked with developing WPS action plans by the Ministry of Social Policy. Furthermore, municipality/settlement (*hromada*) level governments have also been encouraged to develop their own LAPs (UN Women Ukraine, 2018b; see also Dudko and Langenhuizen, 2022 for an in-depth discussion). At least 18 oblast governments have developed their own LAPs and others have integrated them into broader gender equality and/or social development action plans, such as in Dnipro. The plans have been of a mixed scope and quality, with some developing their plans based on a localised gender and security analysis, often with substantial CSO input (e.g. Luhansk region); others integrating elements of WPS into other plans (e.g. Kherson and Zhytomyr); some focusing on the local implementation of national activities outlined in the NAP (e.g. Odesa) and others reportedly taking shortcuts (OSCE/LSE 2020):

"The quality of the LAPs really varied, depending on the level of interest and knowledge among local administration, and among local women's organisations.

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[19] Kyrgyz national staff of an international organization, Bishkek, October 2019

Some were really outstanding, but other just took the NAP, copy-pasted the activities into their LAP, and didn't even adjust them to the local level."[20]

While the development of a context-specific, gender analysis based action plans was seen by respondents as the ideal case, with Luhansk region getting a special mention as a good case, the other options – short of simply copy-pasting the NAP – were seen as resource-effective ways of addressing WPS (cf. Dudko & Langenhuizen 2022). Nevertheless, they had the drawback of not necessarily having much analysis of local needs going into them. Most of the regional plans do not have an earmarked budget, and a mid-term review highlights that many struggled to find additional resources (UN Women Ukraine 2018b; Dudko & Langenhuizen 2022). The mid-term review also raises the issue of a lack of understanding of WPS issues at the oblast and hromada levels (UN Women Ukraine 2018). A further issue which came up in interviews was the lack of commitment to gender equality and to engaging with civil society among some local-level administrators. Situating the action plans at the oblast level thus does bring WPS closer to the local level, but it does not necessarily translate into effective local implementation unless the next-lower level of administration, i.e. the municipalities, are properly engaged, and have the political will, capacity and resources to implement them (OSCE/LSE 2020).

The development of oblast action plans has been supported by external partners, including the OSCE, UN Women and GNWP. UN Women Ukraine for example has conducted localisation workshops in at least Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, and has developed detailed localisation guidelines for local government (UN Women Ukraine 2021). The Ukrainian Women's Fund has also been holding trainings for local government and civil society actors in oblast centres to raise awareness about UNSCR 1325 at the local level.

The Russian invasion in February 2022 has, in the starkest of ways, underscored the importance of the WPS Agenda at all levels. At the Ukrainian-level much of the work has had to be suspended or radically reconfigured. For example, with respect to conflict-related sexual violence, the Ukrainian government and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict have drawn up a framework co-operation agreement, explicitly referencing the NAP (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and OSRSG-SVC 2022). The Russian invasion has also however been accompanied by a curious WPS-related silence by key outside actors, such as by NATO, raising concerns about how seriously the Agenda is taken by these actors (Wright 2022).

Discussion

This brief analysis of the localisation efforts in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Ukraine has highlighted some initial positive outcomes of localisation efforts as well as a number of the challenges. While from a global level vantage point (e.g. UN Women 2015), localisation is seen as something of a verstaile, multi-purpose tool to address the shortcomings in implementing the WPS Agenda, things look much more challenging at the working level of municipalities and regional administrative units. That is not to say that localisation has failed, but rather that it is very much work in progress. As mentioned in the introduction, assessing the impact of the localisation efforts was and is hampered by a lack of available data as well as by the fact that implementation often is still at the very early stages, and has been put on hold by Covid-19 as well as other factors, such as conflict in Armenia and between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In Ukraine, most dramatically, the previously-achieved results have been at a minimum put in question by the Russian invasion. Nonetheless, I will attempt to draw out some preliminary findings here.

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[20] Interview, national-level state representative, Kyiv, October 2019

The five countries covered here have implemented localisation through a variety of approaches. Pathway one, in which LAPs are formulated independently and pro-actively at the local level independent of a NAP, has been pioneered to some extent in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos 2018), but more data on these efforts was not available beyond them having taken place. Pathway two, in which local level civil society and administrative structures develop a LAP within the parameters of a NAP led arguably to the most concrete localisation outputs, in particular when there was strong engagement by local civil society and a high level of buy-in from key figures in local administration, such as in the case of Zugdidi municipality in Georgia and Luhansk oblast in Ukraine. The third pathway, in which locally articulated needs and activities are integrated into a NAP was followed to an extent in Georgia and also in the development and design process of the third WPS NAP in Kyrgyzstan. In Ukraine, there were also instances in which local government structures, rather than formulating their own activities, chose to copy these from the NAP, which according to interviewees did not always correspond to local needs and implementation capacities. In all countries, local level organs of national ministries were tasked with implementing activities of national level ministries, in what I have termed pathway five. Pathway six of integrating WPS objectives into other local action plans was followed by some municipalities in Georgia, who integrated these into the gender equality action plans which were being developed at the time of the third WPS NAP. Lastly, according to respondents, activities falling under the seventh pathway have been implemented but these have not been mapped or recorded systematically.

Three of the areas where localisation has been successful in the five countries has been in diversifying the participation of women, addressing different needs in different parts of the country as well as in widening the scope of issues and needs covered by WPS. In terms of broadening the spectrum of women's voices, this has been notably so for women and girls affected by conflict either as IDPs, as ones living in conflict-affected areas and families of soldiers, in the cases of Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and to an extent Kyrgyzstan, if one takes the border clashes with Tajikistan into account. In the Moldovan case, the localisation efforts opened new possibilities for Gagauz women to participate, while in the Kyrgyz case the UNODC-supported *Novostroyki* project created avenues for socio-economically more marginalised women's engagement. Geographically, localisation brought the WPS process to women and communities outside of the capital where such avenues for engagement have mostly been absent, especially rural municipalities. In some cases, this was done broadly across the country (e.g. Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine), and in the others in a more selective way. What is notable in the Armenian and Georgian cases is the direct link to border areas and the so-called 'frozen' conflicts of Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. In terms of more thematic breadth, similar to other localisation processes elsewhere (cf. Babic-Svetlin et al. 2016; Cabrera-Balleza & Fal Dutra Santos 2018), the LAPs included more everyday 'bread-and-butter' issues than the respective NAPs. An interesting exception perhaps was the strong push in Kyrgyzstan by local civil society to include countering radicalisation in the new NAP, an issue which usually tends to be raised at the national level.

In addition to the successes, the localisation processes also had to deal with a range of challenges. According to interviewees, many local level administrations were overwhelmed by the localisation demands, in particular in Ukraine where it was rolled out across the country but also in Kyrgyzstan. Technical and thematic knowledge was missing in many cases, both in terms of how to develop an action plan and in terms of the WPS Agenda. The copy-pasting of activities from the NAP by oblast governments in Ukraine was seen by respondents as one of the outcomes of this lack of capacity. A further challenge has been budgeting and having to address multiple new implementation plans simultaneously, with many local governments struggling even with their regular budgets. The WPS Agenda can

thus come to be seen as an additional burden, administratively and financially. Combining WPS and broader gender equality LAPs, as was done in Georgia and in some oblasts in Ukraine, can at least reduce some of the additional administrative burden.

Respondents also reported at least passive resistance in some administrative structures to the aims of the WPS Agenda. Transparency, participation, openness to debate with and critique from citizens, and a dedication to gender equality and diversity were definitely not hallmarks of the Soviet era administrative structures, and institutional cultures have in part been slow to change in the post-Soviet period. Further challenges have been the linking of different levels of NAP implementation, be it from the local to the national and vice-versa, or horizontally between local level implementers. This has been reflected in the difficulties of national level WPS actors in collecting and collating data on local-level activities, of assessing their impact and linking them to the NAP. Administrative siloes can also get in the way of local-level linking of NAP activities, as local level administrations may not have jurisdiction over the local branches of national ministries, and co-operation at the local level may need to be cleared through the central ministry first.

Conclusion

The five countries covered here tend not to be at the centre of global discussions of WPS NAPs, but they have been at the forefront of experimenting with different pathways to localisation. Localisation has been lauded, in part rightly, as a way to give the WPS Agenda more substance, meaning and real impact at the local level. The experiences of the five countries highlight the many challenges of doing so, and of assessing the impact. It is too early to say for certain how successful the efforts have been, especially given the involuntary pause on implementation caused by Covid-19 and a lack of data. Nonetheless, the initial findings do highlight that localisation has indeed taken the WPS Agenda from the spheres of capital city think tanks and NGOs and security sector institutions to encompass, sometimes albeit reluctantly, a whole new set of actors – oblast and municipal administrators, rural and minority women, IDPs, soldiers' wives – and opened at least new opportunities for participation.

The dominance of the fifth pathway of localisation, i.e. through state institutions, speaks to the centralised nature of state-led WPS NAPs processes. While the post-Soviet legacy may be still a factor in this, for example in terms of an institutional culture in state security institutions or local administrations that is reluctant to engage openly with civil society, this is not necessarily all that different from WPS processes in Western Europe or North America. The opening up of WPS NAPs to local actors and diverse women's voices is arguably, from personal experience, further advanced in the five countries covered here than in countries with 'outward-looking' NAPs.

What is, however, also of concern, is that NAPs are largely seen as technical and administrative tools to address relatively minor issues affecting particular groups of women, rather than delivering full-scale on the four pillars of participation, prevention, protection and relief and recovery. The massive escalation of the war in Ukraine, with its dramatic, in part horrendous, gendered impacts, the attendant humanitarian crisis, the subsequent increased tensions in Moldova, the on-going frozen conflicts in Georgia, the renewed violent outburst of the Nagorno-Karabakh war and the border conflicts in Kyrgyzstan have all highlighted the crucial importance of the themes of the WPS Agenda. The side-lining of processes set up under WPS NAPs in all of these crises however raises questions of how seriously the Agenda is taken by both national and international actors.

ORCID
Henri Myrttinen 0000-0002-8566-867X

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Institutions and organisations interviewed

Civil society organisations, parliamentarians, local administration officials and officials of ministries, state agencies and security sector institutions in Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Ukraine

Global Network of Women Peacebuilders

Inclusive Security
OSCE Gender Section
OSCE Mission to Moldova
OSCE Programme office in Bishkek
OSCE Project Co-Ordinator in Ukraine
OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine
UN Women Country Office Georgia
UN Women Country Office Moldova
UN Women Country Office Ukraine
UN Women Regional Office Europe and Central Asia