

# The feminist geopolitics of Donbas

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# **The Feminist Geopolitics of Donbas: The Role of Art in Challenging Bordering<sup>1</sup>**

**Irina Kuznetsova**

## **Abstract**

Ukrainian art provides unique examples of challenging bordering policies in the geopolitical context of the war in Donbas. Employing critical borders studies and the perspective of feminist geopolitics, this paper looks at borders beyond territories, including discursive landscapes of power and intersectionality. It focuses on the role of art in post-Maidan Ukraine as a response to political violence and bordering, and the relations between art and bordering work in non-government-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine. It argues, that feminist art, through practices of “seeing as a border,” brings a more intimate geopolitical perspective to audiences’ understandings of the lived experiences of civilians residing on non-government territories of Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts. Through analysis of Alevtina Kakhidze and Maria Kulikovska’s art, the research demonstrates how the geographical gaze towards art and its role in dis-bordering add to the understanding of space and resistance.

## **Introduction**

The armed conflict in eastern Ukraine started in April 2014 with approximately 5.2 million people living in the affected areas. During the war, more than 3,000 civilians have

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been killed and over 7,000 injured.<sup>2</sup> Over 1.4 million people have been internally displaced within Ukraine as a result of the violence.<sup>3</sup> The non-government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are facing a humanitarian crisis with continuing military actions, human rights abuses, and ideological censorship. Many public spaces have been radically altered as a result of the imposition of the new regime. Most street art created before and during the war was destroyed by supporters of the new regime and in its place Soviet and Russian symbols have appeared. Many artists and cultural organizations were forced to escape the non-government-controlled parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to avoid persecution. The cities bordering the self-proclaimed republics also suffered from the military action with the widespread destruction of buildings and the displacement of local populations. Municipal and regional authorities are facing huge pressure caused by both economic difficulties and political instability. Ideological divisions have arisen and certain cultures are under attack in these territories as the conflict has divided communities in the regions.

The socio-political origins of the conflict have been well-presented in academic discourse,<sup>4</sup> yet there is a need for further discussion about the everyday experiences of political violence, especially in relation to art and creative communities. Art plays a significant role in the current conflict in eastern Ukraine and is employed in different ways by

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<sup>2</sup> “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine. 1 August 2020 – 31 January 2021,” *OHCHR*, 2021, 13, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/31stReportUkraine-en.pdf>, accessed 2 February 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “Online Maps and Dashboards: Map of Ukraine with Internally Displaced Persons registered by Oblast,” *UNHCR Ukraine*, 2020, available at <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoieY2RhMmExMjgtZWRIbS00YjcwLWI0MzktNmEwNDkwYzdmYTM0IiwidCI6ImU1YzM3OTgxLTk0LTQ0NDZlNC04YTBlLTk0NDk0MmFmODBiZSIsImMiOiJh9>, accessed 21 December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Taras Kuzio, “Competing Nationalisms, Euromaidan, and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15, no.1 (2015): 157–169; Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014); Andrew Wilson, “The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no.4 (2016): 631–652; Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Ukraine’s Eastern Borderlands: The end of ambiguity?” in *What Does Ukraine Think?*, ed. Andrew Wilson (London: ECFR, 2015): 45–52.

those on different sides of the conflict. The multitude of actors involved, and the lack of dialogue between them in the context of protracted geopolitical conflict, means that there are opportunities for advancing research into how art explores borders, violence and forced population displacement. This paper aims to consider these questions within the conceptual framework of a critical borders studies approach, intersectionality and geographies of art.

The paper examines, firstly, the perspectives of critical borders studies and feminist geopolitics, which allow us to look at borders beyond territories, including discursive landscapes of power, and intersectionality within the context of the war in Donbas. It then focuses on the role of art in post-Maidan Ukraine as a response to political violence and bordering, and interconnections between art and bordering work in non-government-controlled areas of eastern Ukraine. Finally, I focus on artists' responses and resistance to displacement and the imposition of new borders through analysis of the works of Alevtina Kakhidze and Maria Kulikovska.

The paper is based on author interviews with artists, analysis of discussions of their work in the mass media, and visual and discursive analysis of artworks. I also rely on extensive fieldwork in Ukraine from 2017, during which I studied the social consequences of population displacement from the country's war-torn territories. The empirical material from that project is not included directly in this text but provides the foundation for a better understanding of the social and political context and consequences of war in Donbas.

### **Geographies of borders, art and feminist geopolitics**

The bordering practices in the current war in Donbas can be analysed through the prisms of critical borders studies and feminist geopolitics. There are not only physical checkpoints between government and non-government-controlled territories in eastern Ukraine and discursive landscapes of power between Kyiv and the supporters of the non-

government-controlled regional regimes, there are also symbolic differentiations between East and West in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Tatiana Zhurzhenko states that in the last two decades, “a detrimental identity politics has led to the cultural essentialization of ‘Donbas’ and ‘Galicia’ and has programmed cultural stereotypes, aggressive cliché and open hostilities.”<sup>6</sup> Forced population displacement from non-government-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were followed by the creation of discursive landscapes of power over IDPs, especially pensioners,<sup>7</sup> who often experienced othering and ‘social distancing’.<sup>8</sup> These factors constitute complex processes of bordering within Ukraine’s territory and society.

The last two and half decades have witnessed growing discussion about borders which are considered to exist beyond territories.<sup>9</sup> Critical border studies aim to decentre the border which is not a “taken-for-granted entity” but a condition “in a constant state of becoming.”<sup>10</sup> There is a tendency “to essentialise the discursive constructions that accompany the empirical apprehension of changing bordering practices.”<sup>11</sup> For example, Paasi suggests distinctions should be drawn between technical landscapes of social control and discursive landscapes of

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Andrii Portnov, “‘Donbas’ kak Druqoi. Ukrainskie intellektual’nie diskursi do i vo vremya voyni” (“Donbas” as Other. Ukrainian intellectual discussions during the War time), *Neprikosnovenny zapas* 6, no. 110 (2016), available at:

[https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovenny\\_zapas/110\\_nz\\_6\\_2016/article/12204/](https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovenny_zapas/110_nz_6_2016/article/12204/), accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis,” *Die Friedens-Warte* 89, no. 1/2 (2014): 249-267, 250.

<sup>7</sup> See Irina Kuznetsova and Oksana Mikheieva, “Forced Displacement from Ukraine’s War-Torn Territories: Intersectionality and Power Geometry,” *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 4 (2020): 690-706.

<sup>8</sup> See Viktoriya Sereda, “‘Social Distancing’ and Hierarchies of Belonging: The Case of Displaced Population from Donbas and Crimea,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 3 (2020): 404-431; Emma Rimpiläinen, “Victims, Villains, or Geopolitical Tools? Representations of Donbas Displacement in Ukrainian and Russian Government Media,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 3 (2020): 481-504.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Kathryn Cassidy, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Georgie Wemyss, “Debordering and Everyday (Re)Bordering in and of Dover: Post-Borderland Borderscapes,” *Political Geography* 66 (2018): 171-179; Reece Jones and Corey Johnson, *Placing the Border in Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Saskia Sassen, “When Territory Deborders Territoriality,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1, no.1 (2013): 21-45.

<sup>10</sup> Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams, “Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the ‘Lines in the Sand’ Agenda,” *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 727-733.

<sup>11</sup> Christophe Sohn, “Navigating Borders’ Multiplicity: the Critical Potential of Assemblage,” *Area* 48, no. 2 (2016): 183-189. – p.187. See also Chris Rumford, “Towards a Multiperspectival Study of Borders,” *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 887-902.

social power.<sup>12</sup> Various components of material landscapes, national commemorations, and media comprise discursive landscapes of social power and serve as emotional landscapes of control.<sup>13</sup> Sohn takes this idea further by discussing borders within an assemblage approach. Such an approach “helps explain how different meanings emanating from various actors may interact and endure in a contingent and provisional way.”<sup>14</sup>

Moving away from a border dichotomy whose understanding is embedded in the perspective of the state allows for an alternative perspective, or what Rumford has called “seeing as a border,” a point of view that reveals the fluidity and heterogeneity of borders.<sup>15</sup> The dismantling of dichotomous static categorisation inscribed in the border is a process of “disbordering”.<sup>16</sup> Art offers various ways of imaging alternative borders and opens a space for resistance and transformation.<sup>17</sup> Visual art can both enact and denounce a perceived act of “re-bordering,” as Amihat-Szary has shown in the case of the Canadian-US border.<sup>18</sup> Maja Bajevic, an artist originally from Sarajevo, also engages through her art work in disbordering and the creation of alternative spaces.<sup>19</sup> Artists bodies in feminist art often operate as a site of intervention as responses to warfare and political violence.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of borders and space under construction and the multiple actors involved echoes Massey’s notion of power geometry which captures both “the fact that space is

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<sup>12</sup> Anssi Paasi, “Bounded Spaces in a ‘Borderless World’: Border Studies, Power and the Anatomy of Territory,” *Journal of Power* 2, no. 2 (2009): 213–234; Anssi Paasi, “Borders and Border-Crossings,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, eds. Nuala C. Johnson, Richard H. Schein, and Jamie Winders, 478–493 (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Paasi, “Borders and Border-Crossings.”

<sup>14</sup> Sohn, “Navigating Borders’ Multiplicity: The Critical Potential of Assemblage,” 188.

<sup>15</sup> Rumford, “Towards a multiperspectival study of borders.”

<sup>16</sup> Cristina Giudice and Chiara Giubilaro, “Re-imagining the Border: Border art as a space of critical imagination and creative resistance,” *Geopolitics* 20, no. 1 (2015): 79–94, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Giudice and Giubilaro, “Re-imagining the Border.”

<sup>18</sup> Anne-Laure Amihat-Szary, “The Geopolitical Meaning of a Contemporary Visual Arts Upsurge on the Canada-US Border,” *International Journal. Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 67, no. 4 (2012): 951–962.

<sup>19</sup> Giudice and Giubilaro, “Re-imagining the border.”

<sup>20</sup> Kinna, Ruth, and Gillian Whiteley, eds. *Cultures of Violence: Visual Arts and Political Violence* (London: Routledge, 2020).

imbued with power and the fact that power in its turn has a spatiality.”<sup>21</sup> Massey has also contributed extensively to the reworking of the politics and geographies of gender, challenging the dominant forms of “gender definitions and gender relations.”<sup>22</sup>

Feminist geopolitics, in turn, contributes to our understanding of borders, Smith notes, by revising our idea of the role of civilian people via seeing them as “embodied political subjects.” Feminist geopolitics “forges a space for the telling of their stories, not just those of their states.”<sup>23</sup> It traverses scales of analysis “from the disembodied space of neorealist geopolitics to a field of live human subjects with names, families, and hometowns.”<sup>24</sup>

Feminist approaches to geopolitics open up perspectives into intimate geopolitics which also go beyond “bounded categories and territories,” focusing on embodied experiences and emotional attachments such as sexuality and family, which are “contoured by historical residues, socio-cultural norms, state-centric policies and global economic dynamics.”<sup>25</sup>

Before drawing on the examples of Ukrainian feminist art in challenging borders in the context of the war in Donbas, I will focus on the role of art in geopolitical resistance and exploration of conflict in Ukraine more generally.

### **Art and War in Ukraine**

Scholars have argued that art has played an important role in both resistance and power in conflicted regions such as Northern Ireland, Palestine, the Balkans, and Egypt.

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<sup>21</sup> Doreen Massey, “Concepts of Space and Power in Theory and in Political Practice,” *Documents d’Anàlisi Geogràfica* 55 (2009): 15–26, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Cited from Jennifer Hyndman, “Unsettling Feminist Geopolitics: Forging Feminist Political Geographies of Violence and Displacement,” *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26, no.1 (2019): 3-29, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, “Feminist Geopolitics Revisited: Body Counts in Iraq,” *The Professional Geographer* 59, no. 1 (2007): 35-46, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Barabantseva, Elena, Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, and V. Spike Peterson, “Introduction: Engaging geopolitics Through the Lens of the Intimate,” *Geopolitics* 26, no. 2 (2021): 343-356, 345.

Indeed, some see artistic and cultural production as a driving force of uprisings.<sup>26</sup> Cultural production has been analysed as a driving force for political change in politically conflicted locations.<sup>27</sup> For example, in Cairo, as Smith argues, “art has become an important lens through which to view different perspectives on the political changes taking place.”<sup>28</sup> Smith has likewise argued that public urban art and communities’ interactions with this work can serve as a measurement for the development of conflict and societal transformation.

Art performed an important social role in the Orange Revolution of 2004, inspiring protestors and serving as a means to document pivotal events.<sup>29</sup> It was likewise embedded in Euro-Maidan in 2014.<sup>30</sup> As Susann Worschech argues, art and cultural activities can be seen “as a seismograph for societal change and response” in Ukraine. In some cases, art and civic activism became intertwined: “Many organizations - drivers of cultural change in the Donbas regions today first emerged from decentral Euromaidan civil society activities.”<sup>31</sup>

The subsequent annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas became the focus of attention for many artists through their lived experiences and the sharp sense of belonging

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<sup>26</sup> Mia Gröndahl, *Revolution Graffiti: Street art of the new Egypt* (American University in Cairo Press, 2012); Bill Rolston, *Politics and Painting: Murals and conflict in Northern Ireland* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991); Mark LeVine, “When Art is the Weapon: Culture and resistance confronting violence in the post-uprisings Arab world,” *Religions* 6, no. 4 (2015): 1277-1313; Craig Zelizer, “The Role of Artistic Processes in Peace-Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Peace and Conflict Studies* 10, no. 2 (2003): 62-75.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe, “Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond: On the politics of art, aesthetics, and affect,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 22, no. 1 (2014): 8-27; Alan Ingram “Rethinking Art and Geopolitics through Aesthetics: artist responses to the Iraq war,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41, no. 1 (2016): 1-13.

<sup>28</sup> Christine Smith, “Art as a Diagnostic: Assessing social and political transformation through public art in Cairo, Egypt,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 16, no. 1 (2015): 22-42, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Maryna Bazylevych, “Public Images, Political Art, and Gendered Spaces: Construction of gendered space in socialist and post-socialist Ukraine,” *Journal of Contemporary Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (2010), available at <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jca/vol1/iss1/1>, accessed 20 October 2020; Bohdan Klid, “Rock, Pop and Politics in Ukraine's 2004 Presidential Campaign and Orange Revolution,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 23, no. 1 (2007): 118-137; Natalia Usenko, “Political Issues in Contemporary Art of Ukraine,” *The Journal of Education, Culture, and Society* 5, no. 2 (2014): 180-192.

<sup>30</sup> Nazar Kozak, “Art Embedded into Protest: Staging the Ukrainian Maidan,” *Art Journal* 76, no. 1 (2017): 8-27; Kateryna Radchenko, “Public Art on Maidan. Rebellion in an Artistic Form. Chronicles of One Winter,” in *Donbas, First Line. Project “Donbas Studies”* ed. Lubava Illyenko (Kyiv: IZOLYATSIA, Platform for Cultural Initiatives, 2016): 111-118.

<sup>31</sup> Susann Worschech, “The Role of Arts in a War-ravaged Society: Ukraine’s Re-invention of Culture Since Euromaidan,” *EuropeNow*, 28 April 2020, available at <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/04/27/the-role-of-arts-in-a-war-ravaged-society-ukraines-re-invention-of-culture-since-euromaidan/>, accessed 12 January 2021.



they felt towards these pivotal moments in Ukraine's independence and ideological trajectory since the Orange Revolution of 2004. As Alevtina Kakhidze, an artist originally from Donetsk oblast, stressed: "Ukraine is a very vivid place. There are no artists who have not been involved in this process [of the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas – author's clarification]. It is impossible. They are involved either through their friends or personally because they cannot distance themselves from it."<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, as Marina Pesenti has underlined, culture itself is a crucial part of the response to Russian aggression and of Ukraine's "identity shift":<sup>33</sup>

These two features – Russia's external aggression and Ukraine's domestic identity shift – sparked a moment of intense creativity, manifest in a flowering of the arts and public debate, including the prolific production of new literary works, theatre productions, films, curatorial visual work, music and large-scale cultural events. In turn, these developments stimulated an appetite for cultural consumption previously unseen in Ukraine.'<sup>34</sup>

As Alisa Lozhkina stresses, "For some artists who actively participated in Maidan events, this period was a time of a hard post-revolutionary 'hangover,' an emotional drama that was hard to express in a single artwork. For others, on the contrary, this very period gave

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Alevtina Kakhidze via Skype, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Pesenti employs the term "identity shift" from Mykola Ryabchuk who also introduced the concept of the "two Ukraines" to describe the situation after 2014 and 'identity clash can broadly be characterized as a contest between European and Eurasian modes of development'. See Marina Pesenti, *Cultural Revival and Social Transformation in Ukraine. The role of culture and the arts in supporting post-Euromaidan resilience* (Chatham House, 2020), available at [https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/cultural-revival-and-social-transformation-ukraine?utm\\_source=Chatham%20House&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=11984799\\_REP%20-%20Publication%20alert%20-%202018.11.2020&dm\\_i=1S3M,74VJ3,O7Z6XL,SVBZX,1](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/cultural-revival-and-social-transformation-ukraine?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11984799_REP%20-%20Publication%20alert%20-%202018.11.2020&dm_i=1S3M,74VJ3,O7Z6XL,SVBZX,1), accessed 29 November 2020, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Pesenti, *Cultural Revival and Social Transformation in Ukraine*, 25.

impetus to work on new subjects, problems, and projects.”<sup>35</sup> Art is considered to be a part of the fight against Russian propaganda.<sup>36</sup> In 2014, as Yuliya Ilchuk has noted, artists and writers challenged “the accepted perception of Donbas” and using guerrilla tactics accessed audiences in the occupied territories.<sup>37</sup> For example, Olena Stepova engaged with the genre of “eavesdropping” and using both conversations overheard in her daily encounters and on social media, assembled a book of with the title “Everything will be Ukraine!” In Ilchuk’s view, Stepova “tries to humanize and inscribe [the supporters of the new regime] into the local community as one of ‘us’.”<sup>38</sup>

The individual, lived experience of war have been reflected through art and theatre. The “Theatre of Displaced People,” coordinated by Natalia Vorozhbyt, develops verbatim theatre based on the stories of those who have experienced war and who have been forcibly displaced. The play “I Am Another You,”<sup>39</sup> for example, is performed by students from different parts of Ukraine and provides striking examples of the verbalization of overcoming trauma.

Other Ukrainian artists are re-thinking the past and working at the intersection of memory and identity. Andrii Dostliev, an artist originally from Luhansk, for example, has worked with Soviet family photo albums. Entitled “Occupation,” one of his projects is an attempt to both reconstruct the artist’s memories but also occupy somebody else’s memory

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<sup>35</sup> Alisa Lozhkina (ed.), *Between Fire and Fire. Ukrainian Art now*. Exhibition catalogue, available at [https://issuu.com/alisalozhkina/docs/between\\_firefire\\_catalog](https://issuu.com/alisalozhkina/docs/between_firefire_catalog), accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example: Nina Averianova, “Art as a Tool of Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda under Russian Aggression,” *Almanac of Ukrainian Studies*, 23 (2018): 107–112; Olena Tytar, “Philosophical and Cultural Perspectives of Identities of Eastern Ukraine (On The Material Of The Kharkiv Meetdoc-2018 Film Festival),” *The Journal of V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Series "The Theory of Culture and Philosophy of Science,"* 59 (2019): 74–78. DOI: [10.26565/2306-6687-2019-59-11](https://doi.org/10.26565/2306-6687-2019-59-11).

<sup>37</sup> Yuliya Ilchuk, “Hearing the Voice of Donbas: Art and literature as forms of cultural protest during war,” *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 2 (2017): 256–273.

<sup>38</sup> Ilchuk, “Hearing the Voice of Donbas,” 262.

<sup>39</sup> The play “Ya - ce inshyj/insha ty” [I am the other you], director Ul’ana Bon’tso, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5vdBJSBma4>, accessed 05 April 2021. The performance at the Ukrainian Catholic University and its video-recording has been supported by the project “Ukraine’s Hidden Tragedy...” (grant AH/P008305/1) supported by the AHRC.

while creating a new narrative.<sup>40</sup> In some cases art has also revealed the confronted positions regarding Euro-Maidan and war in Donbas. For example, David Chychkan's exhibition "Lost Opportunities" that questioned the social outcomes of the revolution from anarchists' point of view, has been postponed due to threats from right-wing radicals and then destroyed by anonymous activists at the Visual Culture Research Centre in Kyiv in 2017.<sup>41</sup>

The occupation theme is directly connected with the bordering and occupying practices of the new regime in the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The imposition of the new regime reinforced the geographical imaginaries dividing East and West in Ukraine. For example, Makarychev and Yatsyk, when talking about processes of othering IDPs, use the concept of "biopolitical borders between 'our people' and 'aliens.'"<sup>42</sup> Donbas, they argue, is "discursive" as it offers "extraneous 'elements', a burden for Ukraine's difficult pathway to Europe."<sup>43</sup> However, as Irina Kuznetsova and Oksana Mikheieva<sup>44</sup> and Viktoriya Sereda<sup>45</sup> have demonstrated, central and local authorities also impacted on processes of "othering" IDPs. Moreover, as Sereda has revealed, "social distancing towards IDPs in Ukraine is not so much based on ethnic or linguistic differences as on questioning or limiting their Ukrainian citizenship rights and the freedoms associated with them."<sup>46</sup>

Ideas about bordering were embedded in the works of many artists after Maidan who experienced both displacement and loss and tried to express these lived realities in their work.

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<sup>40</sup> Iuliia Lashchuk, "Displaced Art and the Reconstruction of Memory: Ukrainian Artists from Crimea and Donbas," *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 700–709.

<sup>41</sup> Dmitry Mrachnik, "Nevidomi pohromyly vystavku xudozhnyka Chychkana u Kyievi" [Anonymous have destroyed an exhibition of artist Chychkan in Kyiv], *Hromadske*, 7 February 2017, available at: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/nevidomi-pohromyly-vystavku-khudozhnyka-chychkana-u-kyievi>, accessed 30 August 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet: From Populations to Nations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 113.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>44</sup> Kuznetsova and Mikheieva, "Forced Displacement from Ukraine's War-Torn Territories."

<sup>45</sup> Sereda, "'Social Distancing' and Hierarchies of Belonging."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 424.

I am particularly interested in the intersectionality of such experiences and, first of all, in feminist artists originally from the non-government-controlled territories of Ukraine.

However, women were often excluded from narratives of the event despite the active role which they played in Maidan and as volunteers in Donbas, and also often as victims of violence during the conflict.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, as Jessica Zychowicz explains in her study of feminist art in contemporary Ukraine, women stepped into the “vacuum left by the Orange Revolution in Kyiv’s streets, museums, libraries, and other public spaces.”<sup>48</sup> As she has demonstrated, the body has become a significant part of understanding the democracy in Ukraine: “The nude female body in particular, but also the alternatively gendered body, became the primary site for protests [...]”<sup>49</sup>

Following this reasoning, I draw attention in this article to the performative sculptures of Maria Kulikovska, originally from Crimea, who exhibited her art works in IZOLYATSIA in Donetsk before their venues were occupied and Maria’s statues were destroyed by supporters of the new regime.

Alevtina Kakhidze’s works also embody the lived experiences of the war in Donbas and loss, based on her communication with her mother. She offers another example of dis-bordering and provides a voice for those less heard during the war – elderly people.

To understand the appeal of such intersectional voices, it is crucial to look at the art landscape of the non-government-controlled territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts which, in their turn, are supported by Russia, and the ways that their bordering work forms particular discursive landscapes of power.

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<sup>47</sup> Uilleam Blacker, "Martyrdom, Spectacle, and Public Space: Ukraine's National Martyrology from Shevchenko to the Maidan," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 257-292; Olesya Khromeychuk, "Gender and Nationalism on the Maidan," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 2, no. 1. (2016): 123-147; Sarah D. Phillips, "The Women's Squad in Ukraine's protests: Feminism, nationalism, and militarism on the Maidan," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014): 414-426.

<sup>48</sup> Jessica Zychowicz, *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-first-century Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 19. The

## **Cultural instruments of bordering in non-government control areas of Donbas**

From the onset of the conflict in 2014, leaders of the regime in the non-government-controlled territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts strengthened the presence of “Russian” culture in the region, with explicit support from Russian film stars, musicians, and writers who visited the self-proclaimed republics. Concerts, talks, and charity events were staged even while fierce fighting was taking place. A prominent Russian writer, Zakhar Prilepin, who formed his own battalion in Donbas was even listed as an advisor of Oleksandr Zakharchenko, a former leader of a fighting group in Donetsk.<sup>50</sup> The representation of Russia’s cultural elites in Donbas, as Makarychev and Yatsyk have demonstrated with the example of “The Night Wolves,” is an example of “imperial nationalism.”<sup>51</sup>

In Russia, state-led ostracism towards those who supported Ukrainian policy in Donbas was not uncommon, and divided country’s cultural elite.<sup>52</sup> Pressure was also put on cultural organizations in Russia engaged in debate around the conflict, with meetings disrupted and state funding being withdrawn. The director of the Moscow Ukrainian Library was arrested for keeping books on the Holodomor famine (banned following the collapse of Russian-Ukrainian relationship after Crimea’s annexation).<sup>53</sup>

The war and the establishment of a new regime, which later came to be labelled by the Ukrainian government a “regime of occupation,” forced many artists to leave Donbas.

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<sup>50</sup> “Best-Selling Russian Author Boasts of ‘Killing Many’ in Ukraine's Donbas,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 August 2019, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/best-selling-russian-author-boasts-of-killing-many-in-ukraine-s-donbas/30115450.html>, accessed 19 December 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, “‘The Night Wolves’: Anti-Maidan and Cultural Representations of Russian Imperial Nationalism,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 4, no.1 (2018): 7-28.

<sup>52</sup> In response, the Ukrainian government created a ‘blacklist’ of cultural agents from Russia, banning their performances and tours in Ukraine. An ‘approved’ list was also created, comprising Russian singers, artists, and actors who openly disagreed with Russia’s activities in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

<sup>53</sup> See, also, Irina Kuznetsova, “To Help ‘Brotherly People’? Russian Policy Towards Ukrainian Refugees,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72, no. 3. (2020): 505-527.

IZOLYATSIA: Platform for Cultural Initiatives had to flee from Donetsk in 2014 after supporters of new regime demolished their art installations, occupied their offices and installed Russian/Soviet symbols in their grounds. In 2015 artists associated with IZOLYATSIA “blew away” audiences by staging a mock-occupation of the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennale, mimicking the Russian military involvement in East Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

The artist Sergii Zakharov, who was later called “Donetsk’s Banksy,” was arrested and jailed for six weeks without trial in 2014 for placing life-sized caricatures of the leaders of the self-proclaimed republics in public spaces. Zakharov then posted photographs of the caricatures on social media, which were widely shared. Ukrainian artists’ resistance to the Russian involvement in Donbas also took the form of boycotting Russian cultural events and exhibitions. Nikita Kadan, Lada Nakonechna and Mykola Ridnyi, for instance, withdrew from an exhibition at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow in 2014. Daniil Galkin and Maria Kulikovska also cancelled their shows at Saint Petersburg’s Erarta Museum.

Such events further complicate the deeply contested identities and memories in Ukraine surrounding the events of World War II, the Holodomor, and the overall relationship with the Russian state,<sup>55</sup> which have meant that, since the Soviet Union’s collapse, Ukraine has experienced a fractured mnemonic geopolitical framework.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, surveys demonstrate that there is no dominant historical narrative in Ukraine which could unite or

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<sup>54</sup> The initiative was curated by New York artist in residence at IZOLYATSIA, Clemens Poole. See more: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/avyvn5/art-project-onvacation-tackles-the-russian-occupation-of-ukraine-555>. From 2014, IZOLYATSIA has been based in Kyiv, and in 2020 it established another office and art residence in Soledar, an industrialized town in the Donetsk region.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Sanshiro Hosaka, “Hybrid Historical Memories in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 71.4 (2019): 551-578; Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, Tatiana Zhurzhenko, eds. *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Tanya Zaharchenko, “Polyphonic Dichotomies: Memory and Identity in Today’s Ukraine,” *Demokratizatsiya* 21, no. 2 (2013): 241-269; Zhurzhenko, “A Divided Nation?,” amongst others.

<sup>56</sup> Jan Kubik and Michael H. Bernhard, “Twenty Years after Communism: The politics of memory and commemoration,” in *The Politics and Culture of Memory Regimes*, ed. Jan Kubik and Michael H. Bernhard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 7-36.

fracture society.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, supporters of the new regime in non-government-controlled areas immediately re-established Soviet symbols. For example, portraits of Stalin immediately appeared on Donetsk's central square. Imposing Soviet and Stalinist symbols on the region also enabled the rejection of "immoral" modern art, LGBTQ+ rights and the promotion of anti-Western discourses<sup>58</sup> by idealizing and de-problematizing a deeply contested past. Conversely, symbols central to Ukrainian history and independence were threatened or destroyed. For example, in August 2015, the Donetsk rebel authorities destroyed a monument to the Holodomor victims and Donetsk State University removed a monument to Ukrainian dissident Vasyl Stus.

At the same time, it would be a simplification to focus exclusively on the Russian policy towards Donbas in order to understand recent shifts in the cultural landscape. As Taras Kuzio notes, the role of regionalism and identity in the context of war in Donbas is often overlooked.<sup>59</sup> The founder of IZOLYATSIA, Lubov Mikhailova has argued that the situation in Donetsk was partly rooted in the neglect of culture: "That idealism of people who wanted the coalmines to return and wanted to bring back the mentality of Soviet space is rooted in the fact that in the last 25 years after collapse of USSR, nothing was done in the cultural sphere in Donbas."<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise that grassroots art activism is immediately repressed in the non-government-controlled part of the Donetsk oblast: "in occupied Donbas

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<sup>57</sup> Andre Liebich, Oksana Myshlovska, Viktoriia Sereda, with Oleksandra Gaidai and Iryna Sklokina, "The Ukrainian Past and Present: Legacies, Memory and Attitudes," in *Regionalism Without Regions: Reconceptualizing Ukraine's Heterogeneity*, eds. Ulrich Schmid and Oksana Myshlovska (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2019): 67-134.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Tatiana Riabova and Oleg Riabov, "'Gayromaidan': Gendered Aspects of the Hegemonic Russian Media Discourse on the Ukrainian Crisis," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015); Portnov, "'Donbass' kak Drugoi."

<sup>59</sup> Taras Kuzio, *Putin's War Against Ukraine. Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017). Though there are some studies of regional identity differences, see for example, Maria Lewicka and Bartłomiej Iwańczak, "The Regional Differentiation of Identities in Ukraine: How Many Regions?," in Schmid and Myshlovska, *Regionalism without Regions*, 25-66; Ihor Stebelsky, "A Tale of Two Regions: Geopolitics, identities, narratives, and conflict in Kharkiv and the Donbas," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 59, no. 1 (2018): 28-50. There is also published research available on ethnic and language differences: for example, Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, "War and Identity: The Case of the Donbas in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, 2-3 (2018): 139-157.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Lubov Mikhailova, London, 2016.

there is only one ideological line from ‘above,’ and civil initiatives are just absent.”<sup>61</sup> It was challenging to attempt cultural interventions in the territories under the new regime – partly because most artists and activists have left but also because those who remain genuinely fear for their safety. At the same time, there are some initiatives which maintain conversations and artistic exchange between the government and non-government territories, such as, for example, the journal of informal culture of Luhansk and Donetsk, *Golden Coal*.<sup>62</sup> Ukrainian artists residing in government-controlled areas have challenged the political violence and new bordering processes since the annexation of Crimea and outbreak of war in Donbas, such as, Alevtina Kakhidze, who “humanized” Donbas for national and international audiences, reflecting on the experiences of ordinary people.

### **Alevtina Kakhidze: “to live through the war together”**

Since very earliest days of the war, Alevtina Kakhidze, living in the Kyiv area, has curated a Facebook page ‘Klubnika Andreevna’ (Strawberry Andreevna is a nickname given to her mother Liudmila by a kid when she worked in the kindergarten) which is based on conversations with her mother. Strawberry Andreevna, like many residents of Zhdanovka and other towns in non-government-controlled territories, did not want to leave her established life – her home, garden and usual routine. Alevtina Kakhidze revealed in an interview that:

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> *Golden Coal* – journal of informal culture in Luhansk and Donetsk. See, for example Josh Nadeau “Golden Coal: the zine capturing the lives of Donbas’ youth in the midst of war,” Calvert journal, 22 January 2020, available at <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11586/golden-coal-donbas-zine-youth-culture-east-ukraine-luhansk-donetsk>, accessed 30 April 2021. See other initiatives: <https://mitec.ua/podolati-roz-yednannya-suchasne-mistetstvo-shodu-ukrayini/?fbclid=IwAR3OOy11Kxa4oOmJC0gZrtoaMtRplwchBNxLH9y9MCuDkyfqfbuKfZaqYh8>



Some people ask me why I can't take my Mom from there. Well, you can't say that about a human being; you can't take someone like a suitcase [...] For five years people have been saying to me: why don't you take your mother away? Everyone has the right to their own decision, everyone has the right to choose, to think as she sees fit. Even when everything is torn inside you, and you want to help, if a person refuses, she has the right to do so.<sup>63</sup>

This excerpt echoes with de Certeau's understanding of space as a place mastered by the practice of everyday life.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, in Ukraine, our interviews with elderly IDPs demonstrated that they suffered the most from the loss of their everyday routine intertwined with the spaces of their houses, gardens or towns.<sup>65</sup>

As the description of Kakhidze's Facebook page states: "The war will finish sooner or later, but we need to continue to live. Therefore, we decided to live with her through this war."<sup>66</sup> On the Facebook page, Kakhidze posted excerpts from everyday conversations with her mother and made drawings based on her ideas about what was happening behind the line of demarcation. The drawings, which the artist makes with black and red felt-tip pens on white paper, show the daily life of her mother, the dogs she fed when their owners left their homes and went to Russia, the fruits she sells. As Kakhidze mentions, "Strawberry Andreevna never demonized either side of this war. She always used to say – stop your

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<sup>63</sup> Natalia Humeniuk, "'Ia 350 raziv vybachalas za vsikh ministriv sotspolitiki pered persionerkamy v Bakhmuti'—khudozhnytsia Alevtina Kakhidze ["350 times I've apologized on behalf of the social policy ministers in front of the seniors in Bakhmut"—artist Alevtina Kakhidze], *Hromadske.ua*, 31 October 2019, available at <https://hromadske.ua/posts/ya-350-raziv-vibachalas-za-vsikh-ministriv-socpolitiki-pered-pensionerkami-v-bahmuti-hudozhnicya-alevtina-kahidze>, accessed 10 June 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>65</sup> For example, as John Round has demonstrated in his research on GULAG survivors, elderly people tend to stay in a territory where they are accustomed to living because their practices "work" in a specific space despite the seeming economic benefits of migration to central regions. John Round, "Rescaling Russia's Geography: The challenges of depopulating the northern periphery," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 5 (2005): 705–727; see, also, Kuznetsova and Mikheieva, "Forced Displacement from Ukraine's War-Torn Territories."

<sup>66</sup> Klubnika Andreevna. Strawberry Andreevna, available at <https://www.facebook.com/truealevtina>, accessed 10 June 2020.

‘yours’ and ‘ours’”.<sup>67</sup> Thanks to Kakhidze’s ability to tell the stories of ordinary people from the occupied territories, some viewers of her work, who were not familiar with the eastern part of Ukraine,<sup>68</sup> claimed that she “populated Donbas,”<sup>69</sup> and “made Donbas human” for them,<sup>70</sup> showing the lived experiences of those who cannot simply be dismissed as a regime supporters or “pension tourists.” As Kakhidze explained:

I am writing about the occupation because my Mom tells me what is going on there. I know whether the pensions are being distributed there earlier than Ukrainian newspapers. I know what a bank is, if it is there at all. I know what a post-office is, and that it does not open there, and how many doctors there are now in the town.<sup>71</sup>

Everyday conversations with her mother formed the basis of a play staged in Cologne, called “Calls from the Cemetery.”<sup>72</sup> The title refers to the fact that, in conditions of poor network coverage, Strawberry Andreevna had to go to the cemetery, where there was a stronger signal, to talk to her daughter. Kakhidze’s art about life in the non-government-controlled territories and people’s experiences crossing the border to receive pensions is an example of feminist geopolitical thinking, where the focus is on ordinary people’s experiences of war and borders. It is deeply intimate as she lived through the experience of war together with her mom and is intertwined with emotions of longing, care, and loss.

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<sup>67</sup> Klubnika Andreevna. Strawberry Andreevna, 17 January 2019.

<sup>68</sup> The interregional mobility between eastern and western regions of Ukraine was not very common before 2014 as surveys demonstrate: see “Donbas and Crimea: Interregional mobility and attitudes,” *MAPA Digital Atlas of Ukraine*, available at: <https://harvard-cga.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=2fa308aa641d43139d3a5b5b59081a5a>, accessed 10 June 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Humeniuk, “‘Ia 350 raziv vybachalas.’”

<sup>70</sup> Kateryna Iakovlenko, “The artist who ‘made Donbas human’: Alevtina Kakhidze on empathy and discrimination in eastern Ukraine,” *Open Democracy*, 29 July 2019, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/alevtina-kakhidze-artist-donbas-ukraine/>, accessed 5 June 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Alevtina Kakhidze via Skype, May 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Irina Chevtaeva, “Alevtina Kakhidze: ‘Nuzhno prozhivat voynu s temi, kto nakhoditsia v zone konflikta,’” *DW*, 14 September 2015, available at <https://p.dw.com/p/1GVxn?maca=ru-EMail-sharing>, accessed 10 December 2020.

One can understand “Calls from the Cemetery” also as a symbolic act: a dialogue takes place between persons from a territory where war is going on and Kyiv; a dialogue which is missing in Ukrainian politics today. Processes of othering the population residing in non-government-controlled territories, and the creation of discursive borders with occupied Donbas, led to pensioners being portrayed as traitors and also enforced social distance with regard to internally displaced people. Kakhidze aimed to challenge such tendencies:

The status of the displaced is widely discussed in informational space. Artists also demand that we avoid demonizing these people. And my project plays a significant part in [this process] as it shows that there are not only pro-Russian but also pro-Ukrainian people left in the occupied territories.<sup>73</sup>

The conversations with Strawberry Andreevna formed the core of Alevtina Kakhidze’s participation at the 6<sup>th</sup> Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2015.<sup>74</sup> Considering that some Ukrainian artists had been banned from Russia since 2014, and some refused to participate in any event in a country the Ukrainian government had officially named as aggressor, this participation presented a challenge. The artist said that she initially had her doubts about whether she should come to Russia, but in the end did not regret her participation: “I think it is necessary to come. [...] We are another state. We have another history, other problems. We are different, and people in Russia need to start to learn to respect this fact.”<sup>75</sup> Members of the audience were invited to read the conversations with Strawberry Andreevna for the audience, and as Kakhidze notes, no one refused to participate.

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Alevtina Kakhidze.

<sup>74</sup> The performance formed a contribution to one of the Biennale’s main themes, “How to Live Together,” curated by European artists. See more: <https://moscowbiennale.syg.ma/kak-obiediniatsia-shiestaia-moskovskaia-biennale-kak-biezotlaghati-naia-nieobkhodimost>, accessed 5 June 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Irina Denisova, “U krolikov slabye serdtsa,” [Rabbits have weak hearts] *RadioLiberty*, 14 September 2015, available at <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27286734.html>, accessed 8 June 2020.

By becoming actively involved in the work, participants were able to feel the everyday stories of people residing in war-affected regions. As the artist remarked, her story “is not about shooting. It's about what's going on in people's heads.”<sup>76</sup>

On 16 January 2019, Strawberry Andreevna died from a cardiac arrest at a checkpoint while traveling to the controlled territory of Ukraine from the occupied town of Zhdanovka to receive her pension. Lyudmila Andreevna, like several hundred thousand pensioners who did not want to leave their homes and move to safer territories at the government-controlled areas of Ukraine, was forced to travel every two months to receive her pension from the Ukrainian state in order to supplement the rather modest payments from the self-proclaimed republics. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as of August 2014, 1,278,200 pensioners were registered in the non-government-controlled area (NGCA). However, in November 2019, only 622,200 pensioners with residence registration in the NGCA continued to receive pensions. That means that “the proportion of persons receiving pensions remains under 50 per cent.”<sup>77</sup> People dying at checkpoints is tragically not that uncommon; people have to wait several hours to enter the government-controlled territory of Ukraine or to return to the non-government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Forty people died at checkpoints in 2019. The majority of them were over 60 and died from cardiac arrests or other health issues,<sup>78</sup> which were aggravated by travel and stress and led to premature death.

The topic of pensions was a significant part of Alevtina Kakhidze's reflections about the situation in the occupied territories and the discursive borders between them and the government-controlled areas of Ukraine. As she stated: “The history of pensions [for people

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<sup>76</sup> Irina Denisova, “U krolikov slabye serdtsa.”

<sup>77</sup> “Pensions for IDPs and Persons Living in the Areas not Controlled by the Government in the East of Ukraine,” *United Nations Ukraine*, January 2020 2020, available at [https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2020/03/Briefing-Note-on-Pensions\\_2020.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/2020/03/Briefing-Note-on-Pensions_2020.pdf), accessed 30 April 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Levon Azizyan, “Sumna statystyka smertei na punktakh propusku na Donbasi. Iak tsomu zapobigty?” *Hromadske*, 21 January 2019, available at <https://hromadske.ua/posts/sumna-statistika-smertej-na-punkтах-propusku-na-donbasi-yak-comu-zapobigti>, accessed 5 June 2020.

residing in NGCA] is such a classic example of structural violence.”<sup>79</sup> Her art joined the voices of journalists and social activists in Ukraine who tried to challenge the dominant state discourse regarding the suspension of pensions for IDPs and the elderly residing in non-government-controlled areas.<sup>80</sup> The artist apologized to her mother for the suspension of her pension, and she apologized to the pensioners from Bakhmut: “it might look crazy but artists can [apologise].”<sup>81</sup> As a Ukrainian citizen and a person living near Kyiv she felt she had a duty to do so.

In April 2019, Andriy Reva, the Minister of Social Policy, called pensioners who reside in non-government-controlled areas “scum,” saying in his interview with the BBC:

Everyone who was pro-Ukrainian has left. And those who want to claim pensions on both sides have to put up with [the trauma of queuing to cross checkpoints]. Honestly, I don’t feel pity for them, not one of them, at all. I feel pity for those soldiers and officers, and for their families. They were killed there because of that scum.<sup>82</sup>

Alevtina Kakhidze responded to Minister Reva by producing a drawing about her mother’s death at a checkpoint.<sup>83</sup> In the picture, Minister Reva, with a crown on his head which might also be interpreted as a jester’s hat, is standing on the blanket of a woman

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<sup>79</sup> Humeniuk, ““Ia 350 raziv vybachalas.”

<sup>80</sup> Lesya Ganzha, “Bizhenstvo z barierami. Iak (ne)vyplachuiutsa pensii ludiam z Donbasu” [Refugees with barriers. How pensions are (not) paid to people from Donbass], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 27 February 2018, available at: <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2018/02/27/229229/>, accessed 5 June 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Humeniuk, “Ia 350 raziv vybachalas.”

<sup>82</sup> Volodymyr Malinka, “Mrazi khto? Cherez shcho posvarylysia Ukrainyskyi Ministr i zhurnalistka BBC” [Who’s Scum? Why a Ukrainian Minister and a BBC Journalist Ended Up Arguing], *MediaSapience*, 5 November 2019, available at <https://ms.detector.media/profstandarti/post/22854/2019-05-11-mrazi-khto-cherez-shcho-posvarilisya-ukrainskii-ministr-i-zhurnalistka-bbc/>, accessed 7 May 2019.

<sup>83</sup> See the picture at: Victoriya Bega, “Hudozhnytsia vidpovila ministru, iakyi nazvav zhiteliv okupovanoho Donbasu ‘mraziami’, maliunkom pro pomerlu matir,” *Hromadske*, 30 April 2019, available at: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/hudozhnicya-vidpovila-ministru-yakij-nazvav-zhiteliv-okupovanogo-donbasu-mrazyami-malyunkom-pomerloyi-materi>, accessed 5 June 2020.

(Alevtina Kakhidze's mother). The woman is lying on the territory of government-controlled Ukraine, though Reva is partly on NGCA (his head) and partly on GCA (government-controlled areas). He stands with the words: "Everyone who was pro-Ukrainian has left. And those who want to claim two pensions have to put up with it." Reva's position on the border can be seen to emphasize his role in creating and supporting the invisible borders of control for the citizens of Ukraine residing in occupied territories, and for IDPs. The figure of the mother is holding a death certificate with the following words written next to her: 'Mister Minister, she lacked patience, she died'. Her image is placed on the government-controlled territory of Ukraine while the death certificate is issued by "the DPR." Thus, Kakhidze's art also evidences the administrative procedures for death. The practices of accessing the death certificates of residents of non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine are discriminatory<sup>84</sup> as documents issued there are not recognized in the government-controlled territories.

### **Maria Kulikovska: female body, violence and resistance**

Maria Kulikovska was one of the first Ukrainian artists who not only demonstrated the issue of forced displacement in Ukraine as a result of Kremlin aggression but who also held a performance in a major Russian cultural institution – the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg in July 2014. It was not an authorized performance, but it happened during the opening of the Manifesta'10 Biennale. Kulikovska laid on the steps of the museum covered with the Ukrainian flag. The performance was entitled "illegal Action '254'" – the ID number of an internally displaced person in Ukraine, which Maria received as an IDP from Crimea. The fact that the activity happened in this particular place demonstrated for the audience not

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<sup>84</sup> "Briefing Note: Birth and death registration for residents of non-government controlled areas of eastern Ukraine," *Humanitarian response*, 2018, available at <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine/document/briefing-note-%E2%80%9C9Cbirth-and-death-registration-residents-non-government>, accessed 19 January 2020.

only the crossing of borders around a consensus regarding the definition of art, but also an ‘illegal’ border crossing, using the Ukrainian flag just a few months after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. Saint Petersburg as Russia’s ‘capital of culture’ and Putin’s hometown could not have been a better location for the action. At the same time, the action can be understood as an attempt to transport Russian audiences to the Ukrainian side of the border to witness the death and loss that stand behind Russia’s euphoria regarding the ‘Krym nash’ [Crimea is ours] campaign and the so-called ‘Russian spring’ in Donbas. As Kulikovska explained in interview:

The fact that I was lying down covered by the flag was not a fictitious action, but rather a reflection of reality because there are hundreds of people killed every day, and you see the same image. And it concerns you because they were your acquaintances, friends’ relatives, relatives of those who were killed, so that was a very dramatic moment in lives of many people. That’s why I carried out such an action.<sup>85</sup>

The images from the performance show people walking by or standing near Kulikovska, demonstrating distance and hierarchy.<sup>86</sup> The artist remembers how she felt during the action: “I understood their attitude, I was really under their feet, they just wiped their feet on me.”<sup>87</sup> The administrative/procedural landscapes that society controls as part of bordering became part of this experience as security staff took away Kulikovska’s passport.<sup>88</sup> Later on seeing her address registration details in Crimea, police said that this meant that she was a Russian citizen<sup>89</sup> and as such they could do anything they wanted with her. “This was such a crazy lie, and I understood that I was within that system, that machine, that beast, and I

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Maria Kulikovska, Skype 2015.

<sup>86</sup> “Illegal 254. Action,” *MKUV Studio*, available at <https://www.mariakulikovska.net/en/254-silk-screen-prints>, accessed 15 August 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Maria Kulikovska.

<sup>88</sup> Paasi, “Borders and Border-Crossings.”

<sup>89</sup> In fact, Maria is a Ukrainian citizen. The actions of the police related to the fact that Ukrainian citizens with Crimea’s registration are eligible in Russian law receive Russian passport.

could not do anything about it.”<sup>90</sup> As a result, Kulikovska has been included in the list of Ukrainian artists who are banned entry to Russia.

Later in 2014, Maria recreated this action in Paris as an act of solidarity for “all displaced people around the world.”<sup>91</sup> In this artistic performance several artists including Sofia Akimova, Christina Bouvier, Oleksii Markin, Ornic'Art, Anna Des, Natalia Tselyuba, and some residents of Paris laid down on Boulevard de Charonne covered by Ukrainian flag. In this way, she began to communicate with other European artists and audiences about the war in Ukraine and the experience of forced displacement, responding to the fact that, following the ‘breaking news’ about the annexation of Crimea, mass media across Europe did not address the social consequences of the conflict.<sup>92</sup>

Kulikovska’s performative sculptures are also an example of dis-bordering and feminist protest both before and during the war in Donbas. Back in 2012, she created “Homo Bulla – a HUMAN AS SOAP BUBBLE” sculpture tryptic from the ballistic soap which is used in military training. The sculptures were cast from Maria’s body, and she stated that she felt a deep connection with them. Together with the “Army of Clones” sculptures they were placed in the yard of IZOLYATSIA in Donetsk. Many people understood the exhibition as a form of protest against conservatism and patriarchy: “And some people did not like it, most people were negative about it, because it is provocation – the naked body in a patriarchal, very patriarchal society.”<sup>93</sup>

Maria Kulikovska’s sculptures attracted attention of supporters of the new regime in Donbas even before Maidan. As she explained, this group was preparing to seize IZOLYATSIA’s premises before 2014, and one of the assailants was a frequent visitor to the

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Maria Kulikovska.

<sup>91</sup> “254. Collective Performance, 2014. Act of solidarity with Maria and all displaced people around the world on the streets of Paris,” *MKUV Studio*, available at <https://www.mariakulikovska.net/en/254-collective-performance-paris>, accessed 14 July 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Wilson, “Has Europe forgotten about Ukraine?” *New Eastern Europe* 20, no. 1 (2016): 7-12.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Maria Kulikovska.



exhibition space: “[he] had been visiting over the previous two years, and knew IZOLYATSIA well, he had been at my lectures about feminism, political art, performance and actionism. He had made a dossier about all the artists.”<sup>94</sup> The attention the new regime supporters devoted to the cultural centre, and to Kulikovska’s art in particular, as targets of their cultural aggression, reveals the pervasiveness of Russian media narratives about Ukraine’s status as feminine and Europe as homosexual, as Edenborg has noted.<sup>95</sup> Kulikovska’s art was too provocative in its feminist message for the adherents of the newly imposed ideology, which, as I explain above, attempted to assert and impose conservative values on the region. In the end, her soap sculptures from the “Homo Bulla” tryptic and plaster sculptures from the “Army of Clones” series were used as targets for shooting practice in Donetsk by regime supporters on 9 June 2014. As Maria stated, “the person who led the capture, he called me as an artist of “degenerative art”, and my sculptures were the first which they shot.”<sup>96</sup>

In 2015, Maria Kulikovska created sculptures similar to the destroyed “Homo Bulla” and made them the centre of her performance “Happy birthday!” at the Saatchi Gallery in 2015 by attacking them with a hammer. This action was once again intended to remind audiences in other European countries about the war in Ukraine:

I was in one of the best galleries in Europe, and there are beautiful sculptures all around, and it seems like everything is fine, but beyond all this beauty and bombast, there is something profoundly broken inside (...). But war is not beautiful, and I decided for myself that I have to destroy them.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Maria Kulikovska.

<sup>95</sup> Emil Edenborg, "Creativity, geopolitics and ontological security: satire on Russia and the war in Ukraine," *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 294–316. See also Portnov, ““Donbass’ kak Drugoi. Ukrainskie intellektualnye diskursy do i vo vremia voyny”.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Maria Kulikovska.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

She mentioned that during her stay in the UK, she had a feeling that people do not know what is happening in Ukraine: the war seems to have been forgotten. The fact that the sculptures are made from the soap produced in Sweden, both for everyday life but also for military training, made the performance a sharp metaphor of war:

That was my response and it held up a mirror to what was happening in Donetsk. It is a metaphor of war, because the soap which I used for sculptures I bought in Sweden, and apart from soap for everyday life and for the royal family they sell it to arms companies to test new weapons.<sup>98</sup>

The title “Happy Birthday” is connected with Kulikovska’s displacement from Crimea which meant that she could not see her parents and did not have regular contact with them:

My parents are in Crimea, and I am not in contact with them. That performance in the Saatchi Gallery in November when I smashed my sculptures was on my Mom's birthday, but I was not able to call her and ask how she is. They did not have electricity at that time, and still don't have an Internet connection.<sup>99</sup>

Marilyn Monroe’s song “Happy birthday, Mister President,” which played during the performance, can be understood as an ironic reference to the Russian President and his actions in Crimea and Donbas. Kulikovska did not wear clothes during the performance

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

demonstrating her closeness to the sculptures which were cast from her own body, while at the same time highlighting the contrast of a strong woman taking power over violence, reclaiming ownership over her body.

The performance not only demonstrated a woman's ownership over her body, but also allowed Kulikovska to negotiate her identity in the symbolic space of occupied Donbas onto which an ideology has been enforced that excludes sexual diversity and feminism. The performance can also be seen as a form of protest from within the territories which have been occupied. Kulikovska's feminist art protests against the violation of borders, and, at the same time, is an attempt to claim back those borders through the symbolic crossing of frontiers.

Similarly, the performance "Let Me Say: It's Not Forgotten" in 2019 was performance of Maria Kulikovska shooting her sculptures with a rifle. This time the activity took place in a forest in summertime. She also, in a parallel way to the performance at the Saachi Gallery, claimed ownership over her body by shooting sculptures cast from her body. As Somchynsky has remarked, this performance presented her "intimate relationship to the destruction of her sculptures" together with "the lineages of conflict experienced by generations of individuals such as Kulikovska's family,"<sup>100</sup> which had suffered displacement and political violence.

Later, in 2019, Kulikovska created a set of new figures made of ballistic soap with the addition of blood, semen, and plant juice instead of dyes<sup>101</sup> for the film "The Forgotten" (director Daria Onyshchenko, 2020). The main character in the film is a feminist who despite living in the occupied territory for some time, tries to resist the regime and finally moves to Kyiv. It raises intersectional issues of war and displacement. As Onyshchenko stressed in an

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<sup>100</sup> Kalyna Somchynsky, *Creating Resistance by Engaging Destruction: Three Contemporary Feminist Artists from Ukraine*, A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (University of Alberta, 2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-ar1p-j987>: 45-46, accessed 18 September 2020.

<sup>101</sup> "6 Shot Soap Figures," *MKUV Studio*, available at <https://www.mariakulikowska.net/en/6-soap-bodies-fusillade>, accessed 15 August 2020.

online event at the Ukrainian Cultural Institute in London, “The situation in the occupied territories of Ukraine is particularly difficult for women because they experience violence [...], not only in Ukraine [...] Maria is a feminist sculptor, therefore, she corresponds with the main character.”<sup>102</sup> In the film, Maria in the role of journalist from Luhansk TV, shoots her statues on the site of a former plant which is reminiscent of IZOLYATSIA. As Onyshchenko explained, Maria deliberately chose the role of a journalist, who is a supporter of the occupied regime and who creates her “war reportages” with a green screen behind her, because she wanted to inhabit the role of one of the main evils in this war – disinformation.<sup>103</sup> So, through participation in the film, Kulikovska symbolically crosses the border between the government-controlled and non-government-controlled territories and locates herself in the occupied territory; she gains some authority over the enemy by “getting under its skin”.

## **Conclusion**

Ukrainian art provides unique examples of dis-bordering practices in the geopolitical context of the war in Donbas and adds to our understanding of the role of art from a critical borders studies perspective and the perspective of feminist geopolitics.

The Ukrainian art landscape was hugely transformed in 2014. In response to the geopolitical realities, but also the experiences of displacement, and the loss of family members and friends, many artists became involved in interpreting what was happening in Donbas and Crimea. However, opportunities for free artistic expression and resistance are very limited in non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, where many independent artists and cultural organisation had to flee, and examples of modern

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<sup>102</sup> “Q&A with the director of “The Forgotten” Daria Onyshchenko, 19 November 2020,” *Ukrainian Institute in London*, 21 November 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F046oFc2H64>, accessed 29 November 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Q&A with the director of “The Forgotten” Daria Onyshchenko.

feminist art such as Maria Kulikovska's sculptures at IZOLYZTSIA in Donetsk were destroyed. In these regions, artist practices began to be influenced by some Russian cultural elites and by Soviet nostalgia and contributed to the discursive landscapes of power of supporters of the new regime and its bordering.

Art in government-controlled areas of Ukraine, and feminist art in particular, through practices of "seeing as a border," brings a more intimate geopolitical perspective to audiences' understandings of the lived experiences of civilians residing on non-government territories of Donetsk and Lughansk oblasts. Alevtina Kakhidze's art, in which she experiences war together with her mother, formed a significant reflection on how borders between government and non-government-controlled areas of Ukraine – both discursive and technical – fracture people's everyday lives. Kakhidze's work helps to see Donbas beyond the checkpoints and the constructed dichotomy between East and West in Ukraine. At the same time, Kakhidze's art highlights how the physical violence of war and the regime in non-government-controlled areas, together with the structural violence directed towards pensioners by the Ukrainian authorities, physically and symbolically divide the population on both sides of the border. Kakhidze offers a dignified representation of elderly Ukrainian citizens who are considered traitors by parts of the Ukrainian authorities for their decision to stay in the occupied territories and seem to have been forgotten by those in power in Donetsk and Moscow. This work, however, is deeply interlinked with death – starting with the play "Call from the Cemetery" and later with the death of the artist's mother at a checkpoint. Kakhidze's art, through bringing citizens' perspective of moving 'between borders', looks like a call for bringing temporality to the space instead of what Massey called "the fixed and the dead". She demonstrated that even death itself challenges the physical barriers of checkpoints.

Displacement and death are also at the centre of the artworks of Maria Kulikovska. In several of her performances, she re-creates the execution by “firing squad” of her sculptures in Donetsk by militants at the start of the war in 2014. By demolishing her ballistic soap sculptures newly cast from her own body, she not only reclaims her body but also dis-borders symbolic space and highlights Donetsk and Crimea on the map of Ukraine for both national and international audiences. The embodiment of the experience of the war and the emotional intensity of Maria’s performances constitute a feminist geopolitical approach to understanding the war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea.

Dis-bordering and resisting the violence of the new bordering regime were at the core of both artists’ performances in Russia – in Kulikovska’s performance “illegal Action ‘254’” in Hermitage, and in “Calls from the Cemetery” performed by Kakhidze in Moscow biennale of contemporary art. Despite the different characteristics of art and their appeals, both artists challenged discursive landscapes of power and the space, which in Massey’s terms is “imbued with power”.

Further steps are needed to explore the junctures between art and communities on both sides of conflict in order to understand the processes of (co)production of bordering and dis-bordering. The geographical approach towards art, and feminist art, in particular, adds to the understanding of space as fluid and as a site of opportunities and resistance.

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