Article

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From individual to collective: Vernacular security and Ukrainian civil society in wartime

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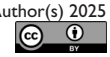

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Abstract

Through a vernacular security lens, this article examines which meanings of security have driven Ukrainian civil society's collective action in response to the Russo-Ukrainian war, which began with Russia's invasion of Crimea and the Donbas in 2014. It draws on a four-year study (2018–2022) of civic engagement in wartime Ukraine, involving in-depth interviews with members of army support groups, humanitarian organizations, volunteer battalions, and anti-disinformation groups. The article challenges vernacular security studies' tendency toward methodological individualism by showing how collective civic resistance produces shared security understandings that transcend individual-level constructions of security. The emergence of a new plural security actor from below blurs the elite/non-elite binary foundational to vernacular security scholarship, as citizen groups become prominent security voices without losing their community connections. The article finds that despite initially focusing primarily on military security, civil society groups' discourse evolved to encompass emancipatory and societal security dimensions, emphasizing both freedom from authoritarian control and the preservation of Ukrainian national identity. As a result, this research also contributes to theoretical bridge-building between vernacular and other critical approaches to security while addressing an important gap in our understanding of civilian agency during armed conflict.

Keywords

Civil society, critical security studies, methodological individualism, resistance, Russo-Ukrainian war, vernacular security

Introduction

> National security depends on each one of us, not on Zelenskyy or Putin.

What is striking about this statement by a Ukrainian member of the Territorial Defense Forces is that it dislocates political leaders from the position of primary actors that matter in the realm of security during wartime (Interview 1). The emergence of civil society as a central security actor in

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Ukraine presents a puzzling challenge to traditional understandings of security politics that privilege the agency of state leaders, international organizations, and great powers. Although neorealist accounts remain prominent in international relations analyses of Russia's war against Ukraine, (mis)interpreting the war as a consequence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's potential eastward expansion into Russia's claimed sphere of influence (for a critique, see Dutkiewicz and Smolenski, 2023), such top-down and decontextualized approaches cannot explain why Ukrainian citizens chose collective resistance over life under Russian occupation. Understanding this choice requires examining security through the lens of those who collectively realize it into existence. This article asks which meanings of security motivated Ukrainian civil society action in response to Russian aggression between 2018 and 2022. The vernacular security approach provides theoretical tools for such an examination, having recently evolved to reimagine citizens as active subjects rather than passive objects of security (Holland and Higham-James, 2025; Jarvis, 2019).

At the same time, this article challenges a fundamental limitation in vernacular security studies (VSS): its tendency toward methodological individualism. By examining Ukrainian civil society's role in resisting Russian aggression, I argue that vernacular security can manifest through organically formed collective civic action rather than just individual perceptions and experiences of (in) security. I show that civil society groups develop shared security meanings and practices that cannot be reduced to an aggregation of individual viewpoints. It is through sustained civic mobilization that citizens can move from passively experiencing (in)security to becoming a plural security actor. Moreover, this collective dimension requires us to rethink the rigid distinction between elite and non-elite actors within VSS, as civil society groups can occupy positions that challenge traditional analytical categories while maintaining their grass roots character. By examining groups that navigate the space between the individual and the state in Ukraine, this research reveals alternatives to state-centric and great power-focused analyses of security in wartime contexts. It also addresses a significant analytical gap in peace, conflict, and security studies regarding civilian agency during war (Bliesemann de Guevara et al., 2023), illuminating how people protect themselves and their communities amid violent conflict in asymmetric, authoritarian, and neocolonial contexts.

Drawing on Ukrainian civil society scholarship, I conceptualize civil society as a dynamic network of citizen groups engaging in collective action to pursue shared goals and interests (Burlyuk et al., 2017; Shapovalova and Burlyuk, 2018). This encompasses traditional civic actors such as registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and charitable foundations, alongside 'social movements, non-registered civic groups, local, small-scale, and online activism as a form of collective but also individual behavior' (Burlyuk et al., 2017: 5). By moving beyond institutional frameworks, this definition captures the fluid nature of civic engagement, from grass roots neighborhood initiatives to digital advocacy networks and spontaneous volunteer movements. In Ukraine's wartime context, this broad conceptualization is particularly salient, as it accommodates both established organizations and emergent forms of civic mobilization that have proven crucial for community resilience and security provision. Although the term 'civil society' suggests a unified entity, this framework acknowledges its inherent plurality, envisioning it as a complex ecosystem where formal and informal actors interact, adapt, and collectively shape the vernacular politics of security in Ukraine.

This study employs two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and hermeneutic textual analysis. It centers on the period from 2018 through 2022, involving 29 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of Ukrainian civil society groups engaged in security-related activities, conducted between July 2018 and February 2022. The sample covered representatives from each major category of civil society actors: nine from army support groups (including Come Back Alive, Initiative Ye+, Wings of Phoenix, and People's Self-Defense of Lviv Region), nine from humanitarian assistance organizations (such as Donbas SOS, East SOS, Veteran Hub, and Centre for Civil

Liberties), six from volunteer battalions and Territorial Defense Forces (including members of the Azov Regiment, Dnipro Battalion, and the 112th Territorial Defense Brigade), and five from groups focused on countering Russian disinformation (such as Turn Off Russian and the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre). All respondents were assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Using an ordinary language interviewing technique, I created conversational spaces where security meanings could emerge naturally rather than being explicitly prompted (Schaffer, 2006). This involved starting with broad questions about the group's work and motivations, then carefully noting when security-related themes emerged in respondents' own terms. When security meanings arose, I pursued these threads through follow-up questions using the respondent's own vocabulary. This technique required constant attention to language choice, avoiding academic terminology unless introduced by interviewees and identifying proxy terms that connected everyday expressions to theoretical concepts.

The hermeneutic textual analysis followed an iterative process of interpretation, moving between text and context through multiple analytical cycles based on Gadamer's (2004) concept of the 'hermeneutic circle'. I began with a first reading of interview transcripts to identify explicit and implicit references to security, marking key terms and phrases. The second analytical phase involved mapping these security references against other recurring concepts (such as sovereignty, identity, and freedom) to understand their interconnections. The third phase examined how these conceptual relationships translated into specific practices by civil society groups. Throughout these phases, I maintained a parallel analysis of contextual factors, including any other texts and social media posts from the groups, official security discourses, broader political developments in Ukraine, and relationships between civil society groups and other actors. This layered contextual analysis helped illuminate how security meanings were shaped by changing circumstances, with each analytical cycle prompting revisions of initial interpretations (Yanow, 2006). Throughout the research process, I also remained conscious of how my Ukrainian heritage could shape my interpretations, acknowledging that my preconceptions both facilitate and potentially limit understanding. While embracing this positionality, I tried to engage with diverse civil society perspectives and resist the temptation to impose monolithic interpretations of the data.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section anchors the discussion in the vernacular security approach, examining its value for studying citizens' security agency while critiquing its methodological individualism. I then turn to the contextual study of Ukraine, providing essential background about how Russia's war against Ukraine began with the invasion of Crimea and the Donbas region. The third section analyzes how Ukrainian civil society arose as an essential security provider in the post-2014 period. Next, the article traces the evolution of civil society's vernacular understanding of security – from an initial focus on traditional military defense to more comprehensive conceptualizations encompassing both emancipation and societal security. The final section examines how Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion reawakened and intensified civil society's role in security politics while maintaining important continuities in how security is construed.

Vernacular security and its limitations

The concept of 'vernacular security' was initially introduced by Bubandt (2005) in his analysis of the varied ways in which Indonesian communities responded to global security discourses. For him, security is a socially situated practice that is 'open to comparison and politically contextualized explication, rather than merely an analytical category that needs refined definition and consistent use' (Bubandt, 2005: 275). Vernacular security research has since foregrounded situated understandings of security among 'ordinary people' in local settings. According to Croft and

Vaughan-Williams (2017: 22), VSS is concerned with mapping the different ways citizens 'construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge, and categories of understanding'. The aim is to document 'the range of referent objects, identity claims, threat cartographies, and security imaginaries used in vernacular speak' (Löfflmann and Vaughan-Williams, 2018: 386–387). The focus on vernacular articulations of security is a helpful corrective to the tendency within security studies to 'speak *for*, rather than *to* (or, perhaps better, *with*) "ordinary" people and the conditions of (in)security they experience, encounter, or construct in everyday life' (Jarvis and Lister, 2013: 158).

The vernacular security approach provides a theoretical framework for engaging with actors in society who have been overlooked in mainstream security analyses. The interest in the production of security from below is what makes the VSS agenda suitable for the study of civil society – an assemblage of citizen collectives that so often appear at the margins of the practice and study of security. Vernacular security research treats such agents' knowledge, experiences, and practices as equally crucial to our understanding of security as those of more structurally privileged actors. Studying the vernacular helps transgress the established hierarchies in security studies between those agents who matter and those who do not, signifying a crucial ontological and epistemological reorientation of the field. The vernacular security research program matches the goal of this article, which is to study the collective systems of meaning embedded within civil society to decenter dominant security paradigms and foreground civilian agency in wartime.

Furthermore, the importance of VSS for this article lies in its reimagining citizenry as an active subject of security, departing from their established representation as a passive object upon which elite actions are exercised. VSS does not simply adopt 'the viewpoint of the people who are secured' but rather recognizes citizens as active agents who 'define, experience, and try to ensure their own security' (Luckham, 2017: 112). For example, in his analysis of vernacular security speak on social media in the wake of an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Islamist terror threat to Marseille, Downing (2021) demonstrates that users drew on local symbols and idioms to subvert both state and non-state elite narratives about Muslims and security. In the light of the perceived impotence of the French security services, he concludes, 'the powerless' were able to resist a coercively 'powerful' terrorist organization by satirically rebuffing its threats on social media (Downing, 2021: 14). Thus, by 'seeking to recover citizens' political agency and the constitutive role of their expressions of security and insecurity', VSS debunks the myth about citizens' passivity that has contributed to the inability to imagine civil society as security actor (Löfflmann and Vaughan-Williams, 2018: 385).

Beyond individual security and rigid subject position binaries

The vernacular security approach forms a solid foundation for thinking about how civil society may play a part in security politics. Yet, it has several limitations. The first limitation of VSS lies in how it envisions the subject of security, which is typically conceptualized in individualized terms. The vernacular security turn explicitly focuses on centering the views and experiences of 'ordinary' *individuals* (Jarvis and Lister, 2013: 172). As Benzing (2020: 97) confirms, the concept of vernacular security 'reflects on individual feelings of security and insecurity and allows analysts to describe the meaning and practice of security in everyday environments'. This methodological individualism is evident in research findings where 'the most common referent object of security' appears to be 'the individual and his or her family', as Vaughan-Williams and Stevens (2016: 47) put it. One participant in their study exemplified this when explaining what security meant to them: 'I think like safety, it's about myself, my family, what could impact on me. I would probably think of global stuff second, third, fourth. First and foremost would be personal security.'

This individualistic framework, however, proves inadequate when examining how citizens collectively organize around security issues. When citizens come together in civil society groups, they develop distinctive collective understandings of security that represent more than just an aggregation of individual views. These collective security conceptualizations transcend individual standpoints, emerging through organic group interaction, shared values, and collective processes of advocacy and action. The limitation of viewing security primarily through an individual lens becomes particularly apparent when examining how civil society groups mobilize and act, as collective action requires the development of shared vocabularies, common threat perceptions, and coordinated response strategies. Therefore, while VSS has made valuable contributions in highlighting how ordinary citizens understand security, its methodological individualism may miss crucial aspects of how security meanings are intersubjectively constructed through group processes. Ukrainian civil society offers a particularly rich context for examining these collective dimensions of vernacular security.

The Ukrainian context also reveals deeper theoretical tensions within VSS, particularly in its conceptualization of 'ordinary citizens'. When previously non-elite actors transform into prominent security speakers on par with state elites, this foundational category becomes problematic. Similar tensions have been observed in other contexts where marginalized groups develop security expertise – for example, in Israeli feminist activists' struggles around small arms control, where grass roots knowledge production challenged conventional security discourse while facing institutional resistance (see this special issue). These developments pose several conceptual challenges for vernacular security research. First, they question the field's tendency to work with rigid binaries (elite/non-elite, ordinary/extraordinary) that may unintentionally reify hierarchies of importance that determine which actors and actions are considered legitimate and authoritative in security politics. Second, they highlight the risk of essentializing subject positions that are inherently fluid and contingent. Third, they raise fundamental questions about how to conceptualize actors who occupy ambiguous positions between traditional categories – for instance, when civil society groups develop militarized capabilities or gain significant political influence while maintaining their grass roots character. These theoretical tensions become particularly evident in the Ukrainian context, which destabilizes the conventional distinction between armed actors and civilians, given the high degree of interpenetration between civil, political, and military spheres.

Indeed, as the exploration of Ukrainian civil society will illustrate, joint citizen action can create new forms of security agency and political subjectivity that transcend conventional analytical categories. By forming into groups, previously disconnected and disorganized citizenry can coalesce into an alternative power center, effectively disrupting the state's monopoly over the making of security. This context exemplifies the emergence of an agentic citizenry that constitutes a nascent political subject – one that operates in ways that are simultaneously mundane and extraordinary. As such, Ukrainian citizen groups simultaneously perform everyday acts of mutual aid and community support while also undertaking extraordinary measures such as organizing territorial defense units and coordinating large-scale humanitarian operations during wartime.

Further still, grass roots mobilization can lead to an inversion of traditional power hierarchies, with civil society groups becoming a new kind of 'security elite' while retaining their connection to ordinary citizens. Through their involvement in security provision and military support, citizen groups can acquire specialized expertise, capabilities, and influence comparable to traditional security elites, while their grass roots origins and continued community embeddedness allow them to serve as a bridge between high-level security decisionmaking and local citizen needs. Such developments suggest that VSS needs to expand beyond studying how citizens perceive security threats to examine how non-traditional actors can actively transform security politics while occupying hybrid positions that challenge established categorizations.

Donbas war

Although the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the remarkable civic mobilization within Ukraine that followed have captured global attention, these developments are rooted in the prolonged conflict in the Donbas region, which has experienced Russian occupation and sustained Ukrainian resistance since 2014. Although the eight-year-long war in the Donbas remained largely overlooked in mainstream political discourse, understanding this period is essential for grasping how the Ukrainian security vernacular acquired its present shape, for contextual conditions play a crucial role in determining which security meanings gain political prominence and which actors emerge as prominent security voices. As I show below, the years between 2014 and 2022 marked a transformative period during which civil society emerged as a significant security provider.

The Russian invasion of the Donbas followed the Maidan Revolution of 2013–2014, which saw an unprecedented civic mobilization in defense of democracy, the rule of law, and European integration. After the revolution ousted Kremlin-backed President Victor Yanukovych in February 2014, the Russian government adopted an aggressive securitizing position. Russian President Putin (2014a) characterized the revolution as a Western-orchestrated coup d'état and declared the new Ukrainian government illegitimate. Putin's narrative, which predated 2014, denied the authenticity of Ukrainian identity and Ukrainians' right to self-determination, insisting that Ukraine and Russia constituted a single nation (Mälksoo, 2022). Replete with calculated falsehoods, this narrative portrayed Ukraine as having lost its 'true' Russian identity through Western influence and needing salvation.

On 27 February 2014, local separatists, with the help of Russian fully armed security forces, occupied government buildings in Crimea (Hauter, 2021). Putin (2014a) justified Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea as the defense of Russian-speaking residents against purported 'neo-Nazi', 'Russophobe', and 'anti-Semite' forces behind what he termed an 'unconstitutional coup and the armed seizure of power'. He pledged to 'protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine and that segment of the Ukrainian people who feel their inseparable not only ethnic but also cultural and linguistic ties with Russia [and] feel themselves part of the broad Russian world' (Putin, 2014b). Facing superior Russian military forces and seeking to prevent escalation, Ukraine's government was unable to mount armed resistance to Russia's annexation of Crimea (Käihkö, 2021).

Russia subsequently orchestrated an armed separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, attempting to create a breakaway region called 'Novorossiya'. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the Ukrainian authorities of provoking a civil war in the Donbas and presented Russia as a 'savior' that seeks to stop a 'fratricidal war' (quoted in Gutterman, 2014). When armed separatist groups began occupying government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk in early March, Kyiv initially hesitated to characterize the situation as war. Following the seizure of Sloviansk by Russia-backed militants on 13 April 2014, Acting President Turchynov (2014) announced an Anti-Terrorist Operation against 'terrorist troops coordinated by the Russian Federation'. This designation as a domestic military operation avoided a formal declaration of war, reflecting Ukraine's institutional unpreparedness. As Turchynov admitted, 'Our country had neither the government system nor the defense system back then' (quoted in Hladka et al., 2017: 30).

The Ukrainian military's response was limited to containing the separatist forces partly due to the lack of troops and resources. In the absence of martial law, which the government avoided declaring to prevent supporting Russia's 'failed state' narrative, the military's options were limited (Bulakh et al., 2017). The Ukrainian government lacked a coherent military strategy, leaving its armed forces, internal security units, and intelligence services ill-equipped to counter Russian intervention (Käihkö, 2021). Years of corruption and Russian infiltration within the Ministry of Defense, particularly during Yanukovych's presidency, had severely compromised the army's

operational capacity (Worschech, 2017). The armed forces lacked basic supplies, including weapons, clothing, and food (Oleinik, 2018) – a situation civil society members described as an army of 'scrap metal' (Interview 2) with soldiers 'in rubber sandals who had never held a gun in their hands before' (Interview 3).

Ukrainian civil society as a security provider

The perceived inadequacy of the government's war effort spurred social self-mobilization in defense of Ukraine's sovereignty. Seeing that there was little the Ukrainian government could do to prevent the annexation of Crimea, citizens began to take collective action to stop the further advance of pro-Russian forces in the east. The questioning of the authority of the state and its ability to defend the country catalyzed the emergence of micro-level forms of security agency. For grass roots groups, wartime engagement in the politics of security started with everyday things, such as small-scale and low-key fundraising campaigns for bulletproof vests, thermal imagers, and clothes (Interview 4). Instead of a single coherent movement, the new security subject represented a dispersed assemblage of newly formed local groups tasked with different functions. The activities of civil society can be subdivided into four categories: armed defense, army support, humanitarian support, and information warfare. Below, I will discuss the leading players within Ukrainian civil society corresponding to these categories. This section ends with a few reflections on the shape that civil society adopted during this period.

Volunteer battalions

Russia's actions in Ukraine inadvertently opened up the politics of security to extra-institutional collective intervention. Citizens mobilized spontaneously, forming volunteer battalions authorized by the government. By 2015, at least 44 volunteer battalions had been set up from the civil population, comprising 13,600 fighters (Bulakh et al., 2017; Ukraine Crisis Media Centre [UCMC], 2015). They were either self-financed or sponsored by members of parliament, regional governors, and Ukrainian oligarchs. Volunteer battalions enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and often fought alongside regular forces (Bukkvoll, 2019). Most of them recognized government authority, but exceptions such as the Right Sector Ukrainian Volunteer Corps did not always wait for official approval before initiating operations and refused to follow orders on several occasions (Bukkvoll, 2019). It was ultimately reformatted into a separate brigade of the Ukrainian army in 2022, whereas most other battalions were integrated into the country's regular military and security structures between 2014 and 2015.

Army support groups

Besides providing 'hard' security, civil society groups have offered various forms of assistance to the Ukrainian army. This aid ranged from crowdfunding and procuring military equipment to evacuating wounded soldiers and providing medical services in frontline hospitals (Falsini, 2018). Notable groups include Army SOS, Come Back Alive, Hospitallers, Initiative Ye+, People's Project, and Wings of Phoenix. In 2015 alone, volunteer groups contributed the equivalent of 4% of the country's defense budget in donations, logistical support, and humanitarian assistance to the army (Sanders, 2017: 41). They also provided specialized technical equipment, such as thermal imaging cameras and tablets with ballistic software, and organized military training courses (Zarembo, 2018). In addition, they monitored defense issues, facilitated prisoner releases, and offered social, psychological, and legal support to veterans and their families.

The activities of groups evolved to cover the needs that the government was slow to meet as the fighting progressed (Puglisi, 2015).

Humanitarian aid groups

Much of civil society's focus also fell on humanitarian operations. Grass roots initiatives arose in response to the humanitarian crisis to help displaced and affected populations, coordinate searches for missing people, and facilitate the release of prisoners. Groups such as Donbas SOS, East SOS, and Crimea SOS were founded to provide accommodation, employment, and administrative, judicial, and psychological aid to internally displaced persons (IDPs). They criticized the government for providing insufficient support to IDPs, prompting them to fill gaps in basic social services. Volunteer efforts supported nearly 1.7 million people fleeing Crimea and the Donbas (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022). Due to the reduction in the already minimal public funding, many services eventually had to cease their existence after 2015 (Falsini, 2018). Larger groups reoriented their focus to international support from donors such as the Open Society Foundations and the United National Development Program.

Information warfare

Civil society groups also engaged in information warfare through awareness-raising and counter-propaganda activities. For example, Turn Off Russian was established in 2014 with the aim of combating Russian influence across various fronts, including culture, diplomacy, politics, and military affairs. The group focused on fighting Russian manipulation in Ukrainian society through media, businesses, and pro-Russian politicians. Its activities included domestic and international awareness campaigns, blocking pro-Russian media channels, and educating populations in Ukrainian-controlled territories. Similarly, the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre is an NGO launched in March 2014, whose press center became the leading platform for briefings, discussions, and round tables about the situation on the front line. The NGO functions as an international communications hub, seeking to provide accurate updates on events and national security threats (UCMC, 2022).

The informality and heterogeneity of Ukrainian civil society

The war in Donbas catalyzed the transformation of Ukrainian civil society into a decentralized security actor operating largely outside formal institutional structures. Especially in the early stages of the war, civil society initiatives emerged primarily through informal channels, leveraging personal relationships and social networks, with funding sourced through voluntary contributions (Oleinik, 2018). This informal character was so pronounced that Shapovalova and Burlyuk (2018: 22) characterized Ukrainian civil society as 'citizens without organizations'. These grass roots initiatives bypassed traditional bureaucratic channels, establishing direct lines of communication with frontline military units. As one volunteer explained, 'We work directly with the military. We do not trust the bureaucrats' (Interview 5). This direct engagement enabled volunteers to assess military needs firsthand and deliver essential supplies more efficiently. However, state authorities' reluctance to accept volunteer-provided military and technological equipment forced these groups to develop alternative supply channels (Zarembo, 2018). Individual volunteers even risked criminal and administrative charges by traveling abroad to purchase critical equipment, such as bulletproof vests and drones, often disguising these acquisitions as personal self-defense purchases.

Today, Ukrainian civil society exists as a diverse network of groups rather than a monolithic actor bound by uniform norms or ideological values. This diversity encompasses various social

networks with distinct interests and identities, including nationalist groups whose rhetoric has sometimes promoted social division. The Azov Battalion serves as a notable example, having drawn attention for its far-right elements during its early formation (Umland, 2019). Russia continues to reference the battalion's initial 'neo-Nazi' ideology to justify its invasion of Ukraine and the destruction of Mariupol, where the unit was originally based. However, what has now become the Azov Regiment bears little resemblance to the original ultranationalist volunteer militia (Sklyarevska, 2022). Following its integration into the Ukrainian National Guard under the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the autumn of 2014, the regiment has undergone significant transformation, removing far-right radicals and shifting toward a pro-democratic orientation (Shekhovtsov, 2023). Overall, while Ukrainian civil society maintains this plurality, it finds common ground in its pro-European, pro-democratic orientation and opposition to Russian influence, with anti-liberal groups representing only a marginal presence (Zarembo, 2022).

Evolving security meanings

The article has now demonstrated that Ukrainian civil society emerged as an essential security provider with the start of the Donbas war, supplementing the state in terms of army provision and humanitarian assistance. Hence, what makes the Ukrainian case distinct is that a non-traditional security actor stepped into the realm of traditional security. In a state that was too weak to defend itself from aggression by a foreign state, the focus of vernacular security discourses was at first predominantly on protecting values associated with statehood: political independence, self-determination, and territorial integrity. During the early, 'hot' stages of the war, army support groups and volunteer battalion fighters were the leading voices within civil society that articulated traditional, military threats to national security. For example, according to Oleksiy, a civic activist and former member of the Dnipro Battalion, 'The war can only be ended by strengthening the armed forces and giving an aggressive response to the Russian occupation of our territories. There needs to be a militarization of the whole population' (Interview 12). Rather than promoting peaceful conflict resolution, Ukrainian civil society actively produced security discourses that encouraged the militarization of society and affirmed the priority of military means.

Nonetheless, with the changing nature of the Donbas war and the subsiding of the immediate sense of emergency, there was an evolution in the logic of security inaugurated by civil society groups. In February 2015, Ukraine was forced to sign the Minsk Accords with Russia that were intended to end the fighting in the Donbas region. Signed by Ukraine, Russia, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Russian-led Donbas militants, the document contained contradictory provisions and demanded significant concessions from Ukraine, including granting 'special status' to the Russian-occupied parts of Donbas (Allan, 2020). The agreement created a stalemate, turning the conflict into a low-intensity war of attrition along a recognized separation zone. As the state became more able to provide for the army and national defense, civil society started to expand its purview toward non-military issues and practices. Counter-balancing the preoccupation with national security or the protection of the state, more comprehensive and alternative conceptions of security began to emerge, becoming more prevalent among groups with activities related to social and humanitarian activism.

Beyond state security: Emancipation, freedom, and democratic values

As civil society groups shifted their focus beyond immediate military needs and state security, resistance against Russian aggression became increasingly viewed as a broader struggle to prevent subordination to authoritarian control by a foreign power. The war began to be articulated as a

direct attack on Ukraine's established system of values, such as freedom, self-determination, and democracy. According to a member of the Come Back Alive army-support foundation, 'Freedom isn't something we can take for granted. We've got to stand up and protect it. And yeah, sometimes you have to take a more militant approach to defending human rights' (Interview 4). A member of another army-support group, Wings of Phoenix, likewise explained: 'I just want [my kids] to grow up in a country where they can actually be free. Not in a police state like Russia, where the government controls everything' (Interview 13). These testimonies envision security as fundamentally about protecting fundamental freedoms and human dignity, seeing the preservation of democratic self-determination as the core issue at stake rather than just territorial defense or state survival.

This evolving discourse signaled a departure from the statist view of security initially adopted by civil society groups at the war's onset. Maintaining statehood now became seen as a means rather than an end – essential for protecting fundamental rights but not sufficient on its own. The primary referent object of security shifted from the state to the people. This evolved perspective was conveyed by Matviy of East SOS, a charity foundation that supports IDPs:

> We must strive to return and unify all our territories. We have a legitimate right to them. But security isn't really about borders. It's about people and their ability to thrive within those borders. . . . New generations are being born [in Russian-occupied territories] who don't know what freedom feels like. People must not be afraid to be themselves, to be Ukrainian. (Interview 9)

The preservation of state sovereignty thus became subordinate to protecting fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech and assembly, LGBTQ+ and ethnic minority (e.g., Crimean Tatar) rights, and the very right to Ukrainian identity. As a member of the Center for Civil Liberties human rights organization emphasized, 'retaking [Russian-occupied] regions is needed to defend the rights of the people who stayed on those lands. We've documented a lot of instances when those who oppose the Russian occupation get kidnapped, tortured, and raped' (Interview 6). 'A government's main job', she continued later in the interview,

> is to protect the ability of citizens to realize their freedom. That's what really matters, and everything else comes second. Even when we talk about keeping the state intact, that's only important because it helps protect these basic rights. We're not trying to preserve the state just to have a state. It's not like we're protecting an empty shell. (Interview 6)

Echoing the notion of security as emancipation introduced by the Welsh School of Security Studies (Booth, 2007), security expanded to denote the ability to independently choose one's future and live a dignified life without domination.

The threats to the well-being of citizens were understood to derive less from the neighbor's army than the political, socio-economic, and cultural oppression that a full-scale Russian occupation could bring in the long run. According to Svitlana, a humanitarian aid volunteer, if Russia were to emerge victorious in the war, there would be the 'return of a USSR-like police state with all its repressions and tyranny. Russification and the subjugation of the Ukrainian people once again' (Interview 7). At stake in Ukrainian resistance was the rejection of Russia's imperialism, as pointed out by a member of Veteran Hub, a humanitarian organization focused on veteran support and reintegration:

> Our losses are the price we pay for refusing to be part of another Russian Empire and [for continuing to] decide by ourselves how we should live. This war is about Russia's imperialist ambitions to restore the USSR, [which are] incompatible with our struggle to be an independent nation. (Interview 8)

This suggests that security cannot be achieved without addressing the deep-rooted patterns of political subordination, socio-economic control, and cultural erasure that characterize colonial relationships.

The Ukrainian context, therefore, reveals an emerging distinctly decolonial understanding of emancipation, where individual rights and national liberation become intrinsically connected. Here, preserving state sovereignty is not opposed to advancing the civil liberties of its citizens, as critical security scholars sometimes assume; rather, they reinforce each other in the struggle against colonial oppression. This demonstrates how emancipation in (neo)colonial contexts operates simultaneously at individual and collective levels, illustrating the inseparability of personal freedoms from broader decolonial struggles.

Societal security: Defending Ukrainian nationhood

In articulating their emancipatory vision of security, Ukrainian civil society groups consistently emphasized one fundamental freedom above all others: the right to exist and develop as a distinctly Ukrainian nation. The construction of Russia as a threat necessitated a corresponding definition of the subject to be secured, raising fundamental questions about Ukrainian identity and the shared values embodied by this collectivity. The constitutive role of identity in civil society discourses on national security remained implicit in the first years of the Donbas war but has gained prominence over time.

This evolution manifested through civil society groups' expanding focus on cultural and societal dimensions of security, as exemplified by the 2019 language law debate. The law, making Ukrainian mandatory for public sector workers, superseded previous legislation that had permitted widespread use of Russian. Although critics raised concerns about the potential marginalization of Russian speakers, civil society groups articulated the law as essential for ending discrimination against Ukrainian speakers and countering Russia's narrative of protecting Russian speakers from alleged genocide (Fortuin, 2022). The assertion of Turn Off Russian, a group working to counter the Kremlin's cultural and informational influences in Ukraine, that 'Ukrainian [language] protects' reflects a broader understanding of language policy as fundamental to national security (Turn Off Russian, 2019). The group's emphasis on 'Ukrainization' as a 'safeguard against [Russians] coming to "liberate" you' demonstrates how language policy became intertwined with national security concerns (Turn Off Russian, 2019).

The emergence of Russia as an existential enemy played a crucial role in consolidating and redefining Ukrainian national identity. The testimonies of civil society groups convey how the Donbas war catalyzed the development of 'national consciousness' – the awareness of the collective of its belonging to a specific nation (Interview 1). According to Zoriana from the Initiative Ye+ group that provides frontline medical support, the war was perceived as an 'existential event that radically changed the people's consciousness and activated the knowledge that Ukraine is not Russia' (Interview 11). Russia's framing of Ukrainian identity as subordinate to and not distinct from a broader Russian identity made setting oneself apart from 'Russian-ess' paramount. Similarly, the interview with Daryna from the Community Affairs army-support and humanitarian aid group exemplifies the war's role in crystallizing national consciousness in historically Russian-speaking regions:

> Before 2014, I didn't necessarily consider myself a patriot of this country. I used to speak Russian and didn't have a strong sense of national identity. Many people in my city [Mykolaiv] were in a similar state of latent patriotism. The war gave me a new understanding. Because if Russia allows itself to kill our people, how can we consider Russians to be our fraternal people? [Russian aggression] connected me to other pro-Ukrainian people within civil society. (Interview 14)

Analytically speaking, it can be argued that integral to the wartime self-definition of Ukrainian civil society has been a discourse that resembles the Copenhagen School concept of societal security – defined as the preservation of a particular collectivity's shared identity (Wæver, 1993). As such, the consolidation of national identity in contemporary Ukraine involved a process of societal securitization driven by the identification of an existential threat to collective identity. For instance, Vasylyna, from the Donbas SOS army-support group, expresses a fundamental societal security concern about intergenerational cultural continuity and the threat of future generations losing their connection to national culture and self-understanding:

> The biggest [source of] insecurity for me is the fact that a whole new generation of children has been born in the occupied territories. They're being brainwashed. They don't feel themselves Ukrainian. Their ideology and worldview are being formed in a way that rejects any bit of Ukrainian identity. But they're Ukrainians, regardless of what they're being taught to believe. The separation from their Ukrainian heritage that's being imposed on these children is itself a form of violence against our society. (Interview 10)

Nevertheless, as the interviews with members of Ukrainian civil society groups also show, the war was seen not merely to threaten Ukrainian identity but also, paradoxically, to strengthen it by compelling Ukrainians to explicitly define and defend their distinctive national character against Russia's repeated denial of Ukrainian nationhood. Through self-organization in defense of their country, civil society groups have actively demonstrated and reinforced the existence of a distinct Ukrainian nation, effectively countering Russian narratives of Ukrainian artificiality. To quote one interviewee:

> There's a positive side to the war. It has united us and shown us who is who. We no longer consider Russians to be our brotherly people. By coming together to defend our nation, we've proven that it's alive and not artificial, unlike what Russia claims'. (Interview 1)

2022 and the reawakening of civil society

Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine in 2022 has reawakened informal civil activism in Ukraine. It has spurred a plethora of volunteer initiatives – from public donations to actions related to the procurement of weapons and civilian protection. Local groups have worked together with the state to support the army and humanitarian aid efforts. Within the first month of the full-fledged invasion, more than 100,000 people enlisted in the Territorial Defense Forces, the newly established volunteer branch of the Armed Forces, to protect strategic objects and take part in combat (*The Kyiv Independent*, 2022). According to the Come Back Alive website, the army-support foundation grew approximately 280 times from ₴19.5 million ($517,000) in 2021 to ₴5.72 billion ($155 million) in 2022 (Come Back Alive, 2022). The number of humanitarian civil society groups increased almost sixfold from approximately 120 at the start of the war to 700 by the end of 2022, 60% of which were locally based groups (OCHA, 2023). Altogether, as of April 2022, as many as 80% of Ukrainians were involved in civil resistance, although their number had fallen to 40% by February 2023 (Onuch et al., 2022; Rating, 2022, 2023).

One observation that can be made is that the advent of a new emergency has signaled a transition to a (neo)traditional security discourse as survival in the face of existential threats (Buzan et al., 1998), yet with a stronger emphasis on the survival of the nation rather than the state. Amid the Russian military buildup in early 2022, one could already notice a refocusing of the meaning of security around the notion of national survival. One respondent, who had just joined the Territorial Defense Forces at the time of the interview, emphasized the threat of national extinction: 'We are fighting for our right to exist as Ukrainians' (Interview 1). After 24 February, security has become

even more about protecting the existence of the nation against its attempted destruction. The phrase 'If Russia stops fighting, there will be no war, but if Ukraine stops fighting, it will cease to exist' has been commonly written on the placards carried by those protesting Russia's invasion of Ukraine worldwide (Kokcharov, 2022). Nonetheless, what has been termed 'survival' entails more than preserving the lives of Ukrainians and the country's sovereignty. Surviving as a nation has been equally an act of defending Ukrainian national identity in the face of its negation by Russia by reasserting its distinguishing characteristics, such as its ancestral language (Kulyk, 2023). Thus, the discourse of security as national survival has been deeply intertwined with the discourse of societal security discussed before, targeting both physical and cultural dimensions of national existence.

That security has not been merely about survival is additionally demonstrated by the fact that security has been associated not with the mere cessation of violence but rather with freedom, self-determination, and democratic values. The article has already shown that civil society groups have consistently rejected the notion of making peace with Russia unless it includes the full restoration of occupied territories. The full-blown invasion prompted a fundamental reconsideration of the meaning of peace itself, extending beyond the simple withdrawal of Russian forces. In February 2023, representatives of Ukrainian civil society issued a manifesto that positioned justice as an inextricable component of peace, declaring 'We cannot achieve peace at the expense of justice or justice at the expense of peace' (Sustainable Peace Manifesto, 2023). Importantly, Ukrainian civil society has rejected the idea of returning to the prewar status quo, arguing that those very conditions enabled Russian aggression. This ongoing reconceptualization of peace aligns with the broader understanding of security as emancipation, reflecting a determined resistance against returning to a 'normalcy' that would perpetuate systemic injustices and oppression.

Conclusion

Illuminating the collective potentiality of vernacular security, this analysis of Ukrainian civil society has captured how citizen agency and collective mobilization can become central to wartime security-making. I have illustrated how citizens moved from being passive objects of security to active subjects who not only provided critical military support but also transformed security from a state-dominated domain into a sphere of collective civic action. Initially emerging to fill critical gaps in state capacity during the Donbas war, Ukrainian civil society groups took on direct responsibility for military defense, challenging the orthodox view that security 'functions primarily at the level of the state and the international and is traditionally closed and non-participatory' (Elliott, 2015: 21). Their activities ranged from providing essential military equipment and training to forming volunteer battalions, effectively displacing the state's monopoly on security provision.

As the immediate military crisis subsided and state capacity improved, Ukrainian civil society's understanding of security evolved in crucial ways. Two distinct but interconnected security discourses emerged that transcended the traditional focus on military defense. The first, developed primarily by humanitarian groups, reframed security as emancipation – emphasizing citizens' fundamental right to live in dignity and determine their own future free from external domination. The second discourse, advanced by groups countering Russian influence, centered on societal security and the preservation of Ukrainian national identity as essential to survival as a distinct nation. Together, these evolving security discourses produced a transformed conception of security that integrated military defense with broader aspirations for national self-determination and cultural preservation. The result reveals a participatory dimension of vernacular security, where civil society emerges as a distinct plural subject that moves from merely experiencing security to actively engaging in its production.

The article makes several key theoretical contributions to vernacular security scholarship. First, it exposes and addresses a crucial limitation in the field: its tendency toward methodological individualism. By examining how Ukrainian civil society groups collectively constructed and enacted security meanings, I have demonstrated that vernacular security cannot be reduced to an aggregation of individual perspectives. The Ukrainian context reveals how shared experiences of resistance and collective action can generate distinctive security conceptions that emerge through group processes and transcend individual viewpoints. Through shared practices of resistance and mutual support, civil society groups can develop security meanings that integrate individual concerns about personal safety with broader collective aspirations for national liberation and societal transformation. Second, this collective dimension of vernacular security challenges core assumptions about the distinction between elite and non-elite actors. I have shown how citizen groups can transform into significant security voices while maintaining their grass roots character and connection to local communities. This hybrid position – simultaneously embodying characteristics of both security elites and community-based actors – defies conventional analytical categories in VSS. Through their collective mobilization, grass roots actors can fundamentally reshape security politics while occupying liminal positions between traditional categories.

Moreover, this research contributes to bridge-building efforts across critical security studies by demonstrating productive intersections between VSS and other theoretical approaches to security. The analysis of Ukrainian civil society's evolving security discourse illustrates how the Welsh School's conceptualization of security as emancipation can be grounded in concrete collective struggles for liberation from colonial domination, encouraging the development of emancipatory approaches to vernacular security. Similarly, while the Copenhagen School's societal security framework typically examines elite-level identity politics, I have revealed how societal security concerns emerged through grass roots mobilization and decolonial resistance. Indeed, vernacular discourses can fuse diverse security meanings, often resonating with, yet not perfectly mapping onto, academic vocabularies. We may discover overlapping and sometimes contradictory concepts of security that resist rigid theoretical categorization, requiring researchers to remain receptive to novel modulations of existing conceptual categories. In this way, subjects may fundamentally reshape our theoretical understanding of security through their lived meaning-making practices.

The story presented here may be concerning for critical security scholars, for whom the militarization of civil society represents a potentially dangerous development that may perpetuate conflict. Millar (2016) argues that normatively charged calls to support military forces can obscure ongoing violence and potentially legitimize it. This dynamic risks involving civil society groups in producing discourses that undergird societal acceptance of violent political acts and paradoxically reinforce state power. However, civilians in conflict zones demonstrate agency in how they engage with conflict landscapes, with many choosing nonviolent approaches to protection and conflict management – a phenomenon that warrants deeper investigation in civil resistance literature (Bliesemann de Guevara et al., 2023). Examining the relationship between civil society and war requires remaining alert to both potential pitfalls and opportunities for democratic engagement.

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13. Mariana, member of Wings of Phoenix, online interview, February 2022.
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