



Katja Garmasch

A new start that's full of contradictions

The situation in Ukraine is complicated. Between war, nationalism and rapprochement with the West, women are changing society.

Nothing new in the East: the weather on the front is hot. In the summer, the war gets worse. The war, officially called an Anti-Terrorist Operation or simply ATO in Ukraine, began in spring 2014, when Russian-backed separatist groups in the Donbas region demanded that Ukraine be split up. The Minsk agreement of 2015, which was supposed to end the fighting between the Ukrainian army and pro-Russian rebels, did not ease the tensions, on the contrary. For Ukrainian soldiers, the situation even intensified, because many commanding officers would not allow them to return fire until the last moment, if the separatists opened fire. So if the agreement is to be observed, one is dependent on the West for assistance. Right now, it is very quiet here in Popasna, near the city of Sloviansk. The first shots are fired around midnight, when the OSCE observers go home.

The soldiers listen to bad patriotic Ukrainian rock, clean their weapons, play with the camp dog, smoke. Roksovana is the only woman among 20 men in this Intelligence Brigade, and one of 50,000 soldiers currently serving in the Ukrainian army or in volunteer battalions.

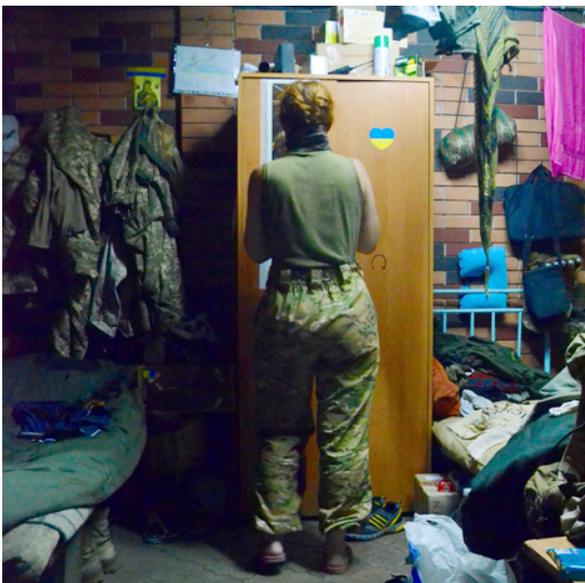


Photo: Katja Garmasch

Roksovana is her nickname, she doesn't want to reveal her real name or show her face. She comes from Crimea, where her family lives and could get into trouble if her identity is made public. "It's better like this", she laughs, "I don't have to put on makeup." A few cosmetics utensils stand tidily arranged next to her bunk bed, above which there hangs a little guardian angel made of wood, a present from her niece. Roksovana is 45 and has no children. That's rare in Ukraine. Why did she become a soldier? Because, she says, it is her civic duty. Because she doesn't want to live in Russia. After Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula, Roksovana resigned from her position as a lawyer at the Economic Court and then worked for an army unit as a volunteer. She has now been on the front for six months, where she spends most of her time in a dark, dirty barrack that she shares with the men. While in western European countries, the — albeit hesitant — admission of women to the military is perceived as a "breakthrough", a traditional image of the woman remains current in post-communist Ukraine, as in many other post-communist states: the woman as custodian and protector of the nation. It is not for nothing that the tallest and most famous Ukrainian monument, the "Motherland Monument" in Kyiv, depicts a woman with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other, both held up toward the sky.

Here, on the front, one meets very different women soldiers: those who, like Roksovana, did not want to stay at home. Those who follow their husbands, but travel home every three weeks to redo their Shellac manicure. Those who need the money because they're single mothers and can't find work. There are also those, who simply want to play war — "asocial scum", as Roksovana says. And those who hope to find the right man in the army, one who earns money, for there are not very many such men in Ukraine at the moment.

In contrast to the volunteer battalions, not every women soldier enters the theatre of war in the regular army. A department will select her according to her skills or specialization. For a long time, many commanding officers didn't want to have any women at all, claiming that their effect on the social fabric would be "hard to calculate" —at best, they would strengthen a brigade's moral, at worst however, they would be a risk factor. For Roksovana, this is completely understandable: "If it's a man, it's a fact, but if something happens to a woman on the front, everyone feels obliged to rescue her and risk their lives for her."

On the periphery of the capital Kyiv — nothing new here either. Once again, there is currently no hot water in the block of flats where former soldiers Belka and Julia live. "At least two more weeks to go", visitors are informed, without having to ask, by the babushka at the main entrance, who traditionally works here as concierge, guard and upholder of moral standards. That there is no warm water is not something that would have occurred to Julia as a matter of course: since the war begun, she showers for only 30 seconds — a habit from the front. Personal hygiene has to be quick in war.

Belka puts out her cigarette and tucks her T-shirt with the blue-yellow Ukrainian coat of arms into her army trousers, which are far too big and keep slipping down. "Many men think that women only go to the front to provide sexual services, so I have to persuade them otherwise. How? With violence of course! What works really well is the butt of a gun! But most are real gentlemen. They've protected me and dug a toilet for me. One's own toilet is the greatest!" — "No, a shower!", counters Julia. "Even if I'm always afraid of

a grenade striking while I shower. That would be the worst: to die so senselessly and naked!" Both burst out laughing and light up their third cigarette in five minutes — a habit from the front. Smoking too must be done quickly in war.

Belka is soft, warm-hearted, out of it. The 21-year-old Julia is by contrast energetic, anarchic, impulsive. At first glance, Belka and Julia don't have much in common, except for their many tattoos. "Heroes never die!" it says in old Slavic script on their upper arms; "All are equal", in Hebrew on Belka's hand. Belka, a Ukrainian Jew from the eastern metropolis of Dnipropetrovsk, was a fashion designer before the war. Julia comes from the small, southern Russian city of Pyatigorsk and was an ardent Russian nationalist before the war. Just a couple of years ago, she still attended marches for an "ethnically pure Russia". And then? "It was Euromaidan in Kyiv. I watched TV in Russia and heard that Ukrainian fascists were drinking the blood of Russian infants. I wanted to see that for myself. But then I got to the Maidan and found friends there, Belka was also present. When the Russians took Sloviansk, it was finally clear to me: my country is in the wrong, they are instigating a war!"

Julia joined the Aidar Battalion, a volunteer battalion with Ukrainian nationalist convictions, Belka followed her some months later. Julia dissociated herself from her Russian family and is considered a "traitor to the fatherland". Belka and Julia have been demobilized, though they would have gladly stayed at the front. Julia has given birth to Miroslava ("the peaceful one"), who is now one year old and a "war souvenir" of sorts. Belka's war souvenir is "diagnosis number 17". She no longer knows exactly what this means since, after six injuries (including traumatic brain injury), her memory is impaired. The worst thing about her condition is the way her hands tremble — bad for shooting a gun. Previously, Belka was a markswoman with Aidar. She was officially registered as a telephonist because, in Ukraine, there are no markswomen. Neither are there female tank commanders like Julia. Up until just one month ago, women were banned in Ukraine from entering the theatre of war as soldiers.

All women were therefore registered as cooks, medics, pool attendants or, of course, telephonists. This is why Belka received only 7000 hryvni, or about 250 euros, instead of the usual salary for marksmen of 12,000 hryvni, plus extra combat pay. This is why she cannot now receive a pension or invalidity allowance. Julia and Belka live on Miroslava's child allowance, a couple of hryvni in unemployment benefit and donations from friends and volunteers. "Of course we are bitter: because it's the lads who get the prizes now. Lads who have done nothing receive money, real estate, flats. And we get nothing. Apart from some volunteers, no one cares about us", says Julia.

Maria Berlinska says: "I didn't come to the front for the money, I didn't want prizes or perks!" Therefore, it didn't matter to her that she was not registered as an intelligence officer. It first occurred to her much later that this was in fact a problem, after she realized that other women in the army had the same experience. Together with Tamara Martsenyuk and Anna Kvit, both sociologists and gender researchers, Berlinska examined the social, financial and legal position of Ukrainian women soldiers. Her interviews confirmed that the situation of women in almost all areas is poor, and in some areas catastrophic: they receive neither uniforms in women's sizes nor a reasonable salary, nor social services; and they receive hardly any recognition from male colleagues. Maria Berlinska had not expected to create a huge stir — there were demonstrations and rallies. But at least the law was changed as a result of

her study: 25 combat occupations in the army have since been opened up to women.

"Ukraine is now changing at a furious pace", says Berlinska. The country has long since grown out of Stalin's laws and everywhere, reform is on the agenda; however, neither the lethargic and corrupt administration, nor the mentality that still hides in the old Soviet garb of a chauvinistic cut, can be changed so quickly. The same goes for the dominant image of the woman. The war, though abnormal and terrible, is in this sense a blessing too, says Berlinska. "What other countries only achieved after many years is happening to us in Ukraine during the course of a few months. We have in fact changed something through our study within just six months — this would not have been possible before, in peace time."

Feminists like Berlinska feel connected to the long tradition of the Ukrainian women's movement: here, earlier than in many other countries, the ideal of equality was taken up and, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, articulated in the context of the women's movement. Ukrainian women poets and journalists such as the national heroine Lesya Ukrainka publicly broke with conventional role assignments and belonged to the feminist avant-garde in Europe. Thus, as a result of the discourse on independence and an emerging national consciousness, the Ukrainian women's movement always had a strongly patriotic focus. Under Stalin, the "woman question" was declared to have been solved — and the women's movement supposedly dissolved. On the one hand, there was good state support: crèches, nursery schools, canteens, so that women could build communism together with men. On the other, Stalin prescribed women the mother role. It was no longer the collective, but the family that was now the "cell of communism". That is: communism was built during the day, potatoes were peeled in the evening.

After the Soviet Union's dissolution, prescribed emancipation was revoked and the image of the woman swung like a pendulum from one extreme to the other: the desire for an exaggerated femininity took root, accompanied by the longing for a role for the middle class woman. Social status was once again secured through a lucrative marriage and that was secured, in turn, through an emphatically feminine appearance, crudely summed up in the clichéd image of an eastern European woman: high heels, low-cut neckline. At the same time, there are still more women than men in the colleges and unis, many women who look after themselves and invest their efforts in a professional career. "As for feminism, most women here have mush in their heads", says Anna Dovgopol with reference to these inconsistencies. Dovgopol, who focuses on gender issues at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Kyiv, continues: "And the situation in the country is just as confused: on the one hand, the war, with its neo-nationalistic and neo-patriarchal discourse. On the other, a peaceful, developing civil society that is adopting western standards. And which recognizes: now is the time in which one can change something. Because now, everything is unhinged!"

Due to the war, patriotic slogans and nationalistic symbols are omnipresent in Ukraine: "Long live Ukraine, all hail the heroes!" Everywhere, Ukrainian flags are flying and, at the same time, people are demonstrating on a daily basis for democracy. A confusing sight. "It was a much-discussed topic in feminist circles, as to whether it was right for feminists to have taken part in Euromaidan, because there was so much rightwing rhetoric there", explains Dovgopol. "But if they hadn't done so, their voice would have been missing from the Revolution. The question is: To which values can we commit

collectively? Or do we allow ourselves to become divided? This is very difficult to answer at the moment. But there is also another development: people who've returned from the front go to Gay Pride because they want their country to make progress". Yet the nationalists are traditionally the archenemies of the queer community. Appealing to received national values such as morality and a sense of family, they discriminate against lesbians, gays and transgender people.

Julia too attended Gay Pride in Kyiv this year. She is currently in a relationship with a woman, but would have attended the parade anyway. When her friends from the front found out, they were taken aback: "What's the matter with you and your Pride? As if there were no other problems in the country!" — "Then I asked them: if there are so many problems, why is nothing more important to you than criticizing Pride? Everyone should be able to fight for their rights!" 6500 police were present at this year's Gay Pride, in order to protect around 2000 participants. "This meant that hardly anyone saw us, so the LGBT Parade didn't really achieve its purpose. But at least no one was attacked and no one injured like last year, which is a massive improvement", says Anna Dovgopol.

Today's Ukraine is shaped by a strong civil society that, since the protests on the Maidan, has taken over the real power, but has also taken responsibility too. It comprises thousands of volunteers who supply the army with everything — aside from weapons and war technology —, organize rehabilitation and treatment for the wounded, provide for refugees from Donbas. It comprises NGOs financed by the West that take care of social problems and provide education and enlightenment. It comprises "normal" people: not a week passes without demonstrations before the Rada, the parliament in Kyiv. After two Maidan Revolutions, hundreds of empty promises and ruined hopes and a century of foreign rule, people no longer trust state power.

Also in terms of equal rights, civil society is gaining momentum, prompting debate. Only without Femen, a well-known group in western Europe, which Ukrainian feminists do not view as political actors but as a marketing gimmick. The most recent example is the Twitter hashtag that the Ukrainian journalist Anastasia Melnichenko started, #IAmNotAfraidToSay, which thousands of Ukrainian and later Russian women too have used in posts on social networks about their experiences of sexual violence. The response triggered by this hashtag carried the topic straight to the centre of Ukrainian society.

And that too is a revolution: a personal revolution, because those afflicted are at last receiving solidarity and support. A social revolution, because the way that sexual violence is handled is changing. And these revolutions show: Ukraine has changed. The inconvenient truth can no longer be swept under the carpet. For so much has accumulated there that it has gone through the floor, ten stories have fallen and taken everything down with them: chauvinism, stereotypes, angst and inaction. And, for a long time now, the point at which things hit rock bottom has yet to be reached.

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