

Schisms and Solidarities:
Feminism, LGBT Rights, and Reclaiming Politics on Russia's New Left

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Introduction

Fieldwork in an era of protest

After weeks of preparation and last-minute reorganization, the 8th of March, International Women's Day, finally arrived. I took the metro to Pushkinskaya, one of the stops for Pushkin Square, named after the beloved Russian poet. The train cars and underground tunnels were filled with a holiday crowd, men carefully shielding bouquets against stray elbows, parents and grandmothers shepherding children bundled in snowsuits, groups of teenagers who were likely out to enjoy the unseasonal sun. For most Russians, International Women's Day calls for gifts of flowers and chocolates to mothers and wives, as well as a day off from work--and perhaps even from cooking for some women, who continue to do the bulk of domestic work in most Russian households.

As I climbed up to street level, I saw the square across the street was already barricaded by metal fences and several police vans, the *avtozaki* whose interiors were equipped with metal cages for detainees who were deemed unruly. A couple of vans with media logos were parked nearby and handful of police milled around the square. Nearby, clusters of bright purple balloons caught my eye, floating above a small crowd outside the McDonald's near the square, where the rally was to be held. I walked closer and Pavel,¹ an organizer for the Rainbow Association, spotted me, smiled, and waved.

“Happy 8th of March!” I greeted everyone once I was closer. One young woman was already giving an interview to a media crew with a camera, while another camera circled the group collecting footage. Tatyana, an insurance executive who was usually

¹ Names introduced in single quotation marks are pseudonyms. Other activists, most of whom were already known publicly for their activist work, requested that their real names be used.

brusque and businesslike, wished me a happy holiday and hugged me. Her snow-white fur coat and hat gave her an opulent aspect compared to the other activists, among whom layered sweatshirts and workboots or cheap sneakers were de rigeur. Most of the activists I had been working with were in their late teens or twenties and many earned marginal incomes in jobs like journalism, freelance work in translation or web design, and teaching.

Once about two dozen of us had gathered, we started to make our way into the square, slowly filtering through the metal detector. Another dozen people wearing the green scarves of the liberal-democratic party Yabloko were already setting up: pulling out professionally printed posters and unfurling flags. I started snapping photos of slogans, greeting familiar faces as more people arrived. Sergei, a graduate student in sociology, said hello, and we chatted about our respective research projects for a few minutes. Nearly everyone seemed to be in a good mood, joking with each other, noting how nice the sun felt.

A small crowd briefly gathered outside the fence, but disappeared. Near me an LGBT activist called out that they had been nationalists threatening to disrupt the rally, but had been detained by the police. "Good," came a reply, "this is a legal rally!" The implication was that having approved a permit for the protest, the city was responsible for our safety.

By the time the rally got started, there were around 200 people on the square, a significantly larger crowd than I had seen at the previous year's rally, March 8, 2012. In addition to Yabloko, a range of organizations had brought flags: several socialist groups, anarchists and the Anarcho-Feminist Group, members of the Rainbow Association with

their cheerful rainbow flags, and trans-feminist activist Yana's pastel-hued transgender flag. A few activists had crafted a dozen or more feminist flags for the occasion, bright purple with the feminist fist painted in silver, and 'Polina' handed me one after I complimented their effort. At the top of the 'stage' area, a few activists held a purple banner with the feminist march's slogan, "Feminism is Emancipation."

One of the primary goals of the rally's organizers, as I had learned while sitting in on their initial planning meetings, was to reclaim the holiday as a political event, not just a day for giving flowers to women. The first International Women's Day had been proposed by the Socialist International in 1910 and was first celebrated with mass rallies for women's political and labor rights. In Russia, women's protests and labor strikes for "Bread and Peace" on March 8, 1917 helped spark the Russian Revolution. During the Soviet period, however, the holiday had been depoliticized, transformed into an official celebration of domestic femininity. It was a process not unlike the history of Mother's Day in the United States, which had originally been an anti-war holiday.

The rally began as the first speaker on the prepared list took the microphone, speaking from the top of a short set of stairs that led from the square toward Tverskaya Street. Like at most rallies, the official protest space was fenced off from the surrounding streets and sidewalks and the speaker attached to the microphone aimed toward the rally's attendees, making it unlikely a passer-by would hear much of the event without going to the trouble of passing through the metal detector herself. The crowd itself was busy as activists went about their work, giving interviews to journalists, passing out flyers to one another and to attendees, occasionally braving a possible reprimand from police by offering flyers outside the rally gates. Others busied themselves collecting donations for

political prisoners and projects, selling copies of their organization newspapers and the anarchist journal *Volya*, which had put out a special feminist issue this month. At any given time, perhaps half the crowd was facing the stage and listening to the speakers. An LGBT activist, 'Misha,' asked if he could hold my flag; we stood together, listening to the speakers and chatting.

Several speakers in, Natasha took the microphone to announce the “Sexist of the Year” awards, a campaign she had started to draw attention to sexism in media, politics, and advertising. She was interrupted by a shout in the crowd; someone was being arrested. Cameras and bodies closed in at one side of the square; murmurs ran through the crowd that it was *Volya*, someone was being arrested for passing out the journal. Extremist literature. Half a dozen police broke through the crowd, carrying a struggling body outside the gates and across the square into one of the waiting vans. A few journalists followed; most of the rest of us watched, waiting. Natasha had broken off her speech. Once the van had closed, the journalists and police walked back. The crowd remained disorganized, unfocused; people milled around, talking, and few watched the stage.

Nonetheless, Natasha tried to go on. "It is shameful to arrest an activist on Women's Day for distributing feminist literature! This is bad, it's unacceptable, but we shouldn't let it stop the whole rally." She continued with her presentation, announcing the awards.

I looked at Misha and asked what we were to do now. He shrugged, saying he didn't know. Others nearby seemed equally unsure whether to watch the stage, or... It was unclear what else might be done. Around us, people fidgeted, glancing toward the

police vans, back at one another, back toward the police.

Within a few minutes, it seemed the anarchists had come up with something. They rapidly collected their things and turned away from the stage. Word came through the crowd: they're leaving. The anarchists walked through and around the barricades toward the police vans, flags flying. As I saw some of my leftist interlocutors start to follow, I trailed behind. We caught up to the anarchists as they surrounded the police vans and started chanting "Shame! Shame!" and demanding freedom for their comrades. Several LGBT activists and leftists surged forward with the anarchists. They locked arms as police began pushing back and starting to arrest them. The activists continued shouting and chanting as police bundled up more detainees, carrying more than a dozen of them, arms and legs, to the vans and tossing them in. As more activists were arrested, some began retreating to the square, taking me along and urging others to stop fighting with police. It would do no good.

Meanwhile the rally had continued. Galina, who headed Yabloko's Gender Fraction, was still at the microphone urging people not to start provocations with police. Very few were paying attention, and later that night a member of the Anarcho-Feminist Group would post a scathing criticism about Yabloko's lack of solidarity, making speeches while people from their own rally were being arrested.

As I returned to the rear half of the rally, 'Leo,' an activist with the socialist group K.R.I. (*Komitet za Rabochii Internatsional* or Committee for a Workers' International), asked me how it was going.

"Well, I thought this was going to be a nice, pretty holiday!" I joked. He laughed. The holiday continued. A few minutes later, a man jumped the barricade, running down a

snowbank on the side of the stage, shouting something unintelligible. As he sprinted through the crowd, a pair of police snagged him by the coat and trundled him over to the rapidly-filling vans. Meanwhile, the air had taken on a peculiar aroma. I glanced around to find that I was not the only person covering her nose. Misha walked over, shaking his head in disbelief.

“What is this, do you know?” I asked.

“Rotten eggs, it smells like. Some Orthodox provocateurs must have thrown them by the stage,” he answered.

“Good lord, really?”

Misha paused for a moment, then asked in slow, careful English, “Do you think people are really aggressive in Russia?”

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer, and after some thought settled on repeating a theory one interviewee had shared with me a few months earlier. “I would say... I think the government is, the authorities are. Maybe that the government and systems of power are aggressive, and they affect people.”

He nodded, then replied, “But the people here might be. Russia was always on the edge of Europe, you know, on the edge of civilization. Things are not as developed here.”

As the air continued to ripen, the crowd was thinning. Galina returned to the microphone to announce that the police had asked us to disband the meeting early and quickly. There would be one more speaker, a mother of a large family who had gone on a hunger strike earlier this year to protest the lack of social support for families.

“I am Orthodox. But those who call themselves Orthodox activists should be ashamed. They should remember that there’s not just an Old Testament, but a New

Testament, too.” She ended her speech by calling shame on the police.

From the back of the rally, Zhenya, a comrade of Leo's, waved at me to come with them. “We’re leaving,” she explained, “and you should come with us so you’re not left alone here.”

I helped them pack up, bundling flagpoles and rolling up signs, and we started to leave. Misha, walking with me, pointed out a group that had collected just outside the metal detectors.

“It's that Enteo!” he said, pointing out the self-proclaimed “Orthodox activist” who was well-known for disrupting feminist and gay-rights events around the city. He was a target of some ridicule among my activist interlocutors, despite that his counterprotests and provocations sometimes became violent.

Flanked by two young women wearing long skirts, the thirty-something Enteo was surrounded by at least half a dozen cameras. The three activists were chanting with solemn faces, as if in prayer or perhaps an exorcism. As we walked closer, exiting the rally site toward the metro, I began to make out the chant: “Yabloko is the party of sodomites and perverts, Yabloko is the party of sodomites and perverts” (*YAB-loko eto PAR-tiya sodoMITov i izvraSHCHENtsev*).

I found it unnerving, even threatening. It was not uncommon for LGBT individuals to be attacked on the street, and in the past year several cities had passed bans on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations.” But one of the activists, 'Alyosha,' seemed to have a different reaction. While the rest of the group walked past, Alyosha stopped, raised a fist in the air, and began head-banging, heavy-metal style, in time with the chant. Grinning hugely, he kept it up as his comrades broke into laughter.

Oppositions and uprisings

One of my favorite Moscow protest signs reads, "Together in struggle, not in disenfranchisement," the hand-painted lettering set beside the image of a closed fist painted in rainbow colors. Like activists elsewhere, feminist, LGBT, and leftist activists in Moscow often talked of the importance of solidarity. But as the March 8 rally showed, solidarity is a difficult thing to create. Different groups of activists have distinct priorities and interests, and different styles of organizing. Moreover, their work does not take place in a vacuum; instead, their plans take shape in a field of action influenced by a host of other actors, from fellow activists to counterprotesters to the government and its security forces. This dissertation is the story of how one activist network was attempting to produce solidarity in a particular place and time.



Figure 1. Poster at a rally: "Unity in struggle, not in disenfranchisement."²

² Except where otherwise marked, all photographs are the author's.

The week I arrived in Moscow to begin fieldwork in 2012, Vladimir Putin was re-elected. He had prompted outrage the previous autumn when he announced in front of a United Russia party convention that he would return to the presidency; it seemed somehow insulting that he didn't even wait for election day to announce the inevitable result. Whether it was this lingering injury; the inspiration of the Arab Spring uprisings, Occupy protests, and other mass mobilizations; the groundwork done by anti-corruption bloggers and citizen groups to organize observers at the Parliamentary elections in November; or perhaps some combination of these and other factors, Russia turned out to be on the verge of an uprising in late 2011. Whatever the cause, when videos of obvious fraud went viral during the Parliamentary elections that November, they sparked unprecedented protests of tens of thousands, and then hundreds of thousands in the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities.

Even though I had planned to focus my research on conceptions of gender, tradition, and citizenship among feminist and pro-life activists, when a contact from a civil society NGO invited me to come along to an opposition rally on March 5, the day after the election, I could hardly say no. After all, I had spent the previous winter protesting austerity and anti-democratic politics on the frigid streets of Madison, Wisconsin. Declaring a budget crisis, Wisconsin's newly-elected governor, Scott Walker, had attempted to push through legislation that not only made severe cuts to education and other public services, but also eliminated collective bargaining for public employees--and this in the state where public employee unions were born. Crowds of up to 150,000 went to the streets, and the state Capitol was host to an unprecedented round-the-clock occupation by students, Teamsters, teachers, and a host of other Wisconsinites who found

their livelihoods and social safety net suddenly under attack (Collins 2012; Nichols 2012). A full year later, it seemed like the right season to be back in a crowd, and as it turned out, the feminists were on the streets, too—along with the LGBT activists, the anarchists, and the rest of the progressive left, as well as the old-line communists, liberal intelligentsia, labor activists, right-wing nationalists, and many others.

The period during which I conducted fieldwork, March 2012 to May 2013, was an eventful one in Russian politics, filling international news with stories of protest, repression, and political maneuvering. But not all Russians, or even all opposition participants, experienced these events in the same way. This dissertation examines the particular perspectives of a coalition young feminist, LGBT, and leftist activists who took advantage of the mass mobilization of an opposition movement in order to advance their own set of goals: exposing misogyny, fighting homophobia, and organizing against the perceived injustices of capitalism. This is, in part, an ethnography of being in a particular time and place, from the excitement of shouting “Russia without Putin!” in the first opposition protests to the crackdown on dissent that followed. But is also an ethnography about how a group of people in a specific context were dealing with a set of problems faced by activists around the world: What good is activism in times when most people are fed up with politics? What should we make of it when activists who are part of the same coalitions, and thus ostensibly allies, seem to fight each other more than their opposition?

At a distance, the major events of the period included the rise and slow decay of a mass opposition movement, punctuated by occasional innovations in repression by the Russian government. The landscape in which my activist-interlocutors found themselves was marked by continuing mass protests against corruption, electoral fraud, and then-

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. These had been touched off late in 2011 after widespread—and widely documented— falsification of the Parliamentary elections was followed by Putin’s announcement that he would return to the Russian Presidency after serving as Prime Minister for a single term. To many it seemed rather bad form, downright insulting, that he did not at least wait until the election results were in to re-appoint himself. Against this backdrop of insult and falsification, an opposition movement took form around a coalition of political parties, activist organizations, and organizing committees (see Volkov 2013). Its most prominent figures, sometimes treated as leaders of the opposition movement, included the anti-corruption blogger Aleksey Navalny, liberal figures like the politicians Boris Nemtsov³ and Garry Kasparov, writers like Dmitri Bykov and Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, celebrity-cum-political figure Kseniya Sobchak⁴, and the macho leftist Sergei Udal’tsov who led the Left Front, among others. Many of these figures were often criticized by my activist-interlocutors as “media figures” (*mediinye figury*) or “VIPs” (*vipy*) believed to be more interested in their own self-promotion than in any deep changes to the Russian political-economic system. Nonetheless, some hundreds of thousands of people took part in rallies, marches, election observations, “White Ribbon” actions, and other opposition activities.

After Putin’s re-election, though, attendance at opposition protests fell to the low tens of thousands at best, a development generally taken to mean it was all over.

Meanwhile the authorities’ response to the protests became increasingly clear, or at least

³ In February 2015, Nemtsov was assassinated while walking within sight of the Kremlin, one of the most policed and surveilled parts of Moscow. Many suspected government approval or involvement. As of the time of writing, two Chechen men with ties to security forces had been named as suspects, but it remained unclear who was ultimately responsible for the killing.

⁴ Sobchak first became a public figure in her own right as host of a popular reality tv show. Sobchak’s father, Anatoly Sobchak, was formerly mayor of St. Petersburg and has been suspected of corruption while in office. Putin initially rose to power as part of Sobchak’s administration and the two were reportedly close friends.

that's how my interlocutors interpreted other events of the spring. In early March, three young women were arrested for performing a "punk-prayer" in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior; what came to be known as the Pussy Riot case played out over the rest of the year as the women were tried for and eventually convicted of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred." Several new laws wound their way through the federal legislature: a requirement that NGOs receiving funding from outside Russia register themselves as "foreign agents," a ban on so-called gay propaganda, a proposal to criminalize "offending the sentiments of religious believers." Each of these presented by state-controlled media as a defense of the Russian state and nation with wide popular support, but was also met with a noticeable surge of protest, whether small or large, by opposition groups. Chapter One discusses how the simultaneously disciplining and exclusionary nature of state power produces dissent and protest among some even while solidifying state legitimacy among others.

Even so, the opposition movement seemed to be dying away through the spring of 2012. Thus it might have been surprising to many observers that over 100,000 Muscovites came out for what would become an infamous protest at Bolotnaya Square on the eve of Putin's inauguration. Tens of thousands attempted to crowd into the square permitted by the authorities on a hot spring day. As I describe later, security services blockaded part of the crowd, causing perhaps-intended confusion in the march. It remains unclear how violence began, but the event ended with "protesters clashing with police" and hundreds of people arrested.⁵ Some of these would later be prosecuted in an extended case that itself became a cause for protest.

⁵ I had left Moscow just before this protest, on my way to the U.S. to wait for a new visa, and so followed this particular event at a distance and through later interviews with activists who had been there. Unfortunately, the visa wait also meant that I was unable to join the Occupy Abai camp in summer 2012.

The opposition mobilization continued on through the rest of the year with periodic mass protests and continual public actions, from pickets for political prisoners to a brief “Occupy Abai” occupation of a central park space in Moscow. In the fall, elections were mounted for representation in the “Coordinating Council of the Opposition,” an attempt to institutionalize opposition politics. But participation in opposition actions gradually fell through 2012 and 2013, though even in spring 2013 the “Social March” was still able to muster several thousand participants. Discussions common among my interlocutors by this point were about frustration with the media-VIPs, the lack of politicization in most opposition actions, and the shift to reform and accommodation tactics, compared to the possibly radical potential of the very first spontaneous actions.

Social Movements in Russia

The protesting crowds of 2011 in Russia took many observers by surprise. For years, even decades, Russia had been described by researchers as depoliticized and lacking a developed civil society. For example, the World Values Survey, which tracks average membership in nine types of organization (from churches to sports clubs to political parties) across some 50 countries, consistently ranks Russia among the lowest average number of memberships per person (Howard 2002; World Values Survey Association 2010-2014). In the Soviet period, the party-state for the most part disallowed independent political or even social organizations, while enforcing at least token participation in official “political” activity (Lane 1979). By the late 1970s, as Aleksei

Yurchak has described, the typical Soviet person was neither a politically active dissident nor an enthusiast Communist, but rather was simply oriented away from (*vne*) the state (Yurchak 2006). On an affective level, this often amounted to something between disengagement and cynicism with regard to the workings of the state, party ideology, and “politics” as a sphere of activity.

The Gorbachev-era policy of *glasnost*, or openness, created something of a window for non-state activity in the 1980s, which saw a noteworthy flowering of citizen activism related to ecological concerns (Henry 2010). This green movement often focused on problems related to heavy Soviet industrialization, from nuclear contamination to degradation of waterways caused by factory waste. Their demands to address ecological damage and its effects on Soviet populations found a broad resonance in the public at the time, particularly in the wake of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster (Petryna 2002). Ecological activism continues to be a form of political activity that has a degree of legitimacy in Russia. While this project focuses on activism related to the politics of gender and sexuality, some of my activist interlocutors had previously or were concurrently also involved in ecological activism. Indeed, one of the projects organized annually by the Rainbow Association is a “rainbow *subbotnik*” event which gathers members and allies to clean trash from parks, riverbanks, and other green spaces around Moscow, a revival of the Soviet-era *subbotnik* or volunteer day, which engaged Soviet youth in litter collection and other civic work. In contrast to the Soviet *subbotnik*, the rainbow *subbotnik* is a genuinely voluntary activity, planned in part to demonstrate LGBT civic engagement and sharing of dominant values. Other activists participated in actions related to the Khimki Forest movement (see below), shared readings about eco-

feminism, or included environmental protection as an explicit part of political platforms drafted for their websites or newsletters.

Ecological movements posed a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the Soviet government by drawing attention to the many ways in which it failed to guarantee the safety or even survival of its people. For example, Boris Nemtsov, who worked as a physicist in the Soviet period, was heavily involved in a post-Chernobyl movement opposing the construction of a nuclear reactor in Gorky (now Nizhniy Novgorod) on the grounds that its safety could not be guaranteed (Dawson 1996). This late-Soviet activism was the foundation for Nemtsov's political career. Even now “ecology” continues to be seen by the public as a legitimate target for social activism, but environmental activism quickly draws the attention of the state when it begins to touch on sensitive areas. Citizen campaigns are more likely to focus on reducing litter or cleaning up parks than on targeting industrial polluters (Henry 2010). Activists who draw attention to environmental damage caused by corporations or the state are often subject to officially sanctioned harassment and arrest, as in the case of environmentalists opposing the construction of an oil pipeline near Lake Baikal in southern Siberia (Levy 2010). On the outskirts of Moscow, the Defenders of Khimki Forest have gained significant public support for their campaign to block highway construction through an ecologically important forest, while its activists have been arrested by police and beaten by unidentified groups (Evans 2012). Threats to activists can take on gendered forms, as when the Khimki movement's leader, Yevgeniya Chirikova, reported receiving a call from Child Protective Services alleging that she had been accused of child neglect and threatening to remove her children (Lally 2012). Such cases illustrate how the post-Soviet

Russian state continues to be sensitive to activism that calls attention to its failure to protect the well-being of its citizens.

To democratizers of the early 1990s, Russia might have appeared to be ripe for the development of a vibrant civil society sector, which was believed to be an important element for “democratization” in formerly undemocratic states. At this time, new lines of funding opened to support civil society development in former socialist countries from a number of Western governments, including the United States, and from independent funders such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute. These initiatives were not only expected to create a democratizing civil society, but also to help cultivate new subjects who would be prepared to integrate themselves into a market society and to care for their needs, rather than depending on government provision of social services (Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009; Matza 2009; Rivkin-Fish 2005). The idealization of civil society in this period has been well documented and thoroughly criticized by researchers who were also part of the flowering of foreign support for civil society. Two points of critique are particularly relevant to my project.

First, in the 1990s and early 2000s Russian civil society was promoted primarily by international NGOs and foreign governments and in ways that were driven mainly by their own domestic and foreign policy agendas (Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009). Their support for “civil society development” through grant-making, training, and professional conferences tended to produce organizations in Russia that were primarily oriented toward their funders’ interests and demands, rather than toward local or national concerns. Being “fed on grants” (as the Russian idiom goes) forces organizations into a perpetual chase for funding, and pressures them to create projects that will appeal to

funders' own priorities as well as produce the kinds of short-term measurable outcomes demanded by short grant cycles (Hemment 2004).

As relates to feminist activism in Russia, foreign funding did succeed to a certain extent in producing a rapid expansion of women's crisis hotlines and centers in the 1990s, and in introducing to Russia international feminist discourses like "sexual harassment" and "violence against women." However, the waning of funding in the early 2000s just as quickly saw most of those crisis centers closed. The vast majority had never found sustainable funding or support in their local communities (Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009). Pressure from foreign governments, particularly the United States, also led to changes in the Russian state's approach to certain issues perceived by international rights groups as women's issues, such as human trafficking, but had little connection to grassroots organizing (Johnson 2009). In short, these international "women's rights" projects have done relatively little to propagate a women's movement in Russia, even before the more recent hostility of the Putin regime to foreign "development" interventions in Russia and to feminism in particular.

My research places this issue of foreign funding and international movements in the context of resurgent nationalist politics. An additional effect of the foreign funding of NGOs in general, and organizations focusing on women's and LGBT issues in particular, is that such organizations became associated in the public eye with Westernization and foreign influence. As Patty Gray has pointed out, development discourse in the 1990s may have coined terms such as "second world" and "transitioning economy" to avoid placing Russia on the level of "developing" regions of the global South, but Russians nonetheless felt the insult (Gray 2011). Michael Herzfeld (2005; 2015) suggests that such

"crypto-colonialism" can result in defensive and reactionary national identity. In Russia, this has meant not only a move to reduce foreign aid and begin producing its own development programs (Gray 2011), but also generalized anxieties about the polluting potential of all things foreign (Caldwell 2002) and official attempts to delegitimize certain foreign elements in Russian society, including a 2012 law requiring organizations that receive funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents" (Ostroukh 2012). Rhetoric from influential public figures like the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church also positions feminism and the LGBT rights movement as part of alleged foreign movements to corrupt Russian culture (Elder 2013), as I detail in this dissertation. Thus feminist and LGBT rights activists face not only the challenge of declining resources and funding, but also a set of predicaments related to national belonging and increasing suspicion of supposed foreign elements.

The post-Cold War push for civil society development has also been criticized for its assumption that civil society necessarily produces a more just or free society. John and Joan Comaroff (2000), for example, write skeptically of civil society as a defanged instrument, arguing that it has mainly served the purpose of making states more functional and more effective, filling in the gaps left in states that have been shrunken under privatization, structural adjustment and austerity programs. Jarrett Zigon (2013) raises a similar point in his discussion of the "human rights" orientation of HIV harm reduction programs in Russia, which are largely conducted by NGOs whose needle exchange services have not been officially sanctioned by the state. Harm reduction NGOs have pushed for legislation addressing the HIV epidemic on the basis of a "right to health," which they justify as necessary for Russian economic growth and political

stability (Zigon 2013). Zigon points out that this use of human rights language and practices merely reproduces and strengthens the political and economic structures that make the lives of drug users precarious. From another direction, Katherine Bowie provides a compelling challenge to the automatic linking of civil society with democracy with her study of the Village Scouts, a state-sponsored right-wing movement in Thailand that played a central role in a brutal attack on students at Thammasat University in 1976 (Bowie 1997). I will return to some of these critiques in Chapters Two and Three, when I discuss how activists' understanding of their work is an attempt to reclaim politics as a legitimate field of action, in opposition to the technical and rights-based claims of many anti-Putin opposition movement leaders, who advocate for an "apolitical" movement. Throughout the dissertation, I also note how this coalition work takes shape within a context of rising nationalism and violence that is often permitted or directly supported by the Russian government (see for example Blanks 2007). My study thus contributes to an ongoing critique in anthropology of depoliticization by examining how and why "politics" are being reclaimed by activists in Moscow.

Rather than focusing on a particular NGO or organization, my project examines a network of activists in Moscow who had a variety of affiliations, from membership in a registered political party to self-organized groups with no official government registration and little in the way of funding. Some of the activists occasionally worked with NGOs such as Amnesty International and international campaigns like U.S. feminist Eve Ensler's One Billion Rising⁶ on particular projects. Lectures and film showings, and other

⁶ Ensler, the author of the popular feminist performance piece "The Vagina Monologues," launched the campaign in 2012 to draw attention to violence against women. The "One Billion Rising" campaign and Ensler's writings have drawn criticism for ethnocentric or neocolonial representations of violence against non-Western women. See Basu (2010); Chief Elk (2013).

events sponsored by NGOs also served as spaces for activists to meet and socialize. But the activities of NGOs formed only one of many arenas of action for my interlocutors. My research not only a case study of grassroots activism in which the formal, registered NGO sector plays an important but not a central role, but also suggests how the move away from NGOs may be critically important for the survival of feminist and LGBT activism in a context of rising nationalism.

“The Opposition” and the "New Left"

The activists who are the subject of this dissertation are not a representative sample of Muscovites participating in the opposition protests. Instead, I came to know them through a combination of “snowball sampling”—in which research participants recommend additional potential contacts from their own social networks—and meeting people organically as I participated in meetings, rallies, marches, and other events. My activist interlocutors include members of feminist, leftist, and LGBT-rights groups, as well as a handful of individual activists who often participated in the same events, actions, and online discussions and thus formed a sort of loose and perpetually shifting coalition of what one might call New Left activism in Moscow (see also Yurchak 2014). Globally, the term "New Left" refers to overlapping networks of activism generally critical of social, political, and economic structures under late capitalism, often including socialist, anarchist, indigenous, feminist, environmentalist, LGBT, and alterna-globalization, and student activists, among others. The term New Left finds its origins in the civil rights, anti-war, counter-culture and student protests of the late 1960s United

States and Europe (particularly 1968).

In the given political field, my activist interlocutors generally occupied what has come to be called the “New Left,” a term that roughly describes the kinds of coalitions that have formed a large part of the alterna-globalization movement in recent decades (Graeber 2009), and which have taken shape since the counterculture, anti-war, student, and civil rights movements that flowered in the U.S. and Europe in the 1960s (Gitlin 1993). Often bringing together groups from feminist, anti-capitalist, environmentalist, indigenous, and many other movements, New Left organizing bridges (or, equally important, sometimes fails to bridge) a broad range of economic and identity-based movements. As Yurchak notes in the specific case of Russia, the term also “points to the movement’s post-Soviet political genealogy, which distinguishes it from such “old left” parties as the proto-Stalinist Communist Party (KPRF) and the left-right National Bolshevik Party (NBP), whose ideologies consist of an unlikely mix of Marxism-Leninism and Russian nationalism. Unlike them, the new left are genealogically linked to Western Marxism and the post-1960s progressive movements” (Yurchak 2014: no pagination in text). Among the activists I worked with, their affiliation with New Left ideas and movements often seemed to mark a generational difference as well as an ideological one. I introduce the term here with the caveat that few of my activist interlocutors used it, preferring the term “leftist,” although many were familiar with and to some extent considered themselves participants in global movements for their various causes.

In using terms like “coalition” or “New Left,” I do not mean to attribute a bounded or centralized character to the social scene in which I conducted research. My

activist interlocutors typically identified themselves and fellow activists with more specific labels: anarchist, leftist, liberal, feminist, LGBT, and so on, and few actively used the term "New Left" (*novoe levyi*). In fact, one of the central themes of this dissertation is the often contentious and messy interactions through which these disparate activists were working to produce the kinds of communities they wanted. Later chapters will analyze the dynamics of these interactions, explaining what the activists' conflicts and solidarity-building actions reveal about the Russian grassroots and the practices of coalition politics more generally. But first, I will describe the somewhat complicated set of political affiliations and orientations by which the activists described themselves and made sense of other actors' positions.

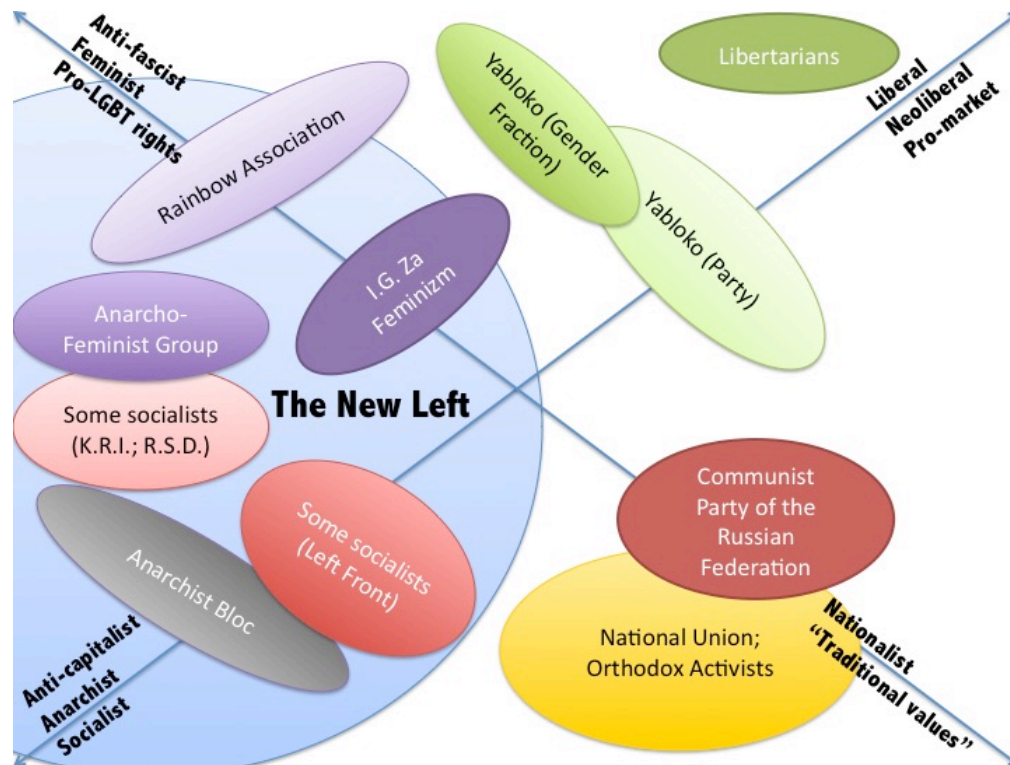


Figure 2. Field of political orientations. Acronyms: K.R.I., *Komitet za Rabochii Internatsional* (Committee for a Worker's International); R.S.D., *Rossiskoe Sotsialisticheskoe Dvizhenie* (Russian Socialist Movement); I.G. Za Feminizm (Initiative Group "For Feminism"). The noun suffix *-nik* is sometimes added to such acronyms, such that a member of K.R.I. could be called "a KRIshnik."

While popular discourse about politics in the U.S. categorizes ideological positions along a single right-left spectrum, and (at least in recent decades) typically uses the terms “left” and “liberal” interchangeably, the activists with whom I worked categorized the political orientations of individuals and movements based on their positions on several key issues: capitalism and the market economy, nationalism, feminism, and LGBT rights. A group could be “leftist” (*levyi*) in the sense of opposing neoliberal economic policies while at the same time being “nationalist” (*natsionalist*) or “right-wing” (*pravyyi*) by accusing gays of undermining Russian traditions. My interlocutors also tended to use the term liberal (*liberal’nyi*) to indicate what in the U.S. is called “classical liberalism,” indicating support for a free market economy and individual civil and human rights. Here it becomes useful to consider political affiliations as a multi-dimensional field, in which a certain region rather than a single side represents the activist network I worked with. This field is oriented around attitudes toward several social structures, ideologies, or value systems, including neoliberal capitalism, nationalism or patriotism, LGBT rights, and feminism. To the extent that dominant interpretations of “the Russian nation” as a symbol have connected Russianness to conservative Russian Orthodoxy, antifeminism, and exclusion of queerness (see Chapters One and Eight), views on LGBT rights and women’s rights likewise tend to correlate. The gender politics of nationalism seem to have a magnetic effect on the political field, to extend the metaphor.

Throughout this dissertation, I will generally use the terms “left” and “liberal” to refer to economic ideologies (anti-capitalist and pro-market, respectively). I follow the

activists in using “right-wing” primarily to mean nationalist, the archetype of which included aggressive patriotism, belief that the former Soviet states should remain in a Russian sphere of influence (sometimes even up to uniting Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine as "Novorossiya"), opposition to feminism and gay rights as “Western” impositions, and support for a powerful Russian Orthodox Church as the backbone of what they see as traditional Russian culture.

A given activists' or group's orientation toward economic and social issues did not necessarily correlate. So for example, the Anarcho-Feminist Group was both radically anti-capitalist, criticizing neoliberal capital and all forms of economic exploitation, and anti-nationalist, attacking the militaristic, anti-gay politicians and groups who presented themselves as defenders of “Russian traditional culture.” They identified themselves as “leftist” and “antifascist.” On the other hand, some factions within the anarchist group Autonomous Action considered themselves Russian patriots, opposing gay rights and immigration, while also sharing a radical critique of capitalism with the Anarcho-Feminists. The anarchist community thus occupies a range of space on the diagram in Figure 2 (see page 22).

I have found this schema to be helpful in sorting out the otherwise confusing Russian political scene, where the liberal democratic party Yabloko was a both staunch defender of market economics and the only major party to have a Gender Faction supporting equality for women and LGBT Russians. Meanwhile, arch-nationalist groups which activists described as “right-wing” offered trenchant critiques of neoliberal economics that often echoed those of left-leaning activists in Russia and globally. According to this system, Yabloko is identified as liberal not because it is socially left-

leaning, but because it advocates for a basically capitalist economic system, calling for adjustments to the regulatory environment and social safety net rather than generally favoring a market economy. The anti-capitalist nationalists, on the other hand, are right-wing because their outlook is essentially authoritarian, chauvinistic, patriarchal, and xenophobic. A crucial factor in this political field is that capitalism is often associated with the West and particularly the United States, whose policy and economic experts played key roles in Russia's post-Soviet economic transformation. For some, anti-capitalism and anti-Western sentiment went hand-in-hand.

The activists I describe in this dissertation tended to be international in their outlook, often seeing connections between the domestic problems they faced in Russia and problems elsewhere. Russian feminists saw the media sexualization of women as an international problem, pointing out examples in Russia and Europe, and followed international news stories such as the 2012 gang rape of a high school student in Steubenville, Ohio, seeing problems of rape and victim-blaming in the U.S., Russia, and other countries as fundamentally similar. LGBT activists in Russia cheered the election of Tammy Baldwin as the first openly lesbian U.S. Senator as a signal that movements for LGBT rights were making progress, even if that progress was uneven around the world. Meeting Russian leftists was the first time I had never needed to explain where Wisconsin was ("a state, not far from Chicago, in the middle of the country")—many of them were familiar with the state's role in the history of the labor movement. My leftist interlocutors closely followed the campaign of socialist candidate Kshama Sawant for Seattle city council in 2013, viewing it as a signal of growing popular support for socialism. (A few even had acquaintances in the international socialist organization of

which Sawant was a member.) Many of the activists were well-acquainted with the global histories of the labor, feminist, and LGBT movements, typically through self-education, as these topics generally had not been covered in their schools. I attended many lectures and discussions throughout my fieldwork that aimed to introduce other activists and interested individuals to topics such as the Stonewall riots and the early gay rights movement in the US, intersectionality theory, and the history of the women's movement in late Imperial Russia. Nearly all of the activists were active in social media networks such as Twitter, LiveJournal, Facebook, and the Russian network VKontakte ("In Contact"). While only a few were fluent English speakers, many knew enough of the language to follow English-language news sites and interact online with English-speakers, and others had some level of fluency in German, French, or other European languages. (Igor, a leftist and LGBT activist with K.R.I., was unusual in having studied in Egypt, where he also participated in labor organizing prior to the 2011 revolution.) Some of the self-identified socialist activists had traveled abroad, including to Europe, to participate in international leftist conferences. They also periodically hosted visiting comrades from other countries, as well as using communications technologies such as the Skype video chat service to enable distant contacts to participate in discussions. This ongoing sharing of information and social contact produces an overall sense that the Russian New Left is part of international activist networks, even for members who themselves never leave Russia.

Throughout the text, I will refer to particular activists' ideological orientations using their own self-designations, and I will use New Left to refer generally to the coalition overall. In this use, "New Left" serves as a shorthand for distinguishing this

particular network of activists both from the “old guard” left of the Soviet era, such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and from the liberal anti-Putin opposition. For most of my activist-interlocutors, “the opposition” was not a group that precisely included them. Self-identified opposition leaders were generally viewed as too liberal, too nationalist, too interested in taking power for themselves, and not sufficiently aware of or critical of the larger systems of oppression and exploitation, far beyond Putin himself, in which Russians were caught. While many of the activists participated to varying degrees in mass actions and opposition protests, for the most part they viewed such events as opportunities to come into contact with a broader public with whom their platforms and messages could be shared. The direct goal of many of these activists was not simply to overthrow the Putin regime, nor was it to take over the opposition movement and become VIPs themselves. Instead, their explicit aim was to make use of this mobilization to shift popular opinion on specific issues and to raise the overall level of political consciousness among the public. This was a particularly important strategy for LGBT activists, who hoped to use public protests to demonstrate to their fellow citizens that LGBT Russians, too, shared the same problems and concerns as other Russians. Mass events, in this way, were “platforms” or “tribunes” that might be used to advance causes beyond mere fair elections, as I will discuss in Chapter Three.

Resistance and dissent

Russia's year of mass protest coincided with a wave of uprisings around the world in 2011 and 2012, including revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and major

uprisings in many other Middle Eastern states, often referred to as the "Arab Spring"; Occupy Wall Street and the international Occupy movement; and growing anti-austerity protests in many parts of Europe. Some scholars interpret such protests broadly as responses to economic and political dispossession. The protests of Occupy, the "Indignados" and other anti-austerity movements in Europe, and the Wisconsin Uprising, for example, have been read as resistance to the unraveling of the social guarantees and labor rights that offered a promise of stability and upward mobility for many Europeans and Americans in the 20th century, coupled with the financialization of the economy and perceived decline in democratic control over government, illustrated dramatically by the austerity measures put in place after the 2008 global financial crisis (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Collins 2012; Graeber 2011; Rasza and Kurnik 2012; Theodossopoulos 2014). As one succinct slogan popular at U.S. rallies put it, "Banks got bailed out, we got sold out."

The element of political dispossession was perhaps more central in Russian protests, in which "For Fair Elections" was often the central theme and the only slogan around which participants seemed to unite was "Russia without Putin" (*Rossiya bez Putina*). Yet even around the edges of mass anti-Putin protests, and more central to smaller rallies organized by other groups, issues of economic dispossession could be seen, as I will describe in Chapters Two and Three. Moscovites protested the closing of local medical clinics and kindergartens, spoke out against pension reforms, and worried about plans to privatize parts of the university system. Neighborhoods formed associations to protest highway expansions and construction companies that failed to build apartments

people had paid for.⁷ If Moscow's protests appeared homogeneous from a distance, focused simply on ousting a disliked political leader, in fact the protests themselves were often heterogeneous scenes filled with potential for debate, conflict, and surprising encounters with a variety of fellow participants. It was in this context that the New Left activists I worked with repeatedly engaged in practices that caused a great deal of friction in the protest scene. The goal of this dissertation is to explain, first, why protest itself was so important to these activists; and two, why their dissent took the particular, contentious forms it did.

Resistance without entanglement

A significant amount of ethnographic research has identified the many ways that people resist power in everyday life. Resistance can be analyzed to show the limits of power, as in James Scott's work on "weapons of the weak" (1985), which analyzes resistance in terms of what it reveals about the limits of hegemony, or the ideological domination of society by a power elite (Gramsci 1971; Williams 1977). The fact that people can resist shows that hegemony is never total, or that even the most marginalized members of a given society retain some agency in responding to the forms of power that marginalize them. My argument in Chapter One develops along these lines, showing how activists' reactions to official pronatalism reveal the limits of that biopolitical discourse.

Scott's attention to "everyday resistance" has also helped scholars recognize the importance of seemingly futile gestures of dissent that fall far short of organized political

⁷ See Greene (2014) for more on the latter protests against fraud in the construction industry, whose participants are known as *dol'shniki*.

movements or rebellions, such as foot-dragging and petty theft, which carry an “implicit disavowal of public and symbolic goals.” In his view, such actions are in contrast to “open defiance” or “more dramatic public confrontations” such as guerrilla warfare or, one supposes, protest rallies (Scott 1985: 32-33). As Edelman (2001) points out, this distinction had a strong influence on studies of resistance in the 1980s and 1990s, but has become less useful as conceptions of power and resistance have become more nuanced. When one activist complains about the authoritarian management style of another, it is not immediately clear whether the complaint is “everyday resistance,” signifying disagreement without a particular goal, or a politically conscious statement—or whether it matters which category we might place such an action in. Part of the issue is that “resistance” is not so neatly opposed to “power” as one might like. Sherry Ortner writes that “domination itself [is] always riven with ambiguities, contradictions, and lacunae” (2006: 7), and resistance is similarly complex: “If we are to recognize that resisters are doing more than simply opposing domination, more than simply producing a virtually mechanical reaction, then we must go the whole way. They have their *own* politics—not just between chiefs and commoners or landlords and peasants—but within all the local categories of friction and tension” (2006: 46). These internal politics, the complex interrelations of resistance and power, are a major theme of the dissertation.

Resistance does more than reveal the imperfection of dominance, of course. As Lila Abu-Lughod points out, we should also be concerned with what resistance reveals about the kinds of struggles people are engaged in—and with the consequences of different forms of resistance. Abu-Lughod warns against romanticizing resistance, noting that resistance to one system of power may cause people to become “enmeshed in new

sets of power relations of which they are scarcely aware” (Abu-Lughod 1990: 50). While she suggests looking to resistance as a diagnostic of power, a further implication of Abu-Lughod’s argument is the importance of examining resistance as a process that itself has consequences. We should not ask only “what is being resisted,” but “what is resistance doing?”

As I will discuss in Chapters Two and Four, my activist interlocutors understood their targets—patriarchy, homophobia, capitalism, authoritarianism—as pervasive. Many identified “everyday” kinds of activity, such as how to organize discussions at meetings, as part and parcel of their activist work. In this dissertation, I examine resistance as it took shape through specific, concrete moments of conflict, paying close attention to what was being struggled over and how that struggle played out. I argue that the particular forms of resistance activists practiced are best understood as attempts to find new methods of resistance that refuse entanglement with and recapitulation of the intersecting structures of power they seek to escape. Their provocations, refusals, and other forms of contention attempted to produce the disruption which Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou suggest is necessary to reimagine activism “beyond and against its normative reduction to a technique of neoliberal governmentality” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 141). By causing problems, activists created space within which their activist networks could be reorganized and redirected toward new kinds of solidarity. In emphasizing the value of conflict over the persistent calls to movement unity, I do not mean to argue that there is no value to compromise, conflict resolution, or tactical delays in handling certain conflicts in order to build a broader movement. Instead, feeling that the latter tend to be sufficiently valued by the leaders of social and political movements, I argue that

contention caused by dissent within a movement should also be examined as an important kind of resistance.

Yet resistance and power are co-constituted. Resistance shapes and is shaped by the predicaments of its particular moment in time and space. Activists' resistance must be understood as constituted within specific circumstances. The phenomenon of mass opposition protest in 2011 and 2012 made it possible for feminist, LGBT, and leftist activists to find new audiences for their messages, and the broader national context gave their projects particular challenges and pressing stakes. Specific repressive acts by the state and fellow protesters, such as the ban on “gay propaganda” or attacks on rainbow flags, could be made into opportunities for new forms of engagement—and those repressive acts may themselves have been prompted by acts of resistance. It is through this resistance and reaction, through processes of friction and conflict, that activists are able to make space for experimentation, challenging of norms, and potentially new forms of organization.

Organization of the dissertation

The first half of this dissertation focuses on the situation of social precarity and repression in which activists find themselves, and how, through the cultivation of certain “political” subjectivities in themselves and others, they come to believe in the possibility of collective action. In Chapter One, I describe how pronatalist policies and discourses, techniques of state that attempt to cultivate docile, reproductively useful citizens, in fact radicalize some Russians by inadvertently highlighting the state's own failure to support

its people. Furthermore, the targeting of LGBT Russians for violent exclusion from state protection invites unruliness from both the rejected and those who sympathize with them.

In Chapters Two and Three, I examine what constitutes activism and politics for New Left activists. Under neoliberal capitalism, social problems tend to be viewed as essentially technical and individual, rather than political and collective. In post-socialist Russia, the neoliberal trend toward disengagement and social atomization seems to work hand in hand with a widespread suspicion of politics and orientation away from public life dating from the late Soviet period, despite continuing belief that certain social issues (such as housing policy and healthcare) ought to be guaranteed by the government. Activism in this context has less to do with the particular activities a person engages in than with the development of a stronger sense of individual and collective agency, even in the face of an increasingly authoritarian social landscape. Closely related to this conception of activism is an understanding of “politics” divorced from party politics and office-seeking, and which even to some extent sets aside goals related to changing state policies. Instead, my activist-interlocutors view their primary audience as fellow citizens and fellow protesters, as shown by their preference for forms of action that allow unpredictable, open-ended engagement with audiences of “average people.”

Noting that a key component of "being an activist" involves developing a stronger sense of agency, in Chapter Four I explain how the issue of agency is also key to understanding everyday experiences of authoritarianism and repressive power. Activists' discussions of repression reveal a conception of authoritarianism as a form of power that operates throughout society, not merely dominance by agents of the state. Repression may come from police or state authorities, but is at least as likely to be exercised by

youth gangs, abusive domestic partners, or even fellow activists. Authoritarianism from this perspective is better understood as a pervasive sense of threat that makes action come to feel impossible. In this context, "being an activist" may be best understood as a subjective resistance to authoritarianism, rejecting the sense of powerlessness that authoritarian political landscapes cultivates.

But what kinds of action do activists take on, and to what ends? The problems identified by feminist, leftist, and LGBT activists were more pervasive and less technical than "Putin" or "vote falsification." Where can problems like patriarchy or authoritarianism be confronted? How can one resist them, and when and how can dissent best be expressed to such systems of oppression?

In the second half of the dissertation, I shift my attention to the forms of resistance practiced by my activist-interlocutors, ordering my discussion around four contentious processes: provocation, refusal, insistence, and conspicuous erasure. While I was working in Moscow, going out to street rallies, sitting in on discussions and planning sessions, my attention was caught periodically by outbursts of conflict within activists' communities. I had expected to observe the ways activists resisted state power in its many forms, from demographic policies to police repression. These were the forms of dissent that were made quite obvious in public protests and which could be seen in subtler ways such as mockery of official discourse. But I didn't expect quite so much contention within the political opposition itself. Discussions among activists sometimes broke down into arguments, as when anarchists at the March 8 rally seemed almost more angry at Yabloko than at the police who had arrested their compatriots. Activists fought with one another, sometimes physically. Groups split apart rather than compromise over

disagreements. Initially I found myself puzzled over these conflicts, wondering why some activists couldn't simply get along in order to get things done. Some of the other activists seemed to share the feeling, rolling their eyes when certain "troublesome" individuals spoke up, or complaining that certain activist groups only ever talked about certain issues. It was only after a few months of wondering over these conflicts that I realized my own bias, the unspoken assumption I had made that it must be preferable for groups to hold together, consolidate, and and compromise for the greater good.

In the final four chapters, I engage with two basic questions: why did these conflicts arise, and what work did they do? My analysis draws from anthropological approaches to resistance, influenced by insights about uncertainty from processual anthropology and feminist theorists' attention to the power of refusal. Close attention to conflict within activist communities, I argue, reveals how contention, jostling, and deliberate friction are central to coalition politics, generating spaces within which alternative forms of action and organization begin to become possible. In this way, my work points to the importance of analyzing the forms resistance takes, which reveal much about the predicaments which people feel constrain their lives, and to the necessity of examining resistance as a process, shaped by shifts in its social, political, and historical context, and producing specific outcomes on its own.

The various moments of contention I analyze in the second half of the are all essentially conflicts about coalition process: how to organize, how to make decisions, what kinds of language to use with and about one another. At a deeper level, though, process matters not simply in terms of how effective or efficient it is. Rather, process matters because it is through processes like refusal and coalition begins to emerge.

Processes—from discussion procedures in organizing committees to who submits official documentation to city authorities to rules about flag usage during rallies—shape who is felt to belong to the emergent group. Furthermore, the issue of recognition is not merely a matter of visibility, but a matter of the power to influence. Belonging is more than being-with; to belong, from my interlocutors' perspectives, means also to share the power to shape the emergence and the future of the coalition.

The kinds of conflict I address here—schism, provocation—develop out of activists' refusal to join in processes that they feel excluded by, and insistence on processes they believe will result in solidarity within their desired communities, both within activist networks and on a broader national scale. The final four chapters thus connect close ethnographic analysis of activists' work to a broader analysis of the politics of the opposition movement and the national-building projects of the Russian government within which feminist and LGBT activists were entangled. Chapter Six examines the case of the feminist punk art group Pussy Riot to explore the function of provocation—transgression of social norms—in making meaning of a shifting social landscape while simultaneously clarifying one's own position within in it. Chapters 7 and 8 will examine insistences and refusals on the part of (respectively) young feminists with respect to the women's movement in Moscow, and feminists and pro-LGBT activists in the broader leftist and opposition movements. I argue that through frictive actions such as insistence and refusal, activists make typical social activities more eventful, creating space within everyday activist practices from which new possibilities could emerge. Finally, Chapter Eight places LGBT activism in the context of national and international politics. The Russian government has used the violent and visible exclusion of queer Russians as a

basis for constructing a national identity in opposition to the West, posing a direct challenge to the assumption that greater visibility of queer citizens leads to greater tolerance. Activists' responses to this conspicuous erasure illustrate the potential value of generative conflict for creating new solidarities, and the critical necessity of coalition building to oppose divisive politics.



Figure 1: Signs on a train platform in Moscow, 2010. "They had a third [child] Yuri Alekseevich Gagarin." "Third baby — thrice the wealth in the third millennium."



Figure 2: Billboard in the Moscow Metro, 2010. "Love for the Motherland starts in the family. - F. Bacon."

Chapter One

Biopolitics and the failure of care in Putin-era Russia

“So when I see this combination, I think about how the baby is exploited to promote some ideas that have nothing to do with it, with its life.”

- Vera comments on a social advertisement displaying a baby in front of the Russian flag [See Fig. 1]

What happens when a state fails to care for its people? Under Putin, the Russian state has advanced a specific set of discourses related to caring for the population, including promises to maintain stability, to address the so-called demographic crisis, and to defend traditional culture. These discourses and the policies that they promote comprise the articulation of biopolitics in Russia: the exercise of the “power over life” that supposedly produces docile subjects. But the narratives of activists highlight gaps between these discourses of care and the lived experience of neoliberalism and authoritarianism in contemporary Moscow. The distance between rhetoric and reality can become untenable, prompting irritation, disgust, and a distinct lack of docility. Furthermore, biopolitics in Russia, as in so many other places, relies equally on the fostering of certain lives and the exclusion of others, as when “protection of the family” includes the persecution of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Russians or “defense of the nation” implies sometimes-violent rejection of the “foreign.”

In this chapter, I build on studies of post-socialist gender politics and my own data to show the role of Russian biopolitics in producing the specific forms of opposition that appeared in 2011-2013. Like in many former socialist regimes, in Russia questions

of gender politics and population management have been key sites for contests over citizenship, state power, and the legitimacy of ruling elites since the end of the USSR. But the discourses through which elites attempt to legitimize their power can intersect painfully with people's subjective experiences of institutional power, economic crisis and austerity, inequality, and violence. Encountering the gendered policies and discourses used to propagate and legitimize state power in contemporary Russia, the feminist, leftist, and LGBT activists with whom I worked reacted with annoyance, anger, and ridicule. As I will describe in later chapters, the specific forms of their activism were often a direct reaction to Russian biopolitics, from protesting the state's rejection of LGBT citizens to demanding protection for legal abortion. In this way, the Russian state's biopolitics prefigure the forms of dissent that mobilize against it. This is a biopolitics that produces unruly subjects.

On subjects and subjectivity

By framing my discussion of activism in terms of subjectivity, I mean to turn attention to politics as a mode of apprehending and relating to the social world, rather than a specific sphere of social life or a set repertoire of actions. This is a perspective derived from my activist interlocutors, as I will describe in Chapter Two, many of whom identified "becoming an activist" more with a shift in worldview than with formally joining an organization, holding a sign at a protest rally, or other specific repertoires of action. Indeed, other people participating in the very same apparently political activities did not always conceive of their participation as "political" or of themselves as

“activists.”

Any given member of a social group perceives the world from a partial perspective, inflected by their own personal experiences and knowledge as well as other aspects of subject position such as economic class, gender, sexuality, and so on. As Alfred Schutz writes, “I, the human being, born into the social world, and living my daily life in it, experience it as built around my place in it, as open to my interpretation and action, but always referring to my biographically determined situation” (Schutz 1972: 15). This partial perspective is not only the result of personal experience, temperament, and other individual characteristics; it is also shaped by broader structures of power and history. Sherry Ortner suggests that subjectivity thus has two valences: “the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects,” and “the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought, and so on” (Ortner 2006: 107). For Ortner, these intertwined senses of the term help to reclaim the humanistic notion of an acting subject not entirely “dissolved” into mere effects of power or structure, but without “reinstat[ing] the illusory universalism of ‘man’” by ignoring power, history, or the “existentially complex” nature of human subjects (109).

Subjectivity is fundamentally social, not only because social conditions shape subjectivity, but also because our perceptions of ourselves and others are themselves social. Selves are relational, coming into being through interaction with others (see de Beauvoir 2011 [1949], among others; Geertz 1973; Jackson 1998). As this dissertation will show, this may include intersubjective exchanges with other human beings as well as interaction with institutions, policies, and discourses, all of which may prompt

individuals to shift, clarify, solidify, or question their orientations to the social world. Yet as Michael Jackson points out, “we must not misconstrue intersubjectivity as a synonym for shared experience, empathetic understanding or fellow-feeling” (1998: 4). Instead disagreement and opposition must be understood as equally legitimate and important modalities of intersubjectivity. Violence, disaster, and loss also structure modes of affect and understanding (Aretxaga 1997; Das 2007; Povinelli 2011).

Returning to Ortner, subjectivity comprises both the psychological richness of a person's experience of life—individuals’ own “feelings, desires, anxieties, and intentions”—and provides a language for examining the historical, political, and cultural forces that shape affect and worldview in ways that may be broadly shared across a community of people (Ortner 2006: 111). In this chapter, I take biopolitics as one of those “historical, political, and cultural forces” and ask what kinds of “feelings, desires, anxieties, and intentions” it produces among activists. My project, however, pays attention not only to the elements of subjectivity that may be broadly shared, but also to the ways in which multiple, competing, and contentious worldviews may exist in a state of friction in a given society.

Gender, biopolitics, and Russia after socialism

During early trips to Moscow and St. Petersburg in the summers of 2009 and 2010, I was repeatedly struck by the prevalence of a social advertisements about family life. The social ad (*sotsial'naya reklama*) is akin to the U.S. genre of the public service ad, intended to shape public attitudes and behaviors for some social purpose beyond consumer desire. I saw many ads on public transit billboards and kiosks in those years,

from celebrations of the cities' histories to warnings about pedestrian safety. But what caught my attention was a series related to the family with slogans like "Love for the Motherland starts in the family," and "Family is one of the masterpieces of nature." It seemed peculiar to see family life for sale, sandwiched in between billboards for luxury watches and cleaning products.

I began to listen more closely to talk about family in the news and in conversations with friends, which was dominated by talk of a so-called "demographic crisis." In statements and policies that were framed as responses to this so-called crisis, Russian officials from Putin on down have promoted an ideology of pronatalism, explicitly encouraging Russians to have more children. For example in his address to the Federal Assembly in December 2012, Putin stated, "I believe that families with three children should become the standard in Russia," and hinted that the maternity capital program might be extended past its original end date of 2016. In the context of the speech, it becomes clear that encouraging motherhood is part of a broader vision of the state as responsible for fostering life. Putin highlighted demographic issues as critical for the nation's future, emphasizing the state's role in promoting its population's moral and physical health and reproductive capacity:

In the 20th century Russia went through two world wars and a civil war, through revolutions, and twice it experienced the collapse of a unified state. The whole way of life changed radically in our country several times. As a result, at the beginning of the 21st century, we were faced with a real demographic and moral catastrophe, with a demographic and moral crisis. If the nation is unable to preserve and reproduce itself, if it loses vital references and ideals, it does not

need an external enemy because it will fall apart on its own. [...]

Either right now we can open up a lifelong outlook for the young generation to secure good, interesting jobs, to create their own businesses, to buy housing, to build large and strong families and bring up many children, to be happy in their own country, or in just a few decades, Russia will become a poor, hopelessly aged (in the literal sense of the word) country, unable to preserve its independence and even its territory.

The demographic programmes adopted in the past decade have shown their effectiveness. The country's population has not only stabilised, but it has also begun to grow. In January-September 2012, it has grown by more than 200,000 people. For the first time in our country's recent history, natural population growth has been posted for five months in a row: the birth rate has finally started to exceed the death rate (Putin 2013).

Here, Putin mobilizes biopolitical discourse to present his leadership as successful and as critical for the survival of Russia itself. The Putin state is justified insofar as it promotes the vitality and fecundity of the Russian people. Policies such as maternity capital represent the state's commitment to this nurturing and care for the population. Crucially, Putin presents the demographic situation as a "moral" problem, rhetoric that resonates with similar messages from the Russian Orthodox Church and many right-wing groups but, as I will show in this chapter, provokes unruly reactions among other Russians.

Reproduction matters to states because the state's own future is at stake, in more ways than one. States need subject-citizens, as a biopolitics perspective would suggest, to

provide labor, revenue, military service, and more. But the relationship between the state and its citizens also helps determine the shape of the state itself, and, as Gal and Kligman argue, discourses about reproduction “provide a fulcrum for constructing the relationship between a state and its citizens” (Gal and Kligman 2000a: 23). Discourses and policies related to reproduction help define who properly belongs within the state's population and how to best guarantee a bright future for the country. Those questions in turn have implications for the state's own survival and political elites' ability to retain power.

With this in mind, Putin's charge to produce “large and strong families” raises questions about precisely which Russians he is speaking to. The ethnic-neutral language of the official speech quoted above (which uses the term *rossiiskii*, indicating citizens of Russia, rather than *russkii*, ethnic Russian) contrasts with the racially and ethnically marked pronatalist ads I include in this chapter, in which the babies and families are blond and pale, and the matryoshka signifies Slavic folk traditions. Rivkin-Fish (2006; 2010) and Oushakine (2001) have noted the ways in which Russian discourses of demographic decline and moral decay serve as a kind of idiom for articulating and negotiating problems of identity, belonging, and citizenship in a period of social disruption. In some cases these discourses are explicitly xenophobic and racist. At other times, such as in the speech above, terms that appear to be merely technical, like “demographic crisis,” seem to permit a kind of *méconnaissance* (Ohnuki-Tierney 2002), allowing many different groups to share a concern about reproduction without necessarily being motivated by xenophobia. Medical experts, for example, may make extensive use of demographic crisis discourse without expressing a special concern for ethnic Russians (Leykin 2011), and non-Slavic Russians were not excluded from the maternity capital

program (Rivkin-Fish 2010). Meanwhile, nationalist groups may connect the same discourse explicitly to issues of ethnicity and the national future, such as through fears that non-Slavic ethnicities are out-reproducing ethnic Slavs in Russia, as well as to threats from Western powers perceived to be undermining the nation. (See Chapter Eight for a discussion of the connection between anti-Western discourse and hostility toward LGBT Russians.)



Figure 3: Sign in the Moscow metro, 2010. "The country needs you to set records! Each minute three people are born in Russia." Interestingly, the woman pictured here (presumably the mother) is ethnically ambiguous.

Foucault argued that a key characteristic of modern state power is that it functions through and is legitimated by biopower, the power over life. In The History of Sexuality,

Foucault describes biopower as operating in two forms: the disciplining of individual bodies into useful and docile elements of the economic system, and the management of the population as a whole in terms of health, life expectancy, and reproduction, which is “effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: *a biopolitics of the population*” (Foucault 1990: 139, italics in original). A biopolitical regime is one that produces the notion that such a thing as a “population” exists, and within which the management of the population’s welfare—health, wealth, productivity—is understood to be within the purview of the state. The state’s management of and performance of care for its population functions to legitimate and naturalize the political order (Greenhalgh 1995; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Krause 2005). As Gal and Kligman describe, “the management, increase, and improvement of such populations through education and public health came [in the early modern period] to be seen as a fundamental justification of states, as important as the maintenance of sovereignty itself” (Gal and Kligman 2000a: 19-20).

Contention over reproduction may become especially pointed in periods of major upheaval and transformation, such as the early post-socialist period in Russia and Eastern Europe, when the relationship between citizens and state is called into question. In these cases, biopolitics is not only a means of integrating populations into particular politico-economic orders, but also becomes a strategy for certain groups to legitimize their claims to rule. For example, Petryna has argued that the new Ukrainian state's provision of certain kinds of social support in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster became an important source of legitimacy for the government. In the process, a new form of "biological citizenship" was produced in which "the damaged biology of a population has become

the grounds for social membership and the basis for staking citizenship claims" (Petryna 2002: 5). Gal and Kligman write that new leaders' discussions about reproduction can likewise serve as "an allegorical, indirect way of talking about the political future" (2000a: 28) and attempting to establish moral legitimacy in response to the perceived failures of socialism. Divergent policies on abortion rights in Poland and Romania, for example, have both been couched in anti-communist terms: in Poland, new restrictions on abortion were promoted as authentically Catholic and Polish, while in Romania, abortion was legalized as a corrective to the inhumane restrictions of the socialist regime (Gal and Kligman 2000b).

In a similar way, Rivkin-Fish has argued that for Russia, "state power and citizenship are being created and transformed through struggles over the meanings of gender and family" (2010: 702). Putin-era policies such as maternity capital, in which mothers who give birth to a second or third child could apply for a one-time grant usable for housing, the child's education, or the mother's pension, have been framed in ways that tie women's problems—unaffordable housing—to larger social problems, namely "demographic crisis." Yet these policies and the discourses surrounding them instrumentalized women, tying state support to their ability to fulfill the state's needs, such as increasing the size of the future workforce. This kind of biopolitics does appear to discipline citizens in certain kinds of ways. Jane Zavisca (2012), for example, has found that maternity capital did prompt some Russians—particularly those with the resources to navigate the program's bureaucracy—to do the work necessary to become eligible for the program, and that the program had some success in reinforcing the government's legitimacy. Even Russians who did not apply, according to Zavisca, interpreted maternity

capital as a gesture of state care, and in this way, the program also reinforced the notion that housing and family care were responsibilities of the state, a certain success of biopolitics.

However, as Didier Fassin (2009) argues, to view biopolitics strictly in terms of governmentality and the normalization of individual conduct and populations is to see only part of the picture. Noting that Foucault initially defined biopower as “a power to make live and reject into death” (qtd. in Fassin 2009: 52), Fassin instead suggests that the creation and use of “biolegitimacy” is at the heart of the politics of life. Similarly, Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) writes of the “bracketing” of official recognition when it comes to certain social groups, such as Indigenous Australians, radical environmentalists, or other groups whose lives constitute some alternative to the dominant (often neoliberal) order. In such cases, those who are perceived to have actively separated and opposed themselves from the state or the market economy become subject to spectacular modes of repression, “making die.” Meanwhile, for those whose lives are simply not valued in the given economic and political system, “the softer forms of letting die will do...allowed to continue to persist in the seams of neoliberalism and late liberalism until they exhaust themselves” (Povinelli 2011: 95). In either case, the process of bracketing or the creation of biolegitimacy is an essential tool for cloaking death with an appearance of necessity or inevitability.

In Russia as elsewhere, certain kinds of citizens are included within the state's discourses of care—such as the young, married, heterosexual Russian couples with multiple children whose lives are deemed valuable through the maternity capital program. Application to the program is one way for these couples to construct themselves as

useful, productive citizens. Russian pronatalism produces additional “docile bodies” through broad participation in its hegemonic discourses, and may act as a kind of “social Viagra” by reinvigorating social norms around family life, as Elizabeth Krause and Melina Marchesi argue in reference to Italian pronatalism (2007). Even for those who do not participate directly, commenting on or thinking about the program provides a way to absorb and propagate a vision of a caring state, and justifying the exclusion of others. If the goal of policy is to encourage childbearing, then it may appear obvious why pensioners, single young people, gay couples, or other household structures are not eligible for housing support; the question of affordable housing in general has been transformed into a question of birthrates, and the proffered answer produces an image of a caring state while simultaneously narrowing the scope of the population deserving of its care.

But as I argue throughout the dissertation, following Fassin, it is not merely the state’s management of its population that is involved with its production of legitimacy. Biopolitics in the Putin-era state is formed by the interplay of the power to foster life and the power to reject—often quite publicly and visibly—unto death. Both the performance of care for certain populations and the ostentatious refusal of care to other populations are fulcrums across which power and legitimacy are contested. I borrow Gal and Kligman’s image of the fulcrum deliberately: just as elites may attempt to leverage care and the refusal of care to gain public support or power, the groups on which biopolitics operates may use the same levers to pry open space to pursue their own interests.

Precursors to Putin-era biopolitics

Biopolitics are not new to Putin-era Russia. The Soviet Union, too, justified its existence in part by claiming to its citizens that its version of state socialism provided a superior management of human life compared to capitalism, while at the same time "rejecting unto death" those whose lives were deemed dangerous, suspect, or unproductive. Soviet industrialization policy went hand-in-hand with deliberate attempts to reshape social life (Goldman 2002; Oushakine 2004), and Stephen Collier writes that "[i]t was the Soviet resolve to promote industrialization, *accompanied by* state-led transformation of collective life, that defined the distinctive formation of Soviet government" (Collier 2011: 49). All the while, this cultivation of a certain kind of collective life was accompanied by various forms of "rejecting unto death": the development of a prison labor camp system, political purges, and the forced relocations of entire ethnic groups.

From an early period, Soviet biopolitics was inflected with nationalism and multiple contradictory gender ideologies. It was not merely that the state managed the population, but the state itself was often conceived in an idiom of gendered kinship between state and citizen, as Katherine Verdery (1996) has argued. She notes that the Soviet state was alternately gendered as the male Fatherland (in Russian, *Otechestvo*) and female Motherland (*rodina*). The government was at times conceived as a patriarch, the father of all Soviet citizens. At other times, the nation was presented as a mother-figure, as in a famous World War II military recruitment poster depicting the nation as a woman along with the slogan: "The Motherland calls you!" Policies related to gender, sexuality,

and family life were likewise shifting from the late imperial period onward. The war years on the one hand produced a loosening of gender norms in certain contexts, such as the establishment of a Women's Battalion toward the end of World War I (Stockdale 2004), and a dissolution of the patriarchal structure of village life (for descriptions of late imperial and early Soviet village life, see Ransel 2000; Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia 1993). As Dan Healey describes, this dissolution resulted in increased fear of and likely experience of rape and other forms of sexual violence during the years of the Civil War, but the same massive social transformations also led to the decriminalization of divorce, homosexuality, and abortion (2015).



Figure 4. Postage stamp commemorating the famous war recruitment poster, "The Motherland Calls!" (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The Soviet government, officially in the period preceding World War II, promoted an official state feminism, including the concept of a "New Soviet Woman" who was "modest, firm, dedicated, sympathetic, courageous, bold, hard-working," willing to sacrifice all to help build the new society (Clements 1985: 220). The propagation

through literature, film, schools, and official discourses of this new gender ideology was relatively successful, for example producing a generation of young Soviet women who demanded to be allowed combat roles in World War II after having been educated under a post-Revolutionary ideology of gender equality (Krylova 2010). Women had played key roles in the 1917 Revolution and participated extensively in government and policy-making in the early years of Bolshevik rule, despite never achieving fully equal access to power and prestige in the Soviet political system (Clements 1997; Stites 1978).

Yet despite some attempts to revolutionize gender relations in the early Soviet period, Soviet women's roles as mothers had been emphasized since shortly after the Civil War. For example, women were addressed as "mothers of the Revolution" and urged to defend the new regime on that basis (Wood 1997). The Stalin-era Wife-Activists movement presented women as civilizing social mothers, volunteering to educate the public in culture, hygiene, and the new Soviet way of life (Neary 1999). This emphasis on the importance of motherhood only increased during and after World War II, during which Russia and the other Soviet state suffered tremendous losses. This was a period of a strongly pro-natalist agenda on the part of the government of the USSR, represented perhaps most famously by the practice of awarding medals and the title of "Hero-Mother of the Soviet Union" to women who successfully bore a large number of children. Some elements of a pro-natalist campaign had begun earlier, such as the 1936 outlawing of abortion; the post-war period saw even stronger pro-natalist propaganda and policies, including state support for art that promoted family life (Krylova 2001).

Furthermore, the Soviet government strictly enforced heteronormative sexuality, especially for men. Certainly male same-sex attraction has long existed in Russia, and

LGBT Russians can count major figures in Russian culture such as composer Peter Tchaikovsky and writer Mikhail Kuzmin as part of their history. Dan Healey (2001a) has described a nascent homosexual subculture in the late imperial period, which was variously ignored, tolerated, or punished under different administrative regimes.⁸ Up to the middle 19th century, same-sex encounters were not necessarily associated with any particular gender or sexual identity, but sodomy (*muzhelovstvo*) was generally stigmatized and had been banned in 1845. Drafted but never completed reforms of the criminal code in 1903 and 1917 show a trend toward reducing penalties for the offense, especially for adults, and the penal code adopted by the Bolsheviks in 1922 decriminalized sodomy (Healey 2001b). Healey points out that there was no single ideological position behind this change, but it was largely associated with an increasing medicalization of the issue, with medical professionals taking various positions on the root cause of homosexuality and how sympathetically to treat this sexual "anomaly," and the Party having no official stance. Decriminalization at this time should be understood as the result more of the increasing influence of scientific professionals than of a movement for sexual liberalization (Healey 2001a).

By the early 1930s, perceived social disorder, including male and female prostitution in urban areas, had prompted a return to criminalization. Prostitutes and other undesirables (the homeless, alcoholics, and other seemingly unproductive groups) were increasingly pressured to legitimate forms of labor or into labor colonies. In 1933, the deputy chief of the secret police, Genrikh Iagoda, wrote to Stalin asking for sodomy to be recriminalized, initially claiming that "pederasts" posed a security threat through their

⁸ In fact, I saw at least two translated copies of Healey's [Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia](#) floating around activist circles in Moscow, their presence an implicit counterargument to official discourses that positioned homosexuality as antithetical to Russian traditions and history.

"recruitment and corruption of totally healthy young people," though this justification did not appear in the final ban. (Healey 2001b: 259). Article 121 was added to the Soviet criminal code in 1933, criminalizing sodomy between men with a penalty of up to 5 years in prison. U.S. observers have estimated that approximately 800 to 1,000 men may have been imprisoned under Article 121 (United States Citizenship and Immigration Service 1998), which was finally revised in 1993 to decriminalize consensual sodomy between adult men. This more recent decriminalization may be contrasted with that of the early Soviet period, occurring in a period when LGBT rights movements were gaining influence in many countries around the world.

Gender, biopolitics, and neoliberal reforms

The unraveling of the Soviet Union coincided with rapid political and economic transformations across the region—what were initially widely expected to be “transitions” to democracy and a market-based economy (Buyandelgeriyn 2008; Zavisca 2011). In Russia, this included privatization schemes for state industries and housing, elimination of food subsidies, cuts to public services such as education and health care, and a new openness to foreign investment, among other things. Many of my interlocutors glossed these changes as “neoliberalism” (*neoliberalizm*), a term which they used not only to describe the “shock therapy” reforms of the 1990s, but cuts to and privatization of public services that were continuing throughout the 2000s and during my fieldwork period. I follow them in using the term in this dissertation to refer generally to the dismantling of previously existing social guarantees and the privatization of public/state

property and services.

By using this term I do not mean to imply that these disparate changes proposed and carried out by disparate actors over a quarter century are necessarily the product of a single, coherent ideology; as Stephen Collier argues, neoliberal reform programs are instead “the product of conjunctural factors,” particular and context-specific attempts to “reconcil[e] the liberal preference for limited and decentralized government with the imperatives for substantive provisioning that are core to the social state” (Collier 2011: 167). In the case of gender and family policy in contemporary Russia, we might consider “neoliberal” the overall trend toward reducing state support for housing, child care, food, universal employment, and so on. But specific policies are produced in specific circumstances, such that a program like maternity capital (described below) combines the support function of a social state with neoliberal goals like creating a mortgage market.

Furthermore, the specific relationship between demographic changes in Russia from the late Soviet period to the present remains under debate. It is commonplace to attribute the decline in childbearing and marriage, rise in divorce, and rise in male mortality to the economic shock and uncertainty of the immediate post-Soviet period (for example, see Natasha's interview below), and some research supports this "crisis" view (Heleniak 2010; Perelli-Harris 2006; Philipov and Jasiloniene 2008). On the other hand, as Ted Gerber and Danielle Berman point out, the same period also saw the introduction of readily available contraceptives and increased public discussion of sex and sexuality, as well as media depicting a wider variety of sexual practices and lifestyles than had been publicized under Soviet rule. Indeed, they find that cohabitation and marriage patterns through the 1990s are more consistent with the latter factors, in line with "second

demographic transition" (SDT) theory (Gerber and Berman 2010). In brief, the "first demographic transition" refers to the demographic changes caused by the decline in infant and child mortality resulting from increased quality of nutrition and medical care, which in many societies resulted in a shift from a high-mortality high-fertility to a low-mortality high-fertility condition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The "second demographic transition" denotes a later shift to a low-mortality low-fertility condition, which became common across much of Europe and the U.S. in the 20th century. SDT theory posits that this decline in fertility, often accompanied by increased non-marital childbearing, was related to increased use of contraception and shifting norms about marriage and family size, though the precise factors involved continue to be the subject of debate and likely vary from case to case (Johnson-Hanks 2008; Sobotka 2008).

These demographic debates enter the political landscape discussed in this dissertation in perhaps surprising ways. Russia's low total fertility rate, which reached a nadir of around 1.3 births per woman in 1999, had increased to around 1.7 as of 2013—still below 2.1, regarded as replacement rate needed to simply maintain population size (World Bank 2015). Combined with a dramatic rise in male mortality and rise in emigration through the 1990s, the low fertility rate resulted in an overall decline in Russia's population. This demographic situation has often been described as a "demographic crisis" and functions as both impetus and justification for Russia's pronatalist policies. As described below, many of my activist interlocutors took for granted that the root cause of this situation was the economic and social conditions from high unemployment and financial crises to the decline in government support for childcare, housing, and health care. In essence, they held the "crisis" view. On the other

hand, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government often suggested that at least some part of the demographic crisis was the result of changes in values, especially an alleged decline in support for traditional family values. While tinged with moral overtones that are typically not echoed in Western demographers' research, these positions nonetheless echo the basic argument of SDT theory. (A third, albeit much less common, view was shared by a few feminist activists who asserted that there was no particular crisis with respect to Russia's demographic situation. 'Ana,' who identified as pagan and was particularly concerned about ecological issues, explained to me that if Russia's population was in decline, that was likely a good thing, as the world was overpopulated as it was.)

Neoliberal or otherwise, the transformations of the post-Soviet period impinged on gender, family life, and citizenship in several ways. The profound and disruptive impacts of this period had a disproportionate impact on women, who were increasingly likely to be underpaid and/or in precarious employment, and who more likely than men to feel the effects of decaying health care systems and declining public support for child care (Hemment 2007; Rivkin-Fish 2005; Rotkirch, et al. 2007; Utrata 2008). In this way, the Russian experience of neoliberalism echoes experiences of structural adjustment programs in many countries outside the former Soviet Union (Pfeiffer and Chapman 2010).

At another level, as I mentioned earlier, gender, family, and sexuality proved to be key symbols through which many former Soviet citizens made sense of the massive changes their society was undergoing. On the one hand, “traditionalist” discourses, which linked Russian ethnic and Orthodox religious identities with heteronormative visions of

family life, became dominant at the elite level as a means of establishing legitimacy against the Soviet past (and in the Putin era, against perceived threats from the West). Despite the fact that the Soviet state actively promoted both “modern” gender egalitarianism/cosmopolitanism and “traditional” family life/national identification, in the fallout of the collapse of the USSR, anti-communism tended to be associated with the revival of national identity and supposed traditional culture (see Verdery 1996). In this ideological configuration, to oppose the excesses of the Soviet regime was to support nationalist movements and to support a return to traditional social life. Russianness stood against Soviet identification, and alongside a retrenchment of an essentialist, heteronormative gender binary (Gal and Kligman 2000a).

For example, Serguei Oushakine (2001) describes how in post-Soviet society the iconic image of the "New Russian Woman" symbolizes Russians' discomfort with the introduction into their society of capitalism and its metaphors of markets and commodities. Oushakine argues that for young Russians, processes of symbolizing gender are a way of making sense of the apparent chaos of post-socialist change. Imagined as a young, attractive woman whose aim in life is to marry rich, the New Russian Woman is associated with capitalism, conspicuous consumption, contact with foreign cultures, marrying for money rather than love, or even with prostitution. If everything is for sale, that includes women, too—and by analogy, the motherland herself; capitalism is understood as a realm of corruption and moral decay (Oushakine 2001).

The New Russian Woman subverts many of the values associated with the New Soviet Woman: individualistic rather than self-sacrificing, interested in beauty and fashion rather than strength and hard work. Yet in both cases, symbolic binaries continue

to work to reinforce links between tradition, morality, authentic feeling, and women in domestic rather than public roles. Where the New Soviet Woman might have been aspirational to many, figures like the New Russian Woman, the prostitute (Borenstein 2006), and the mail order bride (Johnson 2007) are often viewed as women who have been corrupted by contact with capitalism and the West. The opening of the former USSR to international flows of money, goods, people, and ideas has led to an increase in the symbolic figuring of the West as a source of danger and disorder. Interestingly, this marks a significant shift from public concerns about gender and demography in the late Soviet period. While motherhood and family life were often understood as threatened during perestroika, that threat originated in problems related to socialism itself, and the Soviet state⁹. After 1991 and the end of that state, these threats were associated with a different source.

The association of capitalism with corruption and decaying morals has been documented elsewhere, as in Jennifer Patico's examination of the rapid expansion of consumerism and new class structures in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Patico 2008). This theme is also taken up by Rivkin-Fish in her studies of women's health activists in St. Petersburg. While the activists and doctors she works with certainly work in the public sphere and appear to have no plans to abandon their careers, Rivkin-Fish 2005 documents how women draw on beliefs in the value of the 'traditional' nuclear family and in the need for spiritual revival to explain the purpose and legitimacy of their work. Oushakine (2006) describes a similar process occurring as a group of soldier's mothers mobilize the symbolic value of their status—grieving mothers of soldiers who died in defense of the motherland—as they worked to memorialize their sons in memory and in

⁹ For further discussion of the threat the Soviet state posed to family life, see Verdery (1996), esp. Ch 3.

public space.

Similar anxieties related to masculinity have played out in tandem with concerns over femininity. Masculinity may become problematic in periods of high unemployment when many men have difficulty fulfilling the ‘breadwinner’ role they expect to inhabit (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004; Temkina and Rotkirch 2002; Utrata 2011). What 'counts' as masculinity is a problem faced not only by marginally employed married (or cohabiting) men, but also by gay Russians, who face particularly violent stigma. The reinforcement of anti-gay rhetoric and policies is not merely a continuity with 'tradition,' but in some contexts has become a means for Russia to distinguish itself from the more open laws and mores of Europe (Healey 2010), a point I expand on in later chapters. In official discourse, homosexuality has increasingly been constructed as a threat to the nation and to the precarious birthrate (see Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight); as Eliot Borenstein has argued, male homosexuality has figured in Russian popular culture as a symbol of national impotence (Borenstein 2006). However, that the majority of the nation rejects homosexuality does not mean that gay Russians do not identify in some way with their nation, whether through a taste for pornography with a nationalist aesthetic (Healey 2010) or through striving to be publicly recognized as fellow citizens (Stella 2013b).

It is in the context of a perceived “crisis in masculinity” as well as a greater diversity of masculinities presented in mass media that a cult of machismo has been produced around Putin, from the infamous publicity photos of the president hunting, fishing, and practicing judo to the new prevalence among the political elite of coarse language influenced by prison slang (Johnson and Saarinen 2013; Sperling 2015). This is the masculinity of the *muzhik*, a man marked by self-reliance, heterosexual virility, and

ruggedness or even rudeness. The term originally connoted peasant or working-class origins, a lack of education, and an uncultured lifestyle. In recent years, *muzhik* has come to signify something like "real man," a virile Russian national masculinity defined against femininity, liberalism, and homosexuality, and which has played a central role in constructing legitimacy for Putin and his regime (Sperling 2015: 36-39).¹⁰ The figure of the *muzhik* is a fantasy of independence and "a marker of Russianness, and therefore can be set in opposition not only to women and youth, but also to cultural and ethnic outsiders"—including gays (Pospelova 2011). In this way, the *muzhik* also stands against the moral crisis of encroaching Western values, particularly feminism and the visibility of LGBT people. The role of mass media, which are strongly influenced if not directly controlled by the Kremlin, is important here, as Pospelova points out. Survey data shows a significant rise in aggressive homophobia in recent years (see Table 1), suggesting that public support for the ban on "gay propaganda" may be more the product of deliberate cultivation than evidence that Russia has an especially intolerant culture when compared to other societies. This is not to argue that violence toward and exclusion of homosexuality had disappeared in the 1990s, or that Russian society is not generally heteronormative. But the virulence and political salience of homophobia do seem to have shifted dramatically in recent years, illustrating how "tradition" is a continually constructed political project (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

¹⁰ The political and gender ideology associated with the *muzhik* bears a strong resemblance to the masculine ideology propagated in certain right-wing groups in the United States, to whom the qualities Riabova and Riabov describe as features of the *muzhik*—"self-sufficiency, economic independence, respect for private property" and a disdain for "the liberal values of political correctness"—are also core values (Riabova and Riabov 2005, qtd. in Sperling 2015: 36).

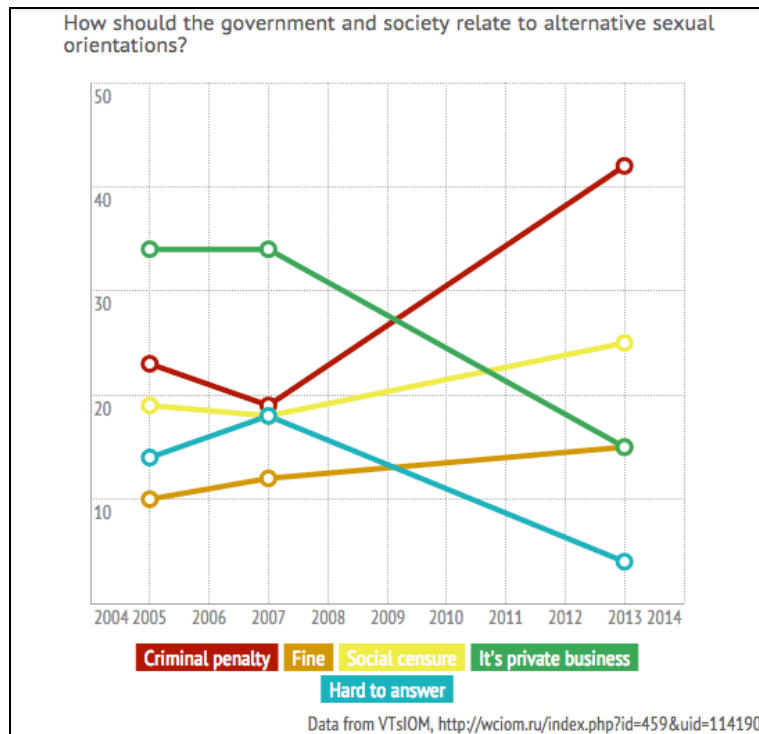


Table 1: Attitudes toward sexuality. This is a limited dataset, but it is suggestive of the polarization surrounding this issue in recent years.

While neoliberal discourses and austerity measures have contributed to a continuing low trust in the state, the often unspoken assumption that they have undermined public belief that the state ought to be providing for its people is questionable at best. In her study on the women’s crisis center movement in the late 1990s, Hemment argued that women activists in the NGO sphere were “not so much re-integrating the wounded person back into society, but re-educating them for a new order. A new order based on the radical free market, where people are responsible for their own welfare and the state is nowhere to be seen and cannot be appealed to” (Hemment 1999: 38). Yet the NGO workers she interviews report that one of their primary challenges is callers who expect the state to provide a solution for their problems, raising the question of how

successful this “re-education” has been. In Chapter Two, I discuss “neoliberal” subjectivities further in terms of the move away from politics and collective engagement.

As it has consolidated power and attempted to legitimate itself, Putin’s rule initially distinguished itself from Boris Yeltsin’s by a strategic return to some of the social guarantees of a liberal welfare state (Scheppelle 2010). Shock therapy in the 1990s and austerity measures in the late 2000s succeeded in stripping away significant public benefits, from guaranteed housing and employment to controls on food prices. Yet the notion that the state owes certain entitlements and social care to its citizens has remained resonant, such that one of the most successful political movements in the early 2000s was pensioners mobilizing to retain their right to free public transportation (Scheppelle 2010). Similarly, several programs to promote homeownership for young people were initiated under Putin, including supports for “housing for young specialists” and maternity capital. Both programs drew on and reinforced existing public belief that the provision of affordable housing was an important form of care the state should provide for its citizens (Rivkin-Fish 2010; Zavisca 2012). These examples of state care represent biopolitics in its nurturing guise, as well as illustrating how neoliberal goals are transmuted through public dissent and political maneuvering into policies that reinforce belief in a social state.

But if social support programs help produce citizens who appeal to the state, thereby legitimizing it, then what happens when those programs are insufficient and ineffective? Many of interlocutors had a simple answer: reactionary gender politics. As discussed above, the politics of gender, family, and sexuality have been central arenas of contention in Putin-era Russia. Elite attempts to consolidate a new national identity and

reactions to increasing political opposition have relied heavily on a discourse of “traditional values.” Even during the two-year period in which I conducted fieldwork, several major new government policies were introduced that aimed at constructing and enforcing norms of heterosexuality, female domesticity, pro-natalism, and obedience to official authority: the ban on propaganda of “non-traditional sexual orientations,” an internet blacklist aimed at protecting children from obscenity, requirements to register NGOs that received international funding as “foreign agents,” a law against offending the sentiments of believers. Along with these policies, leading members of the political elite expressed open hostility to “non-traditional” projects such as feminism and LGBT rights. For example, Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has explicitly accused feminism and feminists of undermining Russia and Russian families:

“I consider very dangerous the phenomenon that calls itself feminism because feminist organizations promote a pseudo-freedom of women, which in the first place should come out outside of marriage and outside of the family. At the center of feminist ideology is not the family, not the raising of children, but a different function of women, which not rarely opposes traditional family values. It is probably not accidental that the majority of leaders of feminism are unmarried women.” (Elder 2013)

Structurally, this new close relationship between the traditionalist Orthodox Church and the Russian state seems to have led to a new articulation of the gendered roles of state and society Gal and Kligman (2000a) discuss. They argue that the socialist state, in a symbolic-structural sense, played the role of patriarch/male provider to its female citizenry. To some extent this relationship broke down as socialism unraveled in

the 1990s, and yet the continuity of a basic welfare state, and of citizens' beliefs that they are entitled to basic benefits, suggests that the relationship is still imagined in the same basic structural terms. The threat here is precisely what many of the protests in 2012-2013 were about: citizens frustrated and angered by the continued shrinking of these social benefits, particularly preschools, maternity support, and other benefits for families.

In this context, it may be that the state's strong support of an Orthodox conception of family life, in which women marry (presumably employed) men and return to the home to manage childcare on their own, is an attempt to find ideological support for a deep change in state-society relations. In other words, "family values" enable a re-imagining of the state in an age of austerity, attempting to devolve responsibility for family life onto individual families and the Church. In place of a masculine state-provider, Russians are given instead a literal Patriarch.

But not all Russians want a Patriarch, a *muzhik*-president, "traditional" families, or a three-child norm. Both the promise of state support for demographic growth (the promise of biopolitics) and this more recent attempt to offer Orthodoxy and tradition as a safety net appear not only to have fallen short for many Russians. These discourses and policies have enabled and produced the specific forms of critique and dissatisfaction expressed by activists. At least among my interlocutors, these discourses produced an acute sense of the ruling elite's corruption and hypocrisy, rather than encouraging a belief in the legitimacy of the state. Their critiques are nearly always in reference to the kinds of promises of care for life implicit in Russian biopolitical discourses, demonstrating how even an opposition reaction to power is still in some ways produced by that power. Biopolitics in this case remains generative and influential. Yet, as I show below, the

kinds of subjectivities it helps constitute may be far from docile.

“Aggressive propaganda” and unruly subjectivities

As part of the formal interviews I conducted, I showed my interlocutors photographs I had taken of a series of pronatalist advertisements that had been on display in the Moscow subway in 2010. (See Figures 1, 2, 4, and 5.) I asked whether they had seen the ads and what they thought of them, often eliciting extensive commentary tinged with irritation, outrage, or irony.

‘Alla’ (LGBT activist): Yes, I remember these. It was some kind of national project. There were some kind of placards with women (with children) and something was written on it, something like... No, I don't remember what was written there, but basically it was "have more children." Well, and I think that was the beginning of what we have now. Just, at that time it was some such project for raising the birthrate. That was an attempt to persuade, and now they're attempting to force it. Yeah. Well, frankly speaking what they were doing then, it was all the same, because let's say in demography there is such a thing as demographic inertia. That is, some kind of demographic processes that usually change slowly, at minimum 20, 30 years to get something moving. And they for some reason believe that right now we'll put up some placards, saying "Have a second child," and the population of Russia will just grow. Of course not! Good lord. Because look. Early they were being sneaky, and now everything is in the open, it seems. I really want children. To make Putin happy, I want many children. I want five!

(laughs) But everything again comes back to money. If I want to have the ability to support them, I have to work. With the kinds of salaries we have now, in order to take care of even a few children, I would have to work so much I wouldn't even see them.

Alla identifies the subway ads with the state's long-term project of increasing Russia's birthrate, drawing a direct line between pro-family messaging and more recent policy restrictions on abortion, which we had discussed earlier in the interview. While her comment about having children for Putin's sake is ironic, Alla stated later that she in fact has a strong desire to have several children. Yet despite being a 'good' biopolitical subject in this way, she responds with cynicism and anger to the state's demographic politics, which in her view simply highlight its failure to provide adequate conditions for its citizens to live.



Figure 5: Billboard in Moscow Metro. "The family is one of the masterpieces of nature. - Philosopher George Santayana"

Vera (feminist and sociology graduate student): Yeah, these two in the metro. I am very used to them, because I see them everywhere. But I often feel a little irritated when I see them, because, well. I remember looking at this one, at how the family's one of the wonders of nature, and wondering, well, what is nature here? Ok, the landscape is natural, but the family, it's a social entity, not a natural one, not a biological one. [...]

But what is curious—I just thought about it now—is that there is no father here. [Referring to photo in Figure 2.] It's a single mother with six children. And it's supposed to, mm, to look like a kind of idyllic, perfect family. I don't know. But it's clearly, if you look at it that way, one mother raising six children? Your first idea would be how difficult it is, how does she manage it? It should have been a picture addressing social problems of single mothers with several children. And it ignores it, it ignores the issue, and it just says that the love of one's motherland begins in the family. So if you have, if your children look like matryoshkas, you're going to love Russia. [laughs] I don't know, it's really absurd. [...]

Vera identifies several gaps between the representations of the ads and her experience of reality: that families are not “natural,” and that actually raising six children would be difficult, not idyllic. In other conversations, Vera critiqued the racial and ethnic politics of pronatalism as well; it is worth noting that the family pictured in Fig. 4 is not only large, multigenerational, and presumably heterosexual, but also white and dressed in a European style.¹¹ While the statement, “It should have been a picture addressing social

¹¹ Thanks to Masha Belodrubrovskaya for the observation that this family is not just white, but actually reads as Western European in terms of clothing style. This may be the result of using commercially

problems of single mothers with several children,” suggests that she agrees in principle with the notion that the state ought to be responsible, at some level, for supporting the lives of its people, encountering this message in fact emphasizes the failure of the state to address the issues it has claimed as a source of legitimacy. Her response to the final ad is particularly telling, drawing out the contrast between the promise of biopolitics and the Russian state’s failure to meet that promise:

I don’t like seeing the Russian flag. I don’t know why I don’t like it. And when I see a child and a flag in the background, it strikes me as a contrast, and as a, I don’t know. Because the baby is supposed to be sweet, but what I automatically associate with the flag is hypocrisy. So hypocrisy, bureaucracy, and some dull official stuff. So when I see this combination, I think about how the baby is exploited to promote some ideas that have nothing to do with it, with its life.

available stock photography rather than a subtle message that Russians should develop a different aesthetic in dress.



Figure 6: Sign in a train station. "Life is in your hands." "Pregnancy: Interrupt / Preserve"

Exchange on a feminist internet forum:

S: [posts link to a news story about Putin's declaration of a "three child norm"]

Hm, and what about those who don't fulfill this normal—jailed, shot, sent to the psych ward? What other options will there be?

K: The demands are growing! Two was enough before :)

G: Eh, and does he already have three?

S: 10, a hero-father¹²

K: And to feed them, clothe them, teach them, and manage to rest—is he planning to do it himself?

G: He's definitely not planning to teach them

¹² After World War II, the USSR's pronatalist policies included honoring women who had large numbers of live children. Women with ten or more received a medal and the title "Mother-Heroine of the Soviet Union."

Many activists interpreted “demographic crisis” discourse in terms of the state’s failure, a reminder that it was not providing the kinds of social support they believed to be necessary to foster families.

Jessica: One of the other themes I’m interested in is the demographic crisis. Have you heard about this?

Zhenya: Oh, yes. Eternally. Well, in the first place when they talk about demography, our official talk above all about the birth rate. Even though those aren’t the same thing. Demography is the relationship between the birth rate and the mortality rate. Let’s say the birthrate has been rising in recent years, but mortality has increased at a much faster rate. That is, the main influence on demography is related first and foremost to the rapid decrease in the quality of life of working people, and as a result of that, naturally there is a rise in mortality. So instead of that they try to turn things around and talk about how supposedly women started to have too few children. Furthermore, they never explain why that happened, as if it were, I don’t know, the depraved influence of the West was introduced to our women, and now they no longer want to be mothers. But of course that’s nonsense. They try to turn a social question into something else, not addressed the fact that many women would like to have a child, but simply don’t have that possibility. Say for example I wanted to have a baby, but I understand that in the situation I’m in right now, that would mean I’d put a tombstone on my own life. My salary is 40 [thousand rubles per month, about \$2,000]. I don’t live in a family apartment.¹³ If there were a baby, that would mean that I would not

¹³ At the time, Zhenya shared a two-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Moscow with three other people.

make enough money to pay a nanny, that is, I would live my entire life just to make enough money to financially support the baby.

Like Alla, Zhenya points to the low wages relative to the cost of living and the expense of caring for a child in Moscow. She, too, highlights the gap between official rhetoric about demography, which she interprets as blaming women's own desires for population decline, and the lived experience of post-Soviet Russians, who have undergone a decline in the quality of life. Hearing about the "demographic crisis" reminds her how difficult life is in Russia, and how impossible the prospect of raising children seems.

Natasha Bitten, a journalist and co-founder of the feminist group *Za Feminizm* (For Feminism or Pro Feminism), explained that the elements of the supposed "demographic crisis" simply didn't add up, in her view.

Natasha: It's a good question because we haven't really got research on it. People think that there are not enough people in Russia. I suppose, this is mostly a problem they started when the capitalism system... Our oligarchs felt the problem, there are not enough people to work in the plants, on factories, on oil. This is the most important business for them, oil and gas. They don't have enough workers. And that happened because of the huge crashes in the 1990s, because they just stole money and they didn't mind about human resources, and there were a lot of crises and people just survived. But objectively the population became smaller because it was very difficult to live. Nobody supported families, supported women. A lot of men died. But at that time the government wasn't worried about this problem. A lot of people, medical personnel, scientists,

journalists, worried about that problem. People are dying, it is too difficult to survive. They did nothing about it. And then ten years ago they had this problem face to face. That's why they started to talk about the demographic crisis.

Natasha, who was born in the 1970s, has direct memories of the crises of the 1990s and the government's lack of care for families, women, and men in those years. Its sudden turn to the problem of population, after "a lot of people" had been aware of the issue for years, is suspect. Not only does Natasha distrust the true motivations of officials who talk about demographic crisis, she also seems to feel insulted that they expect to be believed by the public when making disingenuous statements.

Natasha: They thought that if they prove [that the demographic crisis is caused by] religious reasons it would be better. I think this is a stupid idea because religious people don't really have a lot of children. They have the same one or two, the best option. It doesn't matter, are you religious or not. Religious women get abortions.

Jessica: It does seem like the Orthodox Church plays a big role in gender and politics.

Natasha: It pretends to do it, but I think this is mostly the government's idea, because it's kind of... (searches for words). They think people are so stupid to believe in God, to trust. The Soviet Union wasn't really religious. They believed, we believed in Communism. So they thought if we declined communism, they thought they must give the people something else. And they thought this can be religion. But this is really, I think, a stupid idea too, because people who pretend to be religious, they are not genuinely religious because they just find something

that can be profitable for them. Priests, they are interested in money, and to have houses free from the Church. Something like that. That is why I think our society is not religious. It's a kind of game.

Later in our interview, Natasha explained that it was precisely her sense that pronatalist discourse was an attempt to manipulate the public that prompted her to start an activist group.

Jessica: Was there something specific that made you decide to start *Za Feminizm*?

Natasha: The really aggressive propaganda articles and anti-woman government policy. I have been waiting [for] when there are women in power, for women to start to do something against it. And they did nothing. And so I decided, it will be too late if I don't start right now. [pause] Mostly the propaganda. I'm just, I'm just sensitive to propaganda because I am from this sphere. Propaganda is kind of my job, because journalism is kind of propaganda. So that's why... I just see what happens. Different people don't see it. They don't mind it. They can't understand what happens. I can understand it.

While I most often conducted formal interviews in cafes around Moscow, lacking any office space of my own, Tatyana Sukhareva invited me to her office. She had moved to Moscow to make a career after rising as far as she could in her regional insurance firm. Tatyana had become involved in activism through the mass protests and citizen activism of 2011, along the way becoming increasingly interested in feminism. She, too, had experienced a disjuncture between official pronatalism and her own life experience, feeling that it was impossible to succeed economically and also have children.

Jessica: If I understand correctly, you call yourself "child-free," right?

Tatyana: Well, let me put it this way. It's not exactly like that. The issue is that when the time came I made the choice not to have a child. I understood. I made a list of pros and cons, and I understood that *this* would be my headache, my problem. I calculated that my mother would go on pension when I was 32. Excuse me, at 32 I already had my own department. In principle, let's say this. I could not allow myself a child. Because I understood that that would mean I would really risk my financial position—well, risk in the way that a mother who raises a child alone does. I chose my career. But in principle you could call me child-free.

Jessica: Do you like that term?

Tatyana: Ah, yes, in principle I like that term. Ah, of course it's English-language, but if you say "childless" (*bezdetnyi*) in Russian, it's understood as infertile, as if it didn't work out. Whereas "child-free" (*chaild-fri*) means free from children. That is, like a contradiction to "child-less" [spoken in English].

Tatyana, who was very active in online feminist networks, posting and circulating her own news and posts as well as links to international stories related to gender issues, was one of a handful of Russians who have adopted the English term "child-free" to describe their decision not to have children. As she points out, childlessness is stigmatized in Russia. In the interview, Tatyana also expressed a disillusionment with the Orthodox Church as a result of its positions, which she felt were aggressive:

I was christened Orthodox. But... there was... In general, I've related to Orthodox people for a long time. I went to church, I put on a scarf when I go into a church, and take it off when I leave. That is, like a typical person. Even though in many cases I disagree with Orthodoxy, I am still in some ways [...] I don't entirely agree

with, I never agreed with the position of the Church with respect to women, with respect to the family, that the husband is the head, and so on. I never understood why pride is a mortal sin, and so on. I never understood that. Now when the Orthodox Church acts so aggressively in relation to its own people, its own parishioners, I don't know if I can consider myself Orthodox now.

In the Moscow political landscape, Tatyana was a liberal feminist, concerned about equal rights and equal opportunities for women, but generally in favor of a market economy. This attitude occasionally earned her harsh criticism from more left-leaning feminists, as when Tatyana wrote a tribute online to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher when the latter passed away in April 2013. Still, though her ideological positions and the conditions of her life as director of a firm differed significantly from many of my other activist interlocutors, Tatyana nonetheless experienced a similar kind of disillusionment with the failure of the state to support the values it claimed to, and the aggression with which powerful institutions acted.

The rejection unto death: Biopolitics and LGBT Russians

As noted above, in Russian biopolitics the fostering of life and the rejection unto death are two sides of the same policy coin. For example, in recent years Russian political elites, including Putin and leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, have presented themselves as defenders of the traditional Russian family—a discourse of care for one part of the population which relies on the explicit rejection of another part of that population. While (ethnic Russian) women are encouraged to bear as many children as

possible, LGBT Russians have become a scapegoat for alleged moral and demographic crises. Framed as morally undisciplined, reproductively unproductive,¹⁴ they are targeted by laws such as the 2013 ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations,” which presumes that non-normative sexualities can be transmitted to children, who are susceptible to “gay propaganda.” In Chapter Eight, I discuss in more detail how the state’s visible rejection of LGBT Russians has aided the construction of a Russian national community through a process I call conspicuous erasure. Here, I describe how this “rejection unto death” produces radicalized, unruly subjects among the rejected and those who sympathize with them.

Several of my interlocutors described how they were drawn after other people, often friends, came under some kind of attack. That is, they linked their own politicization to events they were only indirectly affected by. I met ‘Mariya’ when she had been a member of a leftist group a few months. A student in her late teens who had grown up in Moscow, Mariya had a ready smile—unusual in Russia—and kept her long hair dyed a bright hue. Over the course of my fieldwork, she developed from a novice activist getting her first public speaking experience to coordinating a rally of several hundred medical workers and supporting activists. Mariya did not develop her radical political disposition at home. As she explained in an interview, “My mother works for the government. That is, she’s a government employee, a bureaucrat. For United Russia, which is funny. It’s just that they all have to join United Russia.” Instead, Mariya was radicalized through her identification with the problems facing LGBT Russians.

¹⁴ There are of course non-heterosexual parents in Russia. Passage of the “gay propaganda” law, as well as a ban on adoption by same-sex couples, has prompted a significant increase in asylum applications to the US and other countries, some likely motivated by concerns about children. Journalist Masha Gessen, for example, emigrated in part due to fears over the ramifications of the law for her family.

Jessica: How did it happen that you became a member of your organization?

Mariya: That's my favorite story. Do you want me to tell it to you?

Jessica: Please!

Mariya: So, again, I started as an LGBT activist. [...] Last December, when everyone was going to those protests, I didn't participate in that. That was in December 2011. At that time, everyone was going to protests and, well, it was this, you understand, massive. And I at that time, finally found for myself our, our organization, the Rainbow Association. You know right? I looked for it for more than a year. That is, I had an organization, one that dealt with LGBT rights, but before that I was involved in the St. Petersburg organization *Vykhod*. It can't be said that I... I'm not a lesbian. That is, I'm not sure of that, in terms of bisexual, I don't know. Simply the problems of LGBT seemed to me sufficiently acute. So many of my friends are homosexual, and I decided for myself that if they can't somehow go out and defend their rights, then I should. Why not? And that was my position: to go out for them, in the first place. It's not for myself.

Mariya is somewhat ambivalent about whether she herself identifies as an LGBT person. At least, she seems not to feel personally affected by the problems facing them, explicitly describing her activism as defending the rights of others. Mariya's activism is driven by her sense that LGBT Russians such as her friends face particularly difficult problems and are not able to defend themselves.

Like Mariya, Alla did not consider herself a part of the group 'LGBT,' but nonetheless decided to become an activist on their behalf. It was through her engagement with LGBT issues that she came to identify as an activist.

Jessica: Do you identify as an activist?

Alla: Yes.

Jessica: Have you considered yourself one for a long time?

Alla: Probably since my first action, let me see... October 1, 2011. My friend said that there would be an action in support of LGBT [people]. Earlier I was absolutely uninterested in their problem. Well, I understood that there was a problem, that they needed to be helped somehow, right? Probably. But I didn't understand things like gay parades at all, why they would be. Did I want to go with my friend? Sure. But on the whole I absolutely didn't interest myself in it. Because I didn't know anyone who was LGBT, or at least not that I was aware of. Until then I also had never been interested in actions, but she said, let's go. I said, like, sure. That was the Equality March, which the Rainbow Association puts on. They were with feminists and KRI. Well, we literally had just arrived and one of the organizers had been taken by the cops... And somewhere there in the metro there were Nazis with rotten tomatoes, and at that moment they... (pauses)

Jessica: Threw them?

Alla: Yes. They flung things at us. It's like a kind of international sport. (laughs) Yes, and on Thursday it was eggs. Like, earlier it was tomatoes, and now it continues with eggs.

Jessica: What was your reaction?

Alla: Well, understand, my father taught economics. I was already up to date with what kind of person Putin is. I was up to date with how our police work. But it was a different thing when I had never seen anything. I was very much a

homebody. I heard about everything, but that's all. And so that reinforcement of everything that I had been told about, everything I had read, well that was terrible. Sure, not surprising. But probably terrible. That time I really got scared, all the more because literally fifteen minutes later they arrested me.

Even some of those who did identify as gay still conceptualized their activism as primarily motivated by a desire to help others who were lacking support and protection. I ran into 'Adik,' an insurance consultant in his late twenties, at several rallies on LGBT issues before we sat down for an interview. Like the feminists I described above, Adik related with skepticism to official rhetoric about homosexuality. Early in our interview, as we sipped tea and shared a cookie he insisted on buying for me, I asked him if he had any siblings.

Adik: Yes, yes, I have a whole family. (ironic tone) I was always in a whole, white, heterosexual family. My parents lived together my whole life. I have an older brother and a younger sister. My older brother is 32, and my sister is 24. My brother is married and has a daughter. My sister is also married and has a daughter. So now I alone am not following the example of my parents, but they look at it through their fingers. I'll note again for you that my parents always lived together and they still do now. I want to say that I'm a gay who was born and grew up in a wonderful heterosexual family. In Russia there is a stereotype that if a child is born without both parents, it will grow up not understanding anything. But in typical families LGBT children grow up, and in LGBT families typical children grow up.

The notion Adik identifies here as a Russian stereotype is the same logic that

underlies the “gay propaganda” law: a strongly constructivist view of sexuality in which LGBT individuals pose a particular threat to children, who might learn from the “wrong” example. Adik highlights the ways in which his family background in fact conforms to the “ideal” Russian family presented in pronatalist, anti-gay discourses: ethnic Russian, heterosexual, a “whole family” (*pol'naya sem'ya*)—an idiom used in contrast to divorced or single-parent families. Adik’s tone here is slightly sing-song, expressing an awareness that the phrases he uses echo official discourse: “Stable, white, heterosexual family,” “wonderful heterosexual family.” Yet his own life stands as proof that the discourse is false. Whole families do not always reproduce their own heterosexuality. It is noteworthy that Adik presented this critique somewhat unprompted. A question that most of my interlocutors treated as mundane—“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”—seemed to remind him of heteronormative, traditionalist rhetoric that treated him as an impossibility.

While Adik had been involved for a few years with what he considered social activism or social initiatives, such as holiday celebrations and mutual aid groups, he described his organization’s deeper involvement in political activism as a recent change that came in direct response to the government’s increasing hostility to dissent and to LGBT Russians.

Adik: One could say that then the social initiatives were very strongly overtaken by political ones because everything came on just like a blizzard, it was all very sudden. On December 5 I found out that two of our activists had been arrested in the context of the rally after the elections. And... Pasha Samburov was given ten days [in jail] for not complying with an officer and that became some kind of... [A moment] when we understand that something is moving, that the stone is

turning. The 10th of December we go out on Bolotnaya Square, literally fifteen people, ten or fifteen people, and raise up our three signs and one rainbow flag.

"Gays and lesbians have also had their voices stolen," "Gays and lesbians are also against crooks and thieves."¹⁵

As he notes, Adik did not participate in the initial mass opposition protest on December 5, 2011. Instead, he was drawn into the movement through the arrest of his friend and fellow activist, Pasha. As it happened, I interviewed him on the anniversary of that protest.

Adik: Now it's been a year. Today is December 5th. Exactly a year ago at ten o'clock at night I was at home. After work they called me and said some of us had been arrested. The next day they called me at work and said Pasha, my friend, is going to court in an hour. I dropped everything at work, and for two days I didn't do anything but try to fight off his ten day sentence.

At the next mass protest on December 10, he and the other LGBT activists were attacked by fellow protesters (see Chapters Four, Seven and Eight for additional discussions of repression and LGBT resistance).

Adik: What we were fighting with, from one side crazy aggression from the right-wing, who were attacking us, who were fighting with us. One was trying to take our rainbow flag. We chased him off, and that torn up flag is a sort of trophy. We're preserving it now, along with the signs. And from the other side, the understanding of the people who at a certain moment figured out who here is the aggressor, and they started to protect us. They started to help us chase of the right-

¹⁵ *Zhuliki i vorov*, a reference to United Russia, which Aleksei Navalny and other opposition activists had deemed the "Party of Crooks and Thieves."

wingers, helped us take down the fascists, as we call them. They were on our side. And that marked the beginning of the era of political organization, of political activity for the Rainbow Association.

Conclusion

This chapter has placed Putin-era biopolitics, including pronatalism and the ban on propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations, in the context of the history of gender and family policy in Russia since the early 20th century. Gender and sexuality are often the focus of generalized anxieties over changing social and political circumstances, and policies and discourses related to gender and sexuality have long formed a key means through which the Russian and Soviet states have attempted to create legitimacy. Biopolitics operates both as the power over life, aiming to produce certain kinds of docile, productive subjects, and as a rejection unto death, which excludes other subjects from social support and recognition.

While many scholars have focused on how biopolitical discourses functions as disciplining techniques, I have argued that many activists and opposition protesters became politicized by the failure of Putin-era biopolitics. Promises to care for the lives of certain kinds of citizens and for the nation as a whole have formed one of the central strategies through which Putinism has vied for legitimacy in Russia. Activists' critiques of pronatalist messaging and policies reveal the inherent instability of biopolitics as a means of disciplining a population. Embedded in promises to care for the lives of the people is the potential to question the sincerity of that promise and the ability to fulfill it. Furthermore, pronatalism is entangled with exclusionary discourses of national belonging

that distribute legitimacy to residents differentially according to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other characteristics. While these discourses may prompt identification among some Russians, as I will argue in Chapter Eight, others view them as cynical, hypocritical, or even insulting and manipulative. As I showed in this chapter, many activists encountering pronatalism in its various forms are not prompted to mold themselves into better-disciplined citizens. Instead, the encounter produces unruliness and resistance. Biopolitics thus lays the groundwork for particular forms of opposition and critique.

Chapter Two

"If you don't do politics, politics will do you":

Reclaiming politics after socialism



Figure 1: Women not engaging in political activity at a rally against school privatization

"We will protect our children!"

Grade School-Gymnasium-Lyceum | Educational Complex

One late autumn weekend in Moscow, I attended a rally protesting the ongoing privatization of Russia's education system. Around a hundred people were gathered on a public square near the city center, some with banners and placards, others passing out opposition leaflets or preparing to give speeches at the central microphone. My eye was caught by a bright poster reading "We will protect our children," held by a pair of women: one in her twenties, the other perhaps forty. I walked over to snap a photo and meet them; I had gotten interested in activism related to family and reproductive life. They were happy to let me get a photo, and to explain the particular school closings they

were concerned about. But when I asked how long they'd been involved in politics, one of the women replied with some confusion. "This isn't politics. We're just expressing a social demand," she explained.

Political activists in Russia struggle with the very notion of politics. It's something of a dirty word, one people often associate with corruption and self-promotion.¹⁶ Orientations away from or outside politics—what Aleksei Yurchak (2006) terms *vne politiki*—have typified Russian subjectivity since at least the late Soviet period (Ries 1997; Shevchenko 2009). Even those who are engaged in movements or organizations that aim to change society, such as NGOs, have been found to share a kind of apolitical subjectivity, an orientation directed away from considering their work political (Phillips 2008; Rivkin-Fish 2005). Others, less able to pursue simply apolitical lives, may even develop "crushed" subjectivities, as Jack Friedman has argued of coal miners in Romania. Friedman has suggested that the product of shock therapy in former socialist states has been "excess subjectivities," unproductive subjects who fall outside the flows of global capital and trade, abject rather than resistant or usefully docile (Friedman 2007). In either case, a strong legacy of state socialism and its aftermath has been widespread disengagement. When mass opposition protests broke out in Russia in 2011, many observers seemed just as surprised as Russians themselves seemed to be.¹⁷

But as I found, even within this seemingly politicized mass public, at what I initially assumed to be political protests, the question of whether participants' activity was

¹⁶ The verb often used here is *piarit'sya*, to self-promote, derived from the English PR (public relations). There may be a hint of association, then, between self-promotion and the dirtiness of capitalist competition, markets, and so on.

¹⁷ See for example how the following news articles framed the protests as surprising and unprecedented:
<http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/ihs-global-insight-election-2011-unprecedented-mas-118297.html>
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/09/russia-putin-twitter-facebook-battles>
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2109796/Russian-police-brace-unprecedented-wave-protests-Putin-odds-win-election.html>

“political” remained contentious. My interlocutors—youth who took part in feminist, LGBT, and New Left groups, most of whom identified as activists—frequently came into tension with other protesting groups who considered their platforms “too political” or who do not want their particular issue “politicized.” Participants at rallies did not uniformly consider themselves activists, as I learned early on when I unthinkingly asked questions such as “So how did you become an activist?” or “How did you get involved in politics?” At other times, activists found themselves criticized in planning meetings for coalitions they took part in, accused of unnecessarily “politicizing” the cause.

Disengagement from politics, then, should not be assumed to indicate acquiescence to or satisfaction with the current social order. If socialism failed to achieve promises of a brighter, modern future, so too did post-socialist economic and political reforms. This is echoed in Svetlana Boym’s work on nostalgia, which finds that post-socialism has resulted in a disappointment in the promises of capitalism and democracy not unlike early disappointment in the promised socialist utopia. Disengagement is often coupled with deep dissatisfaction about corruption, abuses of power, and the failure of the state to significantly improve the quality of life over several decades (Boym 2001). Critical responses to the status quo are frequently cloaked in depoliticized or apolitical terms, from narratives about the importance of growing potato at the dacha (Ries 2009) to nostalgia (Bloch 2005). Thus mothers holding signs at a protest rally may identify as apolitical while being intensely dissatisfied with the current ruling elite, and many participants in the mass anti-Putin protests of 2011 and 2012 could consider themselves “citizen-activists” (*grazhdanskiye aktivisty*) simply concerned about issues of electoral process, not necessarily engaged in a political struggle.

All of which leaves the question: Who counts as an activist? What makes their work “political,” as opposed to social, personal, or citizenship work? What does becoming an activist entail? As I will argue in this chapter, the problem of politics is not just a matter of comprehending emic categories for their own sake. Asking what counts as politics in Russia opened up conversations about how people conceptualize their relationship to the state, society, and history. To talk about politics is to talk about the possibility of agency in the face of what often appear to be overwhelming constraint and demoralization.

"Wake up, Russia!" Imagining disengagement as a norm

There has been a continuous history of activism in Russia within a small minority of the population since the 1980s, and periodic expansions in terms of the numbers and visibility of mobilization, such as with the ecological or environmental movements of the 1980s and the mass mobilizations against the August putsch in 1991 and during the parliamentary crisis in 1993. Still, most Russians I spoke to seemed to share the sense that prior to November 2011, few of their fellow citizens were politically active. One of the slogans used in the 2011-2012 opposition protests was even “Wake up Russia!” Most participants in the mass protests shared Daria’s experience that the mass mobilization was sudden, unexpected, and ran counter to a general tendency to avoid public political activity (Gray forthcoming; Volkov 2013). Even many who had already been politically active saw the mass protests as important events that either caused change, or marked some underlying change in Russian society.



Figure 2: A sticker for a March of Millions opposition rally

“September 15 | Just go out to the rally because you can't take any more.” Icons (left to right) United Russia logo, state-run television outlet Channel 1, and Putin.



Figure 3: An image circulated online during early 2012:

“And what can I, by myself, do?”

“The Russian national idea, 21st century.”

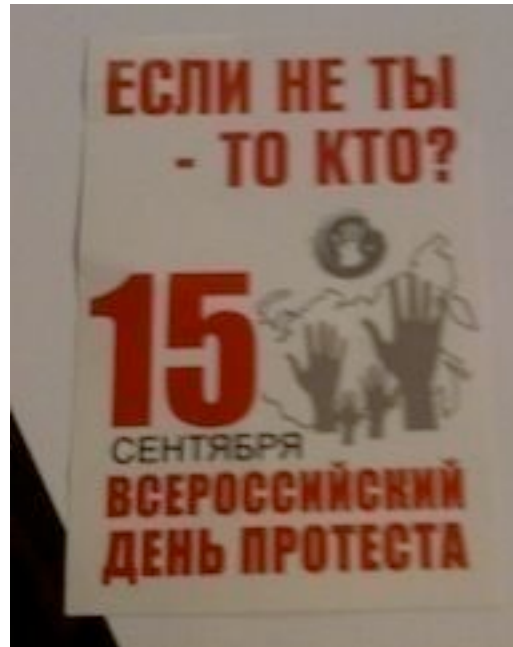


Figure 4: A sticker for a March of Millions opposition rally: "If not you, then who? 15 September All-Russia Day of Protest."

The theory of small things

However, many people who participated in various ways in the upswell of activity around the opposition did not identify themselves as activist, nor did they consider their activity political. I met Daria, a history student in her mid-twenties, through a feminist discussion group, the School of Feminism. Others I met in the same social circle were devoted activists; and members of the group that would become Pussy Riot had participated in earlier iterations of the discussion circle. Daria—who suggested her own pseudonym, based on a love of an animated show of the same name produced by MTV in the late 1990s—had become interested in feminism after reading Engels two years earlier. She had gone out to several of the mass street protests after the Parliamentary

elections in 2011 and volunteered as an election monitor with the liberal-democratic party Yabloko during several elections. Yet when I asked if she considered herself active in any political groups, Daria said no.

Daria: I was an observer at the Duma elections, and then at the Presidential elections. I think that, I know that I can do something. That I can do anything, that I want to help, that I just do not know how. Because all the political parties right now, they are not corrupt, but there is a lot of *kompromat*¹⁸ that goes through their possession. And so I just do not know whom to pick. When the party starts to gain more power—for example, there is some left socialist movement, and so on—and I think that they are cool right now. And I think that maybe I can take their program and like it. But when they start to grow, and when they will start to possess more influence, they will start to be corrupt.

Daria was motivated by her concern about corruption in elections to become an election observer in 2011. That same concern about corruption leads her to be skeptical about political parties, even if their official platforms reflect her views. To some extent, her hesitation to become more involved seems to stem from uncertainty about what could possibly be done: “So I’m not politically active right now, unfortunately. I want to do more, but I just don’t know where to start.” She then makes a turn to the personal, in a pattern much like what Rivkin-Fish (2005) has identified:

There is some kind of a theory of the small things that you can do. [...] So that you can do something not in the political field, but among common people, so you can help someone. You can help some people that live in one block with you. You can go for charity. So I think that’s more valuable than participating in some

¹⁸ Compromising material that can be used for political gain. See Ledeneva (1998).

rallies and so on. I've never been to the rallies, because I understood, I will go to the rally, and what will happen next? I will just go. Of course the amount of people will be more, but I will be taken to the police [...] And everyone [...] will think that I am some kind of an extremist if I was taken to the police. But I'm not. I just want something—I want change. But I do not know how to reach it by going to rallies.

While Daria herself felt generally positive about the mass protests, she recognized that many other Russians might feel differently, particularly as increasing police repression changed the optics of protest. So while she sympathizes with those who go to the streets, she doubts the effectiveness of public actions. I want to highlight her repeated use of uncertainty here; she expresses difficulty even imagining modes of action that could achieve the change she desires in society. Indeed, further into the interview Daria explained that she really wished to move abroad, perhaps to central Europe, where life was more “normal” (see Ries 1997; in Chapter Eight I analyze the role of discourses of abnormality in Russian national identity).

Choosing to engage

Most of my interlocutors, by contrast, had come to see themselves as politically involved and had no qualms about being described as activists. Their descriptions of involvement in protest offer a contrast to Daria's sense of futility, and in describing their activism and their relationship to the protests, they reveal a vision of politics as something not only legitimate, but necessary. Furthermore, they describe a politics whose

target is not primarily the state. When I asked Vera how she related to the opposition protests, she answered:

Vera: I was very excited about them. I felt like something was finally changing. I still think it was like a pivotal moment for, at least for the legitimization of social activism. Of being interested in what happens in your country.

In Vera's view, what is valuable about protest is the the decision for so many to take part in an attempt to change society. Her emphasis on becoming active was echoed by others.

Leo, a thin young man who had grown up in a poor family in small town outside Moscow, was in training as a mechanic. Never without his dark-rimmed glasses, he liked to joke that "A good hipster is a red hipster!" and had once excitedly taken a photo of our feet upon discovering that I was wearing the same gray Converse sneakers he had on.¹⁹ Like a few other left-leaning activists I interviewed, he described having an early sympathy for Russian nationalist narratives in his teen years. He had blamed the difficult conditions of his childhood on the West, and particularly the United States, whose neoliberal economists were widely blamed in Russia for "shock therapy" reforms and ensuing economic crises of the 1990s. When we sat down for an interview at a cafeteria in downtown Moscow, he half-joked that if not for his terrible vision, he might even have been tempted to participate in some of the aggressive street action his right-wing friends had gotten up to. Interestingly, the left-leaning activists I met who had previously held more right-wing views were all men. I did not investigate the gender dynamics of this issue in depth, but their discussions of the economic crisis, unemployment, and their

¹⁹ *Dobrii khipster--krasnii khipster!* When I asked what he meant by "hipster," Leo explained that it referred to "people who sit in a cafe all day with a Macbook and an iPhone," signifiers of economic class and style that are associated with the label in the U.S. as well. However, his description also reminded me of Kremlin rhetoric dismissing opposition protesters as "office plankton" (*ofisnii plankton*).

resulting aggressive attitudes echoed certain themes in the research on the crisis in masculinity I discussed in Chapter One.

By the time we met, though, Leo had been involved in anti-nationalist left activism for a couple of years and participated in pro-LGBT and feminist actions.

Jessica: Do you consider yourself an activist?

Leo: Yes.

Jessica: And would you say that you engage with politics?

Leo: Yes.

Jessica: And what does that mean to you?

Leo: I would say, since politics in principle affects each of us, when they pass anti-social laws, that impact everyone, all workers, all our lives are gripped by politics. And only through our active participation can we do something so that our interests are reflected. If I participate actively in a union, only in that way can I do something so that my wage doesn't fall, so it stays at the same level or even grows. Without my active participation, there's no guarantee that everything won't go in a worse direction. The fact that I go out to actions, the fact that I attend meetings, discussions... I haven't participated in a strike yet, but I'm sure there will be one at some point. I'm sure that without that, my life wouldn't just be boring. It would be much worse. So yes, I'm an activist. I do politics.

David, like Leo, admitted to holding right-wing views earlier in his life, attributing Russia's suffering to the influence of outsiders who were trying to undermine the nation's future. Some fifteen years older than Leo, David was already a young adult during the 1990s and described it as an uncertain and at times violent period. He had

gradually reconsidered his nationalist views through conversations with leftist activists, coming to believe that capitalism itself was the problem, and that Western powers were merely one manifestation of it. His conception of activism drew on a Marxist vision of progressive history, but also expressed a sense that activism brought a sense of purpose to his life.

David: Of course I am an activist. I think, for any thinking person, the meaning of life, if there is such a thing, it is in precisely that: in conscious participation in the historical process.

Even though David, like many other activists, connected his early interest in politics to personal experiences of hardship, he was careful to make clear that self-interest was not his primary motivation.

David: It's not like they say, that we're all politically active because we couldn't succeed in life. Women become feminists because they couldn't find a husband, or it's people who couldn't make a career who go out to rallies. I'm a good example of that. I have a good career, a rich personal life. Another activist around my age, he's a top manager in his company. He has a wife and children, all the signs of success. We engage in politics because we think it is important work.

Taking action, taking an active role, in the processes that affect one's life is the core of activism for Leo and David. Their explanations of activism reveals a vision of politics as a process that will affect you, like it or not. Disengagement is in fact impossible, a notion I heard repeated by other activists as well. Lena, a feminist and environmental activist I had met through the School of Feminism, offered a particularly concise version: "If you don't get involved in politics, politics will get involved with you"

(Esli ty ne zanimaesh'sia politikoi, to politika zaimyotsia toboi). Politics will come to you, in the experience of many activists. The only choice is whether to become an active participant in the process, which for activists means joining in various kinds of collective enterprises. The particular venue—rally, strike, discussion—is less important than the practice of activity itself.

In her late teens, Mariya had gotten into activism on behalf of gay and lesbian friends who, in her words, couldn't fight for themselves. She identified a distinction between simply being an activist and being “political.” An activist, in her view, is anyone who goes out to things, to events such as rallies. When I asked whether she considered herself an activist, she answered,

Mariya: Well... yes... but, that is, look at what you do. That is, I'm actively involved in our [leftist] organization, and in the Rainbow Association, and now in various unions and so on. 'Activism' in fact is a strange word. It's always seemed to me that 'I'm an activist', of what, what does that refer to? At rallies you see people like that. They just went out, decided to have some kind of activity. Like I was in the beginning, I didn't understand what I was doing. And now... So being a member of an organization is one thing, being an activist is another.

In the context of the general disengagement common to contemporary Russia, “just” going out is still noteworthy. Not everyone in Moscow decides to be involved in public action of some kind. Yet for Mariya, simply going to actions is somehow less-than. In our interview, I explained that I was trying to learn something about what this word meant, “activist.”

Jessica : For example this word activist. Of course it's a familiar word, it's in English too. But I became interested in what, how people use it.

Mariya: Ah, and I'll try to explain what's an activist. For me, it's less than what I'm doing.

Jessica: And you said you're involved in politics.

Mariya: Yes! And now I can say for sure that I'm engaged in politics (*zanimayus' politikoi*). Exactly a year ago, I would have said no. Politics? I don't do any kind of politics. That is, I always said that I was rather political. In fact it's rather telling that, I have a liberal friend, liberal to the bone, really. And he called me out to the protests in December. Then he showed me photos, what kind of slogans people were carrying. And I didn't go. I said, "It's cold. I don't want to do politics at all!" And then I started to get involved with activism in the Rainbow Association. Before that, I thought that activism in terms of LGBT [issues] was one thing, and politics was another deal. That is, I thought that it wasn't politics. And in point of fact, that was already politics. And now I'd say, I consciously engage in politics.

The crucial difference, for Mariya, is consciousness. She was not truly involved in political activism until she was conscious of its political character.

Protest as platform

For many of my interlocutors, protests presented an opportunity to attempt to spread that critical consciousness to others. That is, their goals in attending protests,

particularly the mass opposition protests, had little to do with conventional descriptions of social movements as primarily directed toward the state, or of the opposition protests as directed toward unseating Putin himself. Instead, they viewed protests as opening a physical and social space in which to engage with fellow people and to attempt to shape their subjectivities.

Vera had been working in Bashkortostan translating for election observers when the first opposition protest occurred, but quickly joined in when she returned.

Vera: I come back to Moscow and I hear that there has already been a huge rally, and I was so excited that I went to another non-authorized protest on December 5th, I think. And then I came to Bolotnaya with leftist friends. And it was really exciting, but at the same time I felt I didn't quite belong to the group I was there with. So after that, we discussed it with feminists, had an open organizational meeting, and we came to the second rally on December 24th together, as a feminist group with our own banners. And it was awesome. Because it was, like, we really felt united. And we distributed some unbelievable amounts of leaflets. We agreed we would distribute leaflets only to women, preferably to women who weren't with men. But I also distributed them to women who were, like, in couples with men. Many women said, why feminism? I am not oppressed. I said okay, just read it. [laughs] It was really fun.

Jessica: What was the leaflet about?

Vera: About the main women's problems in Russia today. There were some statistics on gender discrimination at work, double work day, reproductive rights,

of course, and also gender-based violence. And of course also links to websites where you could read more.

Jessica: That must have been exciting.

Vera: Yeah, it was. It was... Yeah, it was a moment of union that, like, the journalists seemed to ignore us. Regular people took pictures of our, we had great banners. Really well-made, painted on tissue. It was like an allusion to the suffragists' banners at the beginning of the century. And the slogans were really good too. It was like, "You can say no to any form of violence." "Feminists for civil liberties." And we had several banners like that, trying to bring together gender issues and the, well, the elections issues... People really liked them, they did. And they also took pictures. They took pictures of themselves near to us. But still I saw practically no pictures of our banners on, in the media, in the reports. The rainbow flags were there, and we stood just next to them, and we were not there. But it's also natural, and we are also used to it. It's very difficult to talk about feminism with journalists because they are mainly liberal, which means, which in Russia means they are patriarchal in most of the cases.

[...] I think also why those rallies were so important is because regular people came there. Like, for the first time in several years, people came there who were not activists. Because before, if it's a rally, then it means that the rally is organized by, I don't know, the Left Front, so twenty activists from the Left Front come. It has always been like that.

In this extended narrative of her participation in the mass opposition protests, Vera reveals that her primary goal had less to do with affecting the Russian electoral system

than with introducing more Russian women to feminist ideas and joining in a collective enterprise with fellow feminists. Even when their banners mentioned Putin and the elections, it was largely in an attempt to connect those issues with women's issues. Here, political participation is not only an exercise of agency, but of drawing connections between people, against the disengagement and atomization often taken to be the status quo. Furthermore, Vera and her fellow feminists sought to elucidate connections between the specific problems that sparked the opposition protest, and other problems facing Russian women. This practice of drawing connections between problems is an important facet of developing a political subjectivity.

Learning to be demanding

When I interviewed Zhenya, a leftist with a particular interest in gender issues, I asked her whether her leftist organization had had any noteworthy successes since she had become involved. She replied that they had helped "politicize" Moscow's LGBT community.

Zhenya: The LGBT organizations with which we worked earlier, earlier they were engaged exclusively with cultural things, some kinds of clubs and such things. They have been politicized, that same Rainbow Association. Now it's an entire group that deals in particular with political questions. They go out to actions with their own political demands.

"Being political" in this sense means being sufficiently aware of one's interests that one can formulate demands, and becoming willing to go out in public to express

those demands—whether that meant going to the streets, or being willing to talk to neighbors and coworkers. This entails not only developing a political consciousness but also becoming willing to take on risk and to be publicly identified as politically active. Implicit here, but more explicit in other statements, is that one must also develop a newly demanding subjectivity, a sense of the self as able or perhaps even entitled to make demands of society or the state. This becomes more clear in Zhenya's discussion of her attempts to get more women activists pushing to have equal participation within activist circles.

Jessica: What are some of the difficulties you face in activism?

Zhenya: Patriarchy. It's patriarchy, when you see that a woman in principle understands and shares your political positions, but she doesn't believe she has the right, or believes that it's just not normal if she does something about it. She says yes, but the destiny of a woman is family. I'm going to have a family. Or yes, but I was raised differently. I can't be an activist.

Zhenya suggests that becoming an activist requires a change in consciousness. Becoming an activist means coming to believe that one can act in the world, that one has the right to work to change things.

In a similar vein, Pavel, an organizer with the Rainbow Association, one of the LGBT organizations with which Zhenya had collaborated, had told me that in his view the group was not sufficiently political. When I asked him to expand in an interview, he contrasted what he saw as political work with the group's many social functions.

Jessica: Do you believe the Rainbow Association isn't politicized enough?

Pavel: Yes, of course. In our movement, a lot of people understand that now participation requires more political activity. In connection with that, it's very difficult because if I had several helpers who participated in, say, coordination of general actions, like antifascist actions for example, who could go to organizing committees and express the opinion of the organization, if I had three or four such assistants, then everything of ours would be done a lot better. For us, unfortunately... (pause) Members of the Rainbow Association do social work (*zanimayutsia sotsial'noi rabotoi*), organize psychological services, do cultural events, and namely in organizational activities, do philanthropic work. [...] In fact, in the first place, we are a social organization, of course. We were created as a social movement, as a service—more accurately, many services that unite the community from various levels

Jessica: Do you think there simply isn't a desire to deal with politics?

Pavel: Well, yes, naturally, well, it's not natural. That doesn't exist yet because, while there isn't yet a consciousness of the need for it. Because there are problems that are solved by means of the method of small good deeds (*metodom malykh dobrykh del*), and there are problems that are solved by political means.

Jessica: What kind of problems?

Pavel: How to put it. In general the most important problem is the problem of involution (*zavitost sfer*). The problem of the LGBT community—communities—making a statement about their own problems in principle. The problem raises itself. Because in Russia right now, there aren't the kind of politicians, or they are

very few, who are able to raise that problem for general discussion. For that reason, it falls to us to do that. Even us personally.

Pavel then highlighted the few other organizations that had helped raise the LGBT problem and publicly supported the Rainbow Association. In this way, he points out a final key feature of a political subjectivity: a willingness to work with or even for others.

Evidence of politicization

One of the tasks for the organizing committee of a typical rally or march is to agree on common slogans under which attendees will gather. These represent more or less agreed-upon principles or demands of those gathered, although they may differ from slogans individuals and participating groups write on posters or chant while marching. The Social March, which was organized by a range of opposition groups and took place on March 2, 2013, was planned as a “March for the Rights of Muscovites,” and so focused on demands related to the city itself and its residents’ problems. As the official list of slogans suggests, the general character of demands suggested that most organizers envisioned some form of liberal democracy with a strong welfare state as their goal.

Let’s return Moscow to the control of citizens!

We need true elections!

Real power and real money to local government!

Shame on judicial corruption!

For elected judges!

No to rising utility prices!

Utility rates—under citizen control!

Give social control over labor migration!

Enough roads and highways over our heads!

We demand the city fulfill its obligation for capital repairs!

Stop illegal construction in our courtyards!

Stop the destruction of forests and parks around Moscow!

City land—under residents' control!

No to closing schools, kindergartens, health clinics!

Eliminate fraudulent homeowner's associations!

We need a new Residents' Code!

Full compensation for the removal of our houses and garages!

Preserve historical monuments and architecture! Save old Moscow!²⁰

These demands are predicated on a liberal conception of citizenship: residents of the city possess rights to representation and fair treatment by the government on the basis of their residence and citizenship. While complaints about corruption of officials and judges suggest that particular individuals or offices are viewed as illegitimate, the solutions proposed are for the most part reforms: the removal of certain officials, empowerment of local authorities, extension of elections to the courts. Even the demand for "residents' control" appears to be more democratic than anarchist; the people should

²⁰ While this kind of claim could be read as elitist, many activists identified preservation of the central district of Moscow in terms of opposing the influence of global capitalism on the landscape of the city, in which glassy office buildings were gradually replacing older brick architecture of the late tsarist and Soviet periods. Additionally, in conversations about proposed higher education reforms, activists often noted that colleges and institutes owned some of the valuable property in the heart of Moscow and shared their suspicions that one end goal of the reforms was to transfer this property to private hands.

control the government, but they are not calling to eliminate it altogether. The organizers and participants who developed these slogans want to participate more fully in the state, not to undermine or delegitimize it. They seem to believe that the basic problems they're mobilizing against are essentially technical issues which can be resolved with instrumental fixes.

This approach is familiar from much of the literature on liberal rights and civil society, and indeed on "rights" discourses in general. To the extent that 'rights' are believed to derive from the state, and one's claim to empowerment or social support is based in one's citizenship, rights-based demands are an attempt to re-negotiate or adjust relationships with the state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Merry 2006). In this way, they may be turn out to be far from revolutionary, and, as Zigon (2013) points out in his discussion of human rights discourse, the reliance on "rights" for claim-making may foreclose the possibility of more fundamental structural change. In other words, once the somewhat inchoate mass opposition became dominated by groups demanding "rights," it was essentially drawn into the existing system. Arguably, movement "leaders" who insisted on an all-inclusive, apolitical approach—demanding fair elections and electoral representation—ensured that the opposition at large would eventually be re-incorporated into the state it originally opposed. And indeed, this was a concern shared among more radical activists.

It is in this context that more radical activists attempt to propagandize their programs. Toward the end of the Social March, 'Anton' and I stood at the edge of the several thousand participants crowded around the stage where representatives of opposition groups—mostly centrist liberals—were giving speeches. Anton was passing

out leaflets about his group's explicitly leftist program to other march attendees. A chant started up in the crowd: "Power to the millions, not the millionaires!" (*Vlast' millionam, a ne millioneram!*). Anton smiled and laughed as he turned to me. 'You hear that? When we introduced that chant last year, they told us to stop, it was too radical. And now, well, there you go!'

Thus for Anton, hearing his leftist (or perhaps populist) slogan repeated at such an "apolitical" event was a sign of success. In discussion at his group's meeting the following week, several members interpreted the Social March fairly positively in that it included some concrete social demands—not merely calls for fair elections. They attributed this to the relative success of leftist activists (including but not limited to themselves) at spreading more political ideas. An article posted shortly after on their website explained the task remaining:

"We again offer a reminder of the necessity of carrying out to protest actions not only social demands. Of course they remain real, but it's also necessary to connect concrete incidents with the systematic despotism ruling in capitalist society, where the interests of profit stand higher than the health of people, clean air or affordable housing."

Politics in this conception is not only a matter of having and expressing demands, asking for social problems to be resolved. It requires an understanding of the larger systems in which those problems arise. Political activism thus involves making demands for fundamental change to those systems.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered a brief sketch of what it means to "be political" in particularly unwelcoming circumstances. Previous research has found that Russian subjectivities tend to be oriented away from politics, meaning both a disengagement from spheres of activity regarded as political and a low level of engagement with civil society and voluntary organizations in general. This finding has been related to the legacies of state socialism, in which political participation was obligatory but regarded as inauthentic. But apolitical subjectivities have also been identified as a common product of late liberalism, in which social life is marked by "a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions" (Ong 2006: 3). As Gilbert et al. have noted, "The postsocialist experience resonates with and exemplifies critical social, economic and political transformations globally: post- industrial political and economic restructuring; the reconfiguration of personhood around flexible labor and niche-market consumption; the displacement of alternate forms of political practice in favor of liberal models of representation and participation; and the wedding of military intervention, US foreign policy and democratization" (Gilbert, et al. 2008: 10). The abjection Friedman describes of coal miners, cast aside as unproductive in the wake of privatization and globalization, is not unlike what James Ferguson has found in Zambia, where development projects reduce poverty to a technical problem to be solved through bureaucratic expansion, thereby depoliticizing both poverty and the state itself (Ferguson 2006 [1994]). Indeed, Ferguson's description of the subjective experience of

modernization's failures in Zambia resonates with David and Leo's descriptions of their radicalization due to Russia's economic and national decline in the 1990s: "recent history has been experienced not—as the modernization plot led one to expect—as a process of moving forward or joining up with the world but as a process that has pushed them out of the place in the world that they once occupied. The only term I have found to capture this sense of humiliating expulsion is abjection" (Ferguson 2006 [1994]: 234).

Depoliticization and disengagement in Russia could thus be described as the product of a particular assemblage of neoliberal and post-socialist structures that has analogues in many places around the world.

My activist interlocutors seemed to share subjectivities that differed significantly from the individualization and depoliticization that have been dominant among Russians in recent decades. To develop this politicized subjectivity is in itself a kind of resistance against the post-socialist/neoliberal predicament, rejecting both abjection and apolitical solutions. They have developed a particular subjectivity marked by a sense of increased agency; a vision of the world's problems as interconnected, rather than individual; and a belief that people can and must demand more of their society. Being an activist is not defined by what one does, so much as one's consciousness about one's actions; activism is as much a subjectivity as an activity.

Furthermore, I want to suggest, activists' cultivation of these political subjectivities serves as a counterpoint to the many studies of life under late capitalism or neoliberalism which have described the current era as marked by a profound depoliticization of social life. As activists' narratives show, the same regimes of austerity and privatization that produce docility and abjection can also generate opportunities for

politicization in the right circumstances. In the next chapter, I describe in more detail how activists make use of protest spaces, such as rallies and marches, in their attempts to politicize others.

Chapter Three

The poetics of protest: Good rallies, intersubjectivity, and politicization

I checked the day's forecast as soon as I woke up. Saturday, December 15: high -13°C , low -18°C , partial sun. Earlier in the week, I had planned to attend two opposition rallies today, one organized by the liberal opposition Coordinating Council and the other by the Union of Left Forces, led by leftist Sergei Udal'tsov. But by the end of the week it had been unclear whether either would be allowed by the authorities. I dressed warmly anyway, with two pairs of wool socks under my boots and layers of clothing under my long down coat. One never knows where the day will lead, and long travel times across the city meant I likely wouldn't be home until night.

I texted David on my way out the door to see if Sasha's plan still held—meeting at headquarters at one to discuss safety. He wrote back immediately that both rallies were now unsanctioned. We were meeting to make a decision about what to do, so I should come anyway.

After a subway transfer and 15 minute walk through one of the seemingly endless neighborhoods of identical high-rise apartments that comprise Moscow's residential outskirts, I reached 'headquarters': a two-room apartment, partly paid for by members' dues, whose living room served as a meeting room and office for the group. One of the members, Valery, lived in the bedroom and paid the other half of the rent, and comrades visiting from other cities or countries often crashed on the dilapidated Ikea pull-out sofa in the living room.

I rang the apartment code at the building door, saying “It’s Jessica” when the intercom crackled, then tried to kick as much slush off my boots as possible after I was buzzed in. Alena let me into the apartment, having just arrived herself. We danced around each other in the tiny entryway, taking off coats and sludgy footwear to leave them by the door. Alena stumbled into the living room, then collapsed on the sofa next to Zhenya, pulling up the hood of her sweatshirt as if ready to take a nap. Zhenya was carefully applying what looked like iodine to her knuckles, giving her hands a mottled appearance. As I came into the living room, I asked her what she was doing. ‘For the bruises,’ she answered. ‘You know we’ve been doing those self-defense classes.’

From the living room, I could see Mariya in the pocket-sized kitchen boiling a pot of water for tea, the essential first step for any group meeting, and Valery working on his laptop just through the open bedroom door. He was a freelancer and webmaster, and often worked from the apartment while meetings were going on. In the living room, Kirill was on the floor jotting notes on a scrap of paper, while Leo circled the apartment carrying stacks of flyers and stickers from the printer in the bedroom to the copy machine that occupied a sizable section of the living room. He and Valery carried on a debate about the title of the flyer: everyone seemed to agree that Valery’s original suggestion, “What to do further?”²¹, was terrible, but nobody had a better suggestion.

Mariya came in with a few mugs of tea, offering me one, then pulled out the rickety paper cutter and began slicing the quarter-page stickers and flyers that would be given out. Over the next several minutes, David, Larisa, Leo, and a tall, blonde man I didn’t recognize arrived; the latter three joined in with preparing tea and flyers. As they

²¹ “*Chto Delat’ Dal’she?*”, a play on the famous political tract by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, “*Chto Delat’?*” (What Is to Be Done?)

joked and chatted with the other activists, the new arrival introduced himself as 'Erik,' a comrade originally from Russia who had been living and working in Europe for several years.

David disappeared for several minutes, prompting Mariya to ask where he'd gone.

'He's washing his hair,' Leo answered.

'Washing...his hair?' Mariya asked, wrinkling her brow in disbelief.

'Ye-es," Leo replied. 'It sounded weird, but that's what he said before he went into the bathroom.'

Leo called over from the bedroom. 'Is there even room in that sink? Anyway, it's freezing outside! He's going to get sick!'

All three laughed. David reappeared a few minutes later, with no comment.

Around 1:15 Kirill began the meeting. He summarized the situation as it now stood: Neither rally had been given an official permit by the city authorities, so instead of two rallies, or even one sanctioned rally and one unsanctioned rally, it seemed that everyone was simply planning to go to Lubyanka Square. Repeatedly emphasizing that we didn't know what to expect, Kirill said that we were to be careful above all. 'This kind of situation—an unsanctioned mass gathering—almost guarantees that there will be a lot of police and that people will be detained.'

* * *

In his ethnography of anarchism and direct action, David Graeber (2009) highlighted how the organizational practices that produce a protest action and what form

the action itself takes can be as meaningful—or perhaps even more important—than the explicit content and messages of protesters. For Graeber, direct action protests such as anarchist protests against the WTO and G8 are sites where radical transformations of the imagination can occur; practices like non-hierarchical organization and direct democracy invite participants to create alternative, even utopian, ways of being in the present moment. Similarly, Maple Rasza and Andrej Kurnick (2012) described how the Occupy Slovenia encampment in Ljubljana used a decentralized, workshop-based structure to enact a form of direct democracy that “created spaces for encounter and collaboration among those with distinct and, in this case, often antagonistic positions.” Jane Collins likewise highlights intersubjectivity as a key feature of protest space in her discussion of the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising. Writing about a site at which solidarity rather than conflict became central to protesters’ narratives, she describes the central protest site as follows:

Sometime on Monday, February 14, I stepped into a parallel universe. I entered a world where firefighters and students slept side by side in SpongeBob SquarePants sleeping bags on the cold marble floor of the Wisconsin State Capitol, where donations from Cairo paid for pizza to feed students running phone banks, and where people wearing Green Bay Packers caps greeted each other on the street with the Steelworkers’ slogan “One day longer” (Collins 2012: 6).

But activists do not always experience these transcendent moments of becoming, and even those who might prefer to engage in transcendence spend much of their time participating in much more structured, even boring actions. In this case, my interlocutors were negotiating within protest spaces that emerged where political parties and opposition entrepreneurs met the security apparatus of an unpredictably repressive state.

In fact, most of the protest actions I observed in Moscow were not attempts at direct democracy or consciously designed to promote encounters with difference. Instead, most were predictable events with formulaic structures: a rally with a central stage for giving speeches, or an organized march with ideological blocs that ended at a central stage for giving speeches. Typically, organizing committees planned events according to these standardized formats using a centralized organizational structure. Marginalized activists such as my interlocutors, however, often sought to create small spaces within these more rigid, predictable event structures that would allow for alternative forms of engagement with fellow protesters. At other times, they were energized when circumstances altered the form of an action, allowing for the kinds of unstructured intersubjective engagements they valued. This movement between the banal and the exciting is the subject of this chapter. I recognize both as important aspects of the everyday experience of activism.

Not all protests are liberating or life-changing, nor are even spontaneous protest spaces truly divorced from the authoritarian conditions which they oppose. And yet, much of activists' work consists in working in and working with the structure of protest events. I examine activists' relationship to the banal and the exciting, and their attempts to transform the one into the other, as a "poetics of protest," drawing on Herzfeld's (2005) conception of social poetics as playing with/in cultural norms. Activists' preference for and excitement about more open-ended and unpredictable protest forms reveals their conception of a "good" protest as a space which invites intersubjective becoming and unexpected possibilities. They look for and try to create spaces that allow for what they view as the "politicization" of others, a process that involves coming to develop a

strengthened sense of one's own agency in the world and coming to see the disparate problems of various groups of citizens as interconnected.

I observed a variety of types of public actions in Moscow, from organized and registered mass marches to unsanctioned walking protests to single person pickets. Each form required different levels of bureaucratic knowledge, organizational capacity, and willingness to take on legal responsibility and personal risk. This chapter focuses closely on a single protest with exceptional characteristics, a “Walk Around Lubyanka,” or *progul’ka*, mass opposition action that occurred in lieu of a planned opposition rally that did not get permission from the Moscow city government. Along the way, I offer comparisons to more quotidian protest actions in order to highlight what made this particular action eventful for my interlocutors, and how they attempted to work with/in the limits of the event in order to create the encounters they sought.

Uncertainty and possibility

Kirill explained the plan. The comrades would go out in pairs, walk around the gathering, and give out agitation materials to the people who had come. We would start at Teatral’naya Square, by the Bolshoi Theater, then work our way to Lubyanka. One comrade would stay at headquarters; if anything happened, we were to call him to ensure someone knew what was going on, so that nobody would simply get lost in the police system and that human rights lawyers and media could be contacted. He would also be keeping track of the news from the street to keep us updated. Those going out would go in pairs, with one giving out flyers when the opportunity arose and the other watching for

police to give warning and to be far enough away that likely only one would be picked up.

* * *

The preparation for the *progul'ka* I described above was marked by a strong feeling of excitement generated by uncertainty. On the one hand, this led to extensive discussion of and preparation for the unknown risks of the day, from assigning teams to keep an eye out for police and discussions of self-defense against counter-protesters, to the activist who carefully washed his hair in the bathroom sink just in case he might spend the night in jail. On the other hand, the activists looked forward to distributing material to a wide range of fellow citizens who might be open to their messages but who did not routinely come to protest actions.

This preference for more open-ended events, without a predetermined list of speakers or cordoned off with police barricades and metal detectors, showed through in activists' reminiscences of the first opposition protests in late 2011. As feminist activist and sociologist Vera Akulova commented in relation to the first opposition protests,

I think also why those rallies were so important is because regular people came there. Like, for the first time in several years, people came there who were not activists. Because before, if it's a rally, then it means that the rally is organized by, I don't know, the Left Front, so twenty activists from the Left Front come. It has always been like that.

In a similar vein, when I asked activists about rallies I hadn't been able to attend, they would sometimes reply, "Ah, just the usual pile of flags and typical people." Discussions of preferred sites for planned actions often revolved around who might come, or whether the site was "little-peopled" (*malolyudnii*) or would have many people walking by. A good protest action, then, is one that attracts more people than those who already identify as activists.

The reason why attracting new faces to protests was not that activists are particularly concerned with achieving high attendance numbers for their own sake, to attract media attention, or as a point of data to leverage against public officials or political parties to demonstrate the popularity of their cause. Activists sometimes described gaps between what they perceived as the goals of most participants in the opposition protests, the ambitions of the self-declared opposition "leaders," and their own aims. It was in precisely this space that my interlocutors operated. Some of the opposition figures who set themselves up as leaders of the movement, such as anti-corruption blogger Aleksey Navalny, were believed to be primarily interested in using their leadership of mass protest movements to advance their own political careers, playing to the mass media or even vying for influence in the current (or perhaps, future post-revolutionary) government. Activists instead viewed the crowd itself as their audience and changing their minds as the end goal. As several of the leftists explained, the mass protests could be used as a platform (*tribuna*) for getting their own messages out. Even though I did not record LGBT or feminist activists using the same terminology, they described similar aims: making use of the existing mass protests as an opportunity to contact new audiences for their ideas. Their vision of "protest as platform" reveals an understanding of politics as a

matter of engaging others in a process of intersubjective change. Hence the flurry of activity in the headquarters when I arrived: leaflets, newspapers, and other printed materials were one of the tools used by activists to create small spaces within a larger protest in which they could engage with other participants, seeking to politicize them.

Vera focused on interactions with "regular people" in her narrative of feminist participation in the opposition protests.

Yeah, it was [exciting]. It was a moment of union that, like, the journalists seemed to ignore us. Regular people took pictures of our, we had great banners. [...]

People really liked them, they did. And they also took pictures. They took pictures of themselves near to us. But still I saw practically no pictures of our banners on, in the media, in the reports. The rainbow flags were there, and we stood just next to them, and we were not there. But it's like, also natural, and we are also used to it. It's very difficult to talk about feminism with journalists because they are mainly liberal, which in Russia means they are patriarchal in most cases.

Vera focuses on how feminist bloc's interactions with fellow protesters in the opposition protests, especially how their banners and slogans encouraged them to see connections between the issues highlighted by the rally—civil rights, Putin, and the elections—and the core issues the feminists wanted to draw attention to. Furthermore, the banners and slogans invited interpersonal interaction through discussions and photos—interactions that might otherwise be impossible in a place where mass media pay scant attention to women's rights.

To return to the *progul'ka*, much of the activists' preparation work involved preparing agitation materials, in this case leaflets that would catch people's attention and

expose them to a leftist message, a description problems that the activists believed would resonate with people, along with an analysis that explained how those problems were in fact interrelated and essentially political. At other actions, agitation included stickers, newspapers, placards, and slogans to shout. It is crucial here that, as with Vera's feminist leaflets, the messages of these materials were not directed to Putin or the ruling elite, nor to any state policymaker, party official, or even opposition movement figure. Activists intended the materials to help them make connections with other action participants, whom they variously referred to as "common people," "people," or "working people."

The problem of risk

Sasha raised his hand to give a comment. 'We should also think about safety from provocations. If someone attacks, it would be better to be in a large group.'

I recalled that only a month ago, such an attack had happened as we were meeting up for another rally. There had been too few of us to put up much of a defense, and many of the activists had been talking more regularly about safety and self defense issues since then, and several had begun taking Krav Maga classes. Zhenya often showed up to meetings with bruised hands now, spending part of the meeting applying iodine to small cuts on her knuckles.

'Right,' said Kirill. 'There will also be one person in charge on the street. He can make a decision when we get there and understand the situation. This will be Leo. He knows the area well.'

Leo held up a hand. ‘Well, maybe not so well. But I do know the route to Lubyanka.’

We would be taking the metro to the city center, which meant finding our way through the complex network of tunnels and exits that formed where the main metro lines intersected. Remembering more than one occasion when I found myself giving directions while exiting a metro station, I jotted in my notes, ‘Do I know the center better than the Muscovites?’

Kirill announced that the comrade remaining in the office would be David.

He objected. ‘What, I have to stay here? I want to go to the street!’

They discussed it for a few minutes, until Valery volunteered to handle the headquarters role. He would be working, but claimed overseeing the protest wouldn’t interfere.

* * *

When the planned event’s structure changed from an officially organized and sanctioned rally to an unsanctioned, semi-spontaneous *progul’ka*, the calculus of risk and responsibility also shifted, yet was also fundamentally unknowable. As Graeber writes, "One thing one learns quickly as an activist is that the hand of repression is extremely random" (Graeber 2007: 9; I discuss experiences of repression in Chapter Four). While the city government was (in principle) responsible for the physical safety of protesters during a sanctioned event, at least for the duration of the permit to gather and within the confines of the approved space, the city’s refusal to grant permission for the planned rally

meant not only that the police were not responsible for protesters' safety, but that they were likely to be on alert against the protesters themselves. In this context, Sasha suggests that there might also be a heightened risk of attack from other sources, likely thinking of the aggressive Orthodox activists or neo-Nazis who had previously harassed, counter-protested, and attacked people at leftist, feminist, and LGBT events. (See Chapter Five for further discussion of "provocation" as a political strategy.) For more structured rallies and discussion events, activists in the community had developed standard strategies for managing the risks of provocation and attack, including gathering in groups at alternate locations before traveling to the publicized protest location and organizing self-defense squads to watch the entryways of event sites. But for the *progul'ka*, the activists' discussion centers on the unknown quality of the event, leading them to set up a decision-making process that would allow for safety decisions contingent on whatever happened during the event. David's refusal to stay at headquarters demonstrates how attractive and exciting this uncertainty could be: he wanted to be there, where things might happen, not simply watching at headquarters.

* * *

Larisa had a question about the location. 'What is going to happen on Revolution Square [a public square just outside the Kremlin]? Is it worth going there? Should we just go to Lubyanka or to anywhere nearby, or maybe it would be better to spread out?

'It won't be worth going to Revolution Square, I think,' Kirill answered. 'There will be some people there, but just a couple of Stalinist groups. There's little sense in

distributing agitation among them, and it might even cause problems.'

A short discussion followed about the virtues of remaining in one group versus separating. The final decision was something of a compromise: we would go in two large groups, one starting from near the Bolshoi Theater and one from Lubyanka.

Kirill gave a final warning not to stay in overly large groups. 'A large group gathering is sure to be arrested. And don't be too obvious about handing out flyers!' Checking his watch again, Kirill suggested we should get moving. The activists started divvying up newspapers, flyers, and stickers into various plastic shopping bags and cloth backpacks.

Leo took another look at the full-page flyer that had been printed. 'You know, we should have printed it on a half page instead, something smaller and less noticeable. This one is sure to be called extremist material if the police see it!' he added, laughing.²²

We were split into pairs and everyone began bundling up against the cold. (I was assigned to 'Grisha,' with Kostya commenting that he was probably the safest person to be with—a lawyer.)

The unfamiliar tall man, Erik, turned out to be a former comrade who had since moved to central Europe. Putting on his coat, Erik asked Grisha what he ought to be doing, as he didn't have registration documents in the city yet. From across the room, Valery called out jokingly, 'Your German is pretty good! Just pretend not to be Russian!'

After a press near the door, as hats and gloves and shoes were dropped, found, and borrowed, finally we were all heading toward the metro. The mood was light—most of the activists were joking and laughing, teasing each other. Erik struck up a

²² Russia adopted a law criminalizing extremist activity, including distributing extremist materials, in 2002, but at this time it was only rarely used against political opposition activists. Leo does not take the possibility very seriously.

conversation with me, asking where I was from and what I was doing here, and chatting about the importance of Aleksandra Kollontai in the Revolutionary period when he learned of my interest in gender issues.

Inside the metro we met up with Adik, wearing a multicolored knit cap, who smiled hugely and gave me a hug. Then we all piled into the metro, activists still talking animatedly the whole while. I noticed several riders staring at our group (had split into two to fit into the car). Erik and David noticed the rainbow ribbon Adik had pinned to his coat and observed that it had only six colors, lacking the light blue (*goluboi*) that Russians recognize as distinct from dark blue. Rainbows were becoming a sensitive symbol. Back in September, Anatolii Artyuk, an activist in the pro-Kremlin conservative nationalist group the People's Council (*Narodnii Sobor*) had filed a complaint with the Prosecutor General, accusing the company Vimm-Bill-Dann of propagandizing same-sex love with its "Happy Milkman" products, which featured a rainbow arcing over a gray-bearded milkman and a brown cow (Gabeeva 2012). Admittedly, the milkman's rainbow had the same six colors as Adik's ribbon, and as Artyuk himself asked, "Why is the milkman 'happy?'" (Artyuk 2012). St. Petersburg had recently passed a law banning gay propaganda, offering a legal pretext for such complaints. The Russian head of PepsiCo, Vimm-Bill-Dann's parent company, dismissed the idea that the packaging had any connection to the global LGBT movement, instead suggesting the accusation was merely a publicity stunt for the People's Council (2012), but the rainbow quietly disappeared from the product packaging nonetheless.



Вы будете смеяться, но они убрали радугу с упаковки «Веселого молочника»!



5 окт 2012 в 12:14 через Android | Мне нравится ♥ 258

31 комментариев

[1](#) [2](#)

Figure 1: Social media commentary: "You will laugh, but they removed the rainbow from the package of the 'Happy milkman!'"

The metro reached Teatrnaya, and we all got out, splitting into two groups. I went with Grisha, David, Erik, and Larisa. We walked up to the street, then made our way toward Lubyanka Square. There was already a lot of activity on the street level—a lot of police and police vans all over, and occasional small crowds of people walking toward the square. Many were wearing the white ribbons of the opposition movement²³ or anti-

²³ During a televised Q and A session in December 2011, Putin had mocked the white ribbons, calling them "condoms," and suggested that the protesters massing in his capital city had been paid off (Barry 2011).

Putin/For Fair Elections buttons or insignia on their coats. Many others had “press” cards or vests on. As usual, it seemed as though nearly everyone had cameras, whether built into their cell phones or of the professional variety. I pulled out my own camera and tried to get a few shots. Erik pointed out a squad of police getting into a van—'Photograph them, you'll never get another shot of police wearing *valenki* [gray felt boots]!'

Our small group hung back for a few moments, not quite joining in with the white ribbon crowd, getting a sense of what kind of event today's gathering was. David commented that we should look for passers-by to give leaflets and newspapers to, but they might be hard to find. But as we worked our way closer to the square, it got more crowded on the sidewalks; the underground passageway leading up to the square proper was jammed with people jostling one another, and police were blocking many of the exits toward the square itself.



Figure 2: People carry white flowers to a human rights memorial.

We came out across the street from the square, where there was a crowd. Hundreds of people were walking around, circling around the monument at the center of the square or strolling back and forth from one side of the square to the other. To my eyes, the total crowd seemed likely to reach several thousand, far from the largest opposition protests but perhaps not bad considering the location had changed multiple times, the city's permission had been withdrawn, and it was only about 5 degrees Fahrenheit. The streets were lined with various police and OMON vans, and within a few minutes the sound of a helicopter hovering over us echoed—it remained above the whole afternoon, thrumming in a low tone.

We set up as a group, standing in the middle of the sidewalk just around the exit from the underground passage, and started passing out leaflets. Erik asked me to keep an eye out and speak up if I saw police—passing out material could make problems, he explained, given that we didn't have permission for this event. I watched the crowd, took some photos, and eavesdropped on Erik and David's conversations with the people who walked by. Most didn't have any identifying items—few signs with slogans, few organizational identifications, no flags. Quite a few, though a minority, had ribbons or white flowers (I later learned that many were carrying flowers to the Lubyanka memorial on the square, which honored victims of human rights abuses.)



Figure 3: An activist hands out agitation materials during the progul'ka.

One woman nearer the perekhod stairs handed out small cards with information about election monitoring; I didn't see any other distributing of material, though later heard there was another person or two elsewhere in the crowd. A few people did have signs, which they unfolded and held out, finding perches slightly above the crowd on wide ground-floor windowsills. At one point, an enterprising man in a giant egg costume wandered through slowly. He had a small sign on reading: 'Egg-man just taking a walk. Egg-man doesn't participate in unsanctioned rallies.' This echoed the ostensible justification for the gathering: the VIP-leaders of the opposition had announced they would just be taking a walk here, if other people just happened to be taking a walk at the same time. . . . A group of Pussy Riot supporters with an active social media presence posted a similar announcement, suggesting that if the police stopped you, just say you're out for a walk; people have the right to go for walks.



Figure 4: The Egg Man, just out for a walk.

After some time had passed, I spotted a pair of police walking toward us slowly and turned back to let David, Erik, and Larisa know; they turned their leaflets over so the blank side was facing out or rolled them up; the police walked by without a glance. It seemed they weren't interested. The activists exchanged shrugs, then went back to handing out leaflets.

Erik asked me to take some photos of them, so I tried to get a few shots of them talking with people and handing out information. Later on a small camera crew (an interviewer and a man operating a professional video camera and microphone setup)

came by and started talking with the activists. They were working on a documentary comparing these protests with protests at the end of the 80s, a project they said was funded by the Ministry of Culture. The interviewer was initially interested in David and Erik's views on what democracy was, but the conversation became contentious as it became clear that he had not expected to find self-proclaimed socialists. How could they support socialism after the history of the Soviet period? he asked. David explained that clearly capitalism was little better, given the hardships it had brought to so many people. In his view, he said, the problem was that the Soviet Union had in fact been anti-worker, had destroyed labor unions, and had been anti-democratic. The interviewer, frowning, suggested that democracy was not appropriate for Russia; only educated people really understood how things ought to be run.

An older man, overhearing the conversation, stepped closer to listen. The interviewer turned to him, a man of an age to have spent most of his life under state socialism. 'Well, and how do you feel about socialism?' he asked.

'I'm for it!' the man said.

The interviewer frowned, looking surprised.

'You know, yes, in the Soviet period there was bad and good,' the man said. 'But now there's only bad. Things just keep getting worse.'

David and Erik were obviously pleased, and both recounted the exchange several times later in the day, laughing at the interviewer's consternation.



Figure 5: Activists being interviewed.

What I could hear was a conversation about what democracy was, what they understood socialism to be. One point of contention was that the interviewer seemed to be for *сословие*, democracy led by elites, and anti-socialism. An older man entered the conversation and the interviewer asked him how he felt about socialism, and he said he was for it; sure, in the soviet period there was bad and good, but now there was just bad. (Denis and Dima recounted this a few times later, laughing in delight at the man's phrase and the interviewer's consternation).

Two activists I had met at a lecture on leftist approaches to Palestine walked by, noticed us, and said hi. One asked what I was doing there, and I answered that I was just out for a walk. They both laughed. Anya also came by, sharing additional stickers after David had run out. She said the other group was doing well, but she was getting cold.

Most of the time, people walking by either ignored the outstretched leaflets or grabbed one and kept walking. But every couple of minutes one would stop and talk,

asking about who the group was and what they were about. Erik, for example, talked for several minutes with one pensioner who stopped for a flyer. He listened to the man complain about how hard things were now, how his children had trouble finding jobs and places to live and he didn't know how young people could even manage these days. After a few minutes Erik interjected, 'You know, Marx said that in capitalism, there is always a crisis, and there will always be another crisis.' The man agreed, then expanded further on his experiences during the 1990s crises. Erik continued listening, speaking only occasionally, encouraging the man to share his complaints. Eventually they shook hands, and Erik invited him to share the flyer with others before the man walked on. Three such conversations netted the activists phone numbers of new contacts, one of whom began attending meetings the following spring.

We'd been there maybe an hour and a half when I noticed the number of police increasing along the streets surrounding the walking crowd. I began to feel nervous, and I pointed out the change to Larisa, asking her whether she thought they seemed more numerous. She consulted with the others; they didn't all agree that the police presence was increasing, but we were just about out of flyers and getting quite cold, so we picked up and walked up the street to a nearby bookstore. Along the way, at least one uniformed officer was videotaping; I took a photo of him training his camera on us, wondering where the recording would end up.²⁴

²⁴ Surveillance files can have an unexpected afterlife; Anthropologist Katherine Verdery is currently working on a field memoir based on her own security file, which was collected by the Romanian secret police during her research in the 1970s and 1980s.



Figure 6: The gaze of the state.

The bookstore was almost uncomfortably packed, but warm. We meandered toward the back, ending up in the politics/history section. Grisha pointed out some books to me, noting several books of what he called conspiracy theories written by well-known right-wing figures. He noted that one author was a close friend of Putin's. Erik, too, appeared to be familiar with several of the books, and they joked together about how absurd the ideas were—that the world is secretly run by Jews, that the US wants to take over everything.

Grisha sighed. 'Of course, it's hard to keep some leftists from going into conspiracies as well. People like having a simple story to explain everything.'

Larisa, who had been checking text messages on her phone, suddenly announced that the police had begun detaining people. Navalny, Udaltsov, Sobchak, and a few others were being held.

'Oh no, what will become of the movement without its head? Without its arms? Its

hands?' Dima responded in a dry tone. The others laughed.

The good news was that none of our group had been detained, and there had been no problems at all. Larisa texted back and forth with the other group and came to a decision that we'd call it a day and head back to the office.

Back outside it was still cold. The crowd was thinning but not yet gone. We walked back to the metro, heading toward the office. As we waited for the train, David shook his head in mock sadness.

'And here I washed my hair in vain! I was expecting to sit in jail all night and wanted to be nice and clear for it, but it's all a waste now.' He and Erik laughed.

Back at headquarters, we all warmed up and chatted. Valery, hunched over his laptop on the floor, was going through photos Anya had taken. David mentioned I'd taken some, too, and Valery asked if he could copy them. I said sure, and handed over my memory card with an apology that I wasn't a professional, but hoped a few of them were good. My research participants had universally refused to be paid for their time, not even letting me buy them coffee or snacks when we sat down for an interview, so I hoped the occasional photograph could be a gesture of reciprocity. Valery sorted through and found a couple that weren't bad and uploaded them to the group's Facebook page.

We chatted about movies and current events as tea brewed and Valery continued updating the social media feeds. David and Erik had picked up a few bottles of beer to share. It had been a fairly successful day, it seemed; the activists had been able to talk to many new people they hadn't met before, dozens of flyers and newspapers had been distributed, and a few new contacts had even expressed interest in coming to future meetings.

To show people that something can be done

Alla, an activist who went out to support LGBT rights, also expressed a clear preference for less organized actions, saying that it had been a mistake for the opposition protesters to begin seeking official city sanction for their mass actions. In her narrative, she mentions a friend who was drawn in by the feminist actions:

Jessica: So you found the group of feminists, or...?

Alla: Well, more like they found me. They found me. [...] A friend told me how they came up to her at the first action, that one on the fifth at Chistye Prudy [a park in central Moscow], when it wasn't yet so massive, when it was all starting.

Alla continued, describing the first few spontaneous actions, which she began to attend despite her school exams. She recalls joining a chain of protesters against the riot police, and how hopeful she was at the first several protests. As she described her initial excitement, "I simply didn't believe that people could be people!"

Alla: But what was striking at those actions was the fact that they weren't sanctioned. They were absolutely spontaneous. People themselves simply decided for themselves that every day at seven o'clock, we will go out. And they went out. [...] But the big one was already approved, and it's as if it was already a little bit not what it should be. [...] To be honest, there was hope, at least for me personally, I was hopeful until the tenth. While people were protesting without organization. Before there was any Navalny. Before these leaders of the protest appeared. While there were people who were presenting, the people speaking

from the podium were those walking around the streets.... Those who were detained, they didn't ask permission from the authorities against whom they were protesting. [...] And then there was the first meeting on Bolotnaya Square. [...] We went there, we stood, we listened. Everyone came back to my place and all night we drank vodka to the death of Russian democracy.

For Alla, and for many others I interviewed, the death knell of the opposition protests came with organization. Note the passive verbs she uses for the final protest: she stood, and she listened to the new, self-declared "leaders" give speeches from the podium.

What was exciting, then, about the unexpected *progul'ka* protest I described at the beginning of this paper, was precisely its lack of organization. Indeed, this is what I observed while I was there. Unlike most of the rallies I attended, there was no central stage, no microphone, no pre-arranged list of speakers. Several of the leftist activists I came with engaged in long conversations and debates with other participants about Russia's economic history, what could come after Putin, and whether socialism could take a form other than the authoritarian structure of the USSR.

And yet, despite the limitations of more typical organized protests, my interlocutors went anyway. They persisted in attending and even helping to plan actions that fit the formalized, organized, hierarchical model, rather than focusing only on, for example, talking to co-workers or hanging around shopping centers to chat with regular people. Puzzled by this, I asked Igor, a leftist and prominent LGBT activist, whether mass street actions were important.

Igor: Yes, of course. They're important because it's a demonstration of certain strengths, a demonstration of protest and of the strength of protest. When a

hundred people go out, or a thousand people who are also against [something], they just watch and say, well, nobody wants to go out. As if, why should I? But if 100,000 people go out, already you can't say, it's all the same to everybody. That's why going out... it inspired a lot of people. The inspiration that there is protest, that something can be done.

Protests have a value in and of themselves simply as a visible demonstration of agency, "that something can be done." A mass gathering interrupts the state's authoritarian monopoly on action, in Igor's view.

Yet simply going to the street is not political enough for Igor and many of the other activists. Igor continued, "But on the other hand, in and of itself, going out to the streets still, maybe, isn't enough. In Russia, certainly this turned out to be very little." When I asked what more could be done, he laughed and referred to his organization's written program.

Igor: Well, we have it all written, what can be done! (laughs) No, I'm in complete agreement with that. That 100,000 in Moscow went out, and millions of people understand completely who also suffer from certain social problems, right? But they don't understand how those problems can be solved, because the people who went out to protests, the slogans, especially at the beginning, were pretty abstract. Elections and elections, that's all. But people don't believe in such solutions. So when nobody from the beginning particularly talked about problems, say, with pensions, with education, medicine and so on, low wages, unemployment, that sort of didn't make it to the majority. What kind of connection there was. Elections were always unfair and now they're unfair. What will that change?

That's why, frankly speaking, we from the very beginning talked about how there should be a social agenda, slogans, in order to attract people. Some kind of program of action.

This, for Igor, is the core of politicization: not only showing people that action is possible, but getting them to see their problems as interconnected and political, not just technical.

Conclusion

In planning for any public event, such as the *progul'ka* described in this chapter, marginalized activists must negotiate a set of predicaments, some of which are shared with other opposition activists, and some of which are posed by the opposition itself. On the one hand, participants in the opposition in general face a prevailing attitude of political disengagement and an increasingly authoritarian state. It is difficult to get alternative ideological messages to the public in a context of centralized control of mass media, and where even interested citizens, like Daria, fear that participation in public actions will lead only to arrest. For opposition leaders who potentially seek public office or an influence over government policies, the control exercised by the ruling elite over party lists, registration, and participation in elections is difficult to overcome; in the two years between the end of my fieldwork in Moscow and the end of dissertation writing, prominent opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Aleksei Navalny had been convicted of embezzlement, a felony that would prevent him from eligibility for office; Sergei Udaltsov had been put on house arrest; and most disturbingly, Boris Nemtsov had

been assassinated just outside the walls of the Kremlin. Even contenders for low-level offices faced harassment; one of my feminist interlocutors, Tatyana Sukhareva, had been arrested on charges of embezzlement the day she was set to submit her candidacy papers for a Moscow city election. She remained in prison for the better part of a year until being released in March 2015, now suffering from health problems, and confined to house arrest.

But activists seeking broader change to social and political systems face an additional and other set of problems. Aiming first and foremost to politicize "regular people," many of my activist interlocutors also had to balance their desire for open spaces that make possible intersubjective exchanges and new futures against the potential for danger those same spaces also hold. Managing risk and possibility in a shifting field is difficult, as shown by the shifting plans and reactions of activists during the *progul'ka*. An event that seemed likely to lead to mass arrests turned out to be relatively safe, especially surprising compared to the International Women's Day rally described in the Introduction, which had full city approval and ended with a police van full of detained activists. Activists imagined possible dangers based on past experiences, hypothesizing about the relationship of group size to police attention, but in the course of the protest event such plans may come to little. Another management tactic is, of course, joking. In the next chapter, I will discuss the banality of state repression and the ways that activists' reactions range from fear to humor or disgust. In this chapter, joking about needing clean hair for a night in jail or hyperbole about the tragic loss of liberal opposition leaders demonstrate a form of everyday resistance to the ideological domination of the state and

elites who hope to gain power, not only revealing the limits of hegemony but also illustrating the often playful affect of these young activists.

Tactics must be adapted to a given situation, which itself may change abruptly; whatever work goes into planning an action could be for naught if the authorities cancel a permit at the last minute (I describe another example in Chapter Six, which describes how activists attempted to plan a new, more "political" kind of International Women's Day rally). Perhaps most rallies really were "just a pile of flags," but this was not necessarily for lack of trying. This constant shifting often pushes events toward depoliticization, as the lead-up to the *progul'ka* shows. Instead of an explicitly leftist rally, activists were left with an inchoate event whose theme was little more concrete than "expressing opposition." A similar change shaped an Anti-Crisis March in spring 2015, which was originally planned to express opposition to the largely self-inflicted crisis situation that resulted from Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of separatists in eastern Ukraine. This plan went out the window, however, in the wake of the assassination of Boris Nemtsov in late February. The march was reorganized as a March Against Repression in honor of Nemtsov, transformed into an apolitical memorial event (see further discussion of this tendency in Chapter Seven.)

Meanwhile, the opposition itself posed challenges to New Left activists, as I describe further in later chapters, actively trying to depoliticize many events, and persisting in certain kinds of practices that my activist interlocutors experiences as misogynistic and homophobic. These predicaments create real dilemmas for activists in a complex field of action, which involves not only confrontation with the state, but with fellow activists and the opposition movement as a whole. Indeed, it is precisely because

the problems New Left activists faced were so broad that their primary aim was to reach their fellow protesters and potential new participants, rather than to depose the current regime. The next chapter examines New Left activists' perspectives on the specific kinds of power and domination they were trying to resist through their political work.

Chapter Four

Everyday authoritarianism and the tightening of the screws

“In that way we ourselves recreate the practices of the hierarchical society against which we are fighting—to stereotype and forcibly support the strict classification of our identities, exactly that which is beneficial to it [society]. That we not be not free and self-sufficient, since it’s very difficult to control such people.”

— A queer-identified anarchist writing in a feminist 'zine²⁵

This chapter uses a close analysis of Russian activists’ experiences of repression to develop an ethnographically-informed understanding of authoritarian power in everyday life. In popular media and political science, discussions of “authoritarianism” are dominated by a top-down focus on elite power struggles and by scholarly debates over category definitions. But what happens if we, like my interlocutors, shift from talking about “authoritarian regimes” to examining social relationships in an authoritarian landscape, the everyday lived experiences of authoritarian modes of interaction? I argue that an ethnographic approach informed by feminist theory reveals the limits of a state-centered approach to authoritarianism. I follow Johnson and Saarinen (2013) and Sperling (2015) in arguing that gender is integral to authoritarian power in Russia, not incidental to it. As feminist activists and scholars have long recognized, oppression

²⁵ A term for a self-published magazine, usually produced using a photocopier, that is generally associated with Riot Grrrl, a feminist movement that grew out of the U.S. Pacific Northwest punk scene in the 1990s (See Marcus (2010)). A few Russian feminists used the same term (*zin*), and Katya and Lena, whose Anarcho-Feminist Group helped organize the publication, explained to me that Riot Grrrl publications had been one inspiration for the project. Their group also hosted a showing of a subtitled U.S. documentary about Riot Grrrl bands during my research period.

comes in many intersecting forms—sexism, economic exploitation, racism—that pervade social relations in everyday life. Marginalized activists in Russia likewise experience repression from many sources, including but not limited to agents of the state. As conceptualized by many activists, repressive potential lurks in all social relations shaped by authoritarian, hierarchical, and exploitative political and economic structures. This understanding challenges approaches that treat political elites, party politics, and elections as the defining features of authoritarianism. Furthermore, activists’ affective experiences of both state and non-state repression offer a caution to anthropologists not to overvalue the perceived power of the state over its citizens’ imaginations.

Authoritarian regimes and magical states

The concept of authoritarianism had been relatively little engaged by anthropologists until recent years, perhaps due to a certain skepticism about adopting normative categories as analytical tools. As I discuss below, ‘authoritarianism’ studies grew out of Western Cold War-era foreign policy goals, making the term problematic at best. However, anthropologists’ failure to engage with a popular term has hardly prevented its use elsewhere, including among my interlocutors. Given its widespread use, some scholars have begun to engage with the concept, primarily through ethnographic studies of “everyday authoritarianism” or authoritarianism “from the ground up.” This chapter pushes that research further by using ethnographic findings on everyday authoritarianism in Russia to rethink the concept of authoritarian power from an anthropological and feminist perspective.

Popular and scholarly discussions of Russia often describe its government as authoritarian or semi-authoritarian. These accounts, particularly in news and popular media, tend to treat Russian authoritarianism as the hyper-centralization of state power in the person of President Vladimir Putin. That is, in addition to the general definition of “authoritarianism” as a centralization of authority and power in the state, the Russian case presents a further identification of the authoritarian state with a single authority: Putin. In recent years, repression in Russia has routinely been framed in the news as coming from Putin, even by anthropologists (see for example Sauders 2013). Typical news headlines in recent years illustrate this framing: “With Punishments or Pardons, Putin Shows He Is in Control” (Herszenhorn and Myers 2013); “Putin’s New ‘Fortress Russia’” (Cohen 2012); “Vladimir Putin’s attack on homosexuality is shattering the lives of Russians” (Morrison 2014). Putin is presented as a mastermind, personally responsible for political repression in Russia. These stories often carry echoes of Cold War rhetoric. For journalists and politicians, it may be convenient to blame Putin himself. The narrative of “Putin as villain” is easy to understand and offers an easy solution: change Putin’s mind—or exchange him for a new leader—and the problem is solved. But, as I argue here, it is imperative to understand that repressive power doesn’t originate in any single individual, nor does it exist only in “the state.” This locating of repressive force within the state itself is a major weakness of many studies of authoritarianism.

Scholarly research on authoritarianism likewise has roots in the Cold War. Common approaches developed out of political science research on questions relevant to Western foreign policy during the Cold War and post-socialist “transition”: What makes authoritarian states authoritarian? Why do some authoritarian states become democratic,

while others do not? In these studies, authoritarianism is nearly always juxtaposed with democracy, its Other; an authoritarian regime is whatever a democracy is not.

Furthermore, these studies tend to focus on formal aspects of political institutions and elite competitions over power.

One of the most commonly-cited models comes from Juan Linz, who has described authoritarian regimes as

political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones (Linz 2000: 159).

This tendency to focus on the presence and degree of pluralism at high levels of power remains common. A key question in the field since the 1990s has been to determine why some formerly socialist countries “transitioned to democracy,” while others did not.

Particularly influential in discussions of former socialist states is Levitsky and Way’s conception of “competitive authoritarian regimes,” for which Russia is given as a prime example. These regimes

were competitive in that opposition forces used democratic institutions to contest vigorously—and, on occasion, successfully—for power. Nevertheless, they were not democratic. Electoral manipulation, unfair media access, abuse of state resources, and varying degrees of harassment and violence skewed the playing field in favor of incumbents. In other words, competition was real but unfair (Levitsky and Way 2010: 3).

This definition illustrates a focus on elections and elite competition over the state which is common in the literature. Analyses of “authoritarian” states might be concerned with the level of pluralism (Linz 2000), government protection of civil rights (Pop-Eleches 2007), or whether opposition parties are able to offer real alternatives to voters (Grzymała-Busse 2007). Democracies are then defined by having opposition parties that can genuinely contest incumbents for political power and government protection of liberal civil rights. Authoritarian regimes repress political opponents; democracies restrain such inter-elite violence. Scholars occasionally gesture toward the possibility that these categorical divisions may be less clear in practice—that archetypal democracies in North America and Western Europe occasionally fail to protect civil liberties in their entirety—but no serious effort is made to question these categories. Repression and authoritarian forms of power are thus located within the state, and furthermore in particular (usually non-Western) states. The primary agents of repression are assumed to be state officials or actors in state institutions. Laws are repressive; presidents are authoritarian; prison guards and cops repress.

Anthropologists have tended to engage less with the concept of “authoritarianism,” instead understanding repression through other conceptions of state power. These studies have opened space for comparisons of political power across all states (and even state-like institutions like NGOs or corporations), rather than assuming a fundamental distinction between “democratic” and other kinds of states. Even so, anthropologists studying violence and repressive power have sometimes attributed a great deal of imaginative power to state violence, for example examining how states become fantasies of their citizens or opponents. Writing in this area is dominated by talk of fear

and terror, phantasms and fetishes (see for example Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Taussig 1997). The state is seen as the holder of mysterious forms of power over the imagination: “The terrifying force of the management of bodies and people that characterizes the modern state, coupled with the intimacies that invest it, is not unrelated to the power of the law as it has come to represent the sovereign power of the state. The intense affect of this power [...] has a hold not only on one’s life but also on one’s soul” (Aretxaga 2003: 404). In such a view the state looms large in the imaginations of those it represses. I argue that this kind of analysis may overvalue the state and its power over the imagination. Some threatening states do awe and terrorize; but as I discuss below, others inspire world-weariness, contempt, and mockery.

Michael Taussig’s memoir of a *limpieza* in Colombia offers one indication of why many scholars—not to mention journalists—studying repression have tended to focus on spectacular forms of state and state-sanctioned violence. He recounts thinking that violence had gotten worse in Colombia from the 1970s to the 1990s, but is surprised at what his earlier fieldnotes reveal: “I see first of all that my definition of ‘violence’ is quite different. Instead of in-your-face knives and guns and corpses alongside the roads just outside of town, I see another class of violence, that by men against women, and second the violence of the economy...” (1997: 134-35). Spectacular public violence draws attention in a way that domestic violence and in-group repressions may not, simply because the latter are less visible.

Yael Navaro-Yashin has suggested that people’s preoccupation with “fantasies” of states and statehood must be understood as part of a preoccupation by international institutions with statehood. The centrality of the state to imaginations in non-normative

states, such as the exceptional zone of Northern Cyprus, “is a product of the very international discourses that produce ‘normal’ [and non-normative] states at the same time” (Navaro-Yashin 2003: 114). Of course, as Taussig points out, “the state” is itself an effect, for example an space of order and civilization produced by juxtaposition with Other spaces of disorder, terror, and war. In this respect, it is worth noting that Western studies of authoritarian power have focused on just these kinds of ‘non-normative’ states, whether Nazi Germany, the USSR, or contemporary Eritrea and Russia. Substituting the subject of this chapter for Taussig’s discussion of “terror,” we might suggest: “In talking ‘authoritarianism’s’ talk are we ourselves not tempted to absorb and conceal the violence in our own immediate life-worlds, in our universities, workplaces, streets, shopping malls, and even families, where, like business, it’s ‘authoritarian’ as usual?” (Taussig 1992: 12). In Europe and the United States, imaginaries of authoritarianism locate repression, human rights abuses, and anti-democratic politics always elsewhere, drawing attention away from problems closer to home, not unlike imaginaries of global poverty (Wendland 2012). In this chapter I argue that what makes Russia authoritarian—to the extent that it might be so—is nothing entirely unique to that place.²⁶ Instead I share the experiences of Russian activists as an entry into recognizing that authoritarian forms of power operate nearly everywhere, even if they are not everywhere the same.

Where anthropologists have interrogated the authoritarian, they have brought to bear ethnographic evidence to develop more nuanced conceptions of “everyday authoritarianism” or “authoritarianism from below,” and which bring us closer to an understanding of authoritarianism as an experience of power. These approaches have

²⁶ It bears noting, for example, that while in this dissertation I discuss several examples of activists detained and beaten at rallies, not once did police use tear gas, sound cannons, or armored vehicles at rallies I attended in Russia, all of which are in regular use against protesters in the United States.

asked what ethnographic evidence can offer to understand how repressive governments function in everyday life and have begun to sketch out affective experiences of authoritarian power. Borneman, for example, focuses closely on citizens' relationships to the state, though his research is shaped strongly by typologies of democratic and authoritarian regimes derived from Linz. His aim is primarily to understand the importance of "meaningful opposition" in democracies, how oppositions are formed, and when they might become institutionalized (Borneman 2011). Still, Borneman has recently called for increased engagement with authoritarianism from ethnographic perspectives, presumed to take a less top-down approach (Borneman 2013).

Other ethnographic attention to the authoritarian engages with questions of affect, such as Riggan's study of Eritrean teachers' imaginaries of their state, in which the state was increasingly perceived as pernicious and punishing as it became more coercive (Riggan 2013). As she explains, these imaginaries also undermined the legitimacy of official state ideology: "The imaginary of a punishing state evoked through talk about teacher transfers not only encouraged the use of intimate tactics to navigate that state but also hollowed out government-produced nationalism" (750). Eritrean officials may exercise coercive control of teachers' bodies, but that may not mean intense respect for state power. Strong military control and international bureaucratic exclusion can create "a sense of no escape, of entrapment" among residents, as Navaro-Yashin found in Northern Cyprus (Navaro-Yashin 2003: 119). By contrast, control may be strong yet diffused away from the state itself, as Otten (2013) describes in what he calls the "subtle form of authoritarianism" revealed by Macedonian grape growers' protests against a "thieving state." Here, a centralized and undemocratic government represses its citizens

through less direct means than controlling bodies: selective judicial protection of wine producers' interests over grape growers' leaves the latter at the mercy of a harsh market forces. These ethnographic studies point to the ways in which unspectacular modes of control—direct and indirect—combine to make authoritarian power simultaneously less legitimate and more inescapable.

In this chapter, I link these arguments to a close examination of authoritarian relations through a feminist lens. As Johnson and Saarinen point out, scholarly debates over authoritarianism have largely ignored gender, “despite the compelling arguments put forth by scholars in both east and west that the previous regime change, communism’s collapse, was fundamentally linked to gender” (Johnson and Saarinen 2013: 546). In Chapter One, I described how gender, sexuality, and nationalism have played significant roles in the construction and articulation of state power in post/socialist Russia. Here I adopt an intersectional feminist approach, which understands systems of domination such as class and gender as interlocking and inseparable. Homophobia, economic exploitation, and gender oppression may be seen and experienced radically differently by different groups of people, particularly those whose identities are multiply marginal (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality as an analytical approach has been fruitfully applied to studies of disability, nationality, sexuality and other identities and social justice movements, and continues to be a key tool for examining structural racism in the United States (Carbado, et al. 2013).²⁷ Brought into a discussion of authoritarian state power, an intersectional approach attends to the ways in which marginalized activists’ concerns reach far beyond

²⁷ Analysis of racism and the US prison system inspired by critical race theory may be of particular interest here, given the challenge it poses to both the assumption that state and non-state forms of domination are separable, and to the common representation of the United States in authoritarianism studies as a model liberal democracy.

simply forming a viable opposition party.

Russian political activists live and work at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression which are experienced as simultaneous, overlapping, or intertwined. With their views shaped both by personal experience and (self-)education in political theory, feminist and LGBT activists, as well as allies and comrades who take a systemic view of politics, conceptualize and see these systems as interrelated. Where straight, male, ethnic Russian activists on the left identify their oppressor as the capitalist state, others see continuities between official repression of radicalism and the everyday violence they face at the hands of nationalist gangs, misogynist or homophobic fellow activists, and even their own domestic partners. The personal is political and the political is personal.²⁸ Marginalized activists' experiences further speak back to feminist theory by highlighting the role of the state in making certain kinds of repressions possible. Authoritarian relations reach far beyond elite politicking or interactions with state agents like police. At the same time, state policies and actions, from laws repressing civil society to the tacit permission given to right-wing attacks on LGBT, must be included in an analysis of interpersonal repression.

Below, I begin by examining the ways in which authoritarianism in Russia extends beyond the state (or perhaps, helps produce an experience of power that extends beyond the direct reach of state institutions and agents), describing how feminist and LGBT activists understand sexism and homophobia as specific manifestations of broader authoritarian structures. Activists' own understandings of "authoritarian" power

²⁸ Though my focus in this chapter is primarily on repression related to gender and sexuality, a similar analysis could be done for ethnic minorities, particularly migrant workers in Russia who are so often in particularly precarious, marginalized positions. Other research has explored the ethnic, racial, and nationalist aspects of contemporary Russian identity politics in many spheres. See for example Caldwell (2002); Healey (2010); Lemon (2000); Rivkin-Fish (2006).

relations—state and non-state alike—reveal them to be interconnected. Then I will return to the state by analyzing how state and non-state repression combine in what I suggest is a defining feature of authoritarianism: the creation of a landscape in which political agency disappears.

When the oppressor is not the state: oppression among activists

In the case of feminist and LGBT activists in Moscow, talk about *podavlenie*—oppression—frequently was not about the state at all. What they experience is often something more pervasive: tendrils of repression reaching out from sources high and low. *OMON* riot cops repress activists, certainly. But so, too, do opposition committees that forbid rainbow flags at marches, supposed comrades who tear flags out of activists' hands, and circles of fellow leftists who protect perpetrators of domestic violence, not their victims. During my fieldwork in 2012-2013, I observed and heard about repeated instances of such oppression on some activists from their ostensible allies. Such instances made clear that force used by agents of the state was not the only kind of repression with which my interlocutors were struggling. They often located the fundamental source of repression not in the state itself, but in some extra-state social or economic structure: capitalism, patriarchy, hierarchy in general. Talk of pressure and repression was rarely just about the state itself; activists didn't only refer to their "authoritarian government" (*avtoritarnoye gosudarstvo*), but to living in an "authoritarian society" (*avtoritarnoye obshchestvo*). State policies and official rhetoric were not seen as irrelevant; however, often their role was perceived as creating a landscape in which other repressions

flourished.

Women activists frequently spoke to me and to one another about "repression" (*ugneteniye*) or "oppression" they experienced from a range of sources: the police and the government, but also their families, male activists, or even feminists of an older generation. Feminist activist Vera Akulova, for example, recounted that when she first became interested in leftist politics, she was marginalized and silenced for lacking the time to read key theoretical texts:

Vera: I felt like, I'm just so stupid, I can't say anything because I hadn't read Foucault, the whole Capital, or whatever. And my then-boyfriend [demonstrated] that I had no right to talk about politics if I hadn't read that endless list of books. And I felt really repressed because I had no time to read at all, because I was studying.

Even when Vera's political work shifted into feminist activist, she still found authoritarian forms of organizing. In one case, internal disputes about organizational structure caused an organization to split entirely. As Vera explains, this was a result of:

not only the matter of what we decided to say to the public, but also the matter of how we communicated inside the group. Because most of us wanted to keep the group, well, without hierarchies, so that the communication was between equals. And there were women who didn't want that, who wanted to establish a hierarchy and assign tasks according to some chain of command or something.

Similarly, 'Elena,' a feminist and animal rights activist who used to participate in more public actions and groups, felt pushed out of activism because of authoritarian relations within activist groups.

I don't even see a big difference between animal rights actions and feminist ones. The only difference is that at animal rights actions we were ordered around by men, and ordered around in a rather authoritarian way (*avtoritarno rasporyazhalis'*) [...] At feminist actions, of course, it's not like that. Although, when I was 18 I participated in them. It was difficult for me because some of the members of that group, well, there weren't official 'leaders' but even so there were some members who had more weight than others. They rather cruelly pressured me (*zhestko davili na menya*), that I should go here, go there, draw that kind of poster, and so on. They didn't understand my situation at all, that I was only 18. I was in a very hard situation with my parents, in a coercive relationship with a man who was also in the group. Because he considered himself, and even now still considers himself, a feminist. And it turned out that he received a great deal more support from that group than I did simply because he had the strength to keep going that I didn't have.

In Elena's narrative, the authoritarian is entirely divorced from any consideration of the state. Instead, authoritarian power inheres in everyday life. She describes pressures from parents, an abusive partner, and fellow activists as comparable and intersecting forms of oppression. Furthermore, Elena was not the only woman to have experienced coercion from a male activist who was supported in shared social circles. A major project by a circle of anarcho-feminists during 2012-2013 was the production of a 'zine, *Molot Ved'm* (Hammer of the Witches),²⁹ which published a collection of personal essays on feminism

²⁹ A reference to *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of the Witches), a medieval treatise on witchcraft and how to prosecute witches. The 'zine's cover featured a black-and-white drawing of a long-haired woman with curling horns holding a book while standing over burning candles. Written over her head was the phrase, "I choose."

and activist themes. Nearly every text discusses or refers to experiences of silencing, discrimination, and repression within activist circles.

My path to feminism started with anarchism. For me patriarchy was just such a form of hierarchy as social inequality, capitalism. Before I started to understand that many “anarchists” ignore the fight against patriarchy. For some reason a “typical man” is considered the ideal anarchist—strong, masculine, impassive and gloomy. How does it happen that among the people in a movement which struggles against discrimination, inequality, authority and the hypocritical foundations of society, there are so many who don’t fight against gender stereotypes in themselves? Why do many think that “there’s no place for women in the revolution”?

You believe [in anarchism with the others] and agree to smile when they for the hundredth time say “yeah all these chicks are the same” ... You make yourself smile when again and again ... with perfect conviction they say “we aren’t homophobes” immediately adding “but” and something homophobic.

Activists’ discussions of these everyday repressions revealed that they were not viewed as simply similar to state repression, but were interrelated, part of wide-reaching and mutually reinforcing repressive social structures. Interpersonal repressions—from domestic violence to being ignored by colleagues—were not individual problems, but expressions of larger social ills. (In the second half of the dissertation I examine activists’

resistance to these intra-group repressions.) This conception of the relationship between interpersonal and political violence is somewhat different from what Taussig suggests: “The violence of the economy and that between the sexes gives way to the blatantly political and criminal violence, which in turn gives way to routine and numbness punctuated by panic” (Taussig 2003: 135). Instead, some activists see domestic violence as directly resulting from unjust social structures and state power. As Kirill, a socialist activist who also worked as a teacher, was showing me how to paste agitprop³⁰ around Moscow one afternoon, I asked him about Orthodox opposition to a proposed law expanding government protection of children’s rights.

Jessica: When people talk about parent’s rights to raise children as they like, are they talking about corporal punishment?

Kirill: We are against violence in families. I am categorically against violence to children. But violence can take many forms, physical, psychological, and they’re equally bad. Part of the problem is that people treat their children like property, things that they own. So they think they can treat children any way they like, and when something in their own life isn’t going well, when their self-actualization has been stopped, they use the child instead.

Jessica: To feel self-actualized? [to feel agency, self-actualization, power].

Kirill: (nods) But this isn’t something that can be solved by a law. Society itself has to stop it.

Jessica: How?

Kirill: Society has to change. People’s relationships will change.

³⁰ Agitation and propaganda posters. In this case, we were pasting materials decrying xenophobia as a divide-and-conquer tactic of those in power along the planned parade route for the right-wing nationalist and neo-Nazi groups that would be gathering the following day.

Jessica: You mean, the whole system has to change, economic and political, changes, then people's mentalities will change too?

Kirill: Yes, of course.

On the surface Kirill's insistence that legal changes won't be effective seems to echo the kinds of language often used by apolitical social activists; "change yourself and the whole world will become kinder," as Rivkin-Fish (2004) found. As a Marxist, though, Kirill locates the root cause of problems not in relationships themselves, but in the economic and political structure. People must change how they relate to one another, yes, but that can only happen if the political-economic landscape itself changes to allow other kinds of relationships to exist.

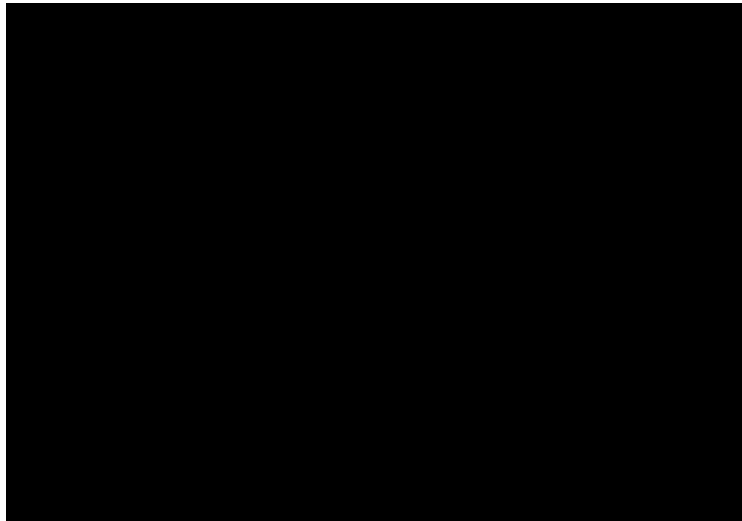


Figure 1: Sticker with the text "NO. Children are not at all guilty for the pressure on mothers. Before you hit a child, think about how much longer you are ready to suffer your own social disenfranchisement." (Artist: Umnaya Masha.)³¹

Other activists shared Kirill's view that domestic violence and violence against

³¹ See work by Umnaya Masha (Smart Mary) at <http://smartmary.livejournal.com/>.

children were the result of a chain of oppression: a parent's life is going poorly, so he expresses his frustration by dominating his child. This theme was echoed in many interviews and conversations and illustrated in several examples of feminist art I collected. The feminist artist Umnaya Masha (Smart Mary) produced a sticker (see Figure 1) asking mothers not to blame their children for the social pressure they suffer, represented by three figures making demands of women: a priest saying, "Abortion is a sin!"; an older woman exclaiming, "At your age I had four children and I worked!"; and a suited bureaucrat demanding "The country needs you to set [birth] records!"³² In response, Umnaya Masha offers a counterpoint: "NO. In pressure on mothers children are not at all guilty. Before you hit your child, think how much longer you're ready to put up with your own social disenfranchisement."

Another illustration (see Figure 2) accompanied an article about domestic violence in a feminist journal, *Net znachit net!* (No means no!). It makes a similar point: repression begets repression. The capitalist boss dominates the male worker, who dominates his wife, who dominates her son, and so on down the hierarchy. As the accompanying article explains,

The family serves in its own way as a model of hierarchical relations in society: man delegates rights to woman, woman — to older children... The relationships of power and submission a person learned in childhood he transfers to his own family and to relationships with his employer.

The repression represented by domestic violence and child abuse are in no way separable from the domination of workers by their bosses or of citizens by their state. All are interconnected, and therefore must be part of any struggle for a better, more just future.

³² See Chapter One, Figure 3 (p. 46).

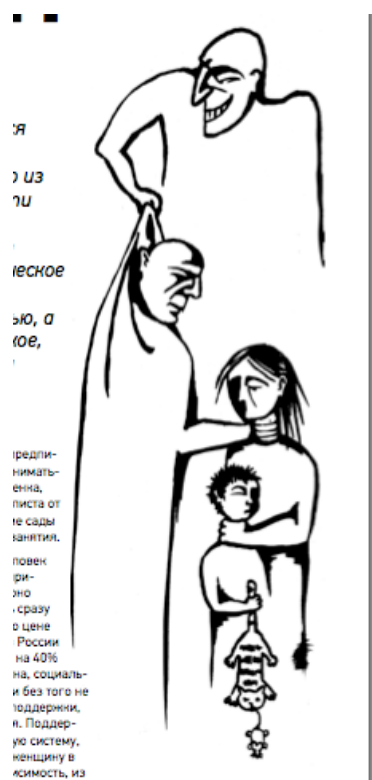


Figure 2. Illustration of hierarchical relationships in "No Means No!" (Artist anonymous.)

Repression as agency curtailed

Authoritarian social relations appear to reshape people's subjectivities, making them feel less able to act in the world. In a repressive social landscape, people come to feel that they lack agency. Katya, an anarcho-feminist, described this sense of impotence and explained it as a result of Russia's long history of political repression.

Katya: I have a lot of friends that aren't anarchists and I explain to them why anarchy is better than capitalism, and it's very hard because people are used to this system and they don't think that there is any alternative, that they can change something.

Jessica: Yeah, I thought about that a little bit on Wednesday at the discussion, where to me it seemed very strange, like they could not imagine a system with equality.

Katya: I think it's a question of society. For example, say in Europe they are more liberal and there is more freedom there. And I think more people than in Russia think about equality, about anarchism or some liberal rights. But here, it's the past, dictatorship, Stalin and other guys. I think it's a question of something that is deep inside people. Even when you try to kick them or beat them or try to somehow oppress them, they think oh, maybe I'm not doing things right. I'm guilty for it. And so they're right and I should do what they tell me. It's just not very easy to change.

Zhenya described a similar sense of lacking agency as one of the issues she has struggled against in her campaign to increase women's involvement in leftist activism in Moscow.

Jessica: What are the major difficulties in activism here?

Zhenya: It's patriarchy. Patriarchy is when you see that a woman in principle understands and shares your political position, but she thinks that she has no right, or thinks that it's generally not normal if she does something about this. She says yes, but the destiny of a woman is family. I will take care of a family. Or yes, but I was raised differently. I can't be an activist. And this overcomes even a woman who comes to the organization and wants to take a more active role, but [the group] tries to work against this. That is, for them it seems that it's right if she sits and doesn't speak at a meeting, it's simply fulfilling what she was told by all

those in charge.

An authoritarian landscape gives rise not only to repressive social relations, but to repressed subjectivities. A fight against oppression, then, is at least in part a fight to regain a sense of agency. This was the theme of one contribution to the feminist 'zine *Molot Vedm'*, in which a woman wrote about her experience in a feminist consciousness-raising group.

At that time [before joining] I was in a difficult situation of patriarchal violence. I don't even mean I lacked the strength in myself to do art projects, actions and rallies, to write articles—it was difficult even to find the energy for simple everyday life (to clean the house, to wash dishes, to go to the store). I was in an abusive relationship with my husband and could not protect myself from my abusive birth family...

Now, after 3.5 years in a consciousness-raising group and 1 year of therapy, I feel myself stronger and more free—this is the most important political result.

Feminism is needed for women to feel themselves strong and free. After three years of “doing nothing”—my own life and a private safe space, I began to feel myself a politically struggling individual.

In other cases, in the view of activists working for LGBT and women's rights, repressed subjectivities manifest not through inaction, but through misdirected domination of others. Some factions on the left thus continued to argue that women's rights and LGBT rights were "bourgeois identity struggles" that should be put aside until the more fundamental struggle against capitalism succeeds. These activists had yet to grapple with the effects of repression on their own attitudes, which were then expressed

as repression of other activists, unwillingness to acknowledge their marginalization, and even the possibility of being vulnerable to elites' divide-and-conquer tactics. In this way, anarchists attacking the bearer of a rainbow flag was a fractal expression of broader systems of domination and repression. I discuss activists' resistance to this in-group repression in Chapter Seven.

The state's role in making repression possible

So far I have argued that authoritarianism should be understood as a form of interaction diffused through society, rather than centralized within a particular type of state. Yet this does not mean that the policies, bureaucracies, officials, security services, and other components of the state play no role in creating a repressive environment. In 2012 and 2013, a new anti-LGBT law worked its way from provincial cities to the federal level in Russia. Often glossed in Russian as "the homophobic law" or "the law against homosexual propaganda," it criminalized "the propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations among minors." In Chapter Seven, I will analyze this law in greater depth as it relates to issues of queer visibility and the formation of national communities in Russia. Here, I examine it as one of the manifold means by which the Russian state is involved in producing authoritarianism in everyday life both as a direct agent of repression, and by making possible the particular forms of other agents' repression.

At the time this research was conducted, it was not yet clear precisely how the "homosexual propaganda" law would be interpreted by police and the courts, but it seemed likely that the law itself was not the main concern for activists. Indeed, there

were plenty of existing laws that are already regularly used to harass and prosecute them—hooliganism, causing mass disorder, unauthorized demonstration, distributing extremist materials, assaulting officers of the law. Activists who support LGBT rights have expressed particular concern not just about how the law might be used against them, but about what the law signals to society at large: that LGBT individuals are not protected by the state and may be harassed and attacked at will. Authoritarianism, perhaps, is less a particular arrangement of state power than setting a certain kind of tone.

In the months before the law's passing by the federal legislature, a group of LGBT activists held a series of flashmob protests titled "Day of Kisses" outside the State Duma building. At each event, they were greeted by camera crews, a strong police presence, and counter-protesters calling themselves "Orthodox activists." Each event followed a similar pattern: the activists kissed, then were pelted with rotten eggs and, at times, fists. [chose not to include photo of this—politics of representation] This was an unwelcome, but not entirely unexpected, counter-protest. The police broke up the fights and dragged the LGBT activists, and occasionally a counter-protester or two, to personnel carriers and then to the precinct station. The "Orthodox activists," some of whom regularly protest LGBT community events as well as public protests, are only rarely fined and cited.

It is difficult to know how to think about an anti-gay mob. Should we consider it part of the apparatus of state violence and control? Or is it better to say that the state creates space for such things to happen, or that official anti-gay sentiment gives a sort of tacit permission for people to become entrepreneurs of repression? Is the state's role a matter of setting the tone of social relations, of opening possibilities for certain forms of interaction?

In fall 2012, for example, the Moscow gay-friendly club 7freedays was attacked by a group of a dozen or so masked young men who broke in during a Coming Out Day party. They beat up several people, demolished property, and then ran out. Attendees recognized several of the attackers and found evidence online that they had taken part in the attack, but police refused even to open an investigation. In discussions afterward, activists didn't attribute the attack directly to the state; the attackers were largely understood as separate agents. But they did suggest that the state's repressive laws help to create an atmosphere in which many people feel free to engage in their own everyday repressions. As Olga, a feminist and lesbian activist, wrote via social media after the attack:

...when football hooligans, people in masks raid a gay party, that is simply a punishable criminal act. But the whole problem is that they won't be caught and they won't be punished. Our girls from Pussy Riot are caught tight, but the football hooligans—never. The police, in the first place, won't show due diligence, and in the second place, it's hard to catch a person without a face. [...]
Yes, of course, I could go up as a witness. And I will respect forever those who do give statements to the police. But we all know how that will end... They forbid us to say “gay” (*gei*) and they say: “Kill!” (*bei*).

Everyday repressions, in this view, are effects of state policies and attitudes, yet not direct actions of state agents. The state thereby devolves responsibility for repression onto others, allegedly uncontrollable criminal elements or extremists on the far right.³³

There is nonetheless a slippage between state and non-state actors that gives rise

³³ Whether or not state security services seem interested in controlling far-right groups, it is worth noting that on multiple occasions city authorities have appeared unable to do so, such as during the football riots in the Moscow center in 2010.

to a certain suspicion, or perhaps paranoia, about the extent to which repressive violence is perhaps encouraged by someone within the state security apparatus. Olga's statement noted further her impression that "Lubyanka [the FSB headquarters in Moscow] extends to one building away from the gay club and there was that sensation, that these faceless masses emerged from there, from the basement gym of the FSB." In an interview another activist, Leo, reported that on multiple occasions he had suspected some cooperation between police and "fascists," as he described them. Each time, activists were detained by the city police at a protest and held for several hours, then released to an empty street. Within minutes, a group of young men appeared and attacked them. Furthermore, Leo described, the captain of police at that office wore a small pin identifying his membership in a nationalist group.

State-sanctioned mob violence has been identified as a feature of fascist and right-wing regimes, often accompanied by a quasi-military aesthetic and rhetoric related to family, kinship, and traditional culture under threat (Connor 2003; Ohnuki-Tierney 2002). For example, Katherine Bowie describes the visible presence of the Village Scouts in 1970s Thailand as part of an increasingly fearful and threatening political landscape, culminating in the deadly attack on Thammasat University and a military coup. Through an initiation ritual woven through with "nationalist rhetoric of loyalty to Nation, Religion, and King," members came to feel deep, even mystical ties to the monarchy which seemed to make them willing to commit tremendous violence against their own fellow citizens (Bowie 1997). The possibility of this violence, highlighted by its occasional practice, underlies the "cultural elaboration of fear" (Taussig 1987: 8, cited in Bowie 1997: 3) that undermines the capacity for action in the population at large. Such

intermittent spectacles of violence on the street echo the periodic outbursts of conflict Russia has stoked along its borders, which Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Michael Bobick argue make Putinism a form of Geertzian theater state:

It is the spectacle of dominance, much more so than actual military occupation, that creates docile populations within the new geographic boundaries of empire in Europe. As Putin extends this new form of sovereignty into Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, he challenges the bureaucratic rationality that is the foundation of contemporary EU governance with a new mode of governance that relies on threat, innuendo, and calibrated displays of the capacity for arbitrary and spectacular violence (Cullen Dunn and Bobick 2014: 406).

Resulting from the diffusion of repressive power away from the state itself, the unpredictability of violence and the uncertain nature of its source is an important affective component of the authoritarian landscape. The sense that violence could spring forth at any moment is frightening and has a powerfully discouraging effect on mass participation in the kinds of public activities subjected to intermittent attacks. When outbreaks of violence are unpredictable, how can one decide which events to attend? Even approval of an event by the city government turns out to be no guarantee of safety, despite that the acquisition of an event permit ostensibly means that the city takes responsibility for the safety of participants in a rally or march. This was amply demonstrated to me when I attended a city-approved "Rally Against Fascism" in November 2012, meeting up ahead of time with other participants in the nearest metro station in order to walk together to the rally.³⁴ From my fieldnotes:

³⁴ I was habitually early to events, a trait most of my interlocutors attributed to my being American and which was not shared by most of them. Several months into my fieldwork, David took to using my example

An angry roaring noise filled the hall. We all looked toward the noise. Suddenly a group of some 30 young men swarmed down the stairs into the station, hooded and disguised with black bandanas and powder-blue surgical masks. Reflexively following the person closest to me, I turned and ran. But we had nowhere to go: the station had only one entrance and exit. A few of us ducked around pillars, perhaps hoping to hide on the platform side. The masked men ran through, flowing past me toward the far end of the station. I couldn't make out what they were shouting. Nobody, it seemed, knew what to do. A few people near me peered futilely down the hall, where the mob seemed to have disappeared. I stood petrified, wanting to help somehow, not wanting to be seen. Angry echoes floated in the air, then coalesced into a chant as the men collected back into a single mass, then ran back up the stairs and out of sight.

Several minutes passed as we took account of ourselves. Igor and another activist had been beaten; a third had been thrown onto the tracks but rescued before the next train arrived. They were escorted out and taken to a nearby hospital.

And then the police appeared, first a pair, and soon a dozen. They were interrogating the activists, rather than taking witness testimony. An official statement released later claimed that “a conflict occurred between two groups of people: two people from one side and three from the other. The conflict escalated into a brawl as a result of which one person was injured.” When we returned from the rally, many of the activists made note—sounding utterly unsurprised and more than a bit cynical—that the entire station and entryway, which had been strangely

to chide his comrades, "The only one who shows up regularly and on time to all the events is Jessica! And she's not even a member of the organization!"

empty of security hours earlier, were now filled with police in full riot gear.

This sense of living in an unpredictably violent world is an important part of the experience of authoritarian power, and one which is made possible by the shifting of power away from official agents of the state. In other words, the fractal or diffused structures of repressive power are a key part of the operation and experience of authoritarianism.

Uncertainty and the production of fear

Police may be difficult to avoid, especially for those committed to political activism. But police violence is institutional, relatively predictable, and more or less comprehensible, making it possible to develop strategies for avoidance, mitigation, and relief. Activists certainly do not wish to be arrested or beaten by police, but their attitudes are often matter-of-fact, as when Katya calmly described her encounters with police during an interview.

Jessica: Have you ever had difficulties with the police?

Katya: I think that it was about five or six times when at some meetings or in some action the police just... I went to the police station. We go out for an illegal action, and then the police come and grab you and you go to the police station. You stay there for like a night and then go home.

Jessica: How did you feel about that?

Katya: The first time I was terrified. But I just understood that I can just say some things like... I just saw that I was terrified because I thought that police, they are

men who are very smart. But when I understood that they are not, they just aren't. [...] I understood that there was nothing to worry about. Just don't say things that you shouldn't say.

Others joked about detentions, as when David joked to me at the end of an unsanctioned mass opposition action that it was too bad there hadn't been any trouble with the police; he'd gone to all the trouble of showering this morning just in case he got stuck in a cell overnight. Activists joked about how funny they looked in photos of their arrests, expressing what Gray calls a "giddy communitas" of detainment which became a trope of the opposition protests (Gray forthcoming). Another activist, Viktor, commented on one picture of himself being carried by three officers, "Well, that one turned out quite funny!" A comrade quickly returned, "Someone just said 'I want a glass of vodka and to be carried.'³⁵ Be careful what you wish for!" This sort of dark humor was common among activists who frequently attend actions. They were neither terrified of the police nor eager to fight with police or to be taken to jail. This is by no means a universal attitude among radical activists; Maple Rasza, by contrast, describes Croatian anarchists' encounters with police violence as "expected, even relished" as an affirmation of the unjust nature of the state (Rasza 2007: 223). But among the activists with whom I worked, joking, irony, and irritation were more common affects than the fear and terror often mentioned in anthropologies of state repression.

To the extent that anthropologies of authoritarianism, states, and repressive violence have been particularly interested in examining how states figure in the imaginations of their citizens, remarks like Katya's offer a crucial counterpoint. Like many anthropologists who have encountered and analyzed threatening states, Aretxaga

³⁵ *Khochu vodku i na ruchki*, a phrase suggesting one is tired and wants a break.

suggested that “[i]t is in the act of killing, kidnapping, disappearances, and imprisonment that the state materializes as a powerful spectral reality, which marks the bodies and souls of those subjected to its practice” (Aretxaga 2003: 402). For activists like Katya, though, harassment from the state does not seem to mark the soul; police are simply not that powerful. Their arrests, even beatings at the hands of police, may be cause for anger, outrage, and ongoing stress, but these encounters alone are not enough to create the sense of pervasive threat associated with authoritarian landscapes. Rather, it is the fact that repression comes from many sources, thereby becoming both unpredictable and inescapable, that gives everyday life a particularly authoritarian cast.

Authoritarian power shadows the livelihoods of activists, many of whom already live somewhat precarious economic lives. A pair of anarcho-feminists had started a small business creating vegan products as an expression of their political positions: selling at cost, working cooperatively with a friend rather than for a boss, and reducing the exploitation of animals. According to one of the founders, Lena, the enterprise was time- and labor-intensive, but covered its own costs. At several events in 2012 and 2013, I heard Lena and her partner describe their independent, cooperative work in discussions with skeptical non-anarchists. They tried to demonstrate that labor could in fact be organized non-hierarchically. But when I interviewed Lena in April 2013, she was no longer working. She and another anarchist, Kostya, described the police harassment and the threat of future prosecution that had led to closing the business.

Lena: A friend and I had a small business, the two of us. We closed it three days ago because the police started to come.

Kostya: Since they are political activists

Lena: Yeah, since we are political activists, they show all kinds of interest in us, they try to repress us in any way they can including through work, through our business. They come to many of our acquaintances at their university, through their studies, they come to work. They came to us at work too, and that's why we closed it.

Jessica: That's awful.

Kostya: The last time they came, people came from the agency that handles drug trafficking. We're really afraid that—

Lena: That they'll plant some narcotics and put us in prison for trafficking.

Kostya: They produced soy products, tofu, products for vegans. And they sold different kinds of books on activist themes.

Lena: Well, and so.

In such cases, repression happens far out of public sight and operates primarily through threat, rather than direct violence. When Lena had earlier been detained and briefly jailed for participating in a rally, she had been angry, but not discouraged from continuing to participate in public actions. (In fact, as I described in the Introduction, she seemed equally angry at the Yabloko party representatives who had continued holding the rally after her detention as at the police themselves.) But the sight of narcotics officers at her own office, and the accompanying implicit threat of significant prison time, was threatening enough for Lena to close down her business.

The timing of legal cases is another important factor in creating the authoritarian mood. Lena had been operating her enterprise for months when it was abruptly threatened with legal action. More widely known, the “Bolotnaya case” involved over a dozen

individuals who had participated in a city-sanctioned mass rally on May 6, 2012 to protest the inauguration of Putin to his third term. The rally had ended in hundreds of detentions, but everyone was released. Over the next several months, however, particular individuals were singled out with serious charges such as causing mass disorder and assaulting officers of the law. These charges came only occasionally and their targets seemed to be chosen almost at random; it seemed impossible to predict who would be arrested next or when it might happen. This unpredictability extends to the period of incarceration, as well. Having inspired rallies, protest campaigns, petitions, donation collections, and a variety of other political mobilization, a handful of the “prisoners of Bolotnaya” were suddenly released as part of an unexpected mass amnesty in December 2013 (which also freed the remaining two Pussy Riot members, foreign Greenpeace activists that had been held, and dozens of other prisoners political and otherwise.) As these incidents illustrate, the affective experience of authoritarianism is of the capriciousness and unpredictability of state power.

The tightening of the screws

Even if one never knows when the strike will come—or how long it will last—activists themselves described a gradual encroachment of authoritarian power over the course of my fieldwork period and into 2014, a process they referred to as “tightening of the screws.” Threat seemed to become increasingly ubiquitous and inescapable as a series of laws passed limiting civil society. Attacks against LGBT Russians increased, and even fellow protestors continued to harass them at rallies. In April 2013, David remarked to

me that he had always wondered how the Stalinist terror of the 1930s could have happened. How had people let it come to that? And now, he said grimly, he was beginning to see how it might.

In late August on social networking sites, a photo started circulating of a letter that was allegedly found in the entryway of an apartment building in Rostov. The text read:

Dear residents!

According to surveillance conducted for your building in the first two quarters of 2013 in your entryway, 1 individual of a non-traditional sexual orientation (homosexual, lesbian, etc.) was found. At the present moment further investigative and operational work is being conducted with this individual.

We ask you to show special vigilance in relation to the individual suspected of homosexual propaganda.

Please note that an individual of a non-traditional sexual orientation might propagandize homosexuality not only directly, describing the advantages of a homosexual life or even offering to engage in sexual activity with you or your relatives, but also gradually, surreptitiously, carrying out the work of homosexual propaganda at home over the course of many years.

Understand that a homosexual might be dressed discreetly, might look like you, might be pleasant in social situations and a good acquaintance of yours! Don't forget that homosexuality does not know age and even a schoolboy or an elderly person could be a propagandist of homosexuality.

Be vigilant in relations with neighbors, especially in your own or neighboring

apartments, in the area by the mailboxes and in the elevator. It's very easy to become a target of homosexual propaganda, and there's but one short step from a common homosexualist to a homosexual-propagandist who corrupts decent people.

If you suspect anyone among your neighbors of homosexual propaganda, immediately inform the Ministry of Internal Affairs at your precinct or call 2406030 and 02.

The administration

The activist on whose page I saw a photo of this letter was skeptical of its alleged provenance; it seemed unlikely that the management of an apartment building would conduct such surveillance. Nonetheless he did suspect, or find plausible, that such a letter had indeed been concocted and posted somewhere by a local provocateur. In a way, though, the true origin of the letter, the actual motivations of its author(s), are beside the point. It has a certain effect simply by existing and circulating in public, and it demonstrates what activists see as the everyday workings of repression with respect to the "homophobic law." Perhaps the law itself might be used to prosecute certain people,³⁶ but many activists seemed even more concerned about what the law signaled to society at large. Over the course of the development of the law, use of the phrase "propaganda of homosexuality" became increasingly widespread in media, online, and in statements by Russian politicians and officials, a sort of institutionalization of anti-LGBT discourse. The very phrase "homosexual propagandist" constructs a very specific idea of a gay person (a subversive political agent), and carries with it a specific understanding of

³⁶ Or beverage companies, as the example of the Happy Milkman's rainbow demonstrated (see pp. 124-25).

homosexuality (threatening, corrupting, infectious). The fact that this language has been adopted, codified, and put into practice by institutions of the Russian state gives it a high level of legitimacy. This letter, then, can be seen as an effect of the law or as an effect of the state, regardless of who produced it. Its language is derived from official, legalistic language. It draws on the threat of the surveillance state, whose existence gives a shading of possibility to the claim that an apartment building is under watch. The state, in other words, created a landscape in which this particular form of repressive act could be possible. This is a text that could only have been written in the shadow of the "homophobic law."

Conclusion

Authoritarianism is neither limited to state institutions and actors, nor is it a static condition. I have argued that we instead consider the authoritarian as a landscape inviting to certain acts of repression, or as an atmosphere charged with latent threat. Working from such metaphors draws attention to the ways in which authoritarian power operates in everyday life. Yet the unpredictable timing, sources, and forms of repressive acts produce a pervasive sense of uncertainty and risk. For the activists described in this article, that is the affective experience of authoritarian power. In total, this approach reveals that authoritarian power is not characterized by its monopoly on domination, nor by a sort of pseudo-legitimacy conferred by fearful imagination. The experience of authoritarian power is rather a sense of profound limitation on one's agency, particularly on the agency of heterogeneous (minority, marginalized) members of society. Repression

is characterized as much by the banal, dulling effect of ever-present threat, as by the spectacle of show trials and police beatings. In this context, the practice of "being an activist"—cultivating agency, critical consciousness, and the capacity for collective action—in itself is a form of resistance.

In some cases, the particular forms of repression described in this chapter stem from the biopolitics of the Russian state. *Muzhik* masculinity is an increasingly dominant gender ideology as evidenced by Putin's public joking about rape, as when in 2006 he called then-President of Israel Moshe Katsav a "mighty man" after allegations that Katsav had assaulted women on his staff (Sperling 2015). Prominent opposition figure Aleskey Navalny has likewise made comments that my feminist interlocutors understood as misogynistic, for example referring to women as "heifers" and ridiculing feminists' complaints about media representation. Like the homophobic law and continual attacks on LGBT activists by fellow protesters, these practices effectively bracket certain groups off from full citizenship, legal protection, and full participation in social movements (Povinelli 2011).

This chapter has explored from an intersectional feminist perspective the structures of power that feminist and pro-LGBT activists experienced and which they were trying to resist. Intersectional feminist theory emphasizes the ways in which the various analytical categories of identity—class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity—are in practice inseparable. Given this reality, a movement for social justice must operate on multiple fronts. From the perspective of relatively privileged members of Russian society, such as the wealthy elite who presented themselves as the leaders of the opposition movement, it may seem clear that the primary problem in Russia is the lack of

competitive and honest elections. But for other Russians who, like Elena or Igor, experience life at the intersection of multiple structures of domination, it becomes difficult to say that Putin is necessarily the central problem in Russia today. If repression is as likely to come from one's comrades or domestic partners as from a cop, if even the state's repressions and exclusions often operate indirectly, through the hands of one's neighbors, then forms of resistance must follow suit. In the next four chapters, I examine how activists' resistance takes shape against what they understand as pervasive domination.

Chapter Five

How to start a Pussy Riot: Provocation and the infringement on agency

We gathered in the biting cold, filing through a police security check into a fenced-off square surrounding a Soviet monument to the proletarian revolutionaries of the failed 1905 uprising. Their stoic faces loomed over the square while activists passed out flyers, set up a sound system, and unfurled flags and posters: "Women make revolution, not soup!" and "For quality day care!" Organized by the Russia liberal-democratic party Yabloko in coalition with Moscow-based feminist, leftist, and LGBT groups, the rally was to mark International Women's Day, March 8, 2012. Suddenly, a small crowd coalesced around a dispute near the entrance. On tiptoes, I peered through the small thicket of cameras and microphones aimed at the scene. The police were trying to take an activist's poster for having an extremist slogan: "We don't need flowers when we're being arrested."

Despite its origins in the 19th century women's movement, International Women's Day is typically marked in contemporary Russia by giving gifts of flowers and chocolates to the women in one's life.³⁷ Just days before, members of the feminist art collective Pussy Riot had been arrested for what was quickly becoming an extremely controversial protest/performance. The poster thus simultaneously rejected conventional femininity while embracing troublemakers who were clearly on the wrong side of the Kremlin; little wonder that the police found it questionable. The rally organizers insistently defended the poster, brandishing a city-approved permit to express women's rights themes at the rally.

³⁷ This depoliticization resembles the shifts in the meaning and celebration of Mother's Day in the United States, which originated in the women's anti-war movement but by the mid-20th century had become a celebration of conventional motherhood through gift-giving.

Eventually the police desisted, and the poster was propped up defiantly against the revolutionary monument for the duration of the rally, linking our action today to three women who had been arrested for feminist protest.

Hardly anyone had seen Pussy Riot's performance in person. It lasted about two minutes before they were escorted out of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior (CCS) by security: five figures in bright dresses, anonymous under multicolored balaclavas, had momentarily taken over the altar to shout lyrics attacking the increasingly intimate church-state alliance that has worked to limit women's and LGBT rights: "Mother of God, chase Putin out! Mother of God, become a feminist!" Combining video footage of this performance with material recorded elsewhere and including their tussle with the Cathedral guards, they uploaded a finished video to YouTube on February 21. By March 4, two members of the group had been arrested, Nadezhka Tolokonnikova and Maria Alekhina, and were soon joined by a third, Ekaterina Samutsevich. The video, along with news of the jailed women, continued circulating online.³⁸ My social media feeds—Russian and English-language—flooded with debates about Pussy Riot; rallies and marches filled with signs, chants, and even balloons referring to the group; allusions to Pussy Riot seeped into mass media and everyday conversations.

Something about the group made it an almost irresistible subject of discussion in the following months. Pussy Riot—an action, an idea, an iconic image—circulated through public events and everyday conversations, mass media and online social networks in Russia and abroad. Over the course of the year following their action at CCS, Pussy Riot provoked a series of reactions within the protest scene and within the state,

³⁸ As of April 2015, the video and accompanying post about the action remains available at <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html>

inspiring new coalitions of liberal and conservative activists, a highly publicized court trial, and even a draft law to make offending religious sentiments a criminal offense, subject to imprisonment.³⁹ Pussy Riot has also proven to be an irresistible topic to scholars and culture analysts, spawning dozens of conference papers and journal articles as well as a book by journalist Masha Gessen (2014), not to mention this dissertation chapter. In their performance, Pussy Riot crystallized key themes that animated Moscow activism in 2012, in particular Putinism, post-socialist gender politics, and the role of conservative Russian Orthodoxy and nationalism in Russian society. Pussy Riot's case was clearly an "event," the sort of socially-meaningful happening that is the focus of processual analysis in anthropology.

But here I am less interested in analyzing the Pussy Riot's performance itself than in examining the specific process of provocation through which their small act of protest became momentous. If Pussy Riot's performance in CCS was an act of resistance and dissent, why was it their action that circulated so widely, and how did their act affect the many other communities that were engaging in resistance and dissent in Moscow that year? In essence, this chapter is an ethnography of talking about Pussy Riot. The Pussy Riot case was rife with provocations, as I will explain below. Through provocation, the case confronted activists and other observers with an acute need to articulate the social norms they felt were being violated, and an opportunity to defend those norms. By reacting to Pussy Riot, my interlocutors established their own positions within a confusing and challenging political field and asserted their own visions of what *ought to be* in the world. Articulating their support for Pussy Riot (albeit to varying degrees), activists on the New Left could negotiate the difficult conjuncture of neoliberal

³⁹ This law was eventually passed in December 2013, Federal Law 136.

capitalism, the illiberal state apparatus that supports it, and the anti-feminist and homophobic ideologies that seemed to pervade the opposition movement as much as pro-government groups. At the same time, talking about Pussy Riot enabled conservative religious activists to assert their own positions as defenders of tradition against the forces of Western cultural imperialism and materialist values. Examining how and why “Pussy Riot” was circulated by these groups and others, I argue, illustrates the potential value and risks of provocation as a tactic for activists with few resources and marginalized causes. Provocation is a generative action, creating opportunities for challenging and renegotiating social norms and community boundaries. At the same time, provocation can also induce a hardening of those same norms, producing continuity in how power is structured, rather than change.

Pussy Riot as event

I understand the Pussy Riot case to be eventful to the extent that many of my interlocutors treated it as such, not because I claim it necessarily marked a significant change in the social order of Russia. Noting Sally Falk Moore’s warning that continuity, too, takes social effort (Moore 1987), I pay close attention to reactions which seem merely to reinforce existing political and moral norms, as well as reactions that can more easily be read as resistance or oriented toward changing the political order. Both are important products of the Pussy Riot event. This chapter analyzes references to Pussy Riot by Muscovites from a range of political orientations which I collected over the course of about 18 months in 2012-2013, attending to the ways in which the case’s

meanings and significance developed over time in relation to specific other events. In this way, I emphasize how events are not generic social dramas, but take place in particular temporal-historical moments as well as cultural and political contexts. Along the way, I also develop a conception of “the provocation” as a particular type of event characterized by transgression, intentionality, and its apparent power over the agency of its witnesses.

Anthropologists have nearly always been interested in social happenings, from potlatches to cockfights, initiation rituals to kula journeys. Typically analysts have tended to juxtapose these happenings to structures, whether social or symbolic, focusing on the essential (if hidden) continuities at work or on the deep, shared cultural values revealed during events, even in those that on the surface appear to be divisive (Turner 1957).

Marshall Sahlins has written that “[a]n event is not just a happening in the world: it is a relation between a certain happening and a given symbolic system” (Sahlins 1985: 153), emphasizing what events revealed about existing symbolic systems even as he focused his attention on moments of disruption, and implying that some clear distinction existed between the former and the latter. Perhaps, as Joel Robbins (2007) suggests, there has been an anthropological bias toward studying continuity. In any case, these approaches to studying events pose analytical problems for describing situations in which conflict is not resolved, where social values are not merely contested but unclear, or when people have difficulty even making sense of things.

Even so, anthropologists have become interested in events as moments of deep change, discontinuity, even incomprehensibility. This is perhaps a result of increasing anthropological attention to spaces of social rupture: war, rape, genocide. Veena Das (2007), for example, explores events that seem to break apart worlds of meaning, such as

the violence of the India-Pakistan partition or surrounding the assassination of Indira Gandhi. She is “attracted to the idea that boundaries between the ordinary and the eventful are drawn in terms of the failure of the grammar of the ordinary” (2007:7), particularly in instances of extreme, shattering violence. An event may bring into being “new modes of actions” that redefine existing social categories and social structures (Das 1996: 6), but it may also be difficult to understand by ordinary means. Indeed, as I will argue, it is the challenge to interpretation that may make a particular moment eventful.

Danny Hoffman and Stephen Lubkemann (2005) suggest that life in places where violence is endemic, “the certainty of uncertainty has become a fundamental reality in the lives of social actors” (318). Because the outcome of any given action is unpredictable, social life becomes particularly “event-full” in the sense that actors must constantly improvise and experiment. Events are thus moments which carry the potential for the creative re-making of society or of selves, a process which may or may not involve continuity of cultural values. Particularly in contexts of ongoing uncertainty, it may be difficult for anything to reflect deep cultural values because it isn’t entirely clear to anybody what those values are.

Yet war zones are not the only places where we can find endemic uncertainty. Research has fairly consistently found that post-socialism⁴⁰ is often experienced as an unmooring of life from settled norms. The simultaneous dissolution of state socialisms and introduction of radically different late 20th century neoliberal regimes has created a region in which former systems of meaning have been radically upset, what could be

⁴⁰ I take to heart the many criticisms of many scholars of most of the available terminological frames with which we have attempted to characterize the change from whatever socialism was to whatever has come after. Here I mean “post-socialism” to highlight the ways in which Russia, though no longer a country one could describe as socialist, nonetheless remains influenced by certain legacies of socialism, as I discussed in Chapter One.

thought of as a society-wide experience of liminality (Oushakine 2004) or a dissolution of Soviet *doxa* and loss of faith in the symbolic power of Soviet rule (Yurchak 2006; Zavisca 2011). In his view, the post-socialist period can be viewed in parallel with the early Soviet period, during which the Bolsheviks' introduction of their vision of modernity deliberately erased existing norms in order to create "void subjects" who would be suitable for re-formation on the model of the New Soviet Man. In practice, this meant people were faced with a series of rapid, unpredictable changes with which they must somehow come to terms. Living through uncertainty and unknowability, it was "through the inexhaustible incorporation of constantly changing life conditions—that the Soviet subject secured a place within a social field that was still under construction." (Oushakine 2004: 416). Similarly, the end of socialism meant people encountered another period of confusing and unpredictable change, what Jane Zavisca characterizes as discursive destabilization.

A central question for anthropologists of post-socialism has been what happens in that encounter. Ethnographies of post-socialist communities have characterized this uncertainty differently and have found variation in how people experience it. For example, Serguei Oushakine (2010) looks at repetitions and repurposings in the Russian art scene to suggest that Russians have been left with a limited symbolic vocabulary with which to make meaning in and of the world. Dawn Nafus (2006) finds St. Petersburgers taking on a "practical disposition" in which they effectively suspend judgement about the contexts in which they find themselves in order to be able to make decisions in the everyday. Nancy Ries (2009) looks to practices of gardening, particularly of the symbolically potent potato, as a way in which Russians make sense of and hedge against

economic and existential uncertainties. Working through moments when meaning breaks down or becomes problematized may also be an important ethical process, as Jarrett Zigon finds in his close examination of individual Muscovites' moral worlds (2010). At the same time, as I argued in Chapter Four, uncertainty can also be experienced as a kind of repressive force, resulting in limited agency and precluding the possibility of creative action. 'Dealing with uncertainty' may be one of the central preoccupations of the anthropology of post-socialism, raising the question of how certain experiences of disjuncture and uncertainty come to produce abjection and repression, while others—as I will describe in this chapter—are generative of action and creative (re)definition of social relationships.

In times of ongoing uncertainty, the structure-change dichotomy may simply dissolve. Change may be incomprehensible; seeming continuity may be empty of meaning. As Hoffman and Lubkemann write, “[e]vents—analytically designated as such because of their 'generative capacity'—present themselves as moments of shifting possibility and constraint for the crafting of subjectivity” (2005: 324). An event, in this view, is the potential for change combined with the unknowability of what that change will be or when it will come. Moore writes,

“Events may equally be evidence of the ongoing dismantling of structures or of attempts to create new ones. Events may show a multiplicity of social contestations and the voicing of competing cultural claims. Events may reveal substantial areas of normative indeterminacy. “ (Moore 1987: 729).

Moments at which seeming continuity is produced may be as significant as moments of radical change; both may be one and the same moment, but interpreted by different

audiences. It is the encounter with “normative indeterminacy” that is important, because it is that confrontation with the unknown that can provoke people to engage in a process of interpretation and norm-making. In this way, Pussy Riot became eventful by posting an interpretive challenge to observers, from the strangeness of the group’s original performance, to the surprising aggressiveness of the prosecution of the group.

Through these reactions and counter-reactions, Pussy Riot—the idea, the symbol—circulated globally. It is that process of provocation and circulation that I examine in the remainder of this chapter. To examine circulation, paying close attention to the work individuals do to circulate ideas, I draw on linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal’s concept of the *clasp*, part of her approach to analyzing the circulation of discourse (Gal 2007). The term ‘clasp’ refers to the relationship that develops between a speaker and an element in the discursive field when the speaker explains, categorizes, and interprets that element. As Gal describes, the clasp is a sort of ‘hinge’ that links the speaker and her object. When speakers discuss an object, they situate it within the discursive field and ascribe particular meanings to it. The concept of the clasp highlights how a speaker performs discursive work to give shape and meaning to the world around her, and in the same gesture situates herself relative to the object in a discursive field. Studying instances of circulation thus requires not only that we trace the movement of the circulated piece of discourse, but also that we attend to how speakers adjust their own positions and relationships within the discursive field as they circulate ideas. Whether we regard the outcome in terms of social change or continuity, in the process of provocation and circulation people construct a certain vision of their social order and their own position within it.

Making sense out of Pussy Riot

When Pussy Riot arose in conversation during my fieldwork, my interlocutors rarely discussed the works and views of the group in and of themselves. More often, they focused on the form of the group's action and the responses they received. In these cases, the clasp gesture involved establishing relationships among not only the speaker and Pussy Riot, but also other entities who had publicly reacted to Pussy Riot's action. For 'Alex,' a 20-something student and socialist activist, conducting this complex multi-part analysis was a well-honed skill. Listening to the organization's weekly meetings, I had observed that his political practice already involved regular close analysis of major news events for the explicit purpose of determining the organization's position. As we walked together to a meeting in April 2012, he asked me whether I found Pussy Riot's name offensive in English. I responded that it wasn't the sort of name I would mention to my grandmother, then asked what he thought of the group in general. Alex explained: 'Our official position is not to support such actions because they are not helpful. This is just actionism. It doesn't express any message, especially to the common people, to the workers. They don't understand an action like this. But of course we don't support the excessive repression used against the group.'

Drawing on his own experience as well as his study of Marxist theory, Alex created a clasp positioning Pussy Riot's action as the wrong kind of protest. As our conversation continued, he suggested that actions like Pussy Riot's were an expression of frustration from people who have decided normal channels of action don't work. Instead

of engaging in politics, they turn to sensationalist expressions just to get attention. In Alex's view, this was counterproductive in the long run because it would confuse and discourage people who might otherwise be sympathetic to opposition politics. He concluded that the correct strategy was to attract new supporters with a clear political message and concrete social demands, which is precisely what his group aims to do in public actions. While maintaining a sense that his group and Pussy Riot shared certain problems—repression by the authorities, difficulty in gaining political influence—Alex still created distance between Pussy Riot and his own group. Thus Alex's analysis and critique of Pussy Riot simultaneously functioned as a legitimization of his own group's tactics and ideology.

As Alex himself noted, he was expressing a position shared by others in his organization. Members of the group had discussed the issue extensively and circulated their analyses not only in conversation, but also in written form, as in this excerpt from Igor's essay in the *samizdat*⁴¹ feminist journal "No Means No!"

The persecution of anti-Putin "blasphemers" has caused a strong reaction in society. The growing movement of solidarity with the repressed underscores the rigidity and inflexibility of their pursuers among politicians and clergy. If the heiresses of "Voina,"⁴² Pussy Riot, didn't quite cause a war in society, then they certainly became symbols of the spirit of rebellion in recent times. [...]

⁴¹ "Self-published," a term often used to refer to censored materials that were published by Soviet dissidents, and which contemporary activists occasionally use today. Indeed, their publishing practices have more than a little continuity with those of earlier dissidents. Igor's organization had acquired a large copy machine, which occupied a corner of their headquarters/office, and which they used to produce leaflets and sometimes journals like "No Means No!" They currently used a professional printer to produce large quantities of journals and their occasional newspaper, but in earlier periods they had had difficulty finding a printer willing to publish their materials.

⁴² Voina was a radical art collective active in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the 2000s and included Nadya Tolikonnikova among its members.

For critique, the weakest point in their performance in the Cathedral is the fact that their political “message” was not in fact addressed to the mass of common workers, and so in many ways it hasn’t found a real response among them. Why the imprisonment of some “hooligans” should bother them remains unclear to the majority, while it’s easier to explain to many why a performance in a cathedral ought to anger them.

Like Alex’s statement, Igor’s essay commented on—thereby further circulating—Pussy Riot’s performance while at the same time highlighting his own political expertise and position. The clasp can be an efficient and productive discursive act, constructing and managing relationships among a host of objects within a discursive field: Pussy Riot, the ruling elite, Alex’s group, the working class. For many Muscovites, invoking Pussy Riot seemed to become a particularly salient way of organizing and interrogating their own political and moral concerns. In their writings, the members of Pussy Riot have not shown a particular interest in politicizing and mobilizing the working classes as such. Still, members of Alex’s group found the case useful for illustrating their own concerns about the current political landscape. At the same time, through their critique of Pussy Riot’s performance, they clarified and legitimated their own tactics. Pussy Riot as an event, in this case, was an opportunity for Alex and Igor to reinforce their existing values.

But why Pussy Riot in particular? Tolikonnikova, Alehkina, and Samutsevich were far from the only political protesters active in Moscow at the time, nor were they the only ones arrested. Furthermore, the “punk prayer” was not the group’s first action.⁴³

What made their performance in the Church of Christ the Savior more eventful than, for

⁴³ In addition to musical performances, Pussy Riot also performed an action titled “Kiss a Cop,” in which members kissed on-duty female police officers on the streets of Moscow. That action drew strong criticism from some other feminists who considered it a form of sexual assault.

example, their earlier performances of similar songs in a metro station and on Red Square? Of the infinite clasps a speaker could make at any given moment, why have so many chosen this one? Considering this question, I have found useful a term often introduced by my interlocutors: **provocation** (*provokatsia*), which I understand as an action intended to force a response by being too outrageous not to answer. In essence, a provocation transgresses the boundaries of the normative in a way that almost demands the observer articulate that norm. I offer this term with the caveat that calling something a ‘provocation’ typically implies a normative judgement, delegitimizing the alleged provocateur by implying that he is only interested in sparking a response or starting a fight. Still, I believe the term is nonetheless useful to describe a particular type of tactic used by activists to attempt to produce events. Through provocation, units of discourse come to appear as agents in a field of political action.

Provocation

One of the figures appearing periodically in activists’ talk about their work—recounting pickets they’ve held, planning work for upcoming rallies—is the provocateur (*provokator*). For example, Alex’s group published a warning/analysis for members prior to a major rally on June 12. The author reminds readers that the purpose of their participation is to share with the public carefully drafted messages: the necessity of self-organization and a change in the power structure, wariness of the liberals and media figures who have named themselves leaders of the opposition movement. But the article concludes with a warning:

Don't get into senseless clashes with the police. Unfortunately, the authorities are not yet on our side. Stop the provocateurs who are trying to start such clashes or to call for them. If these clashes start anyway, try to lead away attendees along with your friends and acquaintances to a safe place. If for some reason even that becomes impossible, and it becomes necessary to oppose police violence and mass arrests, organize for self-defense, join together, give aid to the injured and support to the arrested with actions of solidarity.

The threat of the provocateur is distraction and derailment. Through provocation, a person might interrupt a political action and prevent activists from pursuing their own projects. Note that this power is opposed to the activists' own desires and intentions—they are instructed to try to avoid being drawn into clashes, but warned that it might become impossible. The provocateur thus holds the potential power to shape the actions of others, almost to force others' responses against their own intentions.

In practice, some provocateurs are more successful than others, as I learned at a rally for May Day 2012. Leo warned me early on that we might be faced with provocateurs. "Be careful," he reminded me. "The situation can change very quickly. Avoid the mass of the crowd, and be ready to leave quickly." This warning worried me, although Leo sounded almost excited. But it wasn't until almost the end of the march that I saw even a hint of what he'd meant: a single man with a long graying beard, dressed in the black robe of an Orthodox priest, stood just past the metal barricade along the side of the parade route, reading from a Bible in a loud, angry voice. "What's that about?" I asked Leo. He shook his head dismissively. "Just a provocateur, don't pay attention to him," he replied.

Not every provocation is eventful, it turns out, because not every provocation is especially provocative. The May Day march ended uneventfully. But a few days later the May 6 “March of Millions” opposition rally on Bolotnaya Square resulted in bloody clashes with the police and dozens of arrests. The authorities claimed those arrested had started throwing rocks and chunks of pavement at the police, who were forced to respond. Opposition activists darkly blamed the police themselves, or even provocateurs who had hidden themselves among the otherwise-peaceful opposition. In interviews afterwards, several of my interlocutors recounted that the police had set up barricades in such a way that thousands of participants were backed into a closed-off area, provoking the violence by creating conditions of crowding and confusion. Whether a deliberate provocation occurred on one side or another, many police and marchers experienced one, reacted, and transformed “another typical march” into an event. Over the course of the next several months, at least two dozen march participants were formally arrested and charged with assaulting officers, and many remained in jail more than a year later.⁴⁴ The “prisoners of Bolotnaya” became another organizing cause for opposition activists, prompting ongoing pickets and blocs at later marches and rallies.

Everyday usages of the word “provocation” carry negative connotations, meanings I attempt to set aside to make the term theoretically useful. ‘Provocation’ may be used as an explanation or excuse for otherwise egregious behavior, as when the police claimed that they were forced to make mass arrests; ‘provocation’ implies that one has lost one's own agency and is not responsible for one's actions. In addition, the accusation of ‘provocation’ attempts to delegitimize the accused, as protesters attempt to discredit

⁴⁴ In December 2013, many of the prisoners were released as part of a mass amnesty in honor of the 25th anniversary of the Russian Constitution, likely timed to garner positive media attention ahead of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi.

state security forces by suggesting they planted provocateurs in the crowd. Claiming an action was merely a provocation implies that the provocateur's basic intention was just to cause trouble. In the case of Pussy Riot, by contrast, group members' interviews and published work make clear that their motivations went far beyond simply provoking a fight. Yet the kinds of reactions the performance at CCS produced show that, whether or not Pussy Riot intended to provoke, most observers experienced their action as a provocation. It was through that experience of provocation that Pussy Riot became an event.

What is a Pussy Riot, anyway?

What, then, was provocative about Pussy Riot's action in CCS? One can start with the group's name, which despite being English and essentially meaningless in Russian, was readily understood as something crude by most Russians I talked to, whether or not they knew the English slang term.⁴⁵ Like the group's name, their performance seemed perfectly designed to cause a stir, transgressive in form, content, and location. Instruments and dancing are not permitted inside Orthodox churches, much less cursing and arguably vulgar language in sacred and symbolically important space. While pointed political speech is quite common, to say the least, in everyday life in contemporary Russia, location certainly matters. Furthermore, all the known members of Pussy Riot were young women. Their performance was not simply a protest of citizens against

⁴⁵ Most often, the group's name was written in Latin characters, and occasionally it was transliterated (*Pussi Raiot*), but in conversation the group was always referred to as Pussy Riot, not a translated phrase. One of my Russian tutors, a member of the intelligentsia in his 60s, refused to refer to the group by name any time we discussed them, explaining that he did not want to "continue their performance."

powerful political institutions, but a protest by young feminist women against institutions dominated by powerful older men. The gendered aspect of the case played an important role in how it was circulated and what people found provocative about it. As Anya Bernstein has described, media coverage of the trial focused intensely, even erotically, on the three women's bodies, which she argues "became vital sites for the enactment of sovereignty for a wide range of citizens" for whom the young women of Pussy Riot served as a sacrifice to sovereign violence (Bernstein 2013: 222).

Certainly the Union of Orthodox Women viewed Pussy Riot's action as an extreme provocation, reading their action as particularly degrading to women. The group, a civil society organization with strong ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, released a statement in late March 2012 linking Pussy Riot to moral decay:

The recent outburst of a so-called punk group, which considers itself feminist, plunged the majority of citizens of Russia into shock. The blasphemous act insulted not only the feelings of the faithful, but also the heroism of our ancestors who died on the fields of battle in the Fatherland War of 1812.⁴⁶

We consider the "punk prayer" an extremist crime, degrading millions of women of faith, and demand an appropriate legal assessment be given by society and those in power to this action. It is necessary to denounce this provocation, so that such antics are not repeated. Otherwise, our society can safely be characterized as terminally morally ill.

What referents do the Union of Orthodox Women bring into the clasp here? Feminism certainly, a theme that will be discussed later. Blasphemy as well: dancing of

⁴⁶ The Cathedral of Christ the Savior was originally built to commemorate Russia's victory in the war against France in 1812.

any kind is proscribed in Orthodox churches, much less feminist-themed punk music performed on altars. The letter makes what at first seems a peculiar reference to the Fatherland War of 1812, in honor of which CCS was originally built. It is noteworthy, then, that Pussy Riot performed in the year of the 200th anniversary of Russia's victory over Napoleon. The Church and the government planned an extensive series of commemorative events throughout the year, including public and widely televised services at CCS. Under Stalin, it had been demolished and replaced with a public swimming pool, then rebuilt in gold-leaf and marble glory in the 1990s. Its services for major Orthodox holidays are often televised and attended by prominent state officials.⁴⁷ As a symbol, then, CCS has been used to link the contemporary state to imperial history, the history of Orthodoxy, and the return of the Orthodox Church to public life after socialism. The use of the term 'provocation' in this context helps illustrate how such actions are productive insofar as they produce social action and reaction by defying social norms. The authors worry that this "blasphemous act" is not an outlier, but a hint of worse to come. Pussy Riot far exceeded the limits of acceptable behavior and did so in a particularly publicly meaningful place. Such an action must be answered, lest it invite further blasphemies and the erasure of norms altogether.

One key feature of a provocation, then, is that it threatens the social order through transgression. As Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina point out in their analysis of the Pussy Riot case, transgression of norms in a symbolically rich performance is a key reason why the group's performance attracted such attention (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2012). The threat raised by a provocation is not merely that it momentarily disturbs society. By so blatantly violating norms, it carries the potential to

⁴⁷ The Cathedral also receives about 350 million rubles/year from the Moscow city budget (2013).

redefine what kinds of actions are possible and permitted. The provocation thus causes observers to feel they must respond in order to defend their preferred social order. In this case, the combination of location, form, and message of Pussy Riot's action appeared acutely threatening to a group of Orthodox women whose political projects are directed toward increasing respect for Orthodoxy and the influence of the Orthodox Church in public life.

Clarifying the precise mechanism of the clasp in these instances of norm-transgression helps illuminate how provocation relates to social change and continuity. In a sense, provocation brings norms into existence at the moment it violates them. That is, before the provocation, the norms are implicit, latent, even unconscious. It is only after violation that the boundaries themselves are made visible as people create clasps, identifying the transgression as a transgression while simultaneously establishing their own positions. In a sense, provocation produces social norms by prompting people to make them visible. It is at this moment of visibilization that it becomes possible either to change or reinforce them. A provocation's power, then, is that it creates conditions in which both change and the production of continuity become possible

For Muscovites who already related more critically to the state and the Orthodox Church, the provocation was less Pussy Riot's action than the authorities' repressive response. Olga, a radical feminist and LGBT activist, gave me a copy of an essay she had written for a samizdat feminist literary journal when I asked her what she thought of the group. A generation older than most of my interlocutors, Olga had trained as a historian but had made a career in media amid the crises of the post-Soviet period. Analyzing why this case seemed to resonate with so many people, she had written:

They appeared in the needed time in the needed place and revealed those acute social problems which had long been brewing in society, but which nobody could quite so precisely poke a finger into. [...] It is entirely true that if the three members hadn't been arrested, Pussy Riot would have remained a punk feminist youth group, an art-activist project, which would have developed within the frame of the youth culture-protest political movement. But their arrest—that continuation of their performance, a growth of their performance in the mass scale of the entire country—that's what made Pussy Riot a phenomenon.

Olga's insight, that the group's arrest became an important part of the success of their performance, is borne out in the frequency with which other Moscow activists commented on the group's arrest and prosecution in discussions of Pussy Riot. At the March of Millions opposition protest in September 2012, hundreds of participants had signs, balloons, t-shirts, and other materials carrying the visage of Pussy Riot. The group's multicolored balaclavas had become iconic. I asked Dasha, a leftist activist in her late teens, why this was such a popular theme. "They're a symbol of repression now," Dasha said, explaining that they demonstrated the excessive force being used by the authorities against protestors, including herself and many of her friends. Many signs at the march mentioned the members of Pussy Riot alongside other opposition protesters who had been arrested on seemingly specious charges. These protesters, not unlike the Union of Orthodox Women, viewed Pussy Riot's case as an example of norms being challenged. But they presented the threat as encroaching authoritarianism undermining norms of free political speech. In a way, it didn't matter what Pussy Riot's intended message had been: the fact that they had been imprisoned merely for singing in a

cathedral was provocation enough.

While Alex, Igor, Olga, and Dasha linked Pussy Riot to issues of political protest and government repression (thereby reinforcing their own positions as activists working against an unjust system), many Orthodox activists situated the group within a landscape of moral and demographic crisis caused in part by feminism. Presenting at a major conference for Russian Orthodox activists in October 2012, 'Anna,' a retired schoolteacher, invoked Pussy Riot as an example of the declining morality visible all around:

We unfortunately in this year must talk about declines in morality, about declines in morals, about the demographic crisis, about the crisis in motherhood [...]

Young women break into a cathedral, put on so-called "punk-prayers", [...] That those who perpetuate the case of the movement Femen, as the movement is called by feminists, absolutely so to speak related to the feminist movement, are prepared to rip up holy crosses, and that is good to them. I would like to remind you again that the cross was—The first cross worshipped in Russia was raised by Queen Olga. It's not that today young women just behave themselves that way and that this happens. I think this is not simply a sad event. It was made by our terrible time. It was an attack on Orthodoxy and an attack also on us.

Anna's organization had released a statement online shortly after Pussy Riot's action expressing a similar set of associations:

The main purpose of women—is it really causing boorish behavior, the satisfaction of vile passions, the desire for wealth? If this is really so, then it is a shame for all women. What kind of example will we leave for our descendents?

What kind of families will they create?

The concept of “women’s happiness” is deliberately distorted in the eyes of the public, encouraging women to relate disparagingly to traditional family values, placing in the forefront only the cult of consumption and social self-realization. Already now we see how actively feminist organizations support the idea of safe abortions, the LGBT community, sterilization and other such things. Is this the defense of women’s rights? Not one of them talks about chastity, about the right of a woman to give birth to a child, about fidelity and self-sacrifice.

Interestingly, Anna asserts a connection between the group and the Ukrainian feminist group Femen, which felled a large cross in a public action in Ukraine shortly after the sentencing of the three convicted Pussy Riot members. Anna establishes an opposition between Orthodoxy and feminists, a group which includes both Pussy Riot and Femen and which both signals and causes moral decline (see Zychowicz 2011 for a discussion of Femen's own controversial position within Ukrainian women's activism). At the same time, with this clasp Anna allies herself and her audience with Orthodoxy. Her vilification of Pussy Riot and other “feminists” helps establish Anna’s position as a defender of morality in a time of crisis.

Anna’s linking Pussy Riot to the Ukrainian feminist group Femen shows how the case was especially fruitful because of its openness to further associations. This multivocality helped Pussy Riot’s performance and subsequent arrest circulate because they could easily be made relevant to an incredible variety of other subjects. Yet that openness to clasps meant that Pussy Riot’s own goals and intentions, their self-definition, even their publicly available statements, exerted only a limited influence on the meanings

observers ascribed to their action. The highly contested question of Pussy Riot's relationship to feminism and other feminist groups demonstrates just how limited the group's control over its message was.

Anna's clasp equates Pussy Riot and Femen and asserts that they are both part of a broader movement of feminists. From another point of view, the two groups are separate entities operating in different countries, focusing on different issues, and using fundamentally different tactics. Femen is known for its young female activists appearing topless in public, while perhaps the most widely recognized feature of Pussy Riot's protests are the multi-colored balaclavas and dresses worn by the members. These differences were highlighted by Pussy Riot member Ekaterina (Katya) Samutsevich in an interview after her release from prison:

Kseniya Sobchak: And how do you relate to Femen? Many believe that is your Ukrainian analogue.

Ekaterina Samutsevich: No, I don't believe that is an analogue. They are entirely unlike us in form and even in their view of feminism. [...] Our character is not a girl who takes her clothes off because she wants to look pretty for men. Femen doesn't hide this and writes that 'men want to see women, and so we appear. Through an image that pleases men, we will advance feminism.' [...] We cover our faces. We have a rather androgynous image, a kind of being in a dress and colored tights. Something resembling a woman, but without a woman's face, without hair. An androgyne, resembling a hero from a cartoon, a superhero. (Sobchak and Sokolova 2012)

Samutsevich engages in a sort of anti-clasp, rejecting the association that others

have made between her group and Femen. In doing so, she questions the form of Femen's feminist activism—appealing to the male gaze—and thereby legitimizes her own group's vision, an anonymous superhero whose gender is unclear.

The contest to define Pussy Riot's relationship to the rest of the feminist community was heated, similar to what Jessica Zychowicz (2011) finds among Ukrainian feminist reactions to Femen. Another form of anti-clasp was made by a group of liberal Russian feminists. After the magazine *Snob* published an interview in which an expatriate Russian feminist seemed to claim that feminism in Russia had been almost dead before Pussy Riot appeared, Natasha Bitten, who runs an internet community for Russian feminists, wrote a pointed response:

Russian feminists were accused of being stupid, ignorant, uninformed [...] In all this goes unmentioned the fact that Pussy Riot, and in particular, those arrested for the action in CCS, distanced themselves as much from the ideas of feminism as from Russian feminist organizations [...]. The group PR has in no way supported the struggle of Russian feminist groups against the anti-woman draft law of the Duma restricting the reproductive rights of Russian women. When the anti-abortion law was passed all the same, Pussy Riot announced that feminism in the Russian Federation doesn't exist, because the problem of abortion doesn't trouble anyone, didn't cause any mass protests, and wasn't publicized at all in mass media.

Note that even though the infamous punk-prayer explicitly refers to feminism, Valentina's clasp attempts to separate Pussy Riot from the categories of feminism and Russian feminist organizations. Valentina further complains about the global attention

Pussy Riot received, comparing it to the difficulty other Russian women's groups have in getting attention from the global community, for example when she sought recognition from the UN committee on Women's Rights about rights violations in Russia. For her, Pussy Riot's provocation was not that they attacked the Orthodox Church or even only that their punishment demonstrates a regime edging into authoritarianism, but that their media success allowed them and their supporters to erase the rest of the Russian feminist community.

The conflict around defining Pussy Riot's relationship to feminists and feminism shows how a combination of provocation and symbolic openness helps discourse circulate by inviting and demanding that people interpret and respond to it. This, I argue, is why looking for circulation may help us identify events worth watching for: the more an event defies understanding, the more people may feel compelled to discuss, interpret, and react to it.⁴⁸

There is no guarantee, of course, that the meanings intended by the originator of the discourse will circulate along with it. Pussy Riot's iconic uniforms, the transgressive location and subject of their action, and the symbolic richness of their performance encouraged the series of clasps that made their performance circulate around Moscow, Russia, and even the globe. But as Alex and Igor point out, all this circulation doesn't necessarily mean the group's intended messages are being understood, much less adopted by observers. And in a dark irony, the same qualities that helped the group's performance circulate—a combination of provocation and openness to redefinition—almost certainly contributed to the state's arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment of Tolokonnikova,

⁴⁸ This is not to say that all instances of circulation are eventful, or that all events worth analyzing are publicly discussed (Das 2007 provides wrenching counterexamples, events noteworthy for their silence.)

Alekhina, and Samutsevich. As Igor writes, the case may even have been useful for the authorities in a time of increasing political unrest:

It's impossible not to notice that the authorities were able to manipulate the religious and national sentiments of people, since this allows them to amalgamate social protest and decrease the threat of open class conflict. That's why, on the other hand, no matter how careful Pussy Riot were, the authorities could always represent this in a light beneficial to themselves, as they have done with all protests.

If it is so easy for a resonant protest to lose its meaning, is there any value in being circulated? The provocative form of the group's performance raised lively opinions about the value of provocative protest, including the possibility that provocation might be an important and useful tactic in Russian political life. Here it is important to keep in mind the nature of the public sphere in today's Russia: mass media, particularly television, is dominated by government control. Real access to organs of political power is severely limited. While Russians have constitutional rights to freedom of speech and free association, in practice these too are often limited or their exercise punished with fines and jail, as I detail at several points in this dissertation. Drawing on a close reading of the group's statements and her previous contact with some members of the group through protests and feminist/LGBT activity in Moscow, Lena connects the group's aesthetic to this situation:

Pussy Riot chose punk-rock and illegal partisan⁴⁹ performance because they were needed to express [the group's] position in conditions of bought-off and lie-ridden

⁴⁹ *Partizanskoe*, a reference to guerilla fighters such as the Soviet partisans who fought within German-occupied territory during World War II.

mass media, and likewise of conservatively oriented cultural institutions. They used a bright, postmodern, provocative uniform, which successfully contrasted itself with the formalized social consciousness. [...] The bright uniform, taken from oi!-punk, and above all, the provocativeness allowed them to attract the attention of various levels of society. And they started talking about Pussy Riot. Provoked to talk about Pussy Riot, as I have argued, they were also talking about themselves and their own political predicaments.

Conclusion

The reactions provoked by Pussy Riot's protest show that in some ways their action was quite successful. Their "punk prayer" provided an opportunity for observers to examine and discuss the moral and political landscapes of contemporary Russia as they parsed the group's meaning. By defining Pussy Riot, they defined themselves. The form and content of their performance, as well as the nature of responses to the group, invited observers especially to consider questions of Church and state interaction, the state of feminism in Russia, and rights of free speech and religious observance. Pussy Riot became evidence of a shocking moral decline, of the failure of the opposition to reach the working class, of growing political repression under Putin's government, or of the marginalization of feminism in Russia. But some of these interpretations stray quite far from the group's own views. Pussy Riot's support for LGBT rights also seems to have been little noted in mass media discussion of the group. The punk-prayer in CCS demonstrates the unstable power of the provocation. By being radically transgressive, a

provocation has the capacity to spur people to reinterpret and realign themselves in moral and political fields. Yet the impossibility of controlling their responses means that the results of successful circulation are unpredictable.

In the end, what has all this eventfulness—the sound and the fury—led to? Change and continuity are both difficult to measure, and it is a risky project to predict the results of events that may still be developing. Still, a few examples suggest the way that events—like all social life—play out somewhere between full revolution and complete retrenchment. On the part of the state, the provocation of Pussy Riot led not only to arrests but also to increased legal protection for the faithful; as of December 2013 offending the feelings of religious believers may be punished by up to three years in prison.

Some activists, on the other hand, came to feel more positively about the group. Igor reported in an interview in spring 2013 that he had changed his mind about Pussy Riot after their court statements and embrace of the role of ‘conscientious political prisoner’. Seeing how seriously they carried themselves, he grew to respect them as fellow activists. Valentina, despite her early frustration with responses to the group’s plight, wasn’t immune to taking some pleasure in their effect on the Moscow landscape. Walking by CCS with me in 2013, she pointed out the Cathedral. “Do you know what foreigners call it now?”

“No,” I replied.

Smiling wryly, she answered, “The Pussy Riot cathedral.”

The example of Pussy Riot recalls Michael Jackson's warning that intersubjectivity is not always empathetic or full of understanding (Jackson 1998). Small

though they might be, the shifts in Igor's and Valentina's relationships to Pussy Riot illustrate how intersubjective exchanges laced with friction, such as the process of provocation, can play a role in producing changes in subjectivity. Alternatively, the perceived aggression and blasphemy of Pussy Riot helped energize and solidify conservative activists' self-identification as defenders of traditional culture. Friction in social encounters can thus be a generative force, an issue the following chapters will continue to explore in terms of schism, refusal, and insistence.

Chapter Six

Schism, solidarity, and the deinstitutionalization of Russian feminism

Galina: Sometimes I feel like a teacher in a kindergarten. Everyone saying “I want... I want!” And they don’t listen to advice, to experience. So much energy is wasted.

Jessica: So you mentioned that there were a lot of *raskoly*, schisms. And why do you think that happens, that groups have debates and problems and split apart?

Vera: I think it’s a natural process. I don’t think it’s bad. It can seem bad for, I don’t know, publicity or something. But the group *Za Feminizm* fell apart based on political reasons. It was a difference between liberal feminism and radical feminism. It was... we couldn’t have overcome that.

What should we make of conflicts between activists who, at least in principle, are on the same side? It might be tempting to assume, like Galina, that a falling-out is a failure, particularly when it results in the dissolution of an activist group. After all, one of the measures many observers use to gauge the success of a social movement is how many people join the cause. Losing members, or even entire organizations, would seem obviously to be detrimental to a movement. Activists who insist on highlighting conflicts and internal problems are frequently branded troublemakers or provocateurs, accused of wasting time and energy or foolish refusal to compromise for the greater good. Yet from the troublemakers’ perspective, conflict may seem useful, productive, even necessary.

In this chapter, I focus on contention and cooperation between the grassroots feminist activists I worked with and other activist and civil society groups in Moscow. On the one hand, many of my interlocutors repeatedly refused to engage with certain other activist ventures, such as rejecting as authoritarian overtures to consolidate feminist organizing under the umbrella of the liberal party Yabloko. On the other hand, they themselves organized events intended to promote feminism and to build links across activist organizations, in which they insisted on certain principles of horizontal organization and voluntarism. As Vera pointed out in the quotation that opened this chapter, behind these disputes, which appear to be largely contests over organizing process, lurk deeper disagreements about feminist ideology and, I argue, about the meaning and purpose of activism itself. Through this interplay of schism and solidarity-building, grassroots activists try to advance a new model of feminist activism that seeks forms of resistance to gender inequality that do not simultaneously recapitulate other forms of oppression. I suggest that these efforts take on a particular importance in a period when the women's movement in Russia is undergoing a sort of "de-institutionalization" and is coming under greater threat from state authorities.

The waxing and waning of the organized Russian women's movement

While the history of feminism in Russia dates back at least to the 19th century (Stites 1978), and the women's movement played a significant role in the early years of the Soviet government as described in Chapter One, the forms of activism and institutional structures I observed in Moscow by 2012 were shaped at least as much by

post-Soviet policies, Western development interventions, and the globalization of “third wave” feminism (particularly through the internet), as by any deep links to Russian history. This is not to say that feminism is somehow foreign to Russia, despite claims to that effect made by advocates for “traditional” Russian culture. The feminist activists I worked with sometimes explicitly rooted themselves in their national history, citing writings by Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin or creating contemporary art with allusions to Russian suffragists or women in the 19th century anarchist movement. The basic framework of institutionalized feminism (or lack thereof), and the kinds of women’s organizations available for activists to work with and within, though, were strongly shaped by more recent history.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, research into Russian women’s movements encountered and investigated a particular historical moment when Western political and financial interventions were attempting to foster civil society in the countries of the former USSR. As Janet Johnson described in her study of the women’s crisis center movement in Russia, women’s NGOs in the 1990s were in large part a direct product of investment by Western government and foundation grants, particularly from the United States, that intended to advance “democratization” through “civil society” development, including around women’s issues. This is not to say that the crisis centers and other organizations that resulted were somehow inauthentic; Johnson details how eager many women activists were to have resources with which to address problems they themselves felt to be pressing, such as what Western feminist discourse terms domestic violence (Johnson 2009). While the granting process did work to orient Russian organizations to the goals and interests of funding organizations, these goals were at the same time

vernacularized (Merry 2006), as when “domestic violence” became “violence in the family” in the context of Russian crisis centers. Still, as Johnson notes, the decline of these funding streams in the 2000s led to a precipitous decline in the number of organizations and crisis centers, most of which had never acquired local sources of funding.

Julie Hemment similarly points out that Western governments (in particular, the United States) and foundations hoping to promote certain kinds of social, political, and economic reform in the former Soviet Union initially looked to women’s organizations as a particularly fruitful site for cultivating civil society. In principle, “civil society” was touted as a space for engaged citizenship, empowerment, and healthy debate about state and society. But as Hemment notes, in the 1990s civil society became something of a catch-all signifier for development projects, suggesting whatever reforms the speaker considered necessary in the “transition” from state socialism, and civil society projects came to be central to development work in the region, closely related to the ongoing privatization of government functions, which programs in the new “third” sector were meant to ameliorate. The financial support of foreign granting organizations succeeded in creating hundreds of thousands of NGOs in Russia, including organizations focused specifically on issues understood as related to women, such as domestic violence. Perhaps ironically, given that privatization of services such as childcare, education, and housing disproportionately marginalize women, women took on leading roles in many “third sector” organizations (Hemment 2007).

In some ways, participation in the third sector has provided women with opportunities for individual empowerment and self-actualization—as well as social

capital and sometimes even income—that they had little access to elsewhere in an increasingly precarious and gender- and age-stratified job market (as Phillips 2008 also describes in Ukraine). Foreign support for women’s organizations in Russia also achieved some success in problematizing certain social problems identified as feminist, albeit transformed somewhat in translation (as when “violence against women” and “domestic violence” became “violence in the family”). Yet the market reforms and privatization that were promoted through and enabled in part by civil society development have on the whole marginalized women, while the individualistic and depoliticized nature of NGO work has arguably made it more difficult to see or address gender inequality (and other forms of inequality) as systematic and political problems (Hemment 2007). Furthermore, some feminist NGO work entangles activists with other oppressive structures, such as how framing and fighting the problems of “violence against women” and “trafficking” provided new avenues for the operation of state security apparatuses (Hemment 2007). Perhaps ironically, the withdrawal of foreign funding for women's organizations in recent years of austerity budgets and shifting policy priorities might offer the silver lining of an opportunity for Russian feminists to rearticulate their relationships to institutionalized power, both at home and abroad.

By the time I arrived for fieldwork in Moscow, the feminist scene bore strong traces of these international civil society-development ventures. International feminist organizing retained a presence, as when a representative of Eve Ensler's "One Billion Rising" NGO organized a performance of *The Vagina Monologues* in Moscow, which several Russian activists participated in. Many activists I spoke with had volunteered at crisis centers at one time or another, and a few had worked for various feminist or

women's NGOs. Other traces of this history appear throughout my research: feminist graffiti art publicizing the phone number of the last remaining women's crisis hotline in Moscow; lively discussions among activists at events hosted by international NGOs like Amnesty International; an LGBT film festival sponsored by the Open Society Foundation and several European Union government funds. Though the formal organizations of the "third sector" were in decline, they continued to play roles in the lives of grassroots activists, from providing physical space to giving training and education. A similar role was played by the political party Yabloko, whose Gender Fraction was headed by a woman with strong personal and professional ties to the organized women's movement. But for a number of reasons, which I will discuss in this chapter, the relationships of my interlocutors with institutionalized feminism tended to be distant if not tense or distrustful. Much of their work happened outside the framework of funded civil society organizations, and several activists (feminist and otherwise) explicitly criticized groups that were "fed on grants" as overly beholden to those who held the purse strings.

Their criticisms echo those made by researchers who have pointed out the ways that foreign funders encourage local NGOs and activists to orient their activities around grant-seeking and funders' interests, and that the resulting institutions' activities are often focused on self-perpetuation (Mosse 2013). For women's movements in Russia and East Europe, this has led to organizations that are less well-integrated into their local communities, dependent on funding, and which may not be entirely free to pursue the issues of interest to themselves (Hemment 2007, Johnson 2009, Phillips 2008). As Hemment puts it, "Like NGO professionals everywhere, [Russian women activists] find themselves preoccupied less with local issues than with pleasing donors and securing

their own organizational sustainability” (Hemment 2007: 6). Furthermore, in an increasingly anti-Western climate, financial ties to foreign donors pose substantial risks to Russian organizations. Declining to be involved in more institutionalized forms of activism, then, is one answer to this problem. Refusal might be not merely troublesome, but an attempt to make space for the enactment of some other form of feminist activism. As I will show in this chapter, the interplay between refusal and engagement produced a dynamic series of developments in the activist community.



Figure 1: Graffiti on the door of a human rights lawyer's office in Moscow, March 2013. "Foreign Agent <3 USA"

A meeting goes sour

The October 2012 meeting of the discussion group “School of Feminism” was to be about whether Russia needed a feminist party. The topic followed from a new law passed earlier in 2012 liberalizing the rules for registering new political parties.

Meeting locations for the School of Feminism varied, a problem of location which highlights access to and sharing of physical space as an important hinge between grassroots activism and activism organized by NGOs and political parties in Russia. The first meeting I had attended in the spring had started outside in a square near the center of Moscow. We’d met near a monument, chatted about recent events while waiting for others to join, then all together had walked a few blocks to a family psychology office where we were borrowing space for the afternoon—the office's owner was a friend of 'Olga,' the group's organizer. Along the way we made a stop at a convenience store where each of us picked up cookies and candy to share for tea. We picked our way through a courtyard, into an older brick building, and upstairs to an office with four or five rooms. At the door, we hung up our coats and exchanged our shoes for indoor slippers and sandals, then gradually settled into a room just big enough for the dozen or so women who had come. Olga invited us to set our chairs in a circle, adding that she herself was more comfortable on the floor. Mid-way through the discussion, we took a long break for tea. The atmosphere was warm and informal.

The October meeting, by contrast, was hosted by the Gender Fraction of the liberal-democratic party Yabloko, an opposition party that had become extremely marginalized at the national level by 2012, but nonetheless remained active. This time I

arrived alone and was buzzed into the locked building by a security officer, who checked my passport at the front desk before directing me upstairs. Party flyers and newsletters were laid out on tables in every hallway; Yabloko's party symbol, apples,⁵⁰ dominated the decorating scheme from paintings on the walls to inlaid apples on the tile floors. I found my way to a large hall on the top floor, hung my coat on the wall, and found a seat midway along one side of a U-shaped conference table large enough for at least 30 people. A massive banner promoting civic activism, in Yabloko green, adorned the wall. By the time we started, there were perhaps 15 of us, the majority young women in their thirties or younger.

The leader of the Gender Fraction, Galina Mikhaileva, welcomed us all and passed around a petition she encouraged us all to sign, protesting a proposed increase in capital repairs fees for Moscow residents—an effort to force residents to take on more of the costs of apartment buildings which the government was still responsible for maintaining. Such proposals represent the long tail of neoliberal reforms in Russia, whose infrastructure and citizens' attitudes have proven resistant to a complete rejection of government responsibility for public welfare (Collier 2011).

After pointing out the petition, Galina invited the circle of attendees to introduce ourselves. Explaining that today's event would include two short reports about the idea of a feminist party and then a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages, Galina introduced 'Elisa,' the young woman who would present "for" the formation of a Feminist Party. About 30 years old, Elisa walked around to the head of the room, her hands fidgeting a bit from nerves. In contrast to the middle-aged Galina's suit, Elisa wore

⁵⁰ The party name "Yabloko" is formed from the names of the three founders. In Russia, the word also means "apple," and so apples are something of a design theme in the party office.

what I described in my notes as “pretty sweet black t-shirt with a white and silver dragon graphic on it” and combat boots. Elisa was not a polished speaker; her presentation was delivered in an irregular staccato, sometimes breaking in mid-thought or advancing rapidly in bursts. She began to speak about how a feminist party could be formed, but Galina broke in, explaining that this wasn’t a discussion about how to form such a party. Instead, we were to discuss whether it would be worth doing. Elisa started again, this time focusing on why she thought it was an important project. Her gestures were sharp, emphatic, and her face grew mobile with excitement when she arrived at certain points.

‘Women have many problems, but few pay attention; a feminist party is needed to draw attention to issues like unequal pay, lack of preschools, domestic violence, and—especially—the growing power of the Russian Orthodox Church.’ Elisa noted that the Church received a lot of money to build cathedrals, but there was little money in the budget to support families. The Church and the government should stop propagandizing, telling women to birth more babies, if they’re not going to use resources to support women, she argued. Elisa envisioned a party that would draw attention to problems that fall particularly hard on women, and furthermore, that would be a party for all women organized on what women have in common, no matter who they are—liberal or nationalist, or of any religion, even Muslim. She concluded by observing that women so often aren’t needed and aren’t visible. Only women know themselves and their own problems, and so it is women who should come together to discuss their own goals and needs, and only then could they go to support other parties or any other organizations.

The audience clapped appreciatively, and Elisa took her seat.

Galina followed, starting by saying that she would, to a degree, play devil’s

advocate. She emphasized that she had spent a long time studying and working on politics and women's issues, from her doctoral research to over a decade of work with the party Yabloko, including founding the Gender Faction. In a firm voice, she said she would be happy to share her extensive experience with everyone here. She pointed out that there are so many parties in Russia, especially since the law changed, and few of them receive much attention or have much influence. Organizing a party takes a great deal of time, organization, paperwork, and even money. Certainly, she added, anyone who wants to form a new party is welcome to, but why re-invent the wheel? She invited everyone to feel free to make use of Yabloko's resources, from meeting space to library materials, and to think about joining an existing party rather than spending a lot of effort for little result. She didn't mean everyone was expected to join Yabloko—she clarified—but Yabloko's doors were always open.

It seemed that she had struck a nerve. 'Sofia,' a feminist visiting from Saint Petersburg, jumped in once the discussion period opened. We were deceived, she complained. Nobody had announced earlier that this was a Yabloko event; it was supposed to be for the School of Feminism. And hadn't most of us come because we were interested in helping to found a feminist party? We already decided that we want one, so why was Galina telling us that we shouldn't?

Others joined in, agreeing that they'd already decided it was an important project—that's why this meeting had been scheduled in the first place! The discussion grew heated, with many expressing their irritation that Yabloko had seemingly taken over this event or had invited them under false pretenses. After about 45 minutes, Galina threw up her hands and excused herself from the discussion, saying that we were welcome to

stay for the rest of the allotted time, but if everyone was going to be so argumentative, she would just wish us luck.

I followed her out to ask for an interview. As we walked downstairs to her office, Galina was frustrated with what she understood as waste: ‘Here we have so many young women, with so much energy, and it’s all going to nothing. Sometimes I feel like a kindergarten teacher. Everyone saying “I want... I want”! And they don’t listen to advice, to experience. So much energy is wasted.’ She explained that she had seen this dynamic before, young women who get excited but don’t listen to experience and advice, so they keep repeating the same mistakes that have been made before.

* * *

The feminism of many of the young grassroots activists I spent most of my time with and that of feminists more integrated into the “third sphere” of women’s NGOs and party activism often appeared to be in friction. In this chapter, I outline the sources of that friction, mainly from the perspective of younger activists, in order to elaborate a concept of schism (*raskol*) as it relates to the dynamics of activist coalitions. While my analysis in certain respects builds on prior studies of women’s movements in the post-socialist world and transnational feminist movements, by focusing on grassroots activists who have fractious relationships with organizations that are better integrated into the familiar communities of “civil society” or “third sphere” feminism I hope to open up a broader discussion of the dynamics of coalition activism.

I suggest that younger activists’ refusals, schisms, and other forms of contention

create the sort of generative friction (Tsing 2004) that domestic and transnational feminisms may need to escape their entanglements with state power and the limitations of liberal formations of women's rights. In and of themselves, schisms may not always or immediately produce an answer to the problems that generate them. But they may hold open space for activists to demand engagement with those problems, a practice of "social agonism" that produces the disruption which Butler and Athanasiou suggest is necessary to reimagine activism "beyond and against its normative reduction to a technique of neoliberal governmentality" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 141). Grassroots activists may not have worked out all the shapes a feminist movement might take outside its institutionalized forms, but within their resistance to undesired organizational practices we can see an insistence on finding new alternatives.

Schism as crisis: The organization view

The schism at this School of Feminism discussion resulted from a friction between different expectations about the purpose of the event and different visions of what a feminist movement should be. Galina, on the one hand, had pragmatic concerns shaped by nearly two decades of experience in civil society, specifically organizing activism on gender issues through her position in the opposition party Yabloko. While her primary work has been within a political party, not an NGO per se, Galina's career has followed the kind of trajectory that has prompted some to critique NGOs as merely recapitulating existing social hierarchies (Steven Sampson etc).

Galina: I started to work with Yabloko, but in fact I already knew many of the

people before the founding of Yabloko, with the exception of Yavlinsky. The current chairman, for example. I've been acquainted with him since 1987. I began to work in Yabloko in 1998, and after that I quickly became a member of the party. [...]

Jessica: And it was you who founded the Gender Fraction [of Yabloko]?

Galina: Yes... At first I had a gender commission, from around 2000. And beginning in 2006, when it was allowed for us to form factions, the commission was reorganized into a fraction.

In addition to heading the Gender Fraction of the party, Galina has also played a major role in organizing a number of conferences and events related to an attempt to consolidate a women's movement in Russia. Yet she in some ways recognizes the value in a degree of separation:

Jessica: Why did you need to create a separate fraction?

Galina: Because not everyone shares these views. We [in the party] also have enough people with traditional, patriarchal views. Of course the general views of the party are changing, but this requires very serious effort. Because until I started to engage with it, the theme of gender equality wasn't on the agenda for the party. That is, it wasn't considered an important political theme. Well, and to this day some believe that it isn't necessary for women to have the same rights as men. True, now they don't say this out loud, and earlier they did. But they think it and it's apparent.

Galina explained with some pride that even though Yabloko had never instituted a quota for women in leadership roles, its leadership was currently about 30% women. But when

I asked her to explain why she thought gender quotas were a good idea, she answered that they had worked in many countries to get attention paid to women's and family issues, but Russian politics had gotten extremely difficult for women.

Galina: But it's very difficult to affect Russia now [compared to Central and Eastern Europe]. Especially as far as women's rights are concerned. Right now we have the complete opposite trend, in the opposite direction.

Jessica: Why is that, do you think?

Galina: What do you mean why? Because our government became authoritarian. In a democratic government the question of observing minority rights falls away naturally. Women in some sense are a minority, in the sense of discrimination. In an authoritarian government this doesn't happen. Entirely naturally they begin to pressure women, especially if clericalization starts as it has for us. So that's twice as much, if not four times. That is pressure. But it's even legitimated through legal acts. For example, attempts to pass a law that limits reproductive rights, like we have had. The elimination of any mechanism that would allow women to protect their own rights.

In her view, the social and political situation facing the women's movement in Russia was dire and getting worse. Not only did it make little sense for young activists to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, when a fully-fledged party already existed to fight for their issues, it was actually an incredible waste of activist energy that was in urgent need and short supply. Galina asserted in an interview in October 2012 that Russia had no real feminist movement and few women's organizations, particularly after the decline in foreign funding.

Galina: Women's organizations are weak because they were all paid for by Americans, Americans, Dutch, a little bit from the Germans, a little bit from the English. But after 1996 they all started to exit, and now the last fund that financed the majority of women's organizations, USAID, left on October 1st.

Jessica: Yes, I wanted to ask how things will be after the exit of USAID.

Galina: Bad, it will be bad! We have a system of distributing government grants [...] connected with the Public Chamber,⁵¹ but who do they give grants to? They give grants to cossacks, Orthodox *druzhiny* [self-defense squads], Nashi [the pro-Putin youth organization]. If they give anything to some kind of women's organization, it will be to some kind of organization in the All-Russia National Front. Anyone who wants, even a little, to talk about defending rights, forget it. Here the word '*pravozashchita*' is almost a synonym for "foreign spy," "foreign agent." So it will be very bad. Our own resources are very few, in the organization. I think now there will be a very serious crisis.

Schism as grassroots refusal

But the younger activists who broke into complaint during the discussion understood Galina's goal rather differently. They came to suspect that her true motivation in hosting the event was not simply to provide space for an open discussion about feminist politics, but to increase the membership rolls of her own party. From their

⁵¹ A government body with a consultative or oversight role in Russian Parliament, composed of representatives appointed from Russian civil society organizations. The Public Chamber was created by Vladimir Putin in 2005 and arguably serves as a "tame" civil society supporting the ruling party.

perspective, Galina and their Yabloko hosts had attempted to engage the School of Feminism in a process of consolidation without their consent or prior knowledge. Many of them had attended the meeting precisely because they were interested in forming a new party, as Sofia explained, not in joining Yabloko. Their outrage, then, represented a refusal to be entangled in that process.

Refusal in this case caused an interruption in the planned event itself. The original discussion circle fell apart; Galina and other Yabloko members left the room. Afterward, when I returned, the remaining feminists had begun an excited conversation about what a feminist party platform would look like, going into detailed debates about whether nationalists and conservative religious women would be allowed to join and other dilemmas prompted by the attempt to imagine what the party would look like. The schism created by refusal opened space for these new imaginings and produced a new, if short-lived, collaborative venture among the remaining activists.

At its core, I believe, this dispute stems from a fundamentally different understanding of what feminism is and what feminist activism ought to be. It is telling, for example, that when I asked Galina whether Russia had a feminist movement, her immediate answer was to say, “No, of course not,” explaining that there were very few women’s organizations in Russia and even fewer that self-identified as feminist. Grassroots feminist activists, however, often referred to the Russian feminist movement, taking for granted that such a thing existed, and tended to have a more expansive notion of who might be involved in that movement: Facebook groups, Pussy Riot, ad hoc groups created for a single art project or street action, commenters on Livejournal blog posts. Natasha Bitten, co-founder of the *Za Feminizm*, an initiative group that was required to

officially register with the government, viewed her organization's relative informality and unofficial form as assets, allowing members to participate how they preferred and to the extent that they were able.

Jessica: What is the difference between initiative group and an organization or...

Natasha: That is the point, because an organization is kind of official. You've got documents, it is registered, you have to have an office and an account at the bank. An initiative group, they're just people who can act through it, go out, and it's just voluntary. We just organize, and whoever wants to contact us, to help us, is welcome. We don't mind who it is—men, women. It doesn't matter what age. If people want to support us, they can do it easily.

While Natsha did not explicitly note this, the lack of assets and registration documents may also be beneficial in terms of security. Recall the anarcho-feminists in Chapter Four: owning a business proved to be a means through which state security services could harass and threaten them. Likewise, new rules can be invented for registered organizations, such as the rule to declare one's group a "foreign agent" if receiving funding from abroad.

Here, though, Natasha focuses on the informality of membership as a benefit, allowing people to participate on their own terms, and also requiring less in terms of leadership. The group's Facebook page, for example, allows any member to make or respond to a posting, a form of non-hierarchical organization that allows the group to function as something of an open forum.

Jessica: How many people are involved with *Za Feminizm*, or how many members, or how many people participate often?

Natasha: In the group? I can't really say how many, because I have got a kind of list of members, and people can come up and go out. But in social nets, like Facebook, VKontakte, Livejournal, somebody can come... Hm. About 450 people, something like that. But I don't know if they just read us, or they support us. For example, I need to translate an article from English to Russian. And I went to the Facebook and asked, hey somebody, who would translate this article for our website? Who will translate my press release about our Sexist of the Year 2011 to French, German, and different languages? And people say "me." Who would like to create a diploma for this Sexist of the Year? And people say "me, I would like to do it." And people contact each other. For me, this is more important. Even if I don't come up to Facebook or to Livejournal, people contact each other, discuss something. I think that this is the best, because I don't manage it. They do it. They help themselves. People know themselves better than others do.

The schism at the School of Feminism meeting echoed conflicts between activists related to differences in political views or orientations toward feminism—liberal accommodation with the regime versus something more radical or less institutionalized. Ongoing friction among various feminists around questions of organizational structure and activist practice became visible from time to time in moments of refusal, a resistance to consolidation and accommodation that produced periodic fractures between activists and within their groups. Vera Akulova, speaking about her experiences working with older generations of feminists and with feminist of different political orientations, had seen several such schisms in only three years of feminist activism.

Vera: And around 2010, I became interested in feminism. And I came to my first feminist group. We did street actions. It was called Initiative Group “For Feminism”. Then there was a series of, I don’t know, *raskoly*, “falling apart” several times [laughs softly], so then I was part of the group called Moscow Radical Feminists and we switched from street activities to reading groups. Because we thought that we needed to understand more clearly, what do we stand for? Then we decided that we wanted not only to read what other women said, but also speak for ourselves, so we started a consciousness-raising group. And that’s what I still do. There was also the abortion rights campaign, which was also very important for me.

Vera spontaneously introduced a term that came up often enough in everyday discussions with activists that I began asking about it more systematically: schism (*raskol*). To my ears, the term recalled the anthropology Gregory Bateson's "schismogenesis," which describes social processes that through either polarization or competition produced ongoing and deepening schisms, such as an arms race (Bateson 1958 [1936]). But while Galina viewed such ruptures as wasteful, and Bateson was concerned about the destructive potential of schismogenesis, Vera sees schisms as part of “a natural process” in coalitions whose various members disagree strongly on fundamental issues. For the grassroots feminists with whom Vera collaborates, that “natural process” has led to the formation of a variety of informal groups and ad hoc project-focused coalitions that don’t even appear in Galina’s list of feminist organizations in Russia.



Figure 2: Image circulated by leftists on social media. "Astrologers proclaimed a month of schisms. The number of revolutionary organizations has doubled."

Perhaps their diverging views of schism have something to do with what's at stake: as an influential member of a major political party, Galina has some (albeit quite limited) access to power in the official political system, power which to some extent depends on the size and activity level of the party's active members. Galina views her party as an important institutional structure for organizing political opposition to the party of power, spending much of her time organizing campaigns around the city, region, and country. Yabloko members were regular participants in and co-organizers of a wide range of citizen demonstrations and protests I attended around the city, from protests against highway construction to demands for better support for large families. Galina was also

heavily involved in a campaign to consolidate women's activism, believing that a single, unified movement was the mostly likely to be able to influence policy and the public.

Vera, however, like many of the younger activists I spoke with, had a differing set of interests and concerns. I argue that this partly due to a fundamental divergence in their understandings of where change takes place. As Vera notes, she and many of her friends are deeply concerned with process. It is important to her that the mode of organization of the group reflects and puts into practice the groups values. Thus activists who are working for a more egalitarian society should themselves organize along egalitarian lines, without hierarchy or "chains of command."

Jessica: So you mentioned that there were a lot of raskoly, schisms, which I have noticed and heard about. And why do you think that happens, that groups have debates and problems and split apart?

Vera: I think it's a natural process. I don't think it's bad. It can seem bad for, I don't know, publicity or something. But, I mean, the IG-For Feminism fell apart based on political reasons. It was a difference between liberal feminism and radical feminism. It was... we couldn't have overcome that. And it was also not only the matter of what we decided to say to the public, but also the matter of how we communicated inside the group. Because most of us wanted to keep the group, well, without hierarchies, so that the communication was between equals. And there were women who didn't want that, who wanted to establish a hierarchy and assign tasks according to some chain of command or something. Yeah. So I think it was a completely legitimate cause. And another moment when the Moscow radical feminists... Well, it's hard to say whether they fell apart or not. But, well,

at least, I'm not part of it anymore. And I'm still part of the consciousness raising group, although, well yeah, anyway. Well, there was also a problem of people who are involved in activism, who have been involved in activism for a long time, of burnout. So people are too tired to do anything, and especially because activism requires a lot of communication, problem-solving and small conflicts can become really unbearable.

Jessica: Hmm.

Vera: So I guess that's how it happened. Oh, and there was also the story with the School of Feminism, *Shkola Feminizma*. I also left the project because of hierarchies as well. Because when we started it, there were four of us, and we wanted... We said it from the beginning, that we wanted a non-hierarchical platform for women to get information and for empowerment, too. For empowerment through making speeches or arguing about feminist issues. So it was important that the presentations are not too long and that the speakers change every time. And then one of us, one of the four, of this organizing team, burned out, and left activism for some time. The other went to study. She went to London. And I left because I was very involved in the abortion rights campaign, and I couldn't do both things at the same time. When I came back after a few months, I saw that the fourth woman was the only speaker every time, and she had lectures that went on for one hour, one hour and a half, and I found them personally very dull. [laughs softly] And I even fell asleep once. It was like, you know, coming back to university, listening to the lectures you don't even want to listen to.

J: Mmhmm

V: It was so not what we started. I tried to talk to her about that, but she didn't acknowledge the problem at all. She said... Yeah, she said that there was no real conflict. There was no real, well, there was nothing to talk about, because there was no problem. And so I prefer to leave and do other things instead.

For Vera, if women's empowerment is a key goal, women should be empowered through their practices as activists, not made to listen to an authority the way students must listen to dull university lectures.

Natasha, who as a continuing organizer of Za-Feminizm came out on a different side of one of the schisms Vera mentions, nonetheless had a similar perspective on the source and outcome of that split when talking about Za-Feminizm's history.

Natasha: I am a journalist and I write articles, a column for the newspaper Metro,⁵² which is an international holding. And every two weeks I write a pro-feminism column in the newspaper, and people can see my face. That's why they started our group with me. Because I was [only] one of the people who established this group, but they [the other founders] are not public. And a few of them separated and created their own group. I think it's not bad, too, because I think this is better if we create a lot of groups, different groups, because different people can connect with them, different opinions for some things.

Group schism in Natasha's view is "not bad" because it allows a proliferation of groups and thereby a proliferation of viewpoints. The friction of dispute can produce space for

⁵² Metro is a free newspaper distributed in public transit stations, which claims to reach an audience of 1.2 million daily in Moscow (<http://www.metronews.ru/o-metro/auditorija-i-rynochnaja-dolja-gazety-metro-v-moskve-vyrosli-do-rekordnogo-urovnja/Tpondc---NXYEXaZskyW2/>). As Natasha notes, the paper is owned by Metro International, which is headquartered in Stockholm and publishes similar newspapers in some 150 cities worldwide (<http://www.metro.lu/lang/en/about/management/>)

the movement to expand and for more people to find groups that suit their ideological perspectives.

Like Vera, ‘Elena,’ a feminist and animal rights activist in her early 20s, pointed to hierarchical organizational practices as a reason why she had turned away from participating in events organized by institutional women’s groups.

Elena: ...when I was 18 I participated in them [feminist actions]. It was difficult for me because some of the members of that group, well, there weren’t official ‘leaders’ but even so there were some members who had more weight than others. They rather cruelly pressured me (*zhestko davili na menia*), that I should go here, go there, draw that kind of poster, and so on. They didn’t understand my situation at all, that I was only 18. I was in a very hard situation with my parents, in a coercive relationship with a man who was also in the group. Because he considered himself, and even now still considers himself, a feminist. And it turned out that he received a great deal more support from that group than I did simply because he had the strength to keep going that I didn’t have.

Young feminists’ concern with practice repeatedly runs up against what they perceive as existing hierarchical social norms. Another such moment occurred at the opening of an exhibition of feminist art in March 2013, “International Women’s Day, Feminism: From Avant-Garde to Our Days.” Several feminist artists who were connected to activist communities were invited to take part. Yet when the exhibit was prepared, several of the requested works had not been displayed. The artist Mikaela, for whom this marked the first institutional showing of her work, was surprised and dismayed at the decision, as well as by how she and the other artists were treated: patronizingly called

“girls,” asked to spend hours on work that was not shown, having the quality of their art questioned by the organizers. She wrote in a post for the feminist site Ravnopravka.ru,

Accustomed to work in the activist community, the principles of structuration of which are: defense of the most vulnerable, safe interaction/discussion, horizontality and exchange of experience, I was unpleasantly surprised with the level of patriarchy, misogyny, judgmentalness and age-ism inside the work of a large artistic institution, which was presenting a feminist exhibition.

In the same exhibit, the artist Victoria Lomasko had been invited to present work. Three of the pieces she offered, though, were excluded from the final show, apparently because they included the name “Pussy Riot.” In response, she printed out small notecards of the missing works and made a stir at the exhibit opening by insisting on distributing them. The organizers viewed this as provocation, an unnecessary and unwanted conflict. But when I interviewed Elena a few days later, she recounted the conflict as a needed counter to the organizers’ exclusivity and, perhaps, lack of courage. Elena had saved several of the cards to give me, postcard-sized prints of colorful paintings depicting street protests for and against Pussy Riot.



Figure 2: Postcard distributed at the exhibit of a work by Victoria

*Lomasko depicting a street protest.*⁵³

The concern with hierarchy and exclusivity expressed by Mikaela and Elena illuminates one of the key sources of tension at the School of Feminism meeting described earlier. Galina's expressions of authority—her experience, age, level of education, role as a party official—contradicted the interest many younger grassroots feminists have in organizing on horizontal principles, as did the manner in which she ran the meeting, which perhaps felt dominating to others. Her invitations to collaborate with Yabloko ran counter to many young activists' skepticism of large, established institutions. Her words to me afterward seem to support younger feminists' sense that they are treated patronizingly, particularly her choice to compare them to children in a kindergarten class.

⁵³ See work by Victoria Lomasko at www.knollgalerie.at and www.chtodelat.org, among other places.

From the perspective of feminists who spent years working to incorporate women's issues into institutional power structures, what Hemment (2007) calls "gender mainstreaming," it must be frustrating to see others, especially youth interested in feminist issues, reject those institutions. In a period when foreign support for women's organizations has nearly disappeared, and feminist-leaning organizations have begun to be demonized and harassed by state and Church authorities, the costs of friction within the movement seem particularly high. Without a large, committed, focused organization, what hope could feminist activists have to exert any influence at all on the Russian government and its policies?

Schism as a generative process

But the dynamics of refusal and insistence do not only lead to schism; they are also full of creative potential, producing new ventures that allow activists to experiment with organizational practices, to imagine alternative forms of protest, and to hold space open for forms of activism that would be more inclusive along lines of gender, disability, and other directions of marginalization.

Olga, who as Vera mentioned had fallen into the role of group organizer, had not been able to attend the infamous meeting, and asked for a copy of my audio recording of the discussion to better understand what had happened. She wrote a post on the group's blog in response a few weeks later:

I was able to listen to a record of what happened at the Yabloko office in October, when the majority gathered to establish a Feminist party, but representatives of

another party expressed their doubts and some even made the attempt to give guidance. I got it from all sides after that: from Mikhaleva and from the “angry feminists.” But only after I heard all voices recorded from the real incident was I able to draw conclusions.

In the first lines of my message I want to apologize immediately to those who wasted an hour and a half of their time on analyzing a question that they thought already decided.

In the second place, I recognize that the experience of interacting with Yabloko did not turn out as successfully as had been hoped. I won't say that the five meetings we held in that office were in vain or uninteresting, but some pressure was felt and at the last meeting it resulted in a needless confrontation.

Therefore I invite everyone not to abandon meeting under the name School of Feminism, but to continue in a different place, in a different atmosphere to try to change the spirit of these meetings ourselves.

Despite Olga's attempts to patch the discussion group back together, the dispute at Yabloko turned out to be the penultimate meeting of the School of Feminism during my fieldwork period. About two months later, Olga set up an additional meeting to discuss an upcoming week of protest against violence. I turned out to be the only attendee—a less-than-ideal circumstance for an ethnographer. But even as the School of Feminism appeared to be falling apart, the schism around Yabloko prompted vibrant discussion around how to organize the community, as Olga's post suggests, and produced at least one offshoot group.

Immediately after the October Yabloko discussion ended, nearly a dozen of those

who had attended decided to continue the conversation, moving down the street to a cafe and inviting me to come along. Clustered around a few small tables, we shared tea and cakes along with ideas about the feminist party and more informal conversations about our lives and interests. Shortly afterward, one woman formed a new group on Facebook, which remained active as of winter 2014 with over 250 members, and was organized as a public page with all members allowed to add posts, comments, and invite new members. Many participants used the page to share links to news stories, petitions, and events related to women's activism in Russia and gender issues around the world. In late 2014, for example, members shared news about the arrest of activist Tatyana Sukhareva on charges related to alleged business fraud, but (as activists quickly concluded) most likely motivated by her increasing visibility as an opposition and women's rights activist. They posted links to a site for sending letters to prisoners, and scanned and shared copies of letters written by Tatyana. Such activities may bear little resemblance to the feminist political party first envisioned by activists at the Yabloko discussion, but highlight the possibilities of new forms of organizing that may be produced through the frictions of refusal and contention.

To the extent that sites such as Facebook and VKontakte make it easy to create loosely organized, non-hierarchical, unfunded, and decentralized groups, widespread access to the internet has been particularly helpful in fostering a Russian feminist movement in a period of deinstitutionalization. One doesn't need a grant from USAID or the Ford Foundation to create a social media page to plan and publicize a protest for reproductive rights. Armed with inexpensive, low-tech tools and activist strategies—finding meeting places in an apartment kitchen or cafe, spray paint and photocopied

leaflets—grassroots activists have found a degree of success outside the kinds of formalized civil society imagined by Western democratizers a generation ago.

Perhaps these strategies express the vision of activism-as-agency articulated in the first half of this dissertation more directly than membership in a hierarchical party structure such as Yabloko or the professionalized, grant-focused work often conducted by NGOs. For example, one feminist regularly circled her neighborhood's sidewalks and streets, cleaning advertisements for escort and prostitution services from under the windshield wipers of parked cars. After she posted about this action on a social media group, several commenters applauded her intervention. Others organized occasional film showings and discussion clubs around Moscow, or feminist parties for holidays. Ventures like these create small spaces for those interested in feminist themes (at least, those living near Moscow) to meet one another and engage in discussions without owing any debt or allegiance to a particular organization.

Insisting on alternatives: The rally for March 8

Decentralized forms of organization were also put into practice for protest actions, including a rally for March 8, International Women's Day in 2013, which I described in the Introduction. One of the first events I attended while conducting fieldwork was the 2012 International Women's Day rally, which had been sponsored and organized by the Gender Fraction of Yabloko. But the following year, a number of activists had become interested in organizing their own rally. Trans-feminist Yana Sitnikova floated an invitation on social media in late January, asking interested parties to a discussion at the

gay-friendly club 7freedays about an alternative March 8 event. I arrived early as usual, buzzing the door for the bartender to unlock a gate the club had installed a few months earlier, after being attacked by a mob of what the activists termed “fascists” during a Coming Out Day party. Inside, the underground club was relatively quiet, serving as a comfortable cafe during the early evening hours. I settled in to one of the couches lining the side room Yana had reserved, greeting activists I knew as they came in: 'Olga,' 'Sveta' and 'Katya' from the anarcho-feminist group, Pavel from the Rainbow Association (an LGBT organization), as well as several I didn't know, including a middle-aged woman with cropped hair and a young punk in combat boots with a pink streak in her hair. As the meeting began, Sveta took out a small notebook and jotted notes as she moderated the discussion, inviting each person to raise their hand to comment and calling on each speaker in turn. She welcomed everyone and explained that the anarcho-feminists thought that something should be done specifically by feminists for March 8—a kind of insistence that feminists make themselves visible as such, organizing their own event rather than just joining in with other groups. They suggested a march, or perhaps a march and rally, where each participating group would be able to use their own placards, slogans, and flags. Those gathered uniformly agreed that it was a good idea, and the discussion quickly moved on to suggestions and questions about planning. Who would participate? Who should be invited to the organizing committee?

Sveta suggested her group, the Russian Socialist Movement, the Committee for a Worker's International (two leftist groups that vocally supported women's rights and LGBT rights), the Rainbow Association. And maybe Yabloko?

'Yabloko will have its own rally as usual, probably at the monument to 1905 just

like last year,' Yana pointed out. 'They won't participate in anyone else's events.'

'Is it worth joining in with Yabloko?' asked another young woman.

Olga noted, 'Yabloko does always give a microphone to anyone who wanted to talk, but it would nonetheless be their meeting.'

Yana, sounding irritated, agreed. 'They would be happy to have anyone participate in their event, but they're only capable of having a top-down relationship with any other group, not horizontal organization. It would be better to have an alternative action, our own event.'

Discussion moved on. Would they place a limit on the number of flags allowed to each participating organization? Quick agreement here that a generous limit—five flags per group—should be made, only to prevent any one group from overwhelming the event with their symbols. As one participant noted, the socialists of the Left Front were particularly bad about this, sometimes bringing so many of their red flags that they outnumbered the people standing at the rally! Still, each group should be allowed to represent itself. There would be no limit to the number of feminist-themed flags.

And what about registering the event? This matter took some discussion, as it turned out that only Pavel had previous experience with filing the necessary permit applications with the city government. Sveta and Katya seemed disinclined to try, perhaps (as I jotted the suspicion in my notes) reluctant to associate their names with political activity on any official documentation. Pavel said he certainly knew how and could explain it to anyone, he'd done it before. But he noted that the Rainbow Association only used his passport when they already know the event is going to be refused—city officials were well aware of his name and affiliation. He also suggested to

Sveta that every event is a chance to learn something new—how to apply for permits, how to deal with the bureaucracy.

Olga said she'd be happy to sign on, but she didn't want to be the applicant; the pink-streaked punk, 'Lena,' said the same, then hinted that her passport might have some irregularities. There was a lull, then Olga suggested that she could ask Tatyana Sukhareva. Finding that few in the group knew her, Olga explained that Tatyana was an active feminist, a citizen activist, who had been involved with other opposition events and might be willing. Furthermore, she had a long list of contacts she might be able to invite.

Discussion moved to an active debate about the main slogan, after everyone agreed that each participating group was welcome to display its own slogans and messages on placards and banners. (I volunteered to record the suggestions for a primary slogan and later added them to a shared Google document for the entire group to view and add to.) Olga offered "Equal opportunities outside gender differences" (*Ravniye vozmozhnosti vne gendernykh razlichii*). She noted that she always thought it was positive, and also that equal rights was a bit of a dead end. The law already establishes equal rights, and that hasn't done anything, so equal opportunities/possibilities was something fresh.

Yana said the obvious slogan was "Against Patriarchy," or "Down with the Patriarchy" (*Doloi Patriarkhat*).

Wondering if a more concrete focus would appeal to more of the organizers, I suggested "Against domestic violence" (*Protiv Domashniaia Nasiliia*). Olga objected, saying that it was always better to be for something, to offer something, than to be

against.

More suggestions followed. “Together Against Patriarchy.” “For Women’s Solidarity.” “Equality, Freedom, Sisterhood.” “For Women’s Rights”—which led into a discussion with Yana and “Tanya,” both of whom identified as trans-feminists. They questioned whether sisterhood or ‘women’ included them, saying that transwomen are often left out or their issues are ignored. Yana referred to the body of feminist criticism that “sisterhood” meant white, middle class women and ignored other differences.

Lena said that of course they were included, each group could raise its own issues on its signs and placards.

Tanya said that was just it—if nobody else raised transfeminism as an issue, it would be just one sign; they needed more people.

Lena responded that Tanya was welcome to invite as many people as she wanted, to make whatever signs she wanted. Another activist joined in, supporting Yana and Tanya, and prompting a few other suggestions for slogans without the word “woman.” The debate continued in this vein for half an hour, with all suggestions collected, and all objections to slogans heard in turn. Even after the meeting wrapped up, the debate about slogans continued online for the rest of the week and into the second organizing meeting. Sveta collected e-mail addresses to form a mailing list on Google, and the coalition was begun.

Coalition organizing as feminist practice

It was this kind of voluntarist, horizontally organized planning that many of my

interlocutors seemed to prefer, as the discussions of flags and slogans illustrated. While some activists insisted on bringing rainbow or organizational flags to events, even to the point of provoking conflict at events where they were disallowed, the March 8 coalition members were equally concerned about a single group's symbols overwhelming the rest. The rule established limiting flags to five per group was thus an attempt to construct a coalition that was visibly diverse, allowing each group to present itself as a separate entity while participating in a collective action.

The debate about slogans that followed illuminates the kind of mild friction or ideological jostling that such a coalition invited. This discussion, which continued into the second planning meeting, allowed participants to engage in a debate that seemed to be as much about the goals and purposes of their feminist activism as about the message they hoped the rally would convey to the public. The decision to break away from Yabloko, whose structure did not invite non-members to debate the organizing principles or preferred slogans of an event, created this small space within which more activists could participate in the work of creating the rally.

The power to hold space open

Unfortunately, it would be disingenuous to end the discussion here, pointing to the generative potential of schism without acknowledging the real challenges faced by activists trying to hold space open for new alternatives. Aside from the social costs of being "troublesome" in a relatively small feminist community, activists' ability to create new kinds of events was strictly (if unpredictably) regulated by government officials and

the state security apparatus. A few days before March 8, we received word that the city had refused us permission for the rally. Several activists agreed that the fault was likely in the fact that we had included the word "feminism" in the application—this was another instance of the word itself being demonized. A last-minute planning meeting was held, this time in the offices of a human rights lawyer just a few blocks from the Kremlin whose door had recently been vandalized with anti-Western graffiti. Activists' attempts to negotiate the predicament of intra-feminist hierarchy were entangled within a knot of additional predicaments.

* * *

Around twenty people crowded into the office, independent activists as well as representatives from the Rainbow Association, several socialist groups, and anarchist as well as anarcho-feminist groups. I had found a half-broken office chair in the corner and sat down to observe, waving to those in the room whom I recognized. Olga gestured at me to come closer—"Come on, sit with us," she chided gently. I drew my chair toward the table and settled in, listening as Olga continued her conversation with a man and woman I didn't recognize.

"Do we know what Yabloko will permit? They often let representatives of other organizations speak at their microphone, but we have a long list of speakers of our own," the woman said.

"We'll have to ask them. Who should call?" Olga asked.

"Do we have a contact? What about that, that Yano. You know, it," the man

replied, using a neuter pronoun with an extra emphasis. He added as if jokingly, "Is that a man or a woman, anyway?"

Olga broke in. "Yan-A. Yana. She is a woman. We don't need any of that here."

The man shook his head, shrugged. "Ok, fine. She. As you like."

Olga called the meeting to begin shortly after. We began by quickly introducing ourselves and which group we were representing, if any. Several people I hadn't recognized were from socialist groups that hadn't participated in earlier planning meetings, but had decided to participate. Olga explained the situation: our rally had been refused permission, and Yabloko had offered to let us join in theirs. We weren't quite sure yet what the conditions would be, such as whether our entire speaker list would be allowed. But we needed to decide quickly whether we wanted to merge the two rallies, since the event was tomorrow.

Sveta spoke up. "Why should we join the Yabloko rally? It will just be another boring one like last year, just Yabloko self-promotion. I think we should have an unsanctioned action and make something truly remarkable."

Several of the anarchists nodded in agreement. One piped up, "I'm not coming if it's a Yabloko meeting. We'll just do our own event. If we have an unsanctioned event we can do anything we want. We can carry banners around the Garden Ring, where we might really meet a lot of people and present our message."

Word came back from Lena, who had gotten a Yabloko organizer on the phone. They were willing to split the speakers' list evenly, alternating between one of theirs and one of ours as long until time ran out.

"What about flags?" asked one of the leftists. "We need to carry our own

organizational flags, and there's also the question of rainbow flags."

Lena consulted over the phone and came back with approval for a limited number of organizational flags per group and as many rainbow and feminist flags as anybody wanted to carry. Several of the activists representing organizations nodded, seeming to find the rule appropriate.

The anarchists continued to grumble, many not wanting to lose the independence of our own event. 'Ivan' explained, "We don't want this to be another event for Yabloko self-promotion. We wanted to have something different, a real feminist, political event."

After several minutes of debate, Olga suggested we take a vote—combine the rally with Yabloko's, or not? Everyone but the anarchists voted to go with Yabloko, and Ivan announced that anyone who was interested in something else should meet with them as soon as this meeting finished.

Conclusion: Feminist solidarity

The failed independent rally illustrates how activists' projects take shape as they identify, provoke, and negotiate conflicts with one another, sometimes producing new initiatives that attempt to make space for alternative forms of organizing. For example, the schism at the School of Feminism meeting put a damper on that organization for some time, but gave rise to an entirely new initiative group aiming to create a feminist political party, which remains active as of 2015. At the same time, though, activists' efforts can be suddenly curtailed as state power intervenes, forcing activists into new predicaments such as an urgent calculations about personal risk, effective action, and cooperation with

questionable allies. In the end, the Yabloko rally proved to be more eventful than Sveta and her fellow anarchists had feared, as I described in the Introduction to this dissertation. When a group of anarchist and LGBT activists were detained, carried off by police and tossed into the waiting vans (several later complaining of being kicked and thrown roughly against the bars of the vehicle), the organizers of the rally continued on. The decision to proceed drew stark criticism online afterward; many interpreted the failure to participate in resistance against the police as a failure of solidarity.

It is because of the potential for outside forces to make planned projects impossible that it is crucially important for activists to find ways to change their allies' perspectives on issues like hierarchy and LGBT rights. The right kind of conflict now could mean more effective solidarity in the future. Indeed, despite the fact that the alternative feminist rally did not take place, the International Women's Day rally of 2013 differed significantly from the same rally the year before, with easily twice as many participants, including many more participants from the leftist and anarchist blocs, and including many more feminist and LGBT symbolics. The frictions and refusals of activists during the planning period shifted the rally's form, even if they did not entirely resolve differences and disagreements among the participants. The next chapter continues this discussion of the role of friction in producing and reorganizing coalition politics over time, shifting focus to the issue of LGBT rights within the leftist movement.

Chapter Seven

An awkward relationship: The Left and the LGBT

R: And at rallies could leftists act like leftists, and not like the ultra-right?

A: What did the left do that was bad? Let's imagine that a group of leftists showed up at a gay-demonstration and crawled on stage. And there were a bunch of liberals in the crowd liberals. You think there wouldn't be a commotion?

R: The real leftists stood in defense of the LGBT, against the xenophobia of [organization name]. Homosexuality or heterosexuality—it doesn't have any relationship to political views, it's just a form of human sexuality, exactly like color of skin or ethnic affiliation. So your example isn't relevant.

A: Homosexuality isn't a norm, but a deviation. I can't support the idea of calling a psychological illness a norm.

—Exchange between leftist activists on social media

Resistance and recapitulation

Like the recurrence of hierarchy that troubles many feminist activists, the tenacity of homophobia and hostility to LGBT rights within the opposition—and specifically on the left—was highlighted by activists as a problem that was not only divisive but that also threatened to undermine their goals as activists. Recall the epigraph of Chapter Four, written by a queer anarchist activist for the feminist zine *Molot Ved'm*: “In that way we ourselves recreate the practices of the hierarchical society against which we are fighting.”

In these contexts, activists echoed a problem that has been raised repeatedly by scholars and activists analyzing protest movements. Feminist scholarship, for example, includes extensive critique of the many ways in which the organizational basis for a movement can erase internal differences, marginalize certain members, and exclude others who might otherwise share similar interests (hooks 1984; Kafer 2013; Mohanty 1988). Resistance against one form of hegemonic power often turns out to rely upon and reinforce another. Writing about the role of nationalist discourses in Greek anti-austerity protests, for example, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos asks two questions about resistance that could just as easily refer to the predicaments of feminist and LGBT activists in Moscow: “[T]o what extent does local discontent depart from previous established hegemonic narratives? What is the relationship between indirect resistance, defensive nationalism and electioneering populism?” (Theodossopoulos 2014: 489). But this is not merely a problem identified by scholars wringing their hands over what they might perceive as problematic forms of mobilization. Activists who are marginalized within movements may themselves make similar critiques, as others do among feminist activists in the Ukrainian Maidan revolution (Phillips 2014), women of color and lesbians in the feminist movement both in the United States (hooks 1984; Rich 1989 [1984]) and globally (Mohanty 1988), and militant women in the Irish Nationalist struggle (Aretxaga 1997), among many others.

In Moscow, surrounded by opposition protesters who easily leapt to more or less hegemonic discourses of tradition and ethno-nationalism to legitimate their dissent, my activist interlocutors found themselves searching for ways to prevent their own causes from getting swept aside. In Chapter Six, I discussed how some grassroots feminist

activists dealt with this set of problems through practices of refusal. In this chapter, I turn to “insistence” as a lens for understanding LGBT activists’ tactics in 2012 and 2013. By contrasting these terms, I do not mean to imply that the two groups were mutually exclusive (in fact, as the dissertation hopefully makes clear, many activists considered the two causes interrelated and worked actively on both), nor that their practices were always distinct. Instead, I use these terms—provocation, refusal, insistence—as organizing concepts to highlight certain aspects of contentious activist practice that helped shape the development of these communities over time. It is less important to categorize particular actions as “refusal” or “insistence” than it is to begin to see how the elements of refusal, insistence, and provocation in a given act create and animate events. In this chapter, I examine how and why some activists insisted on raising what they called “the LGBT question” within the opposition community. Like refusal, these practices of insistence produced moments of friction that made the problem of internal homophobia visible. Through insistence, pro-LGBT activists created opportunities for engaging with this problem and opened space for the possibility of solving it.

Rainbow Flags and Rainbow Visibility

Throughout this dissertation I have periodically hinted at the symbolic importance of flags. References to flags pop up in my interlocutors’ descriptions of many protest actions, from narratives of the mass protests on Bolotnaya Square, where LGBT activists were set upon by aggressive right-wingers, to debates in organizing committees about regulating the numbers of organizational flags, to Denis’s exasperation over the dull

rallies where flags outnumber people.

All flags are welcome to visit us! Not many groups came to the rally against xenophobia, discrimination, and stigmatization of social groups. But to look at these few groups from afar was joyous—they looked colorful and cheerful. True, the color black dominated, but it personified that which we came to oppose—discrimination and oppression. Participants from the Rainbow Association sewed a flag with a black triangle on a red background. The feminists as always held a violet flag with a clenched fist in Venus’ mirror. There were transgender and LGBT flags. Three medium-sized banners on feminist themes caught the attention: FREEDOM, EQUALITY, SISTERHOOD. And I especially liked the call: THE PATRIARCHY ON THE ASH-HEAP OF HISTORY!

—A feminist activist describing a 2012 rally on a social media site

For supporters of feminism and LGBT rights, the untroubled presence of violet and rainbow flags served as a clear indicator of support for those causes within a protesting group. On the surface, this might seem to be a straightforward example of a visibility strategy, ensuring that passersby and viewers through mass media would be aware of the presence of LGBT and feminist protesters. This is the impact described by the activist above, imagining what the rally against xenophobia would have looked like “from afar.” Flags thus work against the tendency to interpret a protest movement as a homogenous mass. The proliferation of flags—not just rainbow, but also transgender—makes visible a proliferation of particular marginalized identities and prevents their being

subsumed into the crowd. Furthermore, by bearing these particular flags, protesters claim public space for marginalized discourses and identities.

Striving for visibility may have been particularly important in this moment in time. As I will discuss in the next chapter, powerful groups including the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy and Kremlin officials were working actively to delegitimize LGBT rights and feminism in Russia. For example, in April 2013 Dmitri Peskov, then serving as Putin's press secretary, made the following comment about sexual minorities in an interview with TV host Vladimir Solovev (republished in the newspaper *Kommersant*):

It is not our business to criticize the Netherlands for how they live, for how they relate or do not relate to sexual minorities. But it is our business to state that these phenomena are absolutely unacceptable in our country. Our culture, history, our multi-confessionality and multinationality, the foundations of our society reject these phenomena. In our understanding this is no kind of freedom, in our understanding this are phenomena which are unacceptable to us (Peskov 2013).

This quotation is neither outrageous nor unusual in the context of official discourse. Peskov expresses the official position of the administration that LGBT people and their rights campaigns have no roots or legitimacy in Russia. In such a context, public and visible participation of Russian activists in LGBT causes may carry additional meanings: not simply that LGBT people exist, but that *Russian* LGBT people exist, too.

A feminist social media group calling itself “The world of hardcore lesbianism” has engaged with the problem of cultural and historical legitimacy through a series of pop culture memes, images designed for circulation online [Figures 1-4]. The memes

combine still images from popular Soviet and American children’s cartoons, such as the beloved Soviet stop-motion show *Cheburashka* and Disney cartoons like *Sleeping Beauty*, with satirical or otherwise humorous text related to gender politics, LGBT rights, and feminism. Many of the memes reinterpret single female characters from the cartoons—the archetypal ‘old crones’—as queer figures.

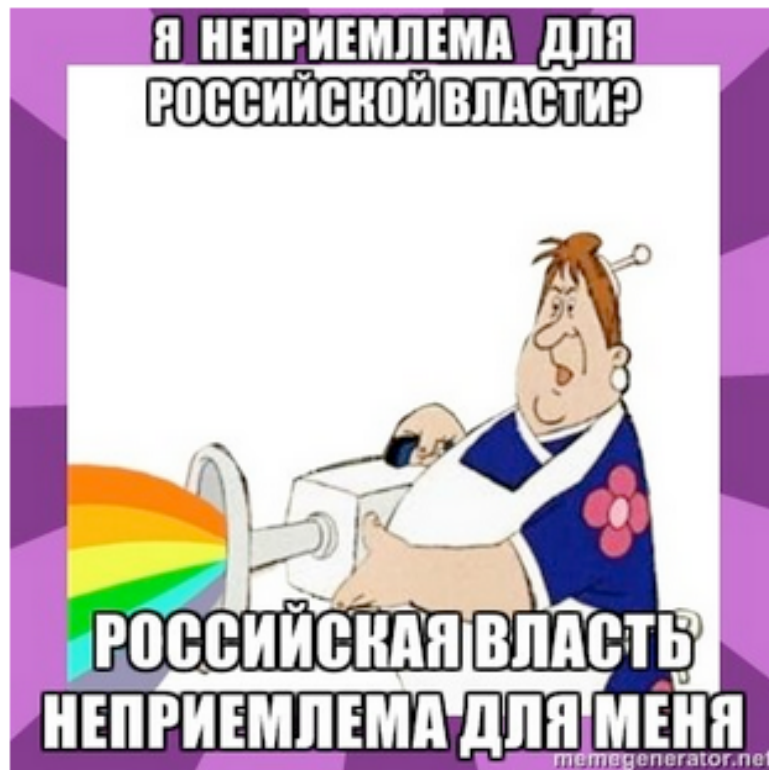


Figure 1: I'm unacceptable to the Russian authorities?

The Russian authorities are unacceptable to me!



Figure 2: —I've long wanted to ask how you live in Russia, if here you can be fined for lesbian relations, childlessness, and the absence of a husband?

—In these difficult times I keep life and limb together with the help of black magic.



Figure 3: —She's still asleep and doesn't know that our family has been declared illegal as "same sex."

—Yes, and she hasn't even heard of Mizulina⁵⁴ yet.



Figure 4: *I don't apologize. I propagandize.*

One of the project's creators, N., explained that it was meant to be a fun artistic project, as well as engaging with serious community work by spreading feminist ideas to communities online.

Jessica: I've seen sort of meme pictures posted with, kind of, with pro-LGBT slogans with, who's the old woman from the Cheburashka cartoons? Is that one of the—

N.: Yeah, yeah, Old Woman Shepoklyak.

Jessica: Yeah!

N.: Yeah, well, there's her and there's Fröken Bock from the Karlsen cartoons.

⁵⁴ Elena Mizulina, member of the Russian Duma and chair of the Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs. Mizulina is known for her opposition to LGBT rights, feminism, and abortion, and was on the list of Russian officials sanctioned by the United States after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In 2010, she received a medal from the World Congress of Families, a U.S.-based organization that aims to propagate right-wing Christian views internationally.

There's a few from the Snow Queen cartoon.⁵⁵ So, the idea was to take non-gender-normative characters from Soviet cartoons, and present them as lesbians.

Like, closeted lesbians.

J: Ah.

N.: Or not closeted, because Shapoklyak obviously is a dissident figure. The idea was to talk about what happens here, or about the Soviet experience and today's experience, and to present lesbianism as opposed to the homophobic discourse, which says it is foreign, and it was somehow introduced in Russia, to present it as an integral part of our history. And also because these characters are very familiar to everyone. It's stuff from childhood.

The memes are thus not simply a defiant gesture, "everyday resistance" akin to peasants complaining about the greed of their landlords (c.f. Scott 1978). In addition to expressing dissent, they also aim to undermine delegitimizing narratives by "queering" history and memory. By reinterpreting Russians' own cultural history and common childhood memories and finding queer characters within them, the activists establish a kind of cultural authenticity for LGBT Russians. Through the meme project, lesbian activists insisted that their community was a legitimate part of Russian society, resisting the bracketing effect (Povinelli 2011) of traditional values discourse.

As N.'s discussion of the meme project notes, though, the general public wasn't necessarily the only target of such projects. Likewise, visibility to some general public was not the only function of rainbow flags. As it turns out, these flags were at least as

⁵⁵ N. focuses on Soviet cartoons in her discussion here, even though several of the memes use still images from American animated films. The question of whether Disney's 'Sleeping Beauty' would register with the meme's Russian audience as a foreign import, an element of (Russian) childhood, or something else, is one I note as important but do not address here.

much messages to others within the activist and opposition community as to the public. By representing group affiliation and sometimes ideological orientation in a highly public way, flags became a means of crystallizing, illustrating, and working out many of the conflicts that organized the opposition community. Like the feminists' practices of refusal I described in the previous chapter, pro-LGBT activists' insistence on carrying rainbow flags generated friction, creating possibilities for change even while it sparked conflict and occasionally violence.

Rainbow flags as flashpoint and stumbling block

I got a call from David about an hour before the planned meet-up time with a location. Today's event was the January 19 March Against Fascism, timed to commemorate the killing of the human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and the journalist Anastasia Baburova. The two had been shot on the street in broad daylight after leaving a press conference in 2009; a little over two years later, two Russians with ties to a nationalist organization were convicted of the murders (Sindelar 2011). David and his comrades were meeting up a few metro stations away from Pushkinskaya, where the march was to start; the distance was a precaution after last fall's attacks. I met up with them at the safe location, then we took the metro together to the march. We were still a couple of minutes early, and a small crowd had built up in front of the security check at the head of the parade route. The police started passing people through the metal detectors precisely on time, and we worked our way toward the gate. Zhenya walked up to greet me, smiling; she seemed happy to be there. The sun was just peeking out onto the

crowd and snow, and it looked like it would be a nice afternoon for January. As I walked in, a man handed me two red carnations. Glancing around, I saw many others holding pairs of flowers. David commented that they were for the grave, the site where Markelov and Baburova had been killed, which was the final goal of the march today. He said it might not be safe to go all the way there—his group wasn't planning to today. But I could try if I wanted to. I held onto the flowers, not really knowing what to do with them.

Once inside, the comrades started passing out signs, some hand-drawn and others printed. Igor unrolled several from a tube that were in a different style than usual. He said they'd been prepared especially for this march, and they had slogans related specifically to LGBT themes.

| |
|--|
| <p>Follow the patriarch, bake cakes. No more! Go on strike!</p> <p>So fascists won't beat up or act rudely, join self defense squads boldly!</p> <p>Instead of punk concerts—work in the unions / Instead of cliques in the movement—student unions in the universities!⁵⁶</p> <p>Without solidarity with migrant workers / you won't build socialism, you won't clear out “bonapart”!⁵⁷</p> <p>Down with fascism, homophobia, sexism (written over a pink triangle)</p> <p>Homophobia and antifascism are incompatible (written over a rainbow)</p> |
|--|

Nearby, Katya and her anarcho-feminist group unfurled a large banner that read “Patriarchy = Fascism!” It was decorated with figures of women attacking swastikas

⁵⁶ Igor handed this one to me and asked if I could hold it up. I commented that maybe I liked punk! But I held it for a while anyway, including for a few journalists taking photos.)

⁵⁷ A reference to the Marxist concept of “Bonapartism,” which for my leftist interlocutors referred to counter-revolutionary forces. In this case, the sign hints that elites could use xenophobia to divide the political opposition.

labeled “homophobia.” The women-figures’ faces were covered in pink Venus symbols, which to my eyes kind of resembled Pussy Riot figures. Many people photographed it. About the same time, the anarchist-LGBT flag popped up above the anarchist bloc, waving half black and half rainbow. The leftists around me unrolled their flags, stringing them onto poles to hold in the light breeze.



Figure 5: Anarcho-feminist banner

A middle-aged man, a member of the Committee for 19 January, which had organized the march, walked over with an irritated look on his face. He began complaining to Zhenya and the leftists, and almost immediately a small crowd gathered around. Video cameras materialized, forming a tight ring around Zhenya and Igor. The organizer was explaining that the Committee had decided in advance that no such symbolics would be allowed; this was to be an apolitical event.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The Committee of 19 January posts this policy on its website, <http://19jan.ru/o-flagah-i-lozungah-19-yanvary.html>

Zhenya shot back that they hadn't been involved in that decision. They hadn't been allowed to discuss it with the committee, there had been no open discussion among all march participants about the rules, and moreover it was important to present a broader message to the people than simply "we're against fascism." "We're for good and against evil isn't any kind of message!" Zhenya said. She and her comrades eventually agreed to put their flags away, feeling they had made their point, but continued holding the LGBT-themed posters high.

Meanwhile, just beyond the crowd of cameras I could see hands periodically reaching up toward the anarcho-LGBT flag, trying to pull it down. The woman holding it resisted, and those around her became increasingly agitated, beginning to yell at one another. Eventually the flag disappeared, and later that night a debate would rage over social media about who was at fault for the altercation—the woman bringing the flag as a provocation, or the macho homophobes within the anarchist movement.

We slowly strolled down the boulevard as the march got going. As usual, the event area was fenced off from the surroundings. Hardly anybody in the march interacted with the small numbers of people on the surrounding sidewalks. Every few minutes someone would start a chant, either Zhenya or one of the leftist bloc borrowing her megaphone, or someone else ahead or behind us. Some were taken up more fully than others; someone behind us tried a few times to start a pro-capitalism slogan going, but it didn't spread. "Fascism will not pass!" was the most common, while the leftists around me chose mostly slogans that combined anti-fascism with feminist, anti-homophobia, or socialist messages, including support for migrant laborers. One ran something like: The enemy isn't the taxi driver or the dvornik, it's the capitalist.

Zhenya clicked her megaphone on, slowly walking backwards while facing our rainbow-leftist bloc: “Down with fascism, homophobia, sexism!” I joined in with the others around me, yelling enthusiastically. Almost immediately, around a dozen people who had been crowded around us started, and quickly walked further ahead. As they passed, I heard one comment “Oh good lord, homophobia!” in a derisive tone. The crowd was noticeably thinner around our group after that, though many remained, including a few young LGBT activists who explained to me that they were definitely not socialists. Still, they explained, this was the only bloc in the march that was supporting LGBT demands. Early on I watched Denis talk up a young man who had walked up to ask about the group and its principles. Even as the LGBT slogans clearly turned some people away, they nonetheless attracted others.

LGBT rights and the value of conflict

The frictions and schisms at this march hint at why the pro-LGBT leftists I worked with were repeatedly criticized by other Moscow leftists for “always talking about the LGBT issue,” and why the feminists within the anarchist movement eventually split off to form their own group. Their persistent raising of an uncomfortable issue caused obvious strife at opposition activities, leading some to label them “provocateurs” or trouble-makers.

The Committee of 19 January, which organized the march described above, did not approve of flags, taking nearly 700 words to detail its position on its website.

On the eve of every January 19 antifascist demonstration we get the very same

strange questions: “Why don’t you allow us to bring party flags? Can we bring black/red/rainbow/white-blue-red flags—they’re not party flags?”

In response, the group offers “two major reasons” for its stance.

The first consists in the fact that for many of us, Russian politics, and Russian rallies and demonstrations, are a farce, because they’re cheap... Stas Markelov and Nastya Baburova, on the date of whose murders by Neo-Nazis we carry out our traditional march, were our friends, and we don’t want to hold a — on the day of their death... Yes, the march does not have a purely memorial character. It is first and foremost political, antifascist, but we are very sure that farce is out of place...

The second reason is because in the 19 January march (and in some cities it is not a march, but pickets, rallies, silent gatherings or noisy roundtables) traditionally people from many different antifascist points of view participate.

Some of them might have a hard time walking near the red flags of communists and the black (black-and-red) flags of anarchists. For some the flags of parties are unacceptable (all or specific ones). For some government flags are entirely unwanted, and for others—rainbow flags are unloved. We ourselves would like to argue with many of these people because, naturally, every one of us has their own political convictions, a clear system of views (and some even have a clear plan) and their own collection of flags and slogans. And that’s the problem, we—the Committee of 19 January—are so various that some of us want to hit the black-and-red diagonal, some of us just the red or just the black, some of us the rainbow... Understanding this very well, we decided in 2009, when we were just

gathering and when we were preparing the first action on the first anniversary of the murder of Stas and Nastya, that there would be no flags and no partisan-political or non-partisan-political slogans that didn't relate directly to the theme of antifascist struggle. For that same reason we will not call the Committee of 19 January a personal and political group. We do not want any individual or group PR on this theme. What we want is antifascist unity.

The organizing committee's statement characterizes all use of flags as a potentially divisive form of self-promotion. The appearance of any one group's insignia threatens to undermine the "unity" of the antifascist cause.



Figure 6: Activist's sign: "Homophobia and Antifascism are incompatible."

A similar explicit aversion to disagreement seems to motivate some leftists' quarrel with rainbow flags and the LGBT issue more generally. In an interview with an

opposition-friendly website, Aleksandr Batov of the leftist group ROT-Front was concerned about the possibility of schism around LGBT rights, comparing the issue to the divisive Pussy Riot case:

"Take the Pussy Riot case, too, which caused a schism in Russian society. Look what alternatives were palmed off on us: either you are for Pussy Riot and for western values, for some kind of neoliberal moments and so on, or you are for the ROC, for conservatism, for the traditional family, for Cossacks with beards and all that. Plenty of people in our country are not prepared to take either of those alternatives, but all the same we are given a choice, "either-or," there is no third variation. I think here we have exactly the same,"

Batov appraises the situation, specifically using the word schism (*raskol*) to describe the result of the conflict over Pussy Riot. He sees only one possibility of escaping the schism in the leftist movement on this question:

"We have to stop letting this theme be imposed. And it's being imposed by very brazen, aggressive methods, right up to making an ultimatum: 'Either you completely support all of our dogma, or you're a villain, a fascist, a bastard and so on.' That is, under a flag of tolerance and everything similar entirely fascist methods are operating. We need to return to the original position, when the leftist movement didn't touch on this theme, was neither for it nor against it."

Batov suggests that by avoiding the issue and thereby avoiding conflict, the leftist movement could out-manuever the authorities, who are the ones who truly benefit from discord in the political opposition. Better not to touch the theme at all than to risk a schism. Furthermore, Batov seems to imply that the entire problem might be the fault of

provocateurs disguised as activists for tolerance. He makes no particular statement about his own position regarding homosexuality or LGBT rights, merely stating that the left should ignore it.

Like the young feminists I described in Chapter Six, though, many of the pro-LGBT activists viewed their insistence on conflict as a useful strategy. While their critics might have viewed their activities as destructive within a small, struggling movement, the activists themselves believed that their work was productive, and even necessary. Indeed, an implication of Batov's statement is that schismogenic actions, like Pussy Riot's performance or bringing a rainbow flag to a protest, do indeed force other activists to address the divisive issue causing the conflict. From a broader perspective, however, pro-LGBT activists were caught up in multiple predicaments in such cases, including not only the pressure to conform to the New Left unity, but also the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church and state officials were continually raising the issue and actively pursuing LGBT people. It was these predicaments in combination that shaped pro-LGBT activists' resistance toward insistence.

Zhenya, for example, explained to me that raising the LGBT question within the leftist movement was in part a means of revealing the true ideological orientations of other activists. It was this question that could show whether they could be relied on in the broader struggle against capitalism, or whether their allegiances to national identity or regressive gender politics might become a problem.

Zhenya: For example when we went out on May Day together with LGBT [activists], they went out with placards “LGBT for equal rights of employment,” as that was on May Day. The reaction of the left, well, from them there was an

attempt to make an attack, even though it was the left. It really shows that it's this question that clearly puts everyone on their places, it's instantly understood.

Either a person is really against any discrimination and for the unification of workers independent of sex, orientation, nationality, race, or he agrees in words, but in practice as soon as a really acute question of gender, about their principles, comes up, well. And these very leftists who started to attack and say that "we don't want anything with these pederasts," they then started to backtrack on the national question, for example saying that "yes, of course, there shouldn't be any discrimination, *but*." And further about how Caucasians come and then here they do something or other. That is the workers clearly show who is who. And for that reason I really like this issue.

Thus the conflict Zhenya's group prompted by pulling out symbolic flags and posters at the anti-fascism march was not only acceptable, but actually important. Without this provocation, a group appears to have unity. But the challenge reveals the shallow nature of this solidarity. If supposed allies against fascism are only willing to march alongside LGBT Russians as long as they don't realize who their neighbors are, what kind of allies are they, really? Later, Zhenya might suggest, when the chant against homophobia caused a number of people to leave the leftist bloc altogether, this decline in numbers might actually have been good, revealing those dozen march participants as unreliable allies. In a context of pervasive social and state violence against LGBT individuals and migrant workers, perhaps the "unity" of antifascism needs to be disrupted.

Interestingly, both pro-LGBT activists like Zhenya and those who wanted to

avoid the issue suggest that it was “the authorities” who raised it in the first place.

Zhenya’s comrade Igor likewise suggested in an interview with Kasparov.ru that it was the government that first made LGBT issues a focus:

It might have been possible to brush this off three years ago, even two years ago it might have been possible. But today to say that this doesn't have any meaning, that it isn't important for you, is impossible. Because this question wasn't raised by us, it was raised by the authorities...Not only the struggle for LGBT rights but the fight against any form of xenophobia is important. To oppose any thing that divides us, that divides simple working people, whether that is nationalism, sexism—that's beneficial. In the present moment at the center of the xenophobic, obscurantist politics of the authorities are LGBT [people] (Bachinskii 2013).

While activists like Batov believe the provocations of the state are best ignored, Igor and other pro-LGBT activists argue that they must be faced because they work. Both perspectives nonetheless view those in power as primarily responsible for the centrality of LGBT issues to contemporary politics. The authorities highlighted LGBT Russians as a target of nationalist exclusion, a process I discuss in more detail as “conspicuous erasure” in Chapter Eight. Activists on the left found themselves facing challenges that were produced by that process, reformulating their own strategies in dynamic response to the strategies of those in power.

What is to be done (with homophobic leftists)?

The tenacity of what my interlocutors called “homophobia” (*gomofobiia*)⁵⁹ within Moscow’s leftist movement posed a problem for pro-LGBT leftists and for left-leaning LGBT rights activists. In the first place, it could be tiring, as one leftist commented on social media:

Periodically I clear the homophobes out of my [social media] feed. I have no desire to read a typical heterosexual-patriarchal cretin who thinks himself a super revolutionary defending the purity of the leftist movement from “perversion.” I’ve gotten fed up watching unimaginable numbers of these internet-warriors my entire political life and they’re all completely useless for revolutionary work. They’re deaf, blind, and excuse me, on the whole, stupid. One should spend time on the internet only on those who at minimum capable of empathy, understanding, and independent analysis.

But not all pro-LGBT activists wanted to disengage from the problem of homophobia, as the insistent forms of queer presence I described above demonstrate. Insisting on conflict—for example, by bringing rainbow flags where they had been forbidden—was not only a practice intended to make LGBT activists visible within the protesting crowd. By creating friction and conflict, it also provided occasions for pro-LGBT activists to highlight the problem of homophobia. Fighting over a flag made homophobia visible, making it possible to begin to address it.

Some of the work of addressing homophobia was carried out outline, for example

⁵⁹ I use “homophobia” as a emic description of the various phenomena I describe in this chapter. My use of the term is not meant to assert that these phenomena were necessarily motivated by hatred or fear of homosexuality. Activists themselves offered a range of theories on this point.

in the social media exchange that opened this chapter. R. used an instance of conflict at a rally to open a discussion about homophobia: “And at rallies could leftists act like leftists, and not like the ultra-right?” When A. responded by asserting that there had been no problem, and that in fact homosexuality was “not a norm, but a deviation,” R. and three other individuals engaged in a long exchange, countering A.’s statements and offering links to scientific studies demonstrating the frequency of same-sex pairs in many animal species and to statements by psychologists recognizing homosexuality as “normal.” Whether or not A. was ever convinced, the exchange does show how activists can and do use moments of friction as opportunities for engagement.

The repeated conflicts over flags highlighted the fact of friction itself, creating an opportunity for a group of pro-LGBT activists to organize around the issue. One result was a public discussion in April 2013, titled “Leftists and LGBT.” Early that spring, Igor had explained to me that the goal of the event was to highlight homophobia within the leftist community. By creating a public forum in which leftist activists with different positions could debate one another, including representatives from groups that had repeatedly attacked LGBT activists, the event would illustrate the ways that LGBT issues had been divisive and to press each organization to develop a position on the question—preferably, of course, a pro-LGBT position. The planning for the event proceeded parallel to several outbreaks of conflict, with LGBT activists insisting on raising rainbow flags at events and heated arguments periodically breaking out over social media. Surprisingly, though, Igor had trouble recruiting an opponent for the pro-LGBT speakers for the discussion. Three days before the event, he posted on Twitter:

Discussion “Left and LGBT”. Anyone! I can’t find opponents from the left. Can it

really be leftists are all LGBT supporters? Skeptics, send a reply!

As it turned out, Igor and his fellow organizers were unable to find a participant willing to openly oppose LGBT rights for their forum—which several activists I talked with at the event interpreted a sign of partial success. Even so, the debate still exposed certain points of tension within the leftist community regarding how to conceptualize LGBT rights and what role that cause and its activists should play in the left.

Staging a debate: How should two movements intersect?

The debate was held on a weekday evening in a small room at a central bookstore, which often made space available for political groups. The same store had hosted candidate debates for the Coordinating Council of the Opposition and a discussion among leftist groups about Palestine (including an Israeli comrade participating via Skype), among other events I attended there. With books lining the walls from floor to ceiling, piled on tables, and displays filling every corner, the space remaining for social events was always rather tight, especially for the customers who continued to browse while debates raged around them. Today around thirty people had gathered, including many socialists and anarchists I knew, as well as about a half-dozen representatives from the Rainbow Association. The crowd quickly overwhelmed the available seating and leaving many standing, packed nearly shoulder-to-shoulder, and the room grew warmer by the minute. One anarchist, ‘Elena,’ who used a wheelchair was unable to get up the half-staircase to the debate space at all, and remained listening from the base of the stairs. She was accompanied by ‘Marko,’ a friend and fellow activist who often helped carry her

chair through the many parts of Moscow that were inaccessible.

At the front of the room, a row of chairs faced the audience. One activist set up a video camera as the debate participants gradually found their way to the front, each taking a seat. Igor waited until until the others were settled, then opened the event by welcoming everyone. He introduced the participants, then himself, and explained what tonight's debate was about.

We don't have much space but all the same a company has gathered, a good one. Even if this isn't the first discussion in this format that has taken place, it's one of the first. I hope it will be interesting. Where did such a discussion originate? Well, it seems obvious to me that in recent times the LGBT movement has become such a неким factor in political life, the last 1.5 or 2 years to be precise. [...]

I wanted the discussion [today] to cover political nuances. I think that we in the left movement shouldn't raise the question, "Do LGBT have the right to exist (*prava sushchestvovania*) or not." We're going to talk about problems connected with the LGBT movement. I invited the most various participants to this discussion. Happily nobody said they didn't want to participate at all. But unfortunately many said that they were busy and didn't come. [...] A., who says he's not a homophobe, but the LGBT movement is a rainbow bomb for the left, yeah? It would have been interesting to debate with him, but, I think, in one way or another we'll touch upon it.

Why in particular the left and the LGBT movement? Because the left themselves need to discuss how to relate to the LGBT movement. What to do. On the other hand, I wanted for us to touch on the question from the other point of view. Why

should LGBT—lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people—be interested in the left and leftist ideas? In what ways do these two movement intersect?

From my own perspective, I certainly have my own position and I'm not planning to play the neutral arbiter. I do have a position. I hope I won't spend a lot of time presenting it as the moderator today, but I really want everyone who would like to, to be able to express themselves. [...]

One more thing. While you still have a chance, somewhere around here there's also propaganda. Take advantage of the opportunity before such propaganda is banned!

Several people laughed. Igor listed a few of the newspapers, pamphlets and other materials touching on LGBT issues that were available on a table near the back of the room. Then he introduced the participants, and the debate was off.

Of particular interest to me was the statement from Yuri of the Left Front, one of the largest leftist groups in the opposition, which was headed by Sergei Udal'tsov, who had become a prominent opposition figure. Mass media often presented Udal'tsov as speaking for the leftist wing of the opposition movement. The Left Front's bloc at several rallies and marches had been a source of attacks on LGBT protesters. Yet Yuri's statement distanced his group from homophobia.

Good evening, I represent the Left Front. First I'd like to say that our movement, our program is in no way homophobic, sexist. Because all around there are statements about our comrades, people who like to polemicize. It's just that people have their own views and will simply speak from their own point of view. What's happening right now is a whole series of actions, reactions of our government.

Just like in conditions of crisis, people start to think about things, to think about the conditions of their existence, as a concrete product of the government. And so social protest—real social protest from the left begins, but people's heads are turned by such problems, like with the passing of this law. Degenerates start to appear, figures like Enteo and certain of the [Duma] deputies, literally in the past year and a half. We think this can't be allowed and we, I think like the majority of people who are fighting for socialism, we believe that socialism can't be built in a society when there exists a group discriminating against another group. This can't be allowed. We are for social equality.

Yuri defends his organization against accusations of homophobia, perhaps discounting the possibility that those "polemics" might have been valid, but nonetheless demonstrating that open sexism and homophobia are becoming unacceptable in the movement. That Yuri explicitly rejects homophobia is important in this statement; he does not brush it aside altogether, or say that he believes it is unimportant, as Aleksandr Batov did in the interview quoted above. In this respect, the debate signaled a degree of success to many pro-LGBT activists.

However, open homophobia was not the only issue pro-LGBT activists identified. Zhenya responded to a slightly different argument some leftists made, which suggested that LGBT rights were unimportant because they only dealt with "bourgeois" issues of private life and marriage rights.

In my view, the simplest thing, the foundation of the left movement, is the unity of the working class, independent of sex, orientation, other characteristics. It seems like this would be elementary. But our opponents start to talk about how

LGBT rights are bourgeois rights, we shouldn't fight for bourgeois rights. But the only bourgeois right that is known to humankind is the right to private property, the right to exploitation by one person of others. All the other democratic rights—to freedom, to private life—these are the rights that the working class should have. And socialists cannot in any case turn away from any group of the working class that is ready to fight. [...] More than anything, that's the question that worries me. When the leftist movement denies some of its fundamental principles of solidarity, is ready to attack its own. And those arguments we hear, on the order of 'bourgeois rights,' that LGBT fight for bourgeois rights, that LGBT should think about class and not their own personal life, and so on. And in my view that's all a cover for homophobia.

Zhenya suggests that the attacks on rainbow flags are fundamentally a failure of solidarity. Furthermore, she rejects the notion that "rights" (*prava*) are necessarily always liberal, insisting on the possibility of socialism that could leave space for freedom and privacy, a leftist conception of LGBT rights that she viewed as distinct from the "bourgeois" rights that had grown popular in the West. Likewise, Igor describes his understanding of the goals of the LGBT rights struggle by distinguishing them from the marriage issue that had come to dominate the gay rights movement in the U.S. in the 2000s. Responding to 'Vanya,' who had shared his view that the basic problem in the left was not homophobia in particular, but a certain cliquishness in the movement, Igor said:

Such rights as the LGBT are defending, the rights they're fighting for, the question of discrimination in the workplace, the problem of freedom of self-expression, that these are problems which are very important to *any* person. And

the struggle isn't just for some kind of wedding march, the opportunity to have a passport stamped,⁶⁰ and so on. Why, then, do you talk about cliquishness?

Conclusion

The relationship between leftist activism and LGBT rights in Moscow is a tense one, comprising efforts to build solidarity between the two movements as well as moments of conflict and violence. In this chapter, I examined how some pro-LGBT activists have attempted to highlight homophobia within the left by continually raising “the LGBT question.” Their insistence on having LGBT issues recognized, made most visible through conflicts over rainbow flags, has caused a great deal of friction within the community, but while some have interpreted this as mere divisiveness, perhaps stirred up by the authorities, many of my activist-interlocutors found it valuable, or even necessary. The friction produced by insistence helps clarify who is on which side and which allies are trustworthy, and creates space for openly debating the proper relationship between various groups in the ‘New Left.’

For example, the debate over “homophobia in the left” happened as a result of ongoing friction at New Left rallies related to rainbow flags and activists raising LGBT themes. Those conflicts thus helped create space for a debate about what kind of relationship ought to exist between the leftist movement and the LGBT movement. Over time, activists who aimed to build a pro-LGBT New Left coalition used these frictions to continue insisting that LGBT rights were important and could not be ignored.

⁶⁰ In Russia, officially registered marriages are marked with a stamp in a person's passport.

This issue is not an abstract one, but in fact has high stakes: While LGBT activists in Russia face similar problems to their counterparts in many countries, the particular ways in which LGBT issues are framed in nationalist discourse and by state authorities pose additional challenges both to LGBT activists and to a leftist movement which sometimes allies with them. Thus the work of legitimization performed by specific kinds of visibility becomes particularly important. Memes that queer familiar elements of pop culture aim to make LGBT Russians visible online in ways that challenge official narratives that frame queerness as antithetical to Russian culture. The presence of rainbow flags at rallies indicates the presence of LGBT Russians as part of the movement, as I will describe further in the next chapter. Chapter Eight will place the predicament of LGBT activists in the context of these nationalist politics, examining the contradictory processes of visibility and erasure within which Russia's LGBT rights movement has taken form.

Chapter Eight

Conspicuous erasure and the politics of queer visibility in Russia

Introduction: Conspicuous erasure

Visibility and erasure are strangely interwoven in Russian politics. In the 2012 case of the feminist-punk-art group Pussy Riot, masked anonymous performers became the international stars of a publicized criminal trial, then were hidden away in prison. The government's blacklisting of websites is announced in mass media (RIA Novosti 2011), and prominent critics of the Kremlin are murdered in cases that are both spectacular and opaque. The subject of this chapter, a 2013 law banning “propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations,” prompted intense public discussions about the need to remove homosexuality from public sight and heightened the visibility of LGBT Russians in Russia and around the world. I have come to think of this tactic as “conspicuous erasure,” a political project that renders visible certain objects in order to exclude them from the public body. Both domestic and international politics are implicated in conspicuous erasure, which in Russia serves not only to stifle dissent and consolidate power, but is also a primary means of stimulating national identity against perceived threats from an allegedly cultural-imperialist West.

In this chapter, I examine the multiple processes of visibility and erasure that entangle LGBT Russians. Instances of conspicuous erasure demonstrate how the globalization of gay rights has created new predicaments for LGBT people in specific local contexts as it intersects with domestic projects of national identification. Around the world, domestic contests over the role of gender and sexuality in citizenship and national

belonging are nested within global hierarchies of power. In such a context, political leaders can as easily transmute the presence of visible queerness into the threat of crypto-colonialism as into evidence of cultural progress.

In the first half of this chapter, I show that the development and passage of a Russian law banning “gay propaganda” can be understood as a means of constructing cultural intimacy and national belonging through the conspicuous erasure of LGBT citizens. By prompting discussions about moral crisis and national decline, the law allowed conservative Russians across various social and political spheres to co-produce a community based on a shared demand for the erasure of LGBT Russians from the national body. In this context, international censure of supposed Russian homophobia may in fact reinforce a defensive sense of embattled national identity. This process of conspicuous erasure is a striking example of the ways in which queer visibility does not always contribute to tolerance or acceptance of queer people. The new risks and forms of violence produced through conspicuous erasure make it difficult to continue valorizing “queer visibility” as a global goal, illustrating how the very global nature of the gay rights movement can itself become threatening.

The second half of the chapter examines how pro-LGBT Russian activists have responded to domestic politics that present gay rights as a foreign threat, which has led not only to violence from pro-government forces, but also from fellow opposition protesters who fear that visible queerness would threaten the legitimacy of their own movement. Pro-LGBT activists attempt to mobilize visibility to create alternate, counter-nationalist spaces of cultural intimacy within which a more queer-inclusive community might form. Many also reject the goal of queer visibility as such, insisting on making

LGBT Russians visible as members of a collectivity founded on broader bases than sexuality alone. Shaped by the predicaments of globalization, nationalist politics, and an increasingly authoritarian state, the project of pro-LGBT activists is to connect the conspicuous erasure of queer Russians to the social and economic vulnerabilities shared by many of their fellow citizens.

In this chapter, I place pro-LGBT activists' forms of resistance within the broader context of Putin-era nationalism and heteronormative policies. I did not conduct extensive ethnographic research on Russian state officials or socially conservative/nationalist activists, and so my description and analysis of their views is based largely on newspaper sources, websites, and media interviews, supplemented with material from two exploratory interviews I conducted with conservative activists. I will begin by describing how the “gay propaganda” law forms the basis for an anti-gay national community by linking queer visibility to broadly resonant narratives of Russian abnormality, crisis, and decline. Along the way, I highlight the ways in which the Russian case calls into question academics’ and activists’ valorization of queer visibility as a necessarily emancipatory process. I then examine how and why pro-LGBT activists struggle for visibility in mass protests.

Abnormality, crisis, and the production of cultural intimacy

In thinking through these intertwined and contradictory processes of erasing and rendering visible, I have drawn on Michael Herzfeld’s concept of ‘cultural intimacy’:
“the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of

external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (2005: 3). For example, as he notes, Americans may be offended when outsiders call them uncultured and simple-minded, but one can become President by performing folksiness well. Cultural intimacy takes on additional dimensions when understood in the context of international hierarchies such as colonial domination, in which foreign elites' judgement of local practices as backwards can produce a sense of reactionary pride (Herzfeld 2015). These areas of common sociality can become potent resources for shaping collective sentiment and national identity, operating as a fulcrum between international regimes of power and domestic power struggles and identity formation.

I argue that discourses of Russian abnormality constitute a key source of cultural intimacy in Russia. Discussing Russian backwardness, crisis, and decline has long allowed people to make sense of what they perceive as persistent disorder and failure in Russian society, while at the same time positioning themselves defensively against Western powers' attitude of superiority. These discourses draw on geographical-moral imaginaries in which comparisons between Russia and the West link national identity to stages of moral, political, and economic progress and decline. Over several centuries, Russian intellectuals and state officials have debated Russia's “backwardness” and its causes, constructing Russia either as underdeveloped compared to the modern, civilized West, or as a bastion of distinctively Russian tradition forging its own path apart from the decadent West (Wolfe 1967). “Russian talk” about Russia since the perestroika reforms of the 1980s has been pervaded by discourses of crisis and decline and anxieties about a newly subordinate relationship of Russia to the West (Gray 2011; Oushakine 2001; Ries

1997; Shevchenko 2009). Discussions about ‘the normal life’ and where it can be found play a significant role in world-building in post-socialist contexts, allowing people to evaluate their own state’s relative success or failure and to comment on their own experiences of globalization and other processes of socio-political change (Galbraith 2003; Gilbert, et al. 2008; Greenberg 2011). In conversations about whether one is living in “a normal country” or leading “a normal life,” Russia and the former socialist world are compared to the West; the latter figures simultaneously as an exemplar of wealth, stability, and modernity and as a source of moral decay and geopolitical threat. These discourses of crisis and the abnormal can also be understood as creating a space of cultural intimacy among many Russians, including between political elites and the public. Furthermore, discourses of Russian abnormality are structurally similar to discourses of tradition and globalization in colonial contexts, which likewise link ideas of backwardness, modernization, tradition, and foreign threat to particular regimes of gender and sexuality (see Mohanty 1988; Stoler 2002).

'Vladimir' was a teacher in his early 30s and a member of a nationalist, anti-capitalist political organization. I first met him outside a subway station where he was collecting signatures for a petition against reforms to the juvenile justice system. He was deeply concerned that the law’s stronger protections for the rights of children were a thinly-veiled attack on Russian families, one being forced on Russia by Europe as part of recent WTO agreements. A few days later, he took me on a walking tour of the winding streets around the Kremlin while telling me more about his activism in the conservative left. I jotted notes as we strolled over the cobblestones, and reconstruct Vladimir’s narrative here.

Our organization is working to build a new Union, but not quite the same as the Soviet Union. We do believe in private property, and the history of the communists and the Church is not good, of course. There should be freedom of speech. But unlike now, there used to be a ‘conception of humanity.’ Liberalism is all exterior: comfort, enjoyment, clothes and so on. It doesn’t say anything about ‘meaning, love for the motherland, for the earth.’ That’s all gone. Those in power talk a lot about patriotism, but nobody believes them.

As children, my parents didn’t even know the word narcotics. Now it’s all in the open, it’s even a big business for mafia and criminals. You can see that society is worse because the rate of suicide is so high. There are as many orphans now as there were after the Great Fatherland War [WWII]. ... They say a planned economy infringes on freedom, but what do we have now? How can this be in a country without even a war? ‘The country sold respect and honor for money.’

Vladimir strongly associated current social problems with the collapse of the Soviet cultural and political order. Yet even though Vladimir was critical of the current government, he attributed much of the blame for Russia’s social and moral decline to Western influence. Unlike activists in the political opposition, he believed the recent re-election of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency had been legitimate. He was encouraged by Putin’s rhetoric about defending the traditional family and re-establishing close ties between the Slavic nations of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Even if he disagreed with the ruling party’s economic program, Vladimir shared with state officials a common sociality produced by their common discourse of Russian crisis and decline.

Discourses about the abnormality of life in Russia were widespread, even among

people in the political opposition. ‘Alla,’ a student who had become involved in political activism through LGBT rights protests, expressed the goal of her activism in terms of normalcy: “I want to make it possible for people to live normally.” Alla suggested that Russia’s social problems had a specifically Russian character.

Jessica: Does it seem to you that all these problems in Russia [repression, misogyny, and homophobia] are particularly Russian problems, or are they related to problems in Europe and elsewhere?

Alla: Let’s put it this way. The problems are unusual. I think each country has its own issues, but simply, if you talk about Western countries or America, they fight with problems and people try to change something, right? Everything is getting better. Maybe in one place a little faster, in another place more slowly, but there’s some kind of progress. And here it’s the reverse. So people try to disengage, they don’t do anything about it, and they don’t regulate the authorities, so the authorities start to act however is good for them. And what’s good for them is to aggravate these problems. So the problem is probably general, but the form it takes here, that’s Russian.

In this way, even many of those who were directly opposed to the current political elite framed their problems in a familiar idiom: Russia’s dysfunction. Discourses about Russia’s abnormality thus figure as the basis for cultural intimacy among a wide range of Russians, even many of those who are opposed to Putin and the political elite. Even if they disagree, they share a conception of Russia and Russianness.

Narratives about Russian crisis and decline resonate deeply with much of the public, making them a potent resource for constructing a national community. As I

discuss below, supporters of the “gay propaganda” law mobilized these discourses of decline in order to generate a sense of Russian community through the conspicuous erasure of LGBT Russians. Supporters of the “gay propaganda” law connected queer visibility to declining family values and even demographic crisis. Religious conservatives and state officials co-constructed a worldview that merged moral and geopolitical threat, associating queerness with foreign influence and moral decay. Gays were generally understood to be a result of the introduction of liberal individualism into Russia after 1991, or perhaps even a fifth column directly supported by the US State Department. Western judgement of Russian "homophobia" thus serves only to reinforce this feeling of threatened identity.

Cultural intimacy and the gay propaganda law

Russians from a range of social positions participated in a shared discourse of Russian moral decline and abnormality which blamed Western influence for a perceived decline in “traditional values,” which is made clear in materials published by Orthodox and conservative social and political organizations, the websites of Russian politicians, and from journalists’ reports about an anti-gay organization called Occupy-Pedophilia.⁶¹ Drawing on this discourse, conservatives’ discussions about LGBT Russians brought them into the public eye while simultaneously associating them with the West, highlighting LGBT Russians as enemies who had to be excluded from the national body in order to protect the Russian nation. Through these discussions and accompanying

⁶¹ The group's name in Russian is *Okkupai-Pedofilii*, in which the ending of 'pedophilia' is altered to rhyme with 'occupy.' Intriguingly, the use of the English "Occupy" implies a reference to the Occupy movement.

practices of conspicuous erasure, queer visibility in Russia was used to produce a national community on the basis of anti-gay sentiment.

The Russian "gay propaganda" law explicitly aimed to erase heterodox sexualities from the public sphere. Passed in June 2013, the final wording of the federal law banned "propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations" among minors. The federal version had been modeled on similar legislation that had passed through city- and region-level legislatures, and whose language had been more explicitly anti-gay, leading pro-LGBT activists to refer to them as "anti-gay" laws or "gay propaganda" laws. In May 2012 St. Petersburg, for example, the legislature added articles 7.1 and 7.2 to the criminal code, criminalizing "Public actions aimed at propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgenderism among minors" and "Public actions aimed at propaganda of pedophilia." The emphasis on "public actions" was key to official and media discussions of the laws, allowing sponsors such as St. Petersburg legislator Vitaliy Milonov to insist that the law had nothing to do with limiting citizens' rights, and instead was only intended to protect children and the public from exposure to allegedly damaging messages: "We are not interfering in the sphere of civil rights and freedoms. We are not trying to create a ban connected with sexual preference. We are speaking only about propaganda, because a wave of popularity of sexual deviances is negatively impacting our children" (Izvestia.ru, 2011).

While gay propaganda bans worked their way from regional legislatures to the State Duma in 2012 and 2013, they were a common topic of conversation, as well as a target of street actions and theme for public lectures and debates. My interlocutors understood the explicit goal of the law to be silencing or censorship and incorporated that

view into their campaigns. At several rallies, for example, Alla carried a poster with a stylized image of a Russian nesting doll whose mouth was covered by black tape. When I interviewed her, the federal version of the law was still working its way through the State Duma, but neither of us doubted that it would pass. When I asked her what its purpose was, she answered, “Well, it’s not passed yet, but it will be, obviously. . . . Frankly speaking, the point of this law, it’s all so that either you say bad things about gays, or you say nothing at all. So yes, it’s censorship, without a doubt.”

While the aim of the law—censorship of LGBT rights activism—appeared obvious, nonetheless it seemed odd that this particular target was being highlighted for censorship. What threat could the tiny LGBT community possibly pose to the Putin regime? As I discussed in Chapter One, sexuality and reproduction have been the focus of a great deal of political attention in post-socialist states because they have provided a symbolically powerful grounding for elite contests over legitimacy in a period of rapid change and uncertainty. The Russian state has engaged intensively with the politics of reproduction since the end of state socialism; discourses of demographic, moral, and family crisis pervade official policy and everyday conversations (Leykin 2011; Rivkin-Fish 2006; Rivkin-Fish 2010). Discourses of crisis and abnormality resonate with many segments of the Russian population, allowing many Russians to connect their personal experiences of social and economic struggle with official narratives of the same.

Understanding the anti-gay law in the context of Russia’s reproductive politics helps explain why the LGBT issue in particular was mobilized to produce common sociality. Conservative activists commonly link perceived crisis and decline to a loss of “traditional family values,” of which an idealized a heteronormative patriarchal family

structure forms an important part. 'Nina,' a pensioner who worked as an organizer for a Russian Orthodox women's organization, explained to me that the primary goal of her organization was promoting the "traditional family."

[Our] goal: propaganda of traditional Orthodox values. A conception of the family where there must be a mother and father, and in connection with this, what do we do? Return the man to his foundation, for him to be dominant in the family [...] and the woman must manage the housekeeping, and raise the children, and there we have a traditional family.

But promoting male-dominated heterosexual family life was not the group's only goal. Nina identified the reunification of the "Russian world" as an important part of the fight to defend traditional values.⁶² The political disruption of the unraveling of the USSR, in her eyes, had disrupted the moral world as well.

The Patriarch has explained that there is a Russian world. The Russian world is unity of the faith, unity of history, and unity of culture [...] And why have the attacks on the Patriarch and the Church become so harsh? It's the unity of the remaining unbroken government. This attack started twenty years ago. The culture became, like it is everywhere, mass, pop. And the Church remained unified. Our enemies, internal and external, had their own goals. And so they seek out where the Patriarch goes, what kind of watch he wears, what kind of house he lives in, and so on.

Nina views the Church as the sole remaining defender of values which were nearly destroyed by the collapse of the USSR. Media "attacks," such as a 2012 scandal related to

⁶² Similar language was used to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, suggesting that it has (or has been given) a broad resonance in the Russian public.

a photo of Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, wearing a luxury watch which was subsequently digitally removed (BBC 2012), indicate the presence of enemies who seek to undermine traditional values and the unity of the Russian nation. Even though Nina herself criticized Russian society for being too materialistic, foreign criticism of the Patriarch's expensive taste and the Church's obvious erasure served only to reinforce her defensive identification with the Church.

National decline and the threat of queerness

Politicians and officials drew on a similar set of connections between "traditional values," social decline, and heterosexuality when they spoke about the ban on "gay propaganda." Duma deputy Elena Mizulina, chair of the Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs and a prominent advocate for the law, explicitly linked the ban to Russia's alleged demographic crisis, the decline in population Russia has undergone since the 1990s. In a Q&A during which 'Ivan,' who identified himself as a gay 16-year-old, asked why she supported a law that made his life harder, Mizulina made use of crisis discourse to justify her support of the law:

Ivan, as a lawmaker I insist on the position of the majority of Russians, who support traditional family values. These are processes extremely important for our country, because the demographic situation leaves much to be desired. By relying on the traditional family we are able to solve this problem (Mizulina 2013).

Here LGBT Russians are folded into an existing narrative of national decline. Mizulina simultaneously implies that queerness threatens the health of the Russian nation, and

presents the erasure of non-hetero orientations as a solution to that problem. Similarly, Moscow city legislator Vera Stepanenko explained her support of the ban by saying, “We have a serious problem with demography, and we cannot allow new young men to be propagandized into joining that homosexual culture. We are sure that many parents likewise support the protection of their children from that culture” (Runkevich 2012). Note that Mizulina and Stepanenko only need to refer obliquely to demography. The existence of a demographic crisis and the audience’s awareness of it can be taken for granted; it is a space of cultural intimacy.

Conservative politicians and media figures used public discussions of LGBT issues to link them to a general narrative of decline, connecting the suffering of the Russian nation to the visibility of queerness in public space. Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the leader of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia who is known for producing sensationalist sound bites, illustrated this logic in a statement in a 2007 interview on the Russian network NTV.

In 1991 we were the object of a terrible expansion. Enemies threw themselves at us. They held liberal values before themselves like a weapon. In and of themselves, liberal values are neither bad nor good. Maybe the reverse, they’re wonderful in and of themselves. But they were used like a flamethrower. With the help of liberal values, my country was destroyed. They talked about the free market, turned my country into an oligarchic republic, having destroyed industry and essentially dishonored the entire population. They talked about freedom of identity, but turned identity to a hotbed of miasmas, a hotbed of molestation, to a hotbed of sodomism (Khakamada 2007).

Zhirinovskiy relates a familiar narrative of national crisis and dysfunction, laying blame on external Western enemies. LGBT visibility becomes a sign of the existence of internal enemies who have been infected by foreign values. Zhirinovskiy's statement echoes similar themes raised by Vladimir, as I described above: liberal values, which have been forced on Russia by the West, are pose a direct threat to the Russian nation by undermining its families.

Russian Orthodox Church officials, too, share in the cultural intimacy of Russian decline, connecting LGBT rights to Western influence and Russian decline. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, a spokesperson for the Church on social issues and chair of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society for the Moscow Patriarchate, has expressed support for the federal ban on gay propaganda while hinting at connections between Europe and LGBT rights defenders. He noted his surprise that “organizations of homosexuals, which consist mainly of people who deny a connection between homosexuality and pedophilia, were simultaneously up in arms against these laws, strongly opposing their passage, complaining to certain Western organizations, gaining the support of certain figures in the Council of Europe” (Interfax.ru 2012).

The same themes appear in discourses used by activists in conservative groups such as the National Council, an Orthodox nationalist non-governmental organization with ties to the Kremlin. The National Council worked closely with the Russian Orthodox Church in a petition drive leading up to passage of the gay propaganda ban (Runkevich 2012). Aleksandr Lapin, a Moscow region representative on the National Council, explained his support for the gay propaganda ban by echoing Putin's use of crisis discourse.

In his statement to the Federal Council, President Vladimir Putin clearly outlined

a few spheres as domestic policy priorities: patriotism, morality, and family values. Russia is faced with serious problems, which may ultimately threaten the very existence of the nation and the government. And it is not only and not just corruption and ineffective economics. It is depopulation, spiritual-moral degradation, and likewise the Russo-phobic anti-patriotic matrix implanted by liberal pseudo-intellectuals over the past decades (Lapin 2013).

Lapin, too, saw gay rights in Russia as a visible manifestation of threatening Western influence, particularly from the United States: “In its foreign policy activities, the USA really loves to defend all kinds of minorities (religious, ethnic, political, social, and sexual), upsetting healthy societies, governments that are sovereign and stable at first glance. In order to better control countries, they erode the identity of nations, ridiculing their history and culture” (Lapin, 2013) Likewise, demographer and editor of the conservative website *Demografia.ru* Igor Beloborodov associates gay rights with dangerous Western values that are contributing to Russian national degeneration.

First we permit homosexuality and we look at it tolerantly, and then we permit incest. For example, Belgium and Holland, two countries that first legalized homosexuality, are already about to legalize child euthanasia [...] This is the path to the abyss, to complete degeneration. Because, of course, however it looks from the position of a contemporary insane Europe, the law [against sodomy] must be returned. And maybe various legal forms for avoiding these people in normal society, protection from the influence of that threat, which the homosexual way of life carries within itself, but something absolutely must be done about it (Nakanune.ru 2014).

Conservative Russians' discussions about LGBT rights and the gay propaganda law produce a cultural intimacy in which Russian national identity is defined by moral crisis and geopolitical threat. The law's conspicuous erasure of LGBT Russians highlights queerness as the source of that moral-political threat.

It is important to note that despite the discursive distance right-wing Russians were creating between Western and Russian values and practices in these statements, Russia's conservative Christian movement in fact has ties to European and U.S. right-wing Christian groups. For example, the World Congress of Families, a U.S.-based coalition group made up of Religious Right organizations, has organized international conferences since the mid-1990s to spread its conception of "family values" abroad, including in the former Soviet Union. WCF, which was created jointly by Russian and U.S. social conservatives in 1995, has played a major role in cultivating Russia's religious right movement, regularly flying representatives of groups like the National Organization for Marriage to meet with Russian politicians and activists (Levintova 2014). As noted in footnote 53, WCF even awarded Elena Mizulina a medal in 2010.

A further irony of the anti-gay law, of course, is that its explicit goal—erasing queerness from the public view—was directly contradicted by its actual effects, as Zhirinovskiy himself noted: “All the press is only about this, and it emphasizes that when we pass this law, start to implement fines, there will be all the more reports about how someone is being fined. So there's your propagandistic trick” (Rosbalt.ru 2013). He further warned that the law might provoke a counter-reaction as the Pussy Riot case had; the risk of conspicuous erasure.

At times, participating in the conspicuous erasure of LGBT Russians seemed

almost a source of pleasure for opponents of LGBT rights. Discussions of the proposed law were prominently featured in sensationalist talk shows and other broadcasts on national TV channels, giving national visibility to the LGBT theme. The topic may have been titillating to audiences not accustomed to public talk about heterodox sexualities, and talk shows deliberately presented it in an extreme light. Participants in televised debates were encouraged to be emotional, according to Igor, a leftist and LGBT activist who has been invited on air several times. When I asked whether the television hosts let guests express themselves, or whether they were pressured to be provocative, he stirred his tea, then answered in his usual measured tones.

Igor: I myself am a journalist. I know how to do that. But unfortunately, in the majority of cases, there are very few opportunities to say what you want. Very few. Because usually it's some kind of talk show. When you arrive, you're told: don't be shy, talk, yell, interrupt! Yell loudly! And it turns out that there, you can't say anything normally. You need to scream, and that's not useful, as a rule. But all the same, we have in principle such a rule that it's better to go than not to go, generally. ... You need to be prepared for not being able to say everything you want. You need to speak very briefly and very clearly.

As entertaining as these discussions might have been for some audience members, they also seemed to be experienced as an unwanted intrusion by conservative Russians, as I heard from several of my Russian language teachers. Just at the moment when government officials had proposed a law defending innocent youth against 'gay propaganda,' it seemed that homosexuality was suddenly everywhere.

That is, proposal of the law didn't simply result from a process of problematization

of LGBT Russians—it constituted that problematization. The highly visible process of erasure itself made queerness visible, legitimating the need for a ban. In this way, conspicuous erasure allowed Russian politicians to raise a problem that resonated with the public and simultaneously offer a concrete solution to it. A space of cultural intimacy was created within which state officials, media figures, religious authorities, and viewers at home could share a sense of Russianness as the experience of moral decay caused by an influx of foreign values. Within that space, they co-produced a Russian national body founded in a shared experience of queerness as an exogenous threat. The conspicuous erasure of LGBT Russians could form the basis for a community drawn together by a commitment to the public elimination of that threat.

Visibility weaponized: Occupy-Pedophilia's conspicuous erasure

Anthropologists tend to treat visibility as desirable. In our own writing, we often seek to highlight the otherwise-unnoticed, including the experiences of marginalized communities. Themes of the hidden and the visible may be particularly strong in queer anthropology, where the metaphor of “coming out” is widely used and scholars frequently seek to “render visible” the lives and problems of those who had until recently been “in the closet,” hidden from public and academic gazes. Social justice activists in recent decades have also appealed to what Boellstorff (2007) calls a “logic of enumeration” in which naming, recognizing and *seeing* marginalized groups is understood as a path to tolerance, equality, and belonging. For example, the gay rights movement’s sidelining of the particular problems of transgender people is called a

problem of “trans invisibility.” This heavy reliance on metaphors of publicity—a “preoccupation with issues of visibility” (Weston 1993: 360)—suggests a widespread assumption that visibility is necessarily desirable, even if specific visibility practices like “coming out” are fraught with personal risk. To be seen is to be recognized; to be recognized is to be accepted. This logic underpins the importance to many LGBT groups of claiming and maintaining visibly gay spaces (Skeggs 1999). But as Stella (2012) points out, embedded in the goal of queer visibility are assumptions about the “inherently subversive and transformative potential” of visibility politics. Not all LGBT people seek visibility; not all visibility is beneficial. Becoming visible risks of increased vulnerability, which is illustrated all too well by the violence regularly enacted at LGBT protests in Russia and elsewhere.

Of course, the fact that coming out can pose risks to queer people does not in itself preclude the valorization of visibility. The deeper challenge to assuming visibility as a virtue, as the Russian case shows, is that visibility itself can be weaponized. The dark power of rendering visible is particularly striking in the citizen vigilantism of a group calling itself Occupy-Pedophilia. Occupy-Pedophilia was founded in Moscow by Maksim Martsinkevich, a well-known skinhead, after he finished serving a term in prison for inciting ethnic hatred (Turovsky 2013). There appear to be several dozen chapters in cities across Russia and even in Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Members set up what are essentially honeypot stings, ads for dates and friendship to lure ‘pedophiles’ to make contact, especially those living in rural parts of Russia. Like the anti-gay law, Occupy-Pedophilia conflates homosexuality and pedophilia, and in interviews its members often refer to their targets more generally as “perverts” or “pederasts.” Once the targeted man

arrives at the arranged meeting spot, he is kidnapped, beaten, and sometimes forced to call his own family and come out to them. Occupy-Pedophilia has filmed many of these incidents and posted them to YouTube, adding an additional level of publicity. One of the most publicized cases caught Andrei Kaminov, a Deputy Head of the Federal Bailiff Service, allegedly attempting to meet a 14-year-old boy in a rented apartment. He was fired after Occupy-Pedophilia circulated a video of his confession online (Akinshin 2013). The coercive visibility of such videos is a stark reminder that ‘being seen’ can as easily be a form of repression as a means to liberation.

The websites and media interviews of Occupy-Pedophilia member suggest that they, too, share in the same discourses of crisis and abnormality promoted by state officials. For example, a *Lenta.ru* investigative report on a group in the Urals quotes a 20-something member explaining his tattoo as a response to perceived moral decline, which he links to non-normative sexuality: “The black sun is widespread in occultism, for me that symbol means striving for wisdom, striving for self-development, because in recent times we see the fall of morals—all around are pederasts” (Turovsky 2013). Another member refers to a host of foreign enemies as the source of decay:

“Things will be good when there’s an iron curtain [again], so all that shit from Europe won’t seep in. The regime should be either national-socialist, or a strict form of communism. To hell with it, so I have the same pants as everyone else, at least I’ll be sure that a Tajik won’t sell my son weed outside the school, and on the way home he won’t meet a homo in the bushes” (Turovsky 2013).

Members justify their vigilantism by claiming that the government has failed to address adequately the problem of moral decline, which would seem to position them in an

oppositional relationship to the state. In fact, the Russian authorities extradited Martsinkevich from Cuba in early 2014 and charged him with extremism, specifically for inciting inter-ethnic hatred (Interfax.ru 2014). Occupy-Pedophilia members may not see eye-to-eye with Russia's ruling elite on the benefits of capitalism, but their shared discourses of moral and national decline nonetheless engage them within the same space of cultural intimacy as Russian politicians, National Council activists, and Russian Orthodox Church leaders.

The production of that intimacy rests on the conspicuous erasure of supposed threats like LGBT Russians. Like the anti-gay law, Occupy-Pedophilia's *raison d'être* is, in a sense, queer visibility. Both cases underscore the dangers of taking "visibility" for granted as a necessarily positive tactic. Of course I do not mean to suggest that LGBT Russians would be better off remaining "in the closet." Nor is my critique founded on concerns about the possible ethnocentrism of applying "Western" norms of visibility-as-recognition to Russia, as Stella (2012; 2013a) has argued. Many Moscow pro-LGBT activists in fact work hard to achieve a certain kind of visibility, as I describe below.

The problem isn't visibility of all kinds, but the fact that 'rendering visible' is a tactic that may be used to many different ends. As the "gay propaganda" ban shows, queer visibility has been central to the production of Russian national identity, even while conservative Russians explicitly frame the LGBT community as Other. Occupy-Pedophilia's aggressive use of conspicuous erasure offers an additional model of visibility in the service of vigilantism. Caught up in the international politics of national identity, queer visibility may not necessarily produce queer belonging. Discussions of visibility must pay careful attention to what kind of visibility is being produced, and for

whom.

Fighting for the right to fight: making erasure conspicuous

At a rally against fascism in November 2012, which Moscow city officials had assigned to an isolated square with little pedestrian traffic, speakers united around the theme of joining together to resist what they perceived as an increase in fascist violence and repression in recent months. Just minutes before the rally, activists gathering in the metro station, including two pro-LGBT activists, had been attacked by a large group of young men chanting nationalist slogans. But while the rally's audience had enthusiastically applauded earlier calls for unity, lines of division became apparent when 'Sasha,' a leftist and LGBT rights supporter, stepped up to the microphone and raised the LGBT theme:

If patriarchy is an essential part of the nationalist dialogue, we should bring to our side representatives of the women's movement, feminists. And just the same with the LGBT movement. If that is one of the main thrusts directing the right—they're directed at gays, you know. We should cooperate with them, struggle together...

At this, he was interrupted by several men in the crowd who began to boo and hiss loudly. Two or three others called out in Sasha's defense: "He's right! It's all right!" Once Sasha finished his speech, his colleague Zhenya, one of the rally organizers, returned to the mic. Looking straight into the eyes of those who had booed and hissed, she confronted them, her voice tinged with anger.

I want to watch your faces really well, because I think anti-fascism is a fight against any division of working people. I am from a simple family, and I have heard the word 'pederast' since I was 12. I think that if I come to an anti-fascist march, here people will understand that among us there should be no division of common people. Not on the principle of sex, not on the principle of nationality. And when my comrade reminds us of that and I see that kind of reaction, I honestly don't understand what I'm doing here. I don't understand. Do people really believe that among equals, some should be more equal?

Zhenya then interrupted the planned list of speakers by calling up Pavel, an LGBT activist who had not originally been scheduled to speak.

For Russian pro-LGBT activists, the problem with the gay propaganda law was not simply that it made LGBT Russians visible; the problem was that it harnessed LGBT visibility to a political project hostile to their own interests. In fact, pro-LGBT activists were engaged in their own politics of visibility in response to the erasure of LGBT issues within the left and in the broader anti-Putin opposition. The LGBT issue was widely understood to be a sensitive one in the general public. Many activists believed that it had the potential to divide the opposition movement, which included socially conservative liberals and far-right nationalists as well as the left. Furthermore, the left itself was conflicted about whether to support LGBT rights, as I will describe below. In the understanding of activists, an important function of the state's conspicuous erasure of LGBT people was to 'divide and conquer' the various fractions of the opposition. Activists responded by deliberately raising the LGBT question among co-protesters as a way of simultaneously pre-empting the state's visibility politics and countering their own

erasure within opposition groups. As Igor put it, “LGBT have to fight just for the right to fight.”

Pavel was an organizer for Moscow’s Rainbow Association, a grassroots LGBT community organization that had become more politically active in recent years. When I interviewed him shortly after the November anti-fascist rally, he recounted that he had rarely been able to speak at political rallies. In his view, politics was dominated by “white, heterosexual, affluent men” who had little interest in problems unfamiliar to them. Pavel explained, “When I come to an organizing committee, say the organizing committee of some anti-fascist rally or citizen's rally, when I say that I want to talk about the problems of LGBT [people], 10 white, heterosexual, affluent men who have gathered behind the table say to me, ‘well, you want to, but that's not interesting to us. It's not our problem and it doesn't promote us.’” In this way, the LGBT community was quietly erased during the planning phase of political actions. Some organizing committees simply disallowed LGBT symbols and excluded from the podium speakers who might raise LGBT themes. Pavel recounted his own experiences of invisible erasure when I asked how often he had spoken at rallies:

I have given speeches at rallies, but those were rallies I organized myself. At some general citizens’ or anti-fascist rallies, I have never spoken, even though in principle I would have liked to. I pushed for it, but it never worked out. Whether from the beginning or at the last moment, I was told that there's not enough time, you won't be promoting us, we have more important speakers, and so on.

The task of pro-LGBT activists, then, was to find ways of making themselves and their cause visible in the face of this erasure—which they accomplished in part by highlighting

the erasure itself.

As I have described earlier in this dissertation, at many of the dozens of events I attended during my fieldwork, pro-LGBT activists raised the LGBT theme in various ways, such as including LGBT issues in slogans, wearing rainbow-colored clothing and ribbons, and talking about homophobia and the LGBT community during speeches. Sometimes they were met with resistance from fellow protesters. The symbol of the rainbow flag was a particularly visible object of contestation, with some protesters physically attacking the flags and the activists who carried them. The hostility was not unexpected; as I heard in planning meetings, pro-LGBT activists often discussed their attempts to convince march organizers to allow rainbow flags. They planned in advance how to respond to attackers, and mulled over the public response to attacks afterwards.

In Chapter Seven, I described how pro-LGBT activists insisted on raising the LGBT theme at public events where they knew they were likely to be met with hostility. For some, carrying a rainbow flag that prompted an attack was a means of rendering visible other activists' exclusion of LGBT themes.

Pavel: There's a leftist political analyst, Boris Kagarlitsky, who really tellingly called the LGBT question "an uncomfortable question." That is, a question which he, his movement, and the leftist movement don't want to participate in a dialogue on, and can't. Well, don't want to, basically. I think this isn't right, of course, because for example for fascists there are no "uncomfortable questions." They have an answer for every question. They have an answer: that we need to punish homosexuals with 3 years in prison, forbid any kind of propaganda, like rainbow buttons and flags, close our clubs, that women should sit in the kitchen, that

migrants should be kicked out of Russia, and so on. They are capable of answering uncomfortable questions. Very much in their own way, but very capable. Anti-fascists, socialists, liberals are wary of answering these questions, afraid to answer them, and so on. That's bad. We are fighting so that they will talk about us.

In this way, attempts to remove the flag and attack the activists were productive; they created moments of conspicuous erasure that enabled pro-LGBT activists to highlight the vulnerability of LGBT Russians. Activists read reactions to LGBT visibility as signals of the movement's underlying attitudes toward the LGBT community, the level of fellow activists' homophobia or their willingness to stand up for and protect LGBT activists. Activists then used post-facto discussions of such incidents to pressure other activists in the left or the broader opposition to recognize and address homophobia within their organizations.

For 'Katya,' an anarchist, making LGBT erasure conspicuous meant splitting off from other anarchists to found a new Anarcho-Feminist Group that could focus more intensively on issues related to gender and sexuality. I interviewed her a few weeks after that schism, meeting at one of Moscow's sparkling shopping malls in a cafeteria-style restaurant where we could sneak in our own tea and 'borrow' mugs and hot water.

Katya [in English]: There were two parts of the anarchist bloc: we, and the red and black flags. And we separated because it was not a very pleasant moment when at the meeting a woman with a rainbow flag came to the bloc, the anarchist bloc, and there were a lot of people saying she should go away because they are afraid people might think they have gays too, and so they began to argue with her.

Tried to maybe somehow beat her. And it was very unpleasant. And after that moment, I began to discuss this question of homophobia in the movement. [...] So I asked my friends and I found about maybe 10 or 20 people that are worried about this problem and I was looking to make some alternative movement inside the anarchy movement. We, women and some transgenders and some queers who come to... We think that we are going to make some reaction, some discussions.

Katya also describes the explicit reasoning given by several of the activists hostile to the rainbow flag: that outside observers might take it as an indication that the entire bloc was gay. They seemed to be concerned about the wrong kind of visibility—that people might see something that wasn't truly there.

On the other hand, even though pro-LGBT activists were disappointed that many of their supposed comrades were hostile to the cause, many of them saw the LGBT question as clarifying: it could render visible rifts within the opposition movement. For Zhenya, a leftist feminist, support of LGBT activists was important not just for the sake of LGBT rights, but because it indicated support for a broad range of economically vulnerable groups.

Zhenya: It seems to me in Russia it's especially important to raise the LGBT question... For example when we went out on May Day together with LGBT [activists], they went out with placards "LGBT for equal rights of employment," since it was on May Day. The reaction of the left, well, from them there was an attempt to make an attack, even though it was the left. It really shows that it's this question that clearly puts everyone on their places, it's instantly understood. Either a person is really against any discrimination and for the unification of

workers independent of sex, orientation, nationality, race, or he agrees in words, but in practice as soon as a really acute question of gender, about their principles, comes up, well. These very leftists, who started to attack and say that ‘we don’t want anything [to do] with these faggots,’ they then started to backtrack on the national question. For example, saying that “yes, of course, there shouldn’t be any discrimination, *but*.” [...] And for that reason I really like this issue.

Raising the LGBT question immediately exposes other fissures lurking beneath the broader leftist community, revealing misogyny, xenophobia, and any other prejudices that might pose potential threats to future unity. In this way, queer visibility is valuable far beyond its power to reveal homophobia. It renders visible the intertwined forms of discrimination on which conservative-nationalist power rests.

While Alla, as a liberal democrat, was less interested in bringing the LGBT community into a broader workers’ struggle, she also understood the LGBT question as a matter of choosing one’s community. Alla made a stark comparison of the present situation to Nazi-era Germany, suggesting that persecution of one’s friends and neighbors forces one to take a position: “You can not love someone, say, the Jews, in the abstract. But if you live in Nazi Germany you have to choose your side. Here it’s just the same. Right now you can hate, say, gays. Right? And when they start persecutions against you, you have to decide who you are, where you are.” Certainly Alla herself had made such a decision. She had been arrested at the very first LGBT rights action she attended, which she explained had simply made her more determined to continue. By the time I interviewed Alla, standing up for LGBT rights had cost her friends, caused tension with her parents, and interfered with her studies, such as when she spent a night in jail during

exam week. Shortly after the International Women's Day rally I discussed in the Introduction, Alla was charged with assaulting an officer—despite clear video evidence that she had simply been carried out of the rally by police holding her by both arms and legs who tossed her unceremoniously into the police van. Fearful of a prison term, she sought asylum in a European county.

Visibility and belonging: becoming part of the protest

In addition to using the LGBT issue to clarify protesters' positions in the political landscape, many of the pro-LGBT activists I worked with highlighted the importance of public actions in making LGBT Russians visible as fellow citizens and human beings who shared in much of the same social suffering as other Russians. Their aim in making erasure conspicuous was to create a space of common sociality that was alternative to that created by official homophobia.

This goal can be contrasted with that of Pride events, whose organizers are more likely to seek a specifically queer visibility or to claim public spaces as queer. Thus a tension exists between the aims of the activists I worked with and other prominent Russian gay-rights activists who have pushed for liberal-cosmopolitan Pride events. The politics of Pride in Moscow have a short but complex history, as Sarajeva (2010) explains. The first proposal to hold a Pride parade in Moscow was put forward in 2005 by Nikolai Alekseev, at that time not a public figure, and Evgenia Debryanskaya, who had been active in the lesbian and gay movement in the 1990s. Though reactions from city officials were strongly negative—then-mayor Yuri Luzhkov repeatedly compared the

parade to a “Satanic act” (Reuters 2010)—reactions from the local LGBT communities were ambivalent at best. Many feared (not without cause) that a Pride parade would draw a violent reaction, rather than leading to growth in public acceptance of LGBT Russians. Others were skeptical of Alekseev’s motives, suspecting that he was more interested in self-promotion than anything else. The Pride Festival that resulted included more international participants than Russians, and the few participants who attended the cancelled parade with Alekseev were met with violence, which became the theme reported by international media (Sarajeva 2010).

In contrast, the younger generation of activists I worked with were less interested in queer visibility for its own sake. Their goal was for LGBT individuals and pro-LGBT activists to participate visibly in the same events as other discontented Russian citizens and to demonstrate that they shared the same social and economic problems as non-LGBT Russians. When an LGBT column participated in the mass protests “For Fair Elections,” they joined as citizens, equal to and like everyone else. Several activists emphasized this theme in interviews.

Alla: You can hate some abstract gay. You can hate some abstract lesbian. But when it’s someone you know, it’s your relative, or even just a person you’ve talked with. Then already it’s impossible. So that’s why I think it’s important for people who go out to actions to see that along with them are going representatives of the LGBT community.

Pavel explained that in his view, “[a]ll the problems of LGBT, for the most part they intersect with the problems of other people, non-LGBT.” Of course LGBT Russians faced particular problems of their own, and Pavel’s Rainbow Association supported many

projects specifically for the LGBT community from psychological support groups to queer-friendly parties. But in the present moment, according to Pavel, one of the Rainbow Association's most pressing tasks was bringing the LGBT community into politics and demonstrating to the non-LGBT community that they all shared many of the same problems. In his view, queer Russians needed to be visible as citizens suffering under the same political and economic regime that harmed the rest of the population.

As a committed leftist, skeptical about liberal conceptions of human rights, Zhenya approached the LGBT issue somewhat differently. She was sensitive to the charge by other leftists that LGBT rights were a "mere bourgeois distraction," a liberal scheme to stave off real change by pacifying a community that might otherwise be radicalized. Yet she was determined to fight homophobia within the left and to work for LGBT causes like the right to equal employment rights. The ways in which she highlighted LGBT issues show this tension. On one hand, she sought to harness the LGBT movement to the greater cause of socialism and economic justice, "for the unification of workers independent of sex, orientation, nationality, race." In this respect, the fact that she often rendered LGBT issues visible in specifically leftist language sometimes led to tension with non-leftist LGBT activists. But on the other hand, Zhenya was committed to making LGBT issues visible in a way that connected them directly to the problems of other Russians, attempting to bring them into a community based on shared experiences of exploitation, precarity, and repression. Like Pavel and Alla, Zhenya raised the LGBT question in order to highlight LGBT individuals as co-participants in a broader struggle.

The potential importance of queer visibility for creating a more inclusive opposition community was illustrated by Igor when I asked him why he thought it was

important for LGBT Russians to participate in street actions. He reflected on what he regarded as small successes of the previous year and suggested that the project of queer visibility undertaken by LGBT activists themselves had had a significant impact on attitudes within the opposition movement.

Igor: LGBT have to fight just for the right to fight. And even participation in the protest movement in the past two years, it helped in the main because LGBT became a part of it. Everyone recognized that they were a part of the movement, a part of civil society or part of the social protest movement. Because earlier, a person with a rainbow flag would have been called a provocateur, a provocation. That is, either against the opposition or the reverse, against the authorities.

Already they don't talk like that. Even the nationalists. Sure, they don't like it, but they recognize that we're here and we are part of the protest. That is, when we went out to actions on September 15th or June 12th, they passed by. They didn't touch us.

Igor's choice to highlight tolerance by the far right provides an important contrast to the intra-opposition conflict and the official homophobia I described above. For example, at a protest march "For Fair Elections" on September 15, 2012, I was standing with the column of LGBT activists and allied leftists preparing flags and posters—one of the largest collections of rainbows I had yet seen in Moscow. Not only did several groups of nationalists walk by, but also a column of Paratroopers in uniform, a group with a reputation for violent machismo. They simply passed by, in this case apparently accepting the presence of LGBT protesters. Perhaps this doesn't sound like much. Yet as Igor points out, the fact that such a visibly queer group was at times accepted without

harassment is noteworthy. For a moment, at least, pro-LGBT activists could feel that they were “a part of the movement.”

The LGBT activist Adik echoed many of the same themes when he explained why he had become increasingly involved in political activism since 2011. Like Igor, he explains that the central goal of LGBT participation in mass protests is to demonstrate that LGBT Russians share many of the same problems as most other people in Russia, even if they have also have particular problems of their own.

Adik: Everything has changed so powerfully in the past year. If before it was some kind of... you know, there was an action, it was looked at from the side as, "Oh, we're gay, we also have rights, we want them to exist." And a large enough part of society looked at that like, "Oh, damn, we don't understand why they need to do that." But now the situation in Russia has gotten to the point where we could talk about more interesting themes, more mass, more interesting to the general population. Now we talk not only about how we're gay, we have rights; we talk about how we are citizens of this country. We are oppressed just like you. We just also have [our own] particular problems. We also want prices to be lower. We also want salaries to be higher. We also want officials to stop lying. We also want to have kindergartens and day care. We want fair elections. We want cheap gasoline. (Aside: Even though we drill oil, we have some of the most expensive gas.)

Yet, as Adik describes, the stakes for achieving citizenship are higher for LGBT Russians than for many others, and their right to belong is questioned by fellow protesters as well as undermined by the authoritarian power exercised against them.

Adik: And at the same time, for society we see a passel of insane people who say "Oh, you went out with rainbow flags! You must want marriage." Now the experience of protest says, "Shoot. We're normal guys who want the same things you do." And it's already been a year of going to all the political actions possible. We raise slogans, slogans about political prisoners, slogans on some anti-state themes. In reaction, how to put it. Whether or not we managed to do it. I think the pogrom on 7freedays is indicative, on October 11. We were celebrating International Coming Out Day, Day of Coming Out of the Closet, the Day of Openness. About 20 people attacked the club, and insofar as to this day it hasn't been admitted (?) it can be said that it was an element of terror.

For pro-LGBT activists, choosing visibility at mass actions was an attempt to evade the state's visibility politics by seeking a different cultural intimacy with a different collectivity. Rather than a Russianness constructed on exclusionary and homophobic rejection of queerness, they sought to construct a polity founded on a shared experience of life under a corrupt and repressive state. The public protests were therefore important as a visibly shared space for shared experiences—what one might call the cultural intimacy of repression and precarity.

Conclusion: Belonging where?

In this chapter, I have described how different forms of queer visibility and erasure are being used to produce competing forms of community in contemporary Russia in response to interlocking predicaments of national and international politics. I introduced the concept of conspicuous erasure to highlight the complex ways in which

visibility may be related to belonging. As the case of Occupy-Pedophilia shows, the exclusion produced through conspicuous erasure is not merely a failure to include queer Russians within the national community. Rather, the national community is constituted in part through the violent and visible exclusion of LGBT people. A similar process of conspicuous erasure was involved in the passage of the national ban on "gay propaganda," which provided an opportunity for Russian politicians, Russian Orthodox Church officials, and socially conservative Russian citizens to share in a cultural intimacy based on the notion that LGBT Russians are to blame for demographic and moral decline, and that Russia's conspicuous erasure of them was a mark of distinctive national culture. On the other hand, the efforts of pro-LGBT activists demonstrate yet another form of queer visibility. Rather than being mobilized to produce an anti-gay nationalist community, or as part of a movement to claim public spaces for a specifically queer community, the visibility produced by these activists is intended to highlight the ways in which LGBT Russians share many of the same social and economic problems as other Russians. By highlighting LGBT Russians as fellow citizens and protesters, and insisting that other protesters allow their presence on that basis, pro-LGBT activists use queer visibility in an attempt to form a community that could offer a true alternative to the conservative-nationalist body produced by state officials and political elites. Various forms of conspicuous erasure in Russia thus illustrate the importance of analyzing queer visibility and other forms of resistance as they take specific forms amid the specific predicaments in which activists find themselves.

Conclusion

From fights over rainbow flags to jailing women for a song, struggles over gender and sexuality have been central to Russian opposition politics in the Putin era. This dissertation has aimed to explain why activism in Russia's New Left has taken these specific contentious forms. In Chapter One, I described how the regulation of gender and sexuality has long played important roles in the construction of political legitimacy in Russia. Through the 20th and 21st centuries, concerns over demographic and moral crisis have undergirded elite attempts to maintain authority and construct a sense of national identity. Russia's pronatalism, the ban on "gay propaganda," and Putin's macho public persona are all aspects of this biopolitics in the present moment, a biopolitics that aims to produce a politically docile and reproductively active public. But some Russians, including my activist interlocutors, experience biopolitics as radicalizing; for them, the sight of a pro-family billboard induces feelings of cynicism and anger rather than national pride. The government's failure to support the lives of its people, as well as its at times violent rejection of those whose right to belong in the nation has been called into question, cultivates unruly subjectivities. In this respect, my research adds an important counterpoint to studies of biopolitics in Russia that have focused primarily on the roles of nationalist and pronatalist discourses in producing political legitimacy.

But being an activist is more than simply ceasing to believe in official ideologies. As I showed in Chapter Two, becoming an activist and being engaged with politics are at heart shifts in subjectivity. Activism involves developing a strengthened sense of one's own ability to act in the world and a belief that collective action is indeed possible, while

politics, in the understanding of my interlocutors, indicates coming to see various social problems as interconnected. Political activism is thus a rejection of the disengagement, atomization, and abjection that characterize life for many people in post-socialist and late-liberal contexts. My findings speak back to studies of post-socialism and late-liberalism that have emphasized the depoliticization of contemporary life, as well as emphasizing that activism's effect on the self should be understood as one of its central functions.

Chapter Three explored how activists understand protest spaces, focusing on what constitutes a "good" protest for New Left activists working within the mass mobilization of the Russian opposition movement from 2011-2013. Much of the structure of a protest event is out of the control of activists, who may put weeks of planning into an event that the authorities cancel at the last moment, or who may be attempting to take advantage of events planned by others, using "apolitical" opposition rallies as platforms for their own messages. Activist practices thus amount to a kind of poetics, a play with and within existing forms to achieve certain ends. By following how activists worked through an unpredictable rally event, and examining activists' own descriptions of good and banal protests, I showed that for New Left activists, a "good" protest is one that allows space for unexpected encounters with people who are not already part of the protest scene, and that allows one to express one's own positions, not limited by the demands or restrictions of others. Furthermore, excitement attaches to events that are themselves unpredictable and out of the norm; protest actions that seem to carry the most potential are thus likely to be the riskiest, a problem which activists try to manage through planning, adaptation, and social strategies like joking and interpersonal solidarity.

If agency and interconnection are key features of activism, then they stand in direct opposition to the everyday experience of authoritarian power. In Chapter Four, I worked from an intersectional feminist perspective, which recognizes that while we may think of various facets of subject position as distinct—class, race, gender, sexuality—people experience various structures of discrimination and domination in combination. Western observers may describe Russians as living under an authoritarian regime, but for women, LGBT Russians, ethnic minorities, or other multiply-marginalized groups, everyday experiences of authoritarianism and repression blur any boundaries between state and non-state actors. Their narratives point to an understanding of authoritarian power that is shaped by the state, but that is exercised by a broad range of actors, including fellow activists and domestic partners. Authoritarianism has less to do with particular arrangements of elite power than with the establishment of a landscape of pervasive but unpredictable threat, the effect of which is an inability to act. In this context, even the subjective identification as an activist may already be a remarkable form of resistance.

The second half of the dissertation explored other forms of resistance, focusing on how activists use certain tactics to create social friction, making protests and interactions more eventful and charged with potential and also creating space within the New Left, the opposition and Russian society at large for the kinds of non-hierarchical, pro-LGBT organizations and practices they want. Chapters Five and Eight locate this discussion of forms of contentious resistance in the context of movements in the politics of gender and sexuality in this period, while Chapters Six and Seven focus more closely on the dynamics of friction within and among New Left groups. By provoking people to locate

and identify themselves within the political landscape, Pussy Riot's performance and the state's responses to it generated a rearticulation of social norms and values. On the one hand, talking about Pussy Riot allowed social conservatives to position themselves as defenders of moral norms and thereby produce a certain vision of social continuity, asserting that the values they represented were traditional. On the other hand, the responses activists who were more sympathetic to the group discursively created a sense of social change, both by establishing a sense that the government had become more repressive, especially to women, and by actually shifting over time by becoming more sympathetic to Pussy Riot's cause and by redefining the landscape of Moscow. The case shows how provocations can allow a relatively powerless group to create opportunities for change, even if the changes they prefer are by no means a guaranteed outcome.

Chapter Six examines the role of schisms and refusals among feminists in Moscow, understanding these practices as taking on a particular role in a period when women's NGOs are in decline. The drying up of foreign funding for Russian NGOs has led to significant declines in their numbers and the resources available for basic infrastructure like office space, particularly for feminist organizations and those that focused on issues related to women's rights. In addition, one legacy of that foreign funding, which placed Russians in an aid recipient role that many felt was uncomfortable and unwanted, has been a certain suspicion about feminism and women's movements as foreign imports. A further predicament New Left feminists find themselves in is fighting against what they experience as repression coming from more established feminists within the movement and misogyny and violence within activist circles and domestic life. In order to prevent the feminist and New Left movements from recapitulating the

hierarchies against which they are fighting, feminist activists engage in practices of refusal, declining to go along with events and organizational practices they disagree with. Refusal generates friction and occasionally group schism that may be unpleasant, but which some activists value as a necessary part of creating a feminist movement with space for all feminists. The example of the International Women's Day rally shows how refusal can operate to shift the course of events, even if activists' power to do so is limited by the interventions of the state.

Chapter Seven moves to an examination of homophobia within the New Left, where LGBT activists have been repeatedly attacked at public events and dismissed by their fellow activists. As Chapter Four showed and Chapter Seven emphasizes, LGBT activists are not only confronted by a hostile state, which has limited their claims to citizenship and legal protection; they also face dangers from society at large, and even from within the opposition and the New Left. Activists who insist on raising LGBT themes and bringing rainbow flags to events are creating friction in order to force their fellow activists to address the problem of homophobia. In this chapter, I described how repeated acts of violence against LGBT activists by leftists—sometimes prompted by LGBT insistence that some leftists read as provocation—created an opportunity for pro-LGBT activists to stage a debate on the issue. Their insistence on making space for LGBT rights in leftist activism succeeded to the extent that nobody was willing to speak against LGBT rights in the forum, while the debate itself allowed leftist and LGBT activists to articulate their understandings of the ideal relationship between their two movements. Friction, in this case, helped produce coalition ties.

In Chapter Eight, I illustrated the importance of coalition ties and solidarity-building to LGBT Russians by demonstrating how the Russian state has used practices of conspicuous erasure to construct a national community based partly on the exclusion of LGBT people. This process has international dimensions, as the visible exclusion of queerness allows Russian elites to present themselves as an alternative to Western values, even while the Russian anti-gay movement has been developed with the help of Western religious conservative activists. Conspicuous erasure in Russia offers a counterpoint to the global LGBT movement's emphasis on the importance of visibility, illustrating how visibility can be weaponized against LGBT people. Nonetheless, pro-LGBT activists in Moscow attempt to turn visibility to their own ends. Their visibility projects try to highlight LGBT protesters as fellow citizens, "a part of the protest."

The stakes of solidarity

Throughout the dissertation, I have emphasized the ways in which feminist, LGBT, and pro-LGBT leftist activists have struggled to build lines of solidarity across their movements and with the broader opposition. For these activists, vague promises that equality for women and LGBT Russians would come later—after the socialist revolution, after the elimination of government, or after Putin was replaced—wasn't enough. As Lena, the anarcho-feminist, put it during a press conference for the International Women's Day rally, "We want equality now already!" In this conclusion, I want to highlight two later events that illustrate why the stakes of solidarity are quite high for

these activists, both in terms of personal support and the prospects for social change on a broader scale.

By 2014, Tatyana Sukhareva, who began her career as a citizen activist shortly before my fieldwork began and had begun to participate in feminist activism in 2012, had become known as an organizer, registering rallies under her own name and even attempting to register as a candidate for the Moscow City legislature. In January 2014, she began receiving threats online (Association of Lawyers of Russia for Human Rights 2014), and on July 10 early in the morning police came into her apartment, searched it, and detained her. She was charged with selling fake insurance policies, which was widely considered among activists to be a fabricated charge. Nonetheless Tatyana was convicted and remained imprisoned until March 2015, when she was released on house arrest. A few weeks later, she had this to say on social media:

When a criminal case against me was fabricated and I was sent to jail, it was no big deal to anybody aside from feminists and a few others, not only that it was an explicitly politically ordered case but that I was tortured, and even went on hunger strike several times.

Liberal "human rights defenders" kept their lips sealed, like they were holding water in their mouths. The people with whom I had worked, who I had lent money to—and not once, with whom I had gone out to rallies and pickets. People wrote filth about me to my good friend B. in private messages... The only ones who were there with me at the court, who posted information about my hunger strikes, who wrote about what was happening with me, were the feminists. Many of them at other times had judged me for my attempts to run for office. But when

misfortune came, they forgot about our differences of opinion. Unlike the liberals, who first needed to know my position on Ukraine and Crimea in order to show me any kind of support.

That's why, when you hear or read about how feminism isn't needed, that "a smart woman can achieve anything on her own, and we mostly have equality," remember my history." We have equality only when it comes to getting beaten by the cops.

Solidarity can mean fellow activists who support you through misfortune, setting aside ideological disagreement in the face of other challenges. A movement that has made space for differences—schisms allowing disagreement to proliferate, as Natasha Bitten described it—can nonetheless remain a movement in solidarity. Meanwhile, others who appeared to be allies, fellow members of the opposition, turned out to be a shallow source of support. The failure of some to support Tatyana when times grew hard echos Zhenya's explanation of why she continuously raises difficult topics among fellow leftists—it may turn out to be quite important to know where people stand, when the time comes.

The question of solidarity through hardship became starkly visible in 2014, as the Maidan revolution in Ukraine sparked heavy disagreement within Russia (which Tatyana alluded to) and highlighted the tendency for causes like feminism and LGBT rights to be pushed to the background in the name of national unity. In November 2013, Ukrainian protesters began occupying the central square of Kiev, demonstrations initially sparked by the Yanukovich government's last-minute refusal of an Association Agreement with the European Union and long-simmering anger over corruption in government. Sarah Phillips describes how women were pushed to the background when security forces

began attacking the protesters, despite almost equal participation throughout the protests. Nationalist rhetoric increasingly positioned women as "mothers of the nation," objects to be protected rather than fellow protesters and defenders of Ukraine. Feminist activists pushed back with their own demonstrations, insisting on equality and solidarity in ways that resembled some of the tactics I described in this dissertation. Yet, as Phillips notes, in the wake of the revolution, as well as the Russian-backed separatism and war that developed in eastern regions of Ukraine, resurgent nationalism seemed likely to come along with a retraditionalization of gender roles (Phillips 2014). The right-wing groups that came to prominence in part for their role in defending Maidan have been hostile to LGBT rights, and in July 2014 the Ukrainian parliament rejected a portion of the EU agreement that would have required anti-discrimination legislation (Ayres 2014). With an example so close to hand, it is little wonder that Moscow New Left activists tend to view the question of ousting Putin as relatively unimportant. Instead, they aim for solidarity now, pushing the present opposition in a more feminist and LGBT-friendly direction in hopes that whenever the current regime ends, whatever or whoever follows will make a bit more space for equality.

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