

The Contemporary Feminist Movement in Russia

Action, Community, and Difference

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Abstract

The words “Russia” and “feminism” seem to be an unlikely combination. Russia is better known for conservative and neopatriarchal policies; feminism, according to a widely held notion, hardly has a place there. However, a grassroots feminist movement has been growing in Russia since the last 15 years. What kind of movement is this? What does it do and which mechanisms allow it to sustain itself and achieve increasing success in a largely unfavorable context? How mass and inclusive is this movement and how does it deal with internal conflicts? These questions guide the analysis presented in this research.

The core data in this research are qualitative interviews with feminists in four cities across Russia complemented by several years of direct and online observation of feminist scenes. Drawing upon this data, I argue that the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is a decentralized grassroots movement that challenges power on various levels of social organization. It combines conventional forms of collective action, such as public protest, and less conventional forms, such as discursive politics that act directly upon society by introducing new definitions and ways of thinking. Meanwhile, feminist communities serve, I argue, as platforms where these new definitions and practices are developed and tried out, while simultaneously providing support and empowerment to movement members. Considering the feminist movement from an intersectional perspective, I argue that due to lack of resources and disempowerment, experiences of multiple marginalization negatively affect participation in the movement. However, these issues can be addressed collectively through resource redistribution and consideration of difference. I argue that debates over difference and inclusion are a crucial area in which the feminist movement produces emancipatory knowledge and innovative practices that can be carried over beyond the feminist communities to larger society.

Finally, this research seeks to contextualize the contemporary feminist movement in Russia by locating it in the global interplay of feminisms and power relationships. I argue that a linear progress narrative that constructs feminism as a hallmark of Western modernity impacts both the relationship between Russian and Western feminisms and power dynamics between feminists variously positioned within Russia and the Russian-speaking space. In places deemed unlikely or unsuited for feminist practice, I argue, feminists resist these assumptions both through critical reflection and by doing feminist politics rooted in local experience and local feminist traditions.

Zusammenfassung

Die Wörter „Russland“ und „Feminismus“ scheinen eine unwahrscheinliche Kombination zu sein. Russland ist eher für seine konservative, neopatriarchale Politik bekannt; laut der weit verbreiteten Meinung, hat dort Feminismus kaum einen Platz. Doch in den letzten 15 Jahren ist in Russland eine feministische Basisbewegung entstanden. Was für eine Bewegung ist es? Was tut sie und welche Mechanismen erlauben es ihr, sich aufrechtzuerhalten und ihre Anliegen in einem durchaus ungünstigen Kontext zunehmend durchzusetzen? Wie massenhaft und inklusiv ist diese Bewegung und wie geht sie mit internen Konflikten um? Nach diesen Fragen richtet sich die hier präsentierte Analyse.

Kerndaten dieser Studie sind qualitative Interviews mit Feminist*innen aus vier Städten in Russland, ergänzt durch eine mehrjährige direkte und Online-Beobachtung der feministischen Szenen. Aufgrund dieser Daten behaupte ich, dass die zeitgenössische feministische Bewegung in Russland eine dezentralisierte Basisbewegung ist, welche Macht auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen der sozialen Organisation herausfordert. Sie vereint konventionale Formen kollektiven Handelns wie den öffentlichen Protest mit weniger konventionalen Formen wie diskursive Politik, welche durch die Einführung neuer Definitionen und Denkweisen auf die Gesellschaft direkt einwirkt. Dabei dienen feministische Communitys als Plattformen zur Erarbeitung und Erprobung dieser neuen Definitionen und Praktiken und bieten zugleich den Bewegungsmitgliedern Unterstützung und Empowerment. Aus einer intersektionalen Perspektive betrachtet wird die Beteiligung an der Bewegung durch Erfahrungen von Mehrfachmarginalisierung aufgrund des einhergehenden Ressourcenmangels und Disempowerment beeinträchtigt. Dieses Problem kann jedoch kollektiv durch Ressourcenumverteilung und Berücksichtigung von Differenz angegangen werden. Durch Debatten um Differenz und Inklusion erarbeitet die feministische Bewegung emanzipatorisches Wissen und innovative Praktiken, welche außerhalb der feministischen Communitys in die größere Gesellschaft übertragen werden können.

Schließlich versucht diese Studie, die zeitgenössische feministische Bewegung in Russland im Kontext des globalen Spannungsfeldes von Feminismen und Machtverhältnissen zu verorten. Ich behaupte, dass ein lineares Fortschrittsnarrativ, welches Feminismus als Kennzeichen der westlichen Moderne konstruiert, sowohl die Beziehung zwischen russländischen und westlichen Feminismen, als auch die Machtdynamiken zwischen den innerhalb Russlands und des russischsprachigen Raums unterschiedlich situierten Feminist*innen prägt. An scheinbar für eine feministische Praxis ungeeigneten Orten leisten Feminist*innen Widerstand durch kritische Reflexion sowie durch eine auf lokalen Erfahrungen und lokalen feministischen Traditionen basierende feministische Politik.

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Table of contents

Acknowledgments	4
Table of contents	6
Introduction	10
Prologue	10
Outline of the study	12
Defining the research object	14
When is contemporary?	14
What is feminism?	14
What is a movement?	15
Where is Russia?	16
Structure of the study	18
1. Political and cultural context in Russia	21
1.1. Social movements and political culture	21
1.2. The women's movement of the 90s	25
1.3. State gender policy and discourse	28
1.4. Attitudes toward feminism in society	31
2. State of the art: scholarship on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia	34
3. Theoretical foundations: thinking the feminist movement	40
3.1. Social movement theory	40
Contentious politics	41
New social movements and collective identity	42
Feminist movement research: politicizing community, culture, and discourse	44
3.2. Intersectionality	47
3.3. Feminist standpoint theory	50
3.4. Postsocialist and postcolonial intersections	52
4. Method: doing feminist research on feminism	56
4.1. Feminist research methodology	56
4.2. Constructivist grounded theory	57
4.3. Researcher's position: an insider in the field?	58
4.4. Collecting data: qualitative interviews and beyond	61
4.5. Geography: choosing sites for fieldwork	62
4.6. Sampling: who were the participants	63
4.7. Interaction with participants and in the field	65
4.8. Granting power to participants: authorizing quotes, agreeing on names	67
4.9. Transcription and translation	70
4.10. Giving back or reentering the conversation: blogging about the feminist movement	71
4.11. Reflection on the fieldwork and method	72

5. Overview of the contemporary feminist movement	75
5.1. The movement's beginnings and major events	75
5.2. What does a Russian feminist look like?	80
5.3. Movement structure and resources	82
Leadership and public prominence	83
5.4. Knowledge and ideologies	84
Feminist knowledge and the feminist "manual"	84
Ideologies: radical and intersectional feminism	86
5.5. Relationships	88
The previous feminist generation and its organizations	88
The LGBT movement	90
Leftist movements	91
6. What is "real action"? Articulating definitions of action and politics	93
6.1. Heroes or layabouts? Feminist contentious action	94
Ranges of feminist contention	95
Protest as "real" and legitimate action	97
Protest as risky and delegitimized action	99
6.2. Direct anti-violence help as legitimate action	102
6.3. "Internet squabbles" and "armchair feminists": online discursive action	104
Ranges of online feminist activism	104
Online activism: significant but lacking legitimacy	107
The risks of online action	111
6.4. Falling off the discursive grid: offline discursive and community-oriented action	112
6.5. The "real action" debate and feminist collective identity	114
6.6. Useful tactics and feminist goals	116
Discursive goals	117
Contentious goals	121
6.7. Collective identity and definitions of politics	122
7. Feminist communities: shielding and nurturing the movement	126
7.1. The gains of togetherness: understanding, support, shelter	127
Understanding: sharing language and politics	128
Emotional support: being willing to listen and empathize	129
Safe(r) spaces? Providing shelter from outside hostility	130
7.2. Maintaining feminist collectives: rules of communication	133
7.3. Social movement community and collective identity	136
7.4. Made to feel like a freak: hostility against feminists	138
7.5. The normalization of feminism and the future of community	143
8. Issues of participation: questioning inequalities within the feminist movement	145
8.1. Participation in the feminist movement	146
8.2. Negotiating forms of participation: assessing and managing resources	147

Participation costs and resources	150
Motivation and identity	152
8.3. Feeling inadequate: systemic inequalities and disempowerment	155
8.4. Policing group boundaries: aggression in feminist spaces	159
8.5. Collective solutions: enabling participation through empowerment	163
8.6. Participation and difference in the feminist movement	169
9. A subaltern imperial feminism: situating Russian feminism in global coloniality	171
9.1. The relationship to Western feminism	172
Local priorities: self-reliance rather than dependence	174
The West as inspiration and hope	176
Challenging internalized inferiority	178
Questioning the Western manual	180
9.2. Russia as a subaltern empire	185
9.3. Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and “the regions”	187
Between leadership and domination	189
Universalist claims	193
An extension of coloniality?	196
9.4. Russian coloniality	197
9.5. Feminism in Russia and global modernity/coloniality	201
Conclusion	203
Seeing and hearing the feminist movement: concluding reflection on the researcher’s position and method	206
Epilogue: the feminist movement’s outcomes and social change	209
References	212

In memory of Olga Lipovskaia (1954–2021)
feminist foremother

Following in your footsteps, refusing to be afraid

Introduction

Prologue

On March 8, 2006, in Moscow, around 40 people march down the Manezhnaya Square, right in front of the Kremlin, carrying handwritten signs and chanting slogans like “Kitchen and Fashion: This Is Not Freedom” and “Machos Can Cry Too.” It is the International Women’s Day. An official holiday in Russia since the Soviet times, it has devolved from a celebration of socialist feminist struggle into a yearly festival of sexism, “the day of spring and beauty,” as the common saying goes, the day women are given flowers and praised for being caregivers and homemakers. It is this state of affairs the group on the Manezhnaya Square wants to change by reanimating this day’s initial spirit of struggle. When it reaches the entrance to a large shopping center in the middle of the square, six women climb onto the portico of the building, their faces covered with bright pink balaclavas (is this what will inspire Pussy Riot six years later?). They hang out a banner shaped like a giant pair of panties and reading: “Flowers Today—Shackles Every Day?” then take out champagne and sprinkle it down onto the onlookers: after all, this is a holiday. Meanwhile on the ground, their fellow activists distribute leaflets explaining the original meaning of the International Women’s Day. As the police appears on the square, the group swiftly dissipates.

This demonstration is, to my knowledge, the first grassroots feminist street protest in Russia at least in the 2000s. Before this, protests were occasionally held by women’s NGOs, yet they were few and generally more reserved. This protest, on the other hand, is organized by an anonymous group that describes itself as “anarchafeminists, media feminists, simply feminists, and other individuals” (Open Women Line 2006). In the end, however, what this protest has in common with previous events staged by women’s organizations is general lack of public response. Despite the protesters’ efforts to attract public and media attention (besides the audacious and provocative form, they made sure to disseminate an announcement to major media in the run-up to the event), the demonstration only gets a couple of brief mentions in the news. Pictures of the protest end up—without reference to the source—on shady entertainment websites that present feminists as a laughing matter.

May 2021. At the Eurovision pop music contest, Russia is represented by singer Manizha with a song entitled *Russian Woman*. A Tajik refugee who grew up in Moscow, Manizha is known for more than her music. She has publicly supported the Russian LGBT¹ “digital pride parade” in 2020, launched an alarm-button app for women who seek protection from domestic violence, and consistently addressed feminist issues like reproductive rights and sexist beauty standards in her interviews

1 I use the shorter form of the acronym as the self-designation used by the movement or specific initiatives. I use the more inclusive form LGBTIQ in other contexts and as a reference to more recent initiatives articulating a diversified politics (cf. Intersex Russia n.d.; Fedorova 2020).

(Аглиуллина 2021).² Her appointment to represent Russia at Eurovision has provoked hot debates: while part of the public showers her with racist insults, another part is enthusiastic about the fact that Russia will be represented by a musician with an articulated feminist, anti-racist, and pro-LGBTQ stance. What is more, the song *Russian Woman* is widely understood to be a feminist manifesto. Weaving traditional Russian and Central Asian melodies into a pop arrangement and mixing Russian and English lyrics, the song speaks of women's strength and calls to resist patriarchal norms. At Eurovision, Manizha begins her final performance in a grotesquely bulky traditional-looking dress, then gets out of it in an overall that references the We Can Do It poster. During the chorus, the large screen in the background lights up to show over 150 people singing and dancing together with Manizha. These self-made videos are subsequently posted on Instagram, giving the public the chance to look closely at each of the participants (Instagram 2021). They are activists, artists, and bloggers from all over Russia, many among them engaged in anti-racist, queer, and feminist work; besides cis women, there are several trans and non-binary people. In video captions, each of them offers their own definition of what it means to be a "Russian woman."

Despite sweeping support, several feminists have been critical of Manizha's Eurovision performance. Skepticism has been expressed as to the sincerity of a feminist statement supported by Russian federal television; some have also recalled Manizha's participation at a music festival in the occupied Crimea (cf. Taparyta 2021), a choice perceived by many as extremely problematic in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. My aim here, however, is not to judge how well Manizha is suited for the role of Russian feminism's public face. By juxtaposing her 2021 performance to the 2006 feminist demonstration, I rather seek to highlight how much has changed for feminism in Russia in terms of public visibility.

In 15 years, feminism in Russia has traveled from near-total media erasure to center stage on federal TV. From a non-issue only existing in public space as a joke and a stereotype, it has grown to occupy a highly contested, yet also highly visible place in the Russian political, social, and cultural landscape. What is more, I suggest that the 2006 demonstration and the 2021 music show are not separate events. Rather, they are connected by the same collective actor, one that was born during or shortly before the 2006 protest and that has brought about the change in public consciousness that manifested itself in Manizha's performance. This collective actor is the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, and it is the focus of this research.

2 I hereinafter provide all Russian references and expressions in Cyrillic rather than in transliteration. This decision is meant to disrupt the conventional academic exoticization of non-Latin scripts.

Outline of the study

Despite the dramatic change it has achieved since its emergence in the mid-2000s, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia has received fairly little scholarly attention. Academic sources have long claimed that there was no feminist movement in Russia (Turbine 2015, 327; Muravyeva 2018, 11). More recently, a few studies have appeared that address the feminist movement or specific feminist mobilizations (cf. Sperling 2015; Aripova & Johnson 2018; Sedysheva 2018). Yet despite richness of data and analytical insights, these studies do not provide a general picture of the feminist movement since they focus on its specific aspects or single events. At the same time, within the feminist scenes in Russia, debates continue over what the movement should do, what priorities should be its primary focus, and whether, in fact, the feminist movement in Russia exists at all.

Against this backdrop, I seek to provide an analysis of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia that is, on the one hand, helpful for understanding it from the outside and, on the other, contributes to ongoing debates within the movement. To this end, I aim in this research to uncover and analyze some of the fundamental processes that characterize the contemporary feminist movement in Russia by focusing on the following questions: What does the feminist movement do? What mechanisms does it rely on to survive and expand? How mass and inclusive is the movement? How does it deal with conflicts and inequalities?

The core data in this research are 13 qualitative, semi-structured individual and group interviews with 18 feminists from four cities: Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Tomsk, and Voronezh. Besides these interviews, I draw in my analysis upon the observation conducted both during fieldwork and in the course of my 11-year-long ongoing involvement in the feminist movement. My approach to data and analysis is shaped by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). This means, in particular, that rather than coming up with hypotheses based on extant theories, I began the research process with an open, explorative perspective on the field and articulated the central research questions based on the recurring topics and processes that emerged from fieldwork.

This is not only research on feminism but also feminist research done by a member of the movement. This is, therefore, engaged research that aims to produce emancipatory knowledge in solidarity with the feminist movement and in support of its cause. My being an insider to (certain) feminist communities has, I suggest, important benefits for my analysis, since it has given me access to knowledge that has been largely unavailable to those outside of the feminist communities. Moreover, sharing a collective identity and experiences with my research participants helps me understand more fully and deeply the internal logic of their action and their tacit assumptions. At the same time, I draw upon feminist methodology to reflect on my complex, unstable, and changing position in the field. I did this research as a person from Moscow who has moved to Berlin and joined a Western university, and moreover, as someone who came out as trans after years of

feminist activism. All this has shaped my position and interactions with participants in complex ways. Throughout all stages of this research, I have used a variety of methods to reduce the power imbalance between myself and my participants. Giving them more control over various research stages and ensuring reciprocity in sharing knowledge has been an integral part of my research process.

My aim is to produce an encompassing, yet at the same time nuanced account of the feminist movement. To make sense of the movement's heterogeneity and complexity, I draw upon intersectionality and feminist standpoint theory to place the perspectives and experiences of multiply marginalized movement participants at the center of my analysis. This, I suggest, allows to see beyond the relatively small circle of the most prominent feminists, focus on the majority feminist experience(s), and more adequately represent the movement as a whole. Moreover, centering multiply marginalized perspectives creates the space for examining important ways in which social innovation is produced in the feminist movement through conflict and political debate. I also seek to make sense of the movement's scope and recognize its encompassing character without losing sight of the specificities of local feminist scenes. To this end, I rely on data collected at four various research sites and examine the relationships between local scenes with a focus on the power dynamics between people situated in different geographic locations.

I consider the contemporary feminist movement in Russia *as a social movement*. I therefore engage with social movement theory in my analysis of the feminist movement's internal processes, action, and relationship to society and the state. I also draw upon social movement studies and, in particular, feminist movement studies to compare the contemporary feminist movement in Russia to movements in other places and historical periods. Thus while I acknowledge the particularity of this movement and its political context, I seek to contextualize it as a movement among other movements and address the commonalities between them.

Drawing such comparisons is one way in which I attempt to displace in my research the discourse that exoticizes Russia as a context incompatible with feminism. Woven in implicit or more manifest forms through much of scholarship on Russia, politics, and gender, this discourse relies, as researchers have observed, on associating feminism with Western modernity and constructing Russia as a backward, authoritarian "Other" to the West (Wiedlack & Neufeld 2014, 147; Wiedlack 2018, 132). I suggest that this discourse inhibits understanding the feminist movement in Russia, its political context and impact. In my analysis, I decenter the Russian state by considering other dynamics and factors that influence the feminist movement. Besides producing a more nuanced analysis, I suggest that this perspective helps unsettle the common image of a brave but small group of Russian feminists as carriers of Western values who wage a desperate struggle against the overpowering monster of the neopatriarchal Russian state. I also critically address the association between feminism and Western modernity by examining the complex ways in which the contemporary feminist movement approaches Western feminism(s).

While my perspective is critical of Western hegemony, I consider it no less crucial to avoid presenting Russia solely as a victim of Western domination. I thus draw upon a postcolonial approach and more specifically the concept of Russia as a subaltern empire (Tlostanova 2006, 638) to consider Russia's role as a colonial state and discuss how (post)colonial power dynamics between its metropolitan centers and colonial, postcolonial, and non-colonial peripheries impact the feminist movement.

Defining the research object

Before I present the structure of the study, it is necessary to define its object. The contemporary feminist movement in Russia: each word in this phrase needs to be discussed. Below I explain the time frame of this study and detail my understanding of feminism, addressing specifically the difference between feminist and women's movements. I further briefly outline the concept of movement and, finally, examine the seemingly trivial yet problematic concept of Russia.

When is contemporary?

In terms of time, I define the contemporary feminist movement in Russia as spanning from the mid-2000s until today. I suggest that the feminist movement has existed during this time as a collective actor both distinct from others, most notably from the women's movement that was most active in Russia in the 1990s, and possessing a certain degree of internal cohesion. This has been possible, I argue, primarily due to a distinct collective identity that the feminist movement has developed and maintained. The feminist collective identity includes definitions of goals and methods, a common language, practices, and cultural artifacts, and relies on a network of active relationships between members (Melucci 1996, 70–71). In all these aspects, the contemporary feminist movement differs significantly from the 90s women's movement in Russia.

The time frame of my study spans from 2004 until today. I focus especially on the period until 2016 as the moment I conducted my last interviews. However, several significant changes have occurred in the feminist movement since. I address them by drawing upon my observations and published materials, including documents produced within the movement, media articles, and academic publications.

What is feminism?

I define the movement I study as feminist primarily because this is how it defines itself. In academic literature, another widely used term is "women's movement." Whereas both terms are sometimes used as synonyms, I refer to the differentiation suggested by Myra Marx Ferree and Carol McClurg Mueller: they define a women's movement as "all organizing of women explicitly as women to make any sort of social change," and feminism as a movement challenging gender oppression (Ferree & Mueller 2004, 577). A women's movement is, from this perspective, a more general term. I suggest that this differentiation is highly relevant for the context of Russia. Already mentioned above, the 90s women's movement in Russia included a

feminist segment but was by no means equal to it. It also comprised, for instance, the notorious Soldiers' Mothers who fought for the rights of army conscripts or organizations supporting elderly people or drug users. References to gender played a role in how these women's organizations framed their work, yet several of them did not challenge, but rather endorsed conservative gender norms (Zdravomyslova 2007, 225; Hinterhuber 2012b, 242). By contrast, the movement that came to replace them has focused explicitly on feminist goals.

A contemporary feminist movement is not a women's movement for one more crucial reason: not all feminists are women. As a non-binary trans person and a feminist, I draw upon an understanding of gender oppression that encompasses cissexism and the gender binary alongside sexism in the narrow sense (cf. Serano 2007, 13; Ahmed 2017, 14). Thus when I use the term "feminists," I do not imply that they are all women; my sample of participants includes people of various genders. At the same time, I distinguish between my personal and methodological definition of feminism and definitions I observe circulating in the feminist movement. These definitions are multiple and contested; debates over them constitute, I suggest, one of the feminist movement's fundamental collective identity processes.

What is a movement?

I define the feminist movement as a grassroots network of loosely connected individuals and groups identifying as feminist and maintaining contact with each other. This definition seeks to capture the highly informal character of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. This movement is not, I suggest, structured around formal organizations but rather consists of informal, unstable collectives that easily dissolve and reemerge in new constellations. Just as in other decentralized social movements, I argue that these ephemeral groups do not define the feminist movement's structure, which rather relies upon personal relationships and communication in a network.

By defining the feminist movement as grassroots, I seek to differentiate it from professionalized, institutional milieus such as women's NGOs, gender studies, and the art scene. The contemporary feminist movement in Russia has mostly existed independently of NGOs and gender studies organizations, and it is only in the few recent years that connections between these scenes have become stronger. Feminist researchers have pointed out that movements can also function in institutional contexts, fighting for change from within institutions (Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 39). Other authors, however, have argued that social movements' potential for challenge tends to be reduced by NGOization and professionalization (Alvarez 1998, 294; Ghodsee 2004, 738). While NGOs and gender studies organizations can be feminist, the fact that they are, to a smaller or greater extent, governed by institutional logics makes them, I suggest, distinct from a non-institutional, grassroots social movement.

The same applies to the art scene. Whereas artists are numerous among feminists and feminist art can be understood as a sphere where the art scene and the feminist movement overlap, I suggest that the connection to art as a social institution shapes feminist artists' priorities and opportunities in a distinct way. This is one of the reasons why Pussy Riot, the collective that is probably the first association anyone has with the phrase "contemporary feminism in Russia,"³ does not fall into my immediate focus, even though I discuss both their performances and persecution as significant events for the feminist movement (cf. Chapter 5). Besides this, my decision to analytically separate the grassroots feminist movement from institutional actors rests upon my commitment to feminist methodology and its principle of "excavating" suppressed knowledge and articulating the unspoken (Smith 1997, 395; DeVault 1999, 30). Previous academic publications on feminism in Russia have rather focused on academic feminism (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014) or formal organizations like women's crisis centers (Johnson 2009; Johnson & Saarinen 2011), while the existence of a feminist movement in Russia has been questioned or even denied (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 550; Muravyeva 2018, 11). Against this background, I suggest that it is high time to address directly those grassroots feminist actors in Russia who, unnoticed by scholars and the media, have produced in the recent years ostensible change in society's perceptions of gender issues.

In contrast to the tradition of social movement theory (cf. Snow, Soule, & Kriesi 2004, 11), my definition of the feminist movement does not explicitly refer to collective action. This is because I do not assume that one must engage in collective action to belong to the feminist movement. Rather, the question of what action is, and more specifically, how feminists define action and what influences their definitions, is one of the central focuses in my empirical work. In the following, I sometimes use the term "activism" to designate action occurring in social movements. However, I try not to refer to members of the feminist movement as "activists" so as not to lose sight of those who do not consider themselves or are not considered by others as activists, yet still belong to the feminist movement.

Where is Russia?

In a context where the contemporary feminist movement in Russia barely exists as an object of academic inquiry, I believe it paramount to consider multiple contexts within Russia rather than studying a specific feminist collective or local scene. A narrow local focus entails the risk of incorrectly generalizing local specificities or overemphasizing aspects that are relevant for one local context but not others. This risk is, I suggest, particularly high when research focuses on Moscow or Saint Petersburg since these two cities differ vastly from other places in Russia in terms of economic, political, and symbolic capital. To ensure more balance in the data and analysis, I have therefore conducted research not only in the two "capital cities," but also in Tomsk in West Siberia and Voronezh in Southern European Russia.

3 For a discussion of why the description as an art collective is more adequate for Pussy Riot than that of a punk band, see (K. Wiedlack 2016, 412).

To think of the feminist movement along a country's national borders seemed almost self-evident as I began my research. In choosing this focus, I have followed the tradition of methodological nationalism (Beck 2007, 286) that is the implicit standard in social research and, in particular, social movement studies. Yet this approach is challenged empirically by the existence of the Russian-speaking space, which is particularly relevant for the consideration of online feminist action. On the Internet, feminist communities that use Russian as their language of communication bring together people from all over the post-Soviet space and those living in diaspora beyond it. Thus several crucial processes, most notably feminist knowledge production and ideological debates, can be understood as occurring in a Russian-speaking feminist movement that transcends the borders of particular states. However, offline feminist action depends considerably more on state-specific processes, which notably include but are not limited to state policies. As I seek to investigate both the online and offline dimensions of the feminist movement, I thus define my research object as the feminist movement *in Russia* and refer to the *Russian-speaking* feminist community when I discuss the broader online communicative space.

A more significant challenge to methodological nationalism is posed by postcolonial theory. A key analytical tool to make sense of the power dynamics within Russia, postcolonial theory suggests that a meaningful distinction to draw is one between the Russian metropolitan area, on the one hand, and colonial and postcolonial peripheries, on the other. Whereas national borders appear salient to differentiate between postcolonial regions (such as Southern Caucasus and Central Asia) and regions that remain colonial (such as Northern Caucasus and Siberia), considering Russia and its area of dominance through a postcolonial lens exposes the fact that Russia's national borders are provisional, changing, and contingent on military violence, as proven by the 2014 annexation of Crimea and a range of previous (neo)colonial conflicts.

Although I now believe a postcolonial perspective indispensable for analyzing social processes in Russia, it was not part of my approach when I conducted fieldwork. However, I refer to it to point out the major limitation of methodological nationalism as applied to Russia. Approaching Russia from a postcolonial perspective also suggests considering that terms like "the Russian-speaking space" or "the post-Soviet space" are not neutral or purely descriptive but rather shaped by (post)colonial power dynamics, including the hegemony of Russian culture and language.

In this vein, a critical discussion of the word "Russian" is also due. In English, this ambiguous concept can be both a reference to the state and to the dominant ethnicity, in contrast both to Russian and German where separate words exist to differentiate between the two meanings (российские vs. русские, russländisch vs. russisch). Drawing this distinction appears to have both analytical and political significance, since acknowledging that people of multiple ethnicities live in Russia is

a necessary preliminary step toward a postcolonial critique. In light of this, I have tried to separate the two meanings in my writing, for instance by referring to “feminism in Russia” rather than “Russian feminism.” However, I have not always been able to draw this distinction in a consistent way. Indeed, equating the state and the dominant ethnicity is a key feature of the Russian (sic) colonial politics and discourse: they are produced by the state, yet at the same time rely heavily on the construction of a white Russian nation. As a result, to speak of “Russian colonialism” is to speak of what the state does as much as of how an ethnic/national dominance is produced. Thus at least in some contexts, the ambiguity between the two meanings of the word “Russian” appears to be irremovable.⁴

Structure of the study

This study is structured as follows. Chapter 1 discusses the major aspects of the political and cultural context in which the feminist movement in Russia operates: the general landscape of social movements in post-Soviet Russia and social attitudes to activism and activists; the women’s movement of the 1990s as the immediate predecessor of the contemporary feminist movement; state policies around gender; and finally, social attitudes toward feminism.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing, albeit rare studies on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. These studies take over, I suggest, some of the threads that have previously appeared in literature on the 90s women’s movement; moreover, some aspects of these studies resonate with public and media discourses on feminism in Russia. It is for this reason that I place the review of existing literature after the discussion of the feminist movement’s political and cultural context rather than in the very beginning of my text.

Returning to scholarly conventions, Chapter 3 addresses the theoretical foundations I draw upon to conceptualize the contemporary feminist movement in Russia: social movement theory, in particular feminist movement studies, intersectionality, feminist standpoint theory, and the emerging theoretical field at the nexus of postsocialist and postcolonial studies.

Chapter 4 presents an aspect of this research that I consider to be just as central to it as the resulting analysis: the method and research process. It begins with a discussion of two major sources of my method: feminist methodology and constructivist grounded theory. It further details my position in the field and reviews the major steps and decisions in my research process. It specifically focuses on the power imbalance between myself as a researcher and my research participants and discusses the tools I have used to mitigate it. It ends with a reflection on the research process, its anticipated and unexpected outcomes.

Chapter 5 serves as a prologue to the empirical analysis by presenting a general overview of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. It outlines the movement’s emergence and some of the milestones that have marked its path since.

4 I thank Olga Reznikova who has first pointed this out to me.

A discussion of the make-up of the feminist scene is followed by a consideration of the movement's structure, leadership, knowledge production, and key ideological debates. The chapter ends with an overview of the feminist movement's relationships to other social movements.

The first of the empirical chapters, Chapter 6 addresses a fundamental question: what does the feminist movement do? It considers the intra-movement debate over which tactics or forms of action are worthwhile and "real" and brings it into dialogue with theoretical debates in social movement theory. I argue that alongside conventional forms of action considered legitimate, namely public protest and direct help to survivors of violence, feminist practice includes several more forms of action, most notably community-oriented and discursive action. Whereas these forms lack legitimacy, they correspond to the feminist movement's central goals, which are, I argue, primarily discursive and target the whole of society rather than the state. I suggest that by reflecting on their practice and debating over forms of action, feminists articulate a new, more encompassing definition of politics, which potentially has far-reaching implications for society.

Chapter 7 focuses on feminist communities as vital collective spaces that sustain the feminist movement and enable further political action. The contemporary feminist movement has emerged in Russia, I argue, in a context where feminism was stigmatized and openly associating with feminism was met with social sanctions. The feminist movement has responded to this stigmatization by creating social movement communities that provide understanding, support, and safety to their members by developing rules of interaction and maintaining boundaries. As social movement communities, I argue that feminist communities are crucial spaces where feminist collective identity is produced and (re)negotiated. Just as in other societies and at other moments in history, they help sustain the movement through a period of reduced political opportunities. While they empower their members and thus lay down the ground for other forms of political action, I argue that feminist communities are also directly political since they produce alternative practices and gradually impact larger society. The social stigma around feminism in Russia has lessened in the recent years and the feminist movement's visibility has grown; this crucial result of the feminist movement's struggle rests, I argue, upon the work done by and in feminist communities.

After a discussion of the mechanisms that help keep the feminist movement together and enable its success, I turn in Chapter 8 to the dynamics that obstruct its expansion. This chapter focuses on the issue of participation in the feminist movement and asks what prevents people from participating more fully and actively. I argue that whereas motivation and sharing a collective identity support participation, it is often inhibited by lack of resources and disempowerment. I also examine the paradoxical role of boundary work, which not only sustains feminist communities but can also push away and alienate newcomers and multiply marginalized people. The barriers to participation can be tackled at the individual

level when feminists negotiate forms of participation, adapting them to their resources and to the rules in the given community. At the collective level, on the other hand, a community can encourage participation by redistributing resources, empowering its members, and showing consideration to difference. This requires collective reflection, exchanging and generating knowledge. A process that depends on innovation, I argue that encouraging participation is one more area in which the feminist movement produces change that can impact society at large.

In contrast to the previous chapters, Chapter 9 takes a broader focus and considers the contemporary feminist movement in Russia in a context that transcends national boundaries. To understand the place and role of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia in global power dynamics, I draw upon Madina Tlostanova's concept of Russia as a subaltern empire, i.e. both subject and object of domination in global Eurocentric modernity/coloniality (Tlostanova 2006, 638). I argue that a hegemonic linear progress narrative that constructs feminism as belonging to Eurocentric modernity shapes both the relationship feminists in Russia have to Western feminism(s) and the dynamics between feminists variously positioned in Russia and the Russian-speaking space. In both cases, the hegemonic discourse on feminism and modernity constructs a hierarchical dichotomy of progressive modern feminists and unenlightened Others who need to learn from them. I suggest that this dichotomy can separate Western from Russian feminists, yet it can also elevate metropolitan Russian feminists over feminists in Russia's (post)colonial and, by extension, non-colonial peripheries. In contradiction to these hegemonic assumptions, I argue that feminists in Russia and specifically in/from Russia's peripheries exercise and reassert their agency through critical reflection on and resistance to objectifying discourses and practices as well as through their independent feminist practice grounded in local concerns, experience, and local feminist traditions.

1. Political and cultural context in Russia

To speak of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, it is necessary to begin with outlining the political and cultural context in which it has emerged. In the following, I discuss four areas I believe relevant for the subsequent examination of the feminist movement's tactics, priorities, and various other aspects of its existence. I first address the general landscape of social movements and political culture in post-Soviet Russia to present a brief account of what it means to be socially and politically engaged and how people perceive activists and activism. I then turn to a specific movement, the women's movement of the 90s, as the immediate predecessor of the contemporary feminist movement. I also discuss the state as a major actor shaping the political opportunities available to the feminist movement, focusing on state policies and discourses around gender. Finally, I look at popular discourses on and attitudes toward feminism and feminists as another major factor influencing the movement's opportunities.

If I speak of the political and cultural context, I mean politics and culture as entangled and mutually constitutive rather than dichotomously opposed to each other. In a similar way, I do not draw any strict analytical divide between social and political movements, even though it has been drawn in the activist discourse in Russia, as will be discussed below. Considering the social, cultural, and political as inextricably connected is an integral element of my analytical approach, which I will address in detail in Chapter 3.

1.1. Social movements and political culture

Social movements and political engagement have long lacked legitimacy in post-Soviet Russia, yet research indicates that this situation is gradually changing. Russia's post-Soviet history began in a wave of democratic mobilization in 1989–1991 that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian state. However, as Karine Clément, Andrey Demidov, and Olga Miryasova argue in their comprehensive study of social mobilizations in Russia, after the initial mass elation and political successes, this early social movement has been increasingly instrumentalized in the political struggle between democratic politicians who advocated for political and economic reforms and their communist opposition (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 90). Eventually, this strife led to a constitutional crisis in October 1993 when mass protest against President Yeltsin and in support of the Parliament was suppressed by the army, resulting in numerous deaths. As researchers argue, the instrumentalization of protest and especially its bloody end deeply affected social attitudes toward politics and protest, causing mass disenchantment, distrust toward politics, and actual fear of openly contentious action, which was now generally considered both dangerous and useless. To a later wave of labor protests, the elites responded with a smearing campaign in state-sponsored media, which produced a powerful discourse on protesters as irresponsible layabouts who “rock the boat” and endanger social peace (Клеман,

Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 97). A series of economic crises additionally reduced social engagement since for a vast majority in society, issues of immediate survival took precedence over all else (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 93).

Whereas the state did not grant protesters' demands directly, researchers suggest that it was in response to the mobilizations in the 1990s that it emphasized a reinstatement of order and control over the economy in its policies during Putin's first presidential term in the early 2000s (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 98). This also became a time of deep social apathy and disengagement. Mainstream culture promoted obedience, conformism, and distrust toward all those outside of one's immediate social circle. If an individual felt discontent or encountered problems, the only legitimate way to solve them or improve one's life was to seek individualized, informal solutions; attempts at confronting authority or acting collectively, on the other hand, were routinely countered with the advice "don't stick your neck out"⁵ (Clément 2015, 213). As a rule, those who chose collective action and thus went against the mainstream were met with ridicule or fear (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 675). Researchers have analyzed this as a dichotomy between a dominant frame of "ordinary" or "normal people,"⁶ cautious and pragmatic conformists, and a challenging activist frame; becoming an activist in Russia, they have argued, has long required a transformation by reframing, as individuals had to abandon their negative attitudes toward activism to adopt the activist frame (Clément 2015, 212). Meanwhile, the vast majority remained depoliticized and disgusted of politics, considering them "dirty" and "deceitful," a realm of crooked politicians no honest person could possibly enter (Журавлев 2014, 29; Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, & Erpyleva 2020, 170).

Despite this culture of depoliticization and disengagement, however, several major waves of mobilization occurred in Russia in the following years and caused shifts in the perceptions of social and political participation. The first wave arose in 2005–2008: ignited by a grassroots campaign against monetization of social benefits, a governmental reform that aimed to drastically reduce social support to disadvantaged groups (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 115), it soon grew to encompass a range of social, housing, and labor issues (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 102). This wave of social movements has, as researchers argue, engendered cultural change: numerous "ordinary people" found themselves transformed into activists, shedding their previous apathetic or even cynical view of collective struggles; moreover, the protests gained some legitimacy in society, alleviating the stigma around social engagement (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 674).

Another major shift came about in 2011–2012 as the "Movement For Fair Elections" challenged fraud at parliamentary elections and Putin's regime more generally (Gabowitsch 2013, 23). Whereas participants at protests initially framed their claims in moral rather than political terms, researchers suggest that it was in this

5 Russian: не высовывайся.

6 Russian: обыватели.

paradoxical way that mass politicization occurred in and around the Movement For Fair Elections, re-legitimizing protest, activism, and interest in politics (Журавлев 2014, 30). After the movement subsided, numerous participants did not abandon activism but shifted it to various local settings and issues, considering this local activism as a direct continuation of their political engagement adapted to new circumstances (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, & Erpyleva 2020, 165).

In the following years, several more movements have articulated social and political claims and ensured increasing legitimization of collective action. For instance, the truckers' movement of 2015–2016 has challenged the dichotomy of “social” and “political” protest, linking together social, economic, and political claims and impacting subsequent mobilizations (Reznikova 2020, 16). In 2017–2018, the youngest participants to join mass anti-corruption protests had already been socialized in a culture where politics was a legitimate part of their cultural horizons (Erpyleva 2020, 10). Although the old delegitimizing and stigmatizing cultural patterns around protest and politics have not vanished definitively, an alternative culture has developed in Russia that valorizes social and political participation.

To the extent that the state perceived these transformations in society as a threat to its authority, it has responded harshly to them. To cut short ongoing and prevent future mobilizations, it has used various forms of repression, including detainments, police violence, and persecution of activists, as well as using existing laws in prohibitive ways and introducing new restrictive legislation. According to analysts, the growing “prohibitive trend” in state policies on public protest gained momentum in the wake of major events like the mass anti-Putin demonstration on the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on May 6, 2012, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the subsequent war in Ukraine, or the football World Cup in 2018 (ОВД-Инфо 2017; Smirnova & Shedov 2018). Demonstrations that did not directly challenge the regime but made other claims, including most feminist demonstrations, have long been relatively easier and safer to hold than protests directed explicitly against the state. However, major surges in prohibitive legislation and practice have influenced feminist protests as well, and whereas there has usually been less detainments and violence at feminist demonstrations, several feminists have been persecuted by the state.⁷

While de jure, Russian law guarantees freedom of assembly, laws are misused by the state to impede mobilization. Federal law distinguishes between several forms of public expressions of opinion or demonstrations;⁸ crucial among these are picketing, single-person picketing, rallies, and marches. Single-person picketing⁹—individual stationary protest in which the claim is usually made through text written on a sign—is a rare form of public protest that does not require notifying local authorities in

7 See Chapter 6 for examples.

8 I hereinafter use the word “demonstration” as an umbrella term for all forms of public protest. This term thus should not be understood as a literal translation of the Russian word *демонстрация* which denotes marches.

9 Russian: *одиночный пикет*.

advance.¹⁰ Picketing (collective stationary protest with visual propaganda but no loudspeaker equipment), rallies (stationary protest with loudspeaker equipment), and marches (mobile protest) must be announced to local authorities, whereas notification periods vary for different forms of events. De facto, the notification procedure is routinely misused by the authorities to allow or ban assemblies (Smirnova & Shedov 2018). As a result, notification, which should be a simple technical procedure, is largely perceived both by authorities and the public as approval; depending on its outcomes, collective action is considered “authorized” or “unauthorized.” Moreover, authorities apply a plethora of tactics to decline notification of undesirable protests: from delaying their response to promptly announcing road maintenance work on the planned event site (Smirnova & Shedov 2018).

Whereas activists continuously try to find ways around state restrictions, the state responds by closing loopholes and cutting off paths. A characteristic example is single-person picketing. Since it can be organized legally and quickly without notifying the authorities, activists have adapted this form to collective action, organizing “single-person picket lines”¹¹—several people standing with protest signs at a distance from each other, usually along the same street—and “picketing queues”¹² where one person holds a protest sign for a limited amount of time and others form a queue in the street, waiting for their turn. Both forms thus allowed for a collective expression of opinion and have been used for quick, spontaneous protests. In response to these innovations, the government has amended the law, qualifying these new forms as collective picketing that requires notification (Консультант Плюс 2004). Moreover, several new norms concerning assemblies have been adopted, e.g. restrictions of possible sites for protests or the introduction of criminal liability for repeated violation of assembly laws (Smirnova & Shedov 2018; 2020b).

Although numerous protests go down peacefully, detainments and police violence are nevertheless routine both at “unauthorized” and “authorized” protests (Smirnova & Shedov 2020b; 2020c). During the demonstrations “For Free Elections” in 2011–2012, for instance, observers have reported 5169 detainments in Moscow alone (OVD-Info 2012). After the notorious march on the Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on May 6, 2012, where police attacked the demonstration, over 30 people were charged; most of them went to jail and several emigrated to escape persecution (ОВД-Инфо n.d.). According to analysts, the “Bolotnaya Square Case” became a model investigators subsequently used to persecute participants at anti-corruption protests in Moscow in 2017 (ОВД-Инфо 2017). With increasingly harsh and arbitrary repression, the state has introduced a climate of fear to prevent social and

10 The law provides for two more ways for citizens to publicly express their opinion without notification to authorities: assemblies (собрания), collective events where neither visual propaganda nor loudspeaker equipment are allowed, and public meetings with parliament members (Консультант Плюс 2004).

11 Russian: цепочка одиночных пикетов.

12 Russian: пикетная очередь.

political participation. Even though in practice, risks of police violence and detainments vary considerably depending on the protest's central claim, organizers, location, and other factors, the danger is nevertheless perceived as increased, which creates an additional barrier to participation in protests.

1.2. The women's movement of the 90s

The women's movement in Russia has a long history dating back to the mid-19th century (Stites 1978, 29; Юкина 2007, 47). During the Soviet time, a state-sponsored women's movement operated through organizations like women's councils and women's departments¹³ (Stites 1978, 329; Юкина 2007, 448), whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, an independent feminist movement emerged among dissidents opposing the Soviet regime (Jarošenko 2011; Козлов & Талавер 2020). I focus, however, on the women's movement in the 1990s as the immediate precursor to the contemporary feminist movement. Associating it with the 1990s is somewhat of a simplification: the movement originated in the late 1980s, remained active in the 2000s, and some of its organizations have survived until this day. However, I refer to the 90s as the period during which the movement was most active and which has shaped its form, structure, and repertoire of action.

According to Valerie Sperling, author of a major study on the 90s women's movement, several women's groups emerged in Russia as soon as assembling and organizing became legal during the Perestroika; by the mid-90s, there were several hundreds of officially registered women's organizations, while estimates of those existing unofficially amounted to several thousands (Sperling 1999, 15). In the context of newly available political opportunities, this swift proliferation of women's groups was a response both to gender issues unaddressed during the Soviet era and new problems that had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet gender legacy implied limited women's emancipation at the expense of multiple workloads (wage labor, unpaid reproductive labor in the home, and public activities commanded by the state). Meanwhile, a popular late-Soviet discourse of women's purported "over-emancipation" (and men's "feminization") masked the persistent gender inequality and restricted the possibility to articulate a feminist agenda (Hemment 2007, 8). Nevertheless, women enjoyed social support and extensive legal protection from discrimination. These tools to mitigate gender inequality were dismantled with the Soviet state. Moreover, neoliberal reforms and ensuing economic crises resulted in unemployment, which hit women particularly hard and caused a feminization of poverty (Sperling 1999, 152; Hemment 2014, 135).

In response to this, a range of women's organizations sprung up to help women survive in these adverse and chaotic circumstances: women's job-training programs, professional associations; mothers' mutual support groups; charitable and social support organizations. Other groups seized the new opportunities to articulate feminist understandings of the Soviet and post-Soviet experience and improve

¹³ Russian: женсоветы, женотделы.

women's lives: consciousness-raising groups, gender studies organizations, anti-violence hotlines and women's crisis centers, and political and lobbying organizations (Sperling 1999, 27; Garstenauer 2018, 72).

The women's movement of the 90s thus formed a rather stark contrast to other social movements in Russia as described in the previous section: this particular movement was not confrontational or mass-based. It was structured around women's organizations which held demonstrations from time to time, yet did not place much emphasis on public protest (Sperling 1999, 19). This makes the women's movement of the 90s hardly a movement from the perspective of classical social movement theory. Indeed, students of social movements in Russia have generally not included the women's movement in the scope of their scholarly interests; for instance, Clément and co-authors refer to it in passing as a network of NGOs rather than a movement (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 93). However, feminist researchers have argued against drawing a strict distinction between "real movements" and NGOs, pointing out that institutional contexts are typical of women's gendered action and specifically feminist action (Ferree & Mueller 2004, 591). As Sperling demonstrates, the form taken by the women's movement was defined by the political opportunities available to it. The early 90s when it emerged were, as described above, a moment of decline of the Perestroika mobilization wave. As the women's movement grew, the general climate in Russia became increasingly hostile to politics, social engagement, and conflict (Sperling 1999, 47). Mobilizing large masses of people for collective protest action was hardly an option. Accordingly, women's movement groups focused on avenues and forms of action available to them, such as participating in electoral and party politics, lobbying women's issues to parliament members, holding training courses, fairs, charitable events, roundtables, lectures, doing research on women, and publishing journals (Sperling 1999, 19). Since protest and direct challenge to the state became deeply illegitimate at that time, several women's organizations favored cooperation and dialogue with the state, e.g. by applying for state funding or raising awareness on gender-based violence among officials (Sundstrom 2018, 220, 227).

The term "women's movement"¹⁴ is both a self-designation (cf. Posadskaya 1994, 158; Айвазова 1998, 118) and an analytical term denoting a movement by and for women (Ferree & Mueller 2004, 577). The movement's relationship to feminism, however, was complicated. Not all members and organizations in the women's movement supported gender equality—for instance, the Women of Russia¹⁵ electoral block that made it to the federal parliament in 1993 drew upon a traditional understanding of gender roles (Hinterhuber 2012b, 130). Some combined high gender sensitivity with essentialist and conservative arguments on woman's role and "qualities" (Hinterhuber 2012b, 242); many pursued gender equality yet rejected the term "feminism," believing it to stand for "struggle against men" and silly radicalism (Molyneux & Posadskaya 1991, 137; Sperling 1999, 61).

14 Russian: женское движение.

15 Russian: Женщины России.

Yet the women's movement also included an explicitly feminist segment that focused most notably on activism against gender-based violence and on feminist knowledge production (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 552). Its major achievement has been the creation of a network of crisis centers to provide support to survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Comprising more than a hundred organizations at its peak in the early 2000s, the network of crisis centers provided psychological and legal support to survivors, raised public awareness, articulating domestic and sexual violence as legitimate and relevant social issues, and lobbied authorities to change the governmental response to gender-based violence (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 545). Feminists have also established gender studies in Russia as an academic field. They have founded several centers for gender studies, conducted extensive research across various disciplines, translated feminist theory, published monographs, anthologies, and handbooks (Posadskaya 1994, 165; Garstenauer 2018, 72). Considering gender studies as an inherently feminist project, these pioneering feminist intellectuals sought to use it as a platform for feminist education (Posadskaya 1994, 158; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 255).

A major limitation of these efforts, however, has been the fact that they have generally remained within the feminist community of the time. Whereas feminists and women activists have invested much effort into producing knowledge and raising awareness on feminist and gender issues, they have hardly reached outside of the NGO and academic context (Sperling 1999, 80; Hemment 2007, 98). The wider public, on the other hand, has remained largely ignorant of feminism. Was this a problem of the movement's priorities or rather of lacking political opportunities? Some movement members, like leading Russian feminist researchers Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova, have highlighted their educational work in the public sphere, including popular media and later, the Internet (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 265). Other movement members and outside observers, however, have characterized the women's movement as a highly privileged, elite movement detached from the lives and concerns of the majority of women (Hement 2007, 5; Гапова 2009, 467) and relatively uninterested in addressing the public or gaining mass support (Sperling 1999, 97). Individual members of the women's movement may likely have differed in their motivation to popularize feminist knowledge. It is beyond doubt, however, that the political opportunities for articulating feminist critique in the public sphere in the 90s were minimal.

After decades of being exposed to the Soviet official discourse on gender equality, society came to associate it with the Soviet state's oppressive power. In the post-Soviet period, by contrast, it experienced what researchers have characterized as a nostalgia for a "natural" gender order, which implied a re-legitimation of patriarchy (Здравомыслова & Темкина 2007, 90). Popular media celebrated a new sexism and new models of femininity that validated sexuality and praised homemaking and childcare over wage work (Sperling 1999, 97; Темкина & Поткирх 2007, 189). This general atmosphere was largely impenetrable for feminist arguments. A rare and likely unique example of an explicitly feminist presence in Russia's public sphere of

the time was feminist journalist and writer Maria Arbatova who co-hosted a TV talk show called “I Myself”¹⁶ in the mid-1990s. Identifying openly as feminist, Arbatova advocated for women’s freedom and independence; a highly controversial figure, she remained the Russian feminist in public consciousness until the advent of Pussy Riot. Other feminists, however, criticized her for promoting an oversimplified, trivialized version of feminism (Гесцен 1998). Some have suggested that it was precisely Arbatova’s approach to feminism that had provided her access to the influential platform of federal television, while feminists with more nuanced stances could not hope for such resources (Воронина in Альчук et al. 2005, 14).

The emergence of women’s and feminist activism in Russia and other postsocialist countries provoked a keen interest of Western feminists and international organizations. This yielded numerous collaborations, generous funding for Russia’s women’s organizations and projects, and a plethora of studies on Russia’s women’s movement by Western scholars (cf. Racioppi & O’Sullivan See 1997; Sperling 1999; Kay 2000; Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009; Garstenauer 2010; Hinterhuber 2012b). An invaluable resource on women’s and feminist history in Russia, some of these studies, however, appear to overemphasize the role of Western support in the emergence and evolution of the women’s movement in Russia to the point even of portraying Russian women activists as unimaginative consumers of Western intellectual products (Sperling 1999, 52; Johnson 2009, 53). It is true that the women’s movement in Russia was dependent on Western funds; when the funding withdrew in 2000s, several organizations closed. Yet this does not mean that Western donors determined the movement’s agenda; I discuss this relationship and its political context in more detail in Chapter 9.

The 90s women’s movement was a major page in Russian feminist history. Having emerged in an unfavorable political context, it has succeeded in empowering its members, providing support to numerous women, developing a feminist language and analyses of gender processes in Soviet and post-Soviet society, and establishing a network of organizations that has partly remained active until this day. However, although women activists have done important feminist work in NGOs, professionalization has caused certain depoliticization, with several organizations eventually abandoning feminist frameworks (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 559). By the 2010s, researchers have increasingly characterized the state of the women’s movement as in decline (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 561; Turbine 2015, 327; Salmenniemi & Adamson 2015, 92).

1.3. State gender policy and discourse

The Russian state’s gender policy under Putin has been described as neomasculinist, neoconservative, or a “gender backlash” (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 261; Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 550; Perheentupa 2019, 44). In this section, I will address some of its major milestones. Without pretending to offer an exhaustive account, I rather seek to provide some context for the relationship of the contemporary

16 Russian: Я сама; the title can also be interpreted as “I’ll do it myself.”

feminist movement to the state, which differs starkly from that of the 90s women's movement. As a preface to the discussion of intersectionality and coloniality in the following chapters, I will also address the connection between the Russian state's gender and racial politics and its somewhat paradoxical relationship to Eurocentrism.

After years of no consistent gender policy, the Russian state took a conservative course in 2006 as president Putin announced a new demographic program in his annual public address (Rotkirch, Temkina, & Zdravomyslova 2007, 350; Stella & Nartova 2016, 17). In this speech, he argued that Russia's demographic situation was an acute problem and that birth rates should be increased. To this end, he suggested a range of benefits to support working mothers and stimulate multiple births, most notably the "maternity capital." Adopted in 2007, this monetary benefit is granted to families who give birth to or adopt a second or third child and can only be spent on housing, the child's education, or to increase the mother's pension fund (Stella & Nartova 2016, 25). Yet the amount and form of the benefit were insufficient to boost birth rates, which was immediately noted by experts and subsequently proven empirically (Rotkirch, Temkina, & Zdravomyslova 2007, 354; Stella & Nartova 2016, 26). Despite its relatively moderate rhetoric, Putin's 2006 speech announced a pronatalist turn in state policy that was going to become increasingly conservative over the following years: as researchers have argued, constructing childcare as the woman's responsibility, it effectively equated parenthood with motherhood (Rotkirch, Temkina, & Zdravomyslova 2007, 355). This ideological conservatism was combined with a revival of the Soviet legacy and, however ironic this may seem, economic neoliberalism: the program suggested in the speech endorsed the familiar Soviet model of the "working mother" and offered a meager material benefit, effectively declining the state's responsibility for families' welfare (Rotkirch, Temkina, & Zdravomyslova 2007, 356; Suchland 2018, 1083).

The state discourse linking motherhood to national interests intensified when a proposal to restrict access to abortion was introduced in the federal parliament in 2011. Prepared by a working group that included members of the Russian Orthodox Church and anti-abortion organizations (За свободное материнство! n.d.),¹⁷ the law draft encompassed such measures as introducing a one-week waiting period after requesting an abortion, signing an "informed consent" form listing possible negative health consequences, compulsory ultrasound visualization of the fetus and listening to its heartbeat, and for married women, a compulsory husband's permission for abortion (Stella & Nartova 2016, 22; Rivkin-Fish 2018, 23). In the explanatory note to the law draft and in subsequent debates, its authors appealed both to "children's rights" and to "national tradition" (Stella & Nartova 2016, 23). Just as Putin's 2006 presidential address, they also repeatedly invoked demographic anxiety (Rivkin-Fish 2018, 28). As researchers have argued, the argument of the law draft constructed women as "the reproducers of the nation" and "womanhood as

17 The working group was presided by parliament member Elena Mizulina who was soon to become famous as the author of the federal "gay propaganda" law (Buyantueva 2018, 472).

‘naturally’ rooted in heterosexual motherhood” (Stella & Nartova 2016, 27). In response to this proposed restriction of reproductive rights, feminists mounted a protest campaign which I will describe in detail in Chapter 5. A modified, significantly toned-down version of the law was ultimately passed (Stella & Nartova 2016, 23).

Probably best known internationally among Russian laws on gender and sexuality is the “gay propaganda law” adopted on the federal level in 2013. Preceded by similar regional laws which were adopted in 11 regions since 2006 (Buyantueva 2018, 472), the law has introduced administrative liability for promoting homosexuality to minors (Stella & Nartova 2016, 28). Framed again as protecting children, this time from allegedly harmful information, the law and its accompanying explanatory note appealed to “traditional family values” and constructed homosexuality as moral deviation (Stella & Nartova 2016, 29). The law has caused a global outcry and large-scale solidarity campaigns (Suchland 2018, 1079). Predictably, it has led to a surge in anti-LGBTIQ hate crimes in Russia (Kondakov 2019, 1). Somewhat less predictably, it has also sparked a renewed mobilization of the LGBT movement (Lapina 2013, 103).

Through these and related policies, the Russian state has consistently constructed the heteronormative patriarchal family as a crucial element of the nation. In this model, as researchers have shown, women are defined through motherhood and caregiving, whereas all family models apart from the heteronormative nuclear ideal, preferably with several children, are delegitimized (Stella & Nartova 2016, 32). In their public statements on these policies, state officials, conservative supporters, and members of the Russian Orthodox Church have repeatedly constructed Russian national identity in opposition to a supposedly morally bankrupt, sexually deviant and “too politically correct” Europe, sometimes referring to it disparagingly as “Gayropa” (Riabov & Riabova 2014, 29). Despite the rhetorical opposition to Europe, however, this discourse is, as Jennifer Suchland has argued, embedded in epistemic Eurocentrism (Suchland 2018, 1074). Political homophobia is deployed in it to claim an “authentic” Europeanness that Europe has allegedly already lost, whereas the Russian nation is constructed not only as heteronormative and patriarchal, but also, crucially, as white (Suchland 2018, 1078). By asserting anti-multiculturalism alongside heteropatriarchy, Suchland argues, Russia situates itself “within the racialized episteme of Eurocentrism,” albeit “as a difference within it” (Suchland 2018, 1077). This complex position has powerful resonance throughout Russian culture and also affects the feminist movement in multiple ways, as I will discuss in the following.

Alongside the Russian state’s neoconservative gender policies, researchers have discussed the use of gender and sexual imagery in Russian political discourse. Sperling, for instance, focuses in her recent book on how political actors in Russia (from Putin through pro-Kremlin youth activists to oppositional politicians) invoke normative ideas on masculinity, femininity, and heteronormativity as a means to

gain political legitimation (Sperling 2015, 294). If strategies like constructing Putin as a “macho strongman” (Sperling 2015, 4), sexualizing electoral support, or ascribing homosexuality to political opponents in order to defame them have been successful, Sperling argues, this is because patriarchal misogynist norms have high cultural resonance in Russia and no powerful counterdiscourse has yet formed in the public sphere to challenge them (Sperling 2015, 4). As the above discussion of the Russian state’s gender policy demonstrates, maintaining a patriarchal gender order is an explicit element of the state’s national and nationalist political strategy. Its current goals are thus in direct opposition to those of the feminist movement. This situation is quite different from the Perestroika when the state oscillated between indifference and support for women’s rights, for instance when ratifying international conventions such as the CEDAW¹⁸ was in the state’s foreign policy interests (Hemment 2007, 78). Therefore, while the 90s women’s movement sought and welcomed collaboration with the state, this is hardly imaginable for the contemporary feminist movement.

1.4. Attitudes toward feminism in society

While the Russian state has increasingly asserted neopatriarchal ideology, society has mostly remained ignorant of feminism. Since the 90s women’s movement did not exercise significant influence in the public sphere, societal attitudes toward feminism in the 2000s continued to bear the legacy of Soviet propaganda. The Soviet state promoted women’s emancipation on Marxist terms, yet vilified non-Marxist feminism as a bourgeois movement dividing the working class (Sperling 1999, 64). State propaganda intensified as the women’s movement grew in the West in the 1970s: emphasizing and condemning feminist separatism, the Soviet press consistently portrayed Western feminists as irrational, fighting against men, and seeking domination (Sperling 1999, 65). This powerful discourse has far outlived the Soviet state. In popular perception, the women’s movement of the 19th century was legitimate, yet after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks had supposedly given women all the rights,¹⁹ which meant that after that point, there was nothing more to struggle for. The idea of feminists as angry, stupid, masculine, and man-hating weighed upon women activists in the 1990s, making even those who believed in feminism refrain from publicly adopting the label (Molyneux & Posadskaya 1991, 137; Sperling 1999, 65). Largely unchallenged, these ideas of feminism and feminists have persisted in the following decades.

The official Soviet discourse on equality as already achieved serves as a foundation for the contemporary Russian postfeminist discourse that discards feminism as irrelevant in response not to a previous feminist mobilization but rather to Soviet gender policy (Salmenniemi & Adamson 2015, 92). At the same time, persistent

18 The UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

19 As gender historians have shown, early Soviet reforms concerning women were prepared and lobbied by the pre-revolutionary feminist movement (Юкина 2007, 439). However, the official Soviet narrative that erases the independent women’s movement still dominates the public perception of the issue.

associations of feminism with the West additionally reinforce the idea of its irrelevance for Russia. The notion of feminism as a foreign, “imported ideology” is likely due to the fact that the Soviet official discourse only discussed Western feminism while erasing feminist history in the Russian Empire (Юкина 2007, 443). While some authors have argued that in the 90s, feminist knowledge was marked in the post-Soviet space as unambiguously Western (Гапова 2009, 473), it seems probable that this perception was common in the feminist communities, possibly also in related academic fields but not among the wider public, since information on post-Soviet feminists did not generally reach it (cf. Kay 2000, 149). Recently, however, the notion of feminism’s foreignness has been promoted by conservatives who have repeatedly insisted that feminism was a “Western import” incompatible with Russian traditions (Riabov & Riabova 2014, 32).

While they have emerged along a different historical trajectory, the arguments used in Russia to undermine and discard feminism bear a striking similarity to those appearing in popular and media discourses elsewhere. Western media and popular culture, as feminist researchers have observed, systematically represent feminism as belonging to the past and portray feminists as angry, humorless, and unattractive to men (Hemmings 2011, 7). Thus across various contexts, public discourses draw on misogynist images to disparage feminists as failing at femininity. Myra Marx Ferree argues that this tendency is a characteristic manifestation of stigmatization deployed by society as a tool of “soft repression” against social movements (Ferree 2005, 146). By contrast to “hard repression” used by states, soft repression is, according to Ferree, collective mobilization of power through informal channels to exclude challenging ideas from the public sphere (Ferree 2005, 141). Alongside stigmatization, another key tool of soft repression, Ferree argues, is silencing. Exercised most notably by mass media, silencing does not depend on state censorship: it can be enacted by free media that suppress, more or less consciously, ideas and arguments that challenge the status quo (Ferree 2005, 147). Silencing can take the form of ignoring the existence of the movement or excluding movement actors as speakers, thus refusing them the chance to argue their cause (Ferree 2005, 149).

For several years, the media in Russia have maintained a stony silence on feminism. During the 90s, but for a handful of exceptions, they have ignored both the women’s movement and its agenda (Sperling 1999, 87; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 260). In a 1998 article, journalist and lesbian activist²⁰ Masha Gessen observed that people in Russia were not only generally convinced that there was no feminist movement in Russia, but also eager to insist that its existence was impossible. How, Gessen wondered, can something that supposedly does not exist provoke such vehement reactions (Гессен 1998)? This astute remark captures a key aspect of the

20 Gessen was active in the gay and lesbian movement. To my knowledge, she has never participated in the women’s movement nor identified as a feminist. However, she has been described as a feminist by Katharina Wiedlack who analyzes her public presence in the US media since 2013 (M. K. Wiedlack 2018, 132), and Gessen’s 1998 article cited above provides a rare sympathetic discussion of the women’s movement in the Russian media.

Russian media and popular discourse—or rather, the interplay of discourse and silence—on feminism in the 1990s, 2000s, and most of the 2010s. Indeed, the media have neither offered a platform to feminists (the single case of Maria Arbatova being an exception that, as discussed above, likely proves the rule) nor shown any consistent interest in the women’s movement. Meanwhile, they have systematically reproduced stereotypes, made disparaging comments on feminism and feminists, and provided a platform to conservative and overtly misogynist speakers who publicly denounced feminism (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 265; Sperling 2015, 286). This suggests that the problem has not only been society’s ignorance of feminism, the media’s indifference, or lack of effort on the part of the women’s or feminist movement. Rather, the media have maintained and actively reinforced an antifeminist consensus by silencing and discrediting feminism. In this context, it is not surprising that most of those who identified as feminist privately or among friends and colleagues in the 90s did not dare do so in public. However, as I will show in the following, the new feminist movement in Russia has managed, with time, to shift society’s antifeminist attitude.

2. State of the art: scholarship on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia

I began my research at a time when there were no academic publications that acknowledged the existence of a contemporary feminist movement in Russia. An exception was a body of scholarship discussing Pussy Riot with a focus on feminism (Hinterhuber 2012a; Gapova 2014; Johnson 2014; Sperling 2014; Wiedlack & Neufeld 2014; Yusupova 2014; Turbine 2015). Then studies appeared that encompassed some feminist mobilizations without focusing solely on them (Sperling 2015; Mason 2015), followed by publications dedicated entirely to the feminist movement (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016; Сенькова 2018b; 2018a; Senkova 2018; Perheentupa 2019). Several more studies have addressed specific feminist mobilizations (Rivkin-Fish 2018; Aripova & Johnson 2018; Arbatskaya 2019; Sedysheva 2018; 2020; 2021). This growing body of academic literature seems to testify to an increasing scholarly interest for feminism in contemporary Russia. For reasons I will discuss below, however, it may be premature to think of these studies as forming a common field of academic inquiry.

Certainly the best-known Russian feminists in the 21st century, Pussy Riot have commanded the attention of the media, general public, and academics worldwide. While much scholarship has focused on Pussy Riot's challenge to the Russian state (cf. Bernstein 2013; Sharafutdinova 2014; Smyth & Soboleva 2014), several authors have also addressed the band's relationship to feminism. As mentioned above, previous scholarship has established the decline of the women's movement in Russia; with increasing concern, researchers have also discussed the Russian state's turn to neopatriarchal policy and ideology (cf. Johnson & Saarinen 2011; 2013). It is against this backdrop that several authors have assessed the appearance of an all-women collective that boldly claimed a feminist identity, feminist politics and aesthetics. For instance, Janet Elise Johnson has argued that Pussy Riot's central feminist accomplishment had been in challenging "the dominant gendered and sexualized order" in Russia (Johnson 2014, 583). Meanwhile, other authors have doubted whether feminism as such or Pussy Riot's feminism specifically had a chance of "taking root" in Russia, since it was largely perceived as foreign and Western (Yusupova 2014, 608; Turbine 2015, 338) or too "elite" and detached from the concerns of the "masses" (Gapova 2014, 19).

Standing out among articles on Pussy Riot and feminism is Sperling's article that discusses Russian feminists' perspectives on Pussy Riot and thus presents for the first time multiple voices from the contemporary feminist movement in Russia (Sperling 2014). This article later made a chapter in Sperling's book *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (Sperling 2015, 222), which became the most influential and cited source on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia to date. Subsequent studies touching upon the subject have drawn unfailingly on Sperling for empirical data (cf. Johnson 2018, 125; Sundstrom 2018, 220). However,

several more studies have also explored contemporary feminism in Russia. Albeit small, this body of scholarship, including Sperling's book, offers rich and detailed empirical data and a range of valuable analytical insights. It presents the feminist movement as a grassroots movement that, in contrast to the women's movement in the 90s, consistently engages in public protest, is rather radical both in terms of tactics and political claims, and actively intervenes into the public sphere, challenging patriarchal and sexist norms in various contexts from institutional politics to the everyday (Mason 2015, 311; Sperling 2015, 251; Perheentupa 2019, 208). Beyond this common ground, existing studies vary widely in their focus. Sperling's book examines the interplay of gender and sexuality with issues of legitimacy in Russian politics. Drawing upon interviews with feminists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg, it discusses the feminist movement as a collective actor that can potentially resist the pervasive sexism and homophobia and thus transform the political landscape in Russia (Sperling 2015, 4). Jessica Mason's doctoral research in anthropology considers the feminist, LGBT and leftist scene in Moscow in 2012–2013, exploring the nexus of grassroots anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, and anti-homophobic politics (Mason 2015, 10). Another ethnographic doctoral research, Inna Perheentupa's study focuses primarily on the Saint Petersburg feminist scene, highlighting both resistance to dominant gender politics and a range of intra-movement processes (Perheentupa 2019, 202). Olga Senkova's articles also consider Saint Petersburg, focusing on ideological debates in the local feminist scene (Сенькова 2018b, 463; Senkova 2018, 9). Finally, Yana Kirey-Sitnikova's article discusses the trans debate in the Russian-speaking feminist scene and details the history of trans feminism in Russia (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016, 167).

Beside differences in their focus, existing studies of the feminist movement also differ in some of their assessments, for instance with regard to the character of the movement. Sperling suggests that just like the 90s women's movement, the contemporary feminist scene in Russia consists of privileged people (Sperling 2015, 218). Perheentupa, on the other hand, draws on her interviews with feminists who stress their working-class background to suggest that contemporary feminism in Russia is a "non-elite" movement (Perheentupa 2019, 169, 213). In a similar vein, Mason highlights the experience of multiple marginalization which, she argues, shapes some of her participants' political priorities (Mason 2015, 177).

Conflicts and disagreement within the feminist movement are a significant issue addressed in all studies. Sperling describes conflicts and splits in feminist collectives as a regrettable dynamic which, in her opinion, prevents consolidation and thus limits the movement's political potential (Sperling 2015, 251). Senkova's articles offer a detailed description of feminists' diverging positions on issues like separatism or sex work (Сенькова 2018a, 85; 2018b, 463; Senkova 2018, 8) yet provide little interpretation. Especially in (Сенькова 2018b), however, a strong emphasis on feminists' animosity toward political opponents both within and beyond the feminist scene produces the impression of a movement torn by conflicts and of activists unable to find common ground. Sharing the perspective on conflicts

among feminists as regrettable “divisions,” Perheentupa suggests that feminists “get stuck” in political debates (Perheentupa 2019, 147), which “deter[s] some activists from cooperating” (Perheentupa 2019, 79). Mason, however, takes a distinctly different approach to conflicts. Confessing a similar initial frustration at witnessing conflicts among activists, she later renounces her assumption that groups are supposed to “consolidate and compromise for the greater good” (Mason 2015, 35) and provides a thorough analysis of the ways in which conflicts and “schisms” open space for new politics and “more effective solidarity in the future” (Mason 2015, 246). Finally, Kirey-Sitnikova who has herself been a central protagonist in a major conflict within the feminist scene reflects self-critically on the possible impact of her “confrontational and uncompromising” style of activism on how the debate over trans inclusion has developed in the Russian-speaking feminist scene; while acknowledging her critics’ argument for a more “gradual and delicate” discussion, she nevertheless suggests that this approach can hardly help deconstruct cisnormativity (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016, 171).

Both Perheentupa and Kirey-Sitnikova also address the connection between conflicts and inequalities in the feminist scene, yet they come to strikingly different conclusions. Discussing the importance of tangible and intangible resources in the feminist movement, Perheentupa examines how differential access to feminist knowledge may result in different political stances within feminism. However, when addressing a conflict over racism in the feminist scene, she interprets anti-racist critique as elitist and academic and suggests that what she calls “gynocentric” feminism (i.e. in this case, one that reproduces racist practices to make a case for women’s common oppression) is less complicated and thus more easily accessible to non-academic feminists (Perheentupa 2019, 165). Kirey-Sitnikova touches upon a similar issue by asking to what extent trans-exclusionary beliefs among Russian-speaking feminists are shaped by their social positions. Having conducted an online survey with around 600 feminists, she finds that participants who “reject” trans people tend to hold considerably more privilege in terms of income and educational level: the “rejecting” group in her sample consists predominantly of people with higher education who earn on average twice as much as people in the “accepting” group who also largely have no university degree (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016, 172). Thus whereas Perheentupa effectively argues that solidarity with marginalized groups is a complicated academic position shaped by class privilege, Kirey-Sitnikova comes to the opposite conclusion that privilege both in terms of income and education is associated with rejection of marginalized experiences. However, since both researchers use widely different methods—Perheentupa’s study is qualitative, Kirey-Sitnikova’s is quantitative, yet with a non-representative sample—this limits the value of the comparison between their studies.

For all their thought-provoking claims, richness of data, and analytical insights, all studies discussed above share a significant limitation. Each of them focuses on a specific, clearly delimited segment or aspect of the feminist movement; as a result, they produce snapshot-like accounts that leave out substantial areas and, moreover,

contribute to a narrative on feminism in Russia that is problematic in several ways. Apart from Kirey-Sitnikova's study that has an issue-related focus on trans feminism but no geographic focus, all other studies concentrate on local feminist scenes either in Moscow or in Saint Petersburg.²¹ Therefore, the scope of the feminist movement remains unknown; neither study provides information on feminist scenes anywhere beyond the two "capital cities." In this way, they produce the impression that feminism only exists in Russia in these central, supposedly more liberal enclaves. This idea resonates only too well with the widely-held notion that feminism is foreign to Russia.

Moreover, existing scholarship places a strong emphasis on the Russian state and its neopatriarchal policies. Sperling's book, for instance, discusses in much detail the state's policies and discourse, actions and statements by state representatives, and Putin's political image (cf. Sperling 2015, 26). Perheentupa, Mason, and Senkova all use the Russian state's authoritarian and neopatriarchal policies as a primary frame of reference for describing the context in which the feminist movement operates (Perheentupa 2019, 17; Mason 2015, 39; Senkova 2018, 3). Whereas addressing the state and political culture is certainly relevant in a discussion of any social movement, insistent references to the state's authoritarianism combined with a narrow focus on a specific, clearly demarcated feminist scene inevitably reproduce the image of a small community of activists facing the huge, crushing machine of a repressive neopatriarchal state. This image has also been used by authors reflecting on their own work as academic feminists in the 2000s (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 261) and by researchers discussing the subsistence of the network of women's crisis centers in Russia (Johnson & Saarinen 2011, 42; 2013, 561). Indeed, portraying Russian feminists as David confronting Goliath is, as Katharina Wiedlack argues, a common element in a discourse that links feminism to Western modernity and progress, reviving a cold-war East/West dichotomy (Wiedlack 2016, 417; Wiedlack 2018, 131). Constructing feminism as inherently Western, she argues, this discourse signifies Russian feminists as carrying Western values and, consequently, as victims of Putin's backward, authoritarian regime (Wiedlack 2018, 132). At the same time, precisely because this discourse incorporates feminism into Western modernity, it can only allow for single Russian feminists (Wiedlack 2018, 133) or a small and weak movement.

The insidious yet persisting notion that there can be no sustained and sizable feminist movement in Russia has clearly had impact on another group of studies, namely those focusing on specific feminist mobilizations in Russia or in the Russian-speaking space. These publications make little to no reference to the existence of a more encompassing feminist movement, just as most studies on Pussy Riot discussed above present this feminist collective as an isolated case. For instance, when Feruza Aripova and Janet Johnson analyze the 2016 hashtag campaign against sexual violence, #янебоюсьсказать / #янебоюсьсказать (in their translation, "I

21 Whereas Sperling and Perheentupa did fieldwork in both cities, Sperling relies primarily on data collected in Moscow, and Perheentupa in Saint Petersburg.

Am Not Afraid to Say” (Aripova & Johnson 2018, 488), they refer to it as a “new kind of feminist activism” occurring as a single, exceptional event in an environment “hostile to feminism” (Aripova & Johnson 2018, 489). In a similar vein, neither Anna Sedysheva who writes about the same hashtag campaign nor Elena Arbatskaya who studies the 2018 #этонеповодубить (“This is Not a Reason to Kill”) mention any previous grassroots feminist mobilizations (Sedysheva 2018; Arbatskaya 2019). An exception among the studies of specific feminist protests in Russia is Michele Rivkin-Fish who discusses moral economy in the abortion rights campaigns of 2011 and 2015. Rivkin-Fish refers to feminist activists as actors in both protests and even names a specific collective, LeftFem (again from Saint Petersburg), that organized the protest to protect abortion rights in 2015 (Rivkin-Fish 2018, 32). However, her account downplays the central role of grassroots activists in the 2011 campaign, suggesting that it was led by NGOs (Rivkin-Fish 2018, 30).²²

Despite overlooking the feminist movement in Russia and its role in ensuring the public success and resonance of the mobilizations they focus on, these studies of specific feminist mobilizations nevertheless make a valuable contribution to academic knowledge on feminism in Russia. They provide insight into these indisputably significant feminist events, the logic of feminist action in Russia, the responses it elicits, and the effects it produces. Moreover, they bring feminist mobilizations in Russia into a broader context of feminist action across the globe, for instance by drawing parallels with #MeToo (Sedysheva 2021, 303) or discussing Russian-language hashtag campaigns in terms of feminist discursive activism (Arbatskaya 2019, 255). If they treat these mobilizations as isolated events without acknowledging the broader feminist movement they are part of, this is not a shortcoming of any individual study. Rather, I suggest, this is a joint effect of several converging tendencies, notably the silencing of the feminist movement in Russian media and the discourse on feminism as belonging to Western modernity. Since the media in Russia have until recently systematically refused to report on the feminist movement, they have effectively kept it invisible even from the most sympathetic and inquisitive observers. The only way to learn about the feminist movement, its activities and increasing scope has been through direct contact to movement members or access to feminist platforms. At the same time, the ubiquitous association of feminism with the West implies assuming that it is foreign to Russia’s society and incompatible with Russian culture, that it can only exist in Russia as a handful of isolated, exceptional cases rather than as a fully-fledged movement. Powerful evidence to the contrary must be provided to overcome this assumption, yet researchers who do not happen to have direct contact to the feminist movement have had no access to this kind of evidence.

As a result, not only have most authors writing on feminist mobilizations in Russia overlooked the connections between them, but they also appear largely unaware of each other’s work. Aside from the more prominent figures of Sperling and Johnson,

22 My critique is based on my direct participation in the 2011 campaign; a detailed account of these events is provided in Chapter 5.

the researchers cited above hardly make reference to each other. To put it differently, the studies of contemporary feminism in Russia have not yet formed a field of their own. However, this state of affairs seems to be changing, no doubt in part thanks to these studies which have introduced grassroots feminist action in Russia to academia, but also, crucially, thanks to the feminist movement's sustained and increasingly successful efforts to make itself and its claims seen and heard by the media and the wide public. A growing academic interest in and acknowledgment of feminism in Russia has manifested itself in several recent and ongoing studies. For instance, Elena Chebankova dedicates a chapter to feminism as a political ideology in her book *Political Ideologies in Contemporary Russia*, describing feminism as “an essential part of the ideological landscape” alongside liberalism, conservatism, socialism, etc. (Chebankova 2020, 230). Olga Andreevskikh and Marianna Muravyeva cite several feminist online platforms and debates in their discussion of gender in Russian-speaking online spaces (Andreevskikh & Muravyeva 2021, 207). In a still ongoing study of the feminist movement in Russia, Olga Sasunkevich focuses specifically on its mass character and broadening agenda which increasingly includes the interests of marginalized groups (Sasunkevich 2021, 56).

My research seeks to contribute to this emerging field of studies by filling some of the gaps in the currently available empirical knowledge and by suggesting a shift of perspective. First of all, I consider the contemporary feminist movement in Russia as a movement that exists with some continuity across multiple geographic locations. I follow how the contemporary feminist movement has evolved since its emergence in the mid-2000s and examine specifically feminist scenes beyond the two “capital cities” and power dynamics between feminists from the centers and the peripheries to produce a comprehensive account of the feminist movement in Russia. To make sense of the movement's scope, complexity, and impact, I address explicitly several questions that have, I suggest, rather been answered implicitly in previous scholarship, in particular on the definition of politics, the role of the state for the feminist movement, and on the relationship between Russian and Western feminisms. This task requires adequate theoretical and methodological tools, which I will present in the following chapters.

3. Theoretical foundations: thinking the feminist movement

While classical grounded theory famously demands that researchers do empirical work first and engage with extant theory afterwards so as to prevent established ideas from limiting their perspective, those working with grounded theory have observed that this methodological requirement is hardly reconcilable with research practice (Charmaz 2014, 306). Some have argued for a “theoretical agnosticism” rather than “theoretical innocence,” which does not preclude working with existing literature early on in the research process, yet implies retaining a critical stance toward concepts and theories (Henwood & Pidgeon 2004, 138). In my research process, I have drawn upon several theories to come up with a general research design. I made the conscious effort to set existing theories aside, however, as I formulated my interview guide, relying from that point on primarily on my observations in the field, and came back to the literature again at the later stages of my analysis.

Below I present the theories that have shaped my argument on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. My perspective is informed by social movement theory, particularly feminist movement studies, along with intersectionality and feminist standpoint theory. I also discuss the theoretical nexus of postsocialist and postcolonial studies, which I engage with to address the larger context in which the feminist movement in Russia is situated.

3.1. Social movement theory

In social movement studies, a social movement is defined as a form of collective action that occurs outside of institutional channels with some degree of organization and continuity and aims to challenge (or support) existing institutional or cultural authority (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi 2004, 11). This definition distinguishes movements from spontaneous collective behavior as well as from institutional actors that may pursue (or resist) social change through more conventional means. Such actors differ from social movements in that they exist and have legitimacy within the political system, whereas social movements are understood to be located outside of it or to “overlap with it in a precarious fashion” (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi 2004, 7). It is this position, according to social movement theory, that typically drives social movements to use conspicuous, disruptive tactics to make their claims and arguments heard.

Below I will discuss two major paradigms in social movement theory: the contentious politics paradigm with its theories of resource mobilization and political process, and the new social movement paradigm, also known as the theory of collective identity, including the field of feminist movement studies. I will address

the central concepts used in these approaches and debates between them and outline their relevance for my subsequent discussion of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia.

Contentious politics

A central approach in social movement studies that is widely used to this day focuses on contentious politics. In this approach, contention is understood as making claims to those in power, usually governments, by engaging in public collective protest (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 7; Tarrow 2011, 9). When contentious action is sustained and organized, researchers qualify it as a social movement (Tarrow 2011, 7). In contrast to institutional politics, contentious action is practiced by “ordinary people” who lack access to institutional channels or challenge authorities in fundamental ways (Tarrow 2011, 7). For this reason, contentious action is typically understood to take the form of protest: demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, etc. (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 263). To study social movement activity in the contentious politics paradigm, scholars have used the method of “protest event counts” whereby the number of protests is assessed based on media reports (Koopmans & Rucht 2002, 231). They have also examined protest cycles or waves (Koopmans 2004, 21): periods of “heightened conflict across the system” (Tarrow 2011, 199) when protests increase and interactions both with the government and between various movements intensify (Whittier 2004, 531). The involvement of governments is central to the definition of politics from the contentious politics perspective (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 8); when social movements do not involve governments, they are labeled “apolitical” (Tarrow 2011, 8).

The question of how and why movements achieve their goals are addressed by related theories of resource mobilization and political process. Resource mobilization theory presents the movements’ internal dynamics in terms of resources: in order to enable collective action, resources available to individuals must be put together and turned into collective resources (B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 116). This is done, theorists of resource mobilization suggest, by social movement organizations that aggregate or produce various kinds of resources: from material assets (e.g. money or equipment) through human resources (time or skills) to cultural and moral resources like knowledge and legitimacy (B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 125). Political process theory, on the other hand, explains social movement dynamics through changes in the political opportunity structure: aspects of the political system that shape the political context and, therefore, the choices of social movement actors (Kriesi 2004, 69; Koopmans 2004, 24). Some aspects considered relevant for social movements are the openness of the political system and its prevailing strategies that determine how likely the state is to use repression against challengers (Kriesi 2004, 71).

Several concepts developed in the paradigm of contentious politics, including contentious action, protest cycles, movement resources, and political opportunities, are relevant for the discussion of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia.

Yet the general pattern of movement action suggested by this approach—namely, that collective action occurs when social movement organizations have mobilized resources and participants to challenge the government—does not quite apply to this particular movement. More helpful concepts and insights are offered, however, by theories of new social movements and collective identity.

New social movements and collective identity

The theory of new social movements was articulated to explain the movements that emerged in Western Europe in the wake of 1968, such as environmental, peace, gay and lesbian, animal rights, and indeed, feminist movements (Offe 1985, 817, 828; Hunt & Benford 2004, 437). These movements, researchers found, did not fit well with previous theories. Instead of a clearly definable structure with social movement organizations, they consisted of temporary, informal groups without clear leaders (Offe 1985, 829) and of loose “submerged networks” that mobilized from time to time in collective action (Melucci 1985, 800). These intermittent outbursts of protest and claims these movements made to governments clearly played a secondary rather than central role for them. Rather than demanding specific reforms or even a change of political regime, these movements sought a change in the values and norms of society as a whole (Ferree 2005, 139), challenging oppositions of private/public and politics/culture (Offe 1985, 820). They thus produced a different understanding of politics, one that was no longer directly associated with governments, and as a research object, they challenged researchers to rethink their assumptions about politics.

Alberto Melucci, one of the central theorists of new social movements, has particularly emphasized their role as agents of social innovation. By engaging in symbolic struggles, these movements produce, according to Melucci, new meanings and social practices, thus directly effectuating the change they seek (Melucci 1985, 797). These movements’ organizational form with informal membership and temporary structures is, he points out, in itself a message and a symbolic challenge to the system (Melucci 1985, 801). Action that was previously deemed cultural, action done in “submerged networks” is, he argues, the main “gift” these movements have to offer to society (Melucci 1985, 800; 1996, 183).

Feminist movements have been a major object of study for theorists of new social movements; they have even been characterized as “the very epitome” of movements that focus on making change in society (Ferree 2005, 140). Students of feminist movements have contributed to developing several key concepts of new social movement theory, including that of collective identity. A movement’s collective identity is understood as the core element that holds together a “new” movement that has neither a clear structure nor hierarchy. An influential definition of collective identity was set forth by Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier in their research on lesbian feminism: “a shared definition of a group based on common interests, experience, and solidarity” (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 170). Collective identity is understood to include shared language, practices, and cultural artifacts, but also

definitions of goals and methods (Melucci 1996, 70–71). In social movement research, collective identity is conceptualized as both a process and product of intra-movement reflection. A “shorthand’ reference point for insiders and outsiders” that identifies the movement by its key issues and ideological arguments, collective identity is, however, subject to continuous re-negotiations and ideological debates within the movement (Flesher Fominaya 2010, 397). Ideological conflicts are thus considered to be a sign of the movement’s vitality and strength rather than weakness: as Whittier argues, “[a] movement remains alive as long as there is struggle over its collective identity” (Whittier 1995, 18).

The concept of collective identity remains a key contribution of new social movement theory; it has been found relevant for movements of various types (Hunt & Benford 2004, 433). Other claims of new social movement theory, however, have not withstood subsequent scrutiny. First and foremost, this concerns the label of “new” for decentralized movements that address society rather than the state. Whereas the founding theorists of new social movements have associated them with the specific context of Western societies in the 1970s (which they variously characterized as “complex” or “postmaterialist” (Melucci 1985, 795; Inglehart 1981, 880), later research has pointed out the existence of similar focuses in women’s and workers’ movements of the 19th century (Calhoun 1993, 385; Ferree 2005, 152). Studies of workers’ movements have also disclaimed the association early theorists had made between new social movements and the middle class (Offe 1985).²³

In the context of Russia, Karine Clément and her co-authors have dismissed the possibility of using new social movement theory, pointing out that Russia was in no way a “postmaterialist society” (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 304). For their study of mobilizations around labor, housing, and other social issues in Russia in 2005–2008, they have referred to the contentious politics approach and, more specifically, resource mobilization theory (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова 2010, 305). The concept of collective identity, however, has been used productively by sociologists who studied anti-Putin mobilizations in 2011–2013 (Алюков et al. 2014, 21). It was Elena Gapova who first directly applied new social movement theory to the context of Russia in her discussion of Pussy Riot (Gapova 2014, 18). Considering Pussy Riot’s method from a new social movement perspective, Gapova analyzes their performances as communicative acts aiming to produce symbolic change (Gapova 2014, 29). However, she also associates new social movements with a “post-industrial era” (Gapova 2014, 18) and claims that Pussy Riot’s “social base” is a “new class” of young urban intellectuals (Gapova 2014, 25), which is why, Gapova suggests, the kind of politics chosen by Pussy Riot is irrelevant for the disadvantaged majority in Russia (Gapova 2014, 24).²⁴ Gapova’s argument thus draws upon a

23 For a critical discussion of the attribution of “new social movements” to a middle-class “base,” see for example (Bagguley 1992). Interestingly, researchers of the middle class have tended conversely to assign to it a political “modernizing” role (Melin & Salmenniemi 2016, 35).

24 I agree with Gapova’s argument that class divisions have played a role in Pussy Riot’s perception in Russia. Yet in my opinion, this has more to do with Pussy Riot being a political art collective rather than (only) an activist group. Class differences in perceptions of Pussy Riot should be

classical Marxist understanding of class struggle that treats “postmaterialist” issues as secondary, insisting on the primacy of the class issue in politics. Yet it is precisely this notion that is challenged by new social movement theory as it considers a plurality of issues and collective actors rather than a single workers’ movement (Melucci 1996, 209).

As I will argue in the following chapters, the concept of collective identity is crucial for making sense of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, as is the notion of a decentralized movement that targets the whole of society rather than the state. The merits of this theoretical lens do not depend, I suggest, on whether the movements in question are considered “new” or associated with “postindustrial” or “postmaterialist” societies. As Ferree has argued, the difference between movements that have been labeled “new” from those considered “old,” notably class-based movements, is not chronological but one of focus and strategy: the movements deemed “old” fight for state power, the movements deemed “new” do not (Ferree 2005, 140).²⁵ In other words, it is the fundamental approach to the question of what constitutes politics that distinguishes the two types of movements.

Adopting this theoretical lens has several consequences for my analysis. Recognizing that a movement can primarily target society rather than the government suggests the need to seriously examine, besides contentious tactics such as demonstrations, a wide variety of action in the cultural and discursive spheres, including online activities. Considering the centrality of collective identity for the movement implies addressing ideological debates within the movement as productive collective identity processes rather than threats to the movement’s unity. In these and other areas, further valuable insights are provided by existing scholarship on feminist movements.

Feminist movement research: politicizing community, culture, and discourse

Whereas social movements may vary considerably in duration, feminist movements find themselves on the longer-term end of the spectrum, having an exceptionally long history. This is probably why it is feminist movement studies that have yielded a conceptualization of political generations in social movements. First used in a feminist context by Beth Schneider (Schneider 1988, 4), the concept of political generations has been developed by Whittier (Whittier 1995, 3). In her study on the persistence of the radical women’s movement in the United States, Whittier defines a political generation as a group of people who became politicized at the same moment and have thus made similar political experiences (Whittier 1995, 15). A

considered, I suggest, in the context of how actionist art in Russia has made (or failed to make) itself understandable to a wide public.

25 Ferree goes on to frame the debate over the “newness” of decentralized movements that target society rather than the state in feminist terms. As she suggests, feminist movements possessing these features have long been disregarded in scholarship, yet these very elements were conceptualized as “new” when they came under the scrutiny of “relatively privileged men concerned about issues that did not fit a conventional left-right spectrum (e.g., environmentalism, anticolonialism)” (Ferree 2005, 152).

political generation is therefore shaped, Whittier suggests, by the larger political context of the time, yet also by the “concrete, lived experience of organizing a challenge together” (Whittier 1995, 17). Studying feminists of various generations, Whittier finds that women who joined the movement during its “heyday” in the 1960s and 1970s share several key elements of collective identity, which sets them apart from those who became feminists in the 1980s and 1990s (Whittier 1995, 17). This generational difference, Whittier observes, can become a source of mutual frustration and ideological conflicts. However, examining political generations and the shifts in feminist collective identity produced by them reveals how the movement endures and changes over time (Whittier 1995, 254).

I draw upon Whittier’s concept of feminist political generations to consider the relationship between the women’s movement of the 90s, and more specifically its feminist segment, and the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. The two generations, as will become apparent in the following, differ considerably in their tactics, goals, and political priorities, which has a lot to do with differences of their respective political contexts. At the same time, there are also continuities and an ostensible motivation, especially in the new generation, to establish and maintain contacts to their activist foremothers. I suggest that the concept of political generation is more productive to describe the relationship between these two groups of feminists in Russia than, for instance, the widely used term “wave”:²⁶ it has more analytical clarity and links differences between groups that discovered feminism at various moments to the political contexts in which this occurred.

For Whittier, relative cohesion within a political generation also depends on belonging to the same movement community (Whittier 1995, 17). Another concept developed by feminist movement researchers, a social movement community is defined as a network of loosely connected actors—individuals, groups, and formal organizations—who share and advance social movement goals (Staggenborg 1998, 182). By studying feminist movement communities, researchers have produced a powerful argument against imagining movements, as is common in the contentious politics framework, as waves of mobilization alternating with periods of “abeyance” where no claims are made and no political activity occurs (Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 44). Leila Rupp has argued based on her study of the feminist community in the U. S. National Women’s Party in the 1940s–1960s that this community has enabled the movement to survive in the hostile political context shaped by the Cold War, McCarthyism, and antifeminist backlash (Rupp 1985, 718). She identifies shared experiences during the suffrage struggle, a collective feminist identity, and personal ties of friendship and love as key elements that have held the community together (Rupp 1985, 721). In studies focusing on lesbian feminist communities in the 1970s–1980s, Taylor and Whittier have argued that social movement communities are key spaces where the movement’s collective identity is produced and articulated (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 122); Taylor and Rupp have detailed both

26 Several feminist researchers have also argued, from a variety of perspectives, against conceptualizing feminist history in “waves” (cf. Nicholson 2010, 34; Naples 2015, 216).

the crucial role feminist culture has played in sustaining the feminist collective identity and its impact on other movements (Taylor & Rupp 1993, 52).²⁷ Arguing against representations of “cultural feminism” as depoliticized, feminist movement researchers suggest that feminist culture produced in movement communities through their institutions and events, such as feminist bookstores, concerts, and festivals, is political both because it helps sustain the movement through periods of hostility and because it challenges the dominant culture by providing alternative models of being a woman (Taylor & Rupp 1993, 50; Whittier 1995, 53).

A similar argument is advanced by researchers focusing on feminist discursive politics. This term was suggested by Stacey Young to conceptualize the feminist movement’s emphasis on “changing how people think about gender, power, [and] self-determination” (S. Young 1997, 12). Thus whereas studies of feminist communities and culture focus on institutions, practices, and artifacts, Young’s attention is directed at language and discourse. She suggests women’s consciousness-raising groups as an early discursive practice aiming to produce change in women’s lives through conversation (S. Young 1997, 13). Young argues against characterizing feminist discursive politics merely as “personal empowerment” or “expressive” activity,²⁸ claiming that it “has as much to do with contesting power relationships and existing social structures as does traditional electoral politics” (S. Young 1997, 17). She examines feminist autotheoretical texts and the work of feminist publishers as two major avenues used by feminists to change language, consciousness, and social practice (S. Young 1997, 59).

More recent scholarship has focused on feminist online discursive politics. Whereas the Internet has been acknowledged as an important sphere for activism, most social movement research has focused on online tools’ auxiliary role in facilitating mobilization or on specific forms of online protest (Earl & Kimport 2011; McCaughey & Ayers 2013). Feminist researchers, on the other hand, have drawn attention to online “discourse as the mode of activism” (Shaw 2012, 373). Examining how Australian feminist bloggers produce both discursive change and “real-world political effects,” Frances Shaw has argued that discursive activism represents an integral part of feminist politics pursued by feminist bloggers (Shaw 2012, 384). Rosemary Clark has studied feminist discursive politics in the case of hashtag activism on domestic violence and highlighted the role of online discursive activism in challenging dominant discourses. She also suggests that online networks allow for an unprecedented mass access to discursive tactics, which results in “more intersectional and open feminist movements” (Clark 2016, 801).

27 While arguing for these feminist communities’ positive role for the feminist and other movements, these authors also retain a critical perspective on the elitism and racism of the feminists in the 40s–60s (Rupp 1985, 740) and the dominance of white middle-class Christian women in lesbian feminist communities in the 70s–80s (Taylor & Rupp 1993, 51).

28 The term “expressive action” comes from early social movement research where it designated action oriented toward “personal change” rather than “social change” supposedly sought through “instrumental action” (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 266).

By studying the forms of action used by feminist movements and the meanings attached to these forms of action by movement members, feminist movement research has challenged the dichotomies of mobilization/abeyance and politics/culture that have dominated in social movement studies. In line with this approach, I do not draw clear boundaries between the “political,” “social,” and “cultural.” By using the term “social movements,” I make no statement on whether a given movement acts politically, just like no implications of this sort are usually made in social movement studies. In the specific case of my research object, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, I regard it as a social movement that does political action, which it carries out in the cultural field, among others. I consider feminist community building, cultural and discursive action as fully-fledged political action alongside more conventional forms like contentious action. As I will argue in the following, this assessment reflects the perspective of many in the feminist scene in Russia. At the same time, many participants in the feminist movement rather endorse a contentious politics perspective on collective action. The debate over forms of action is, I suggest, one of the collective identity processes shaping the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, and it will be the focus of Chapter 5.

3.2. Intersectionality

A central theory in contemporary feminism, intersectionality is also subject to much academic debate. The term was famously introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe Black women’s experience at the intersection of racist and sexist discrimination (Crenshaw 1989). As an analytical and political concept, intersectionality is rooted in Black feminist thought (hooks 1982; Lorde 1983b; Collins 2000) and Chicana feminism (Anzaldúa & Moraga 1983; Anzaldúa 1987). The foundational texts of intersectionality have challenged the concepts of universal women’s experience, common oppression, and global sisterhood which, they have argued, primarily reflect the experiences and political interests of privileged, i.e. white middle-class heterosexual women (hooks 1984, 35; Lorde 1983a, 94). By contrast, Black and Chicana feminists have placed the experience of multiple oppression at the center of their theorizing (Anzaldúa 1983, 165; The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16; Collins 2000, 16). The multiple axes of oppression, they have argued, are co-constitutive of each other and act simultaneously (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16). Conceiving of theory-making as inseparable from lived experience and political practice, Black and Chicana feminists have produced emancipatory theories highlighting difference and complexity over unity and homogeneity (Lorde 1983b, 99).

As intersectionality was taken up by scholars working in a variety of academic fields, debates sparked over which and how many categories intersectional academic analyses should consider. Several researchers have followed seminal texts like “A Black Feminist Manifesto” (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16) in addressing the triad of gender, race, and class, whereas others have insisted on including

several other categories and even created lists (cf. Binder & Hess 2011, 31). In response to this discussion, Nira Yuval-Davis points out that axes of social power relevant to a particular context are not necessarily fixed but constructed by social agents and produced through political struggle (Yuval-Davis 2011, 160). Thus, her suggestion is to study the context-specific “relationships between positionings, identities and political values” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 160). As intersectionality became a “success story” in academia (Binder & Hess 2011, 15), concerns over depoliticizing tendencies have been increasingly articulated: as critics have suggested, the concept has been used in symbolic, merely descriptive ways (cf. Erel et al. 2007, 245; Binder & Hess 2011, 36), and the fundamental role of Black feminists and feminists of color has been relativized (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2011, 77; Bilge 2013, 413). Against this background, Crenshaw has re-emphasized the political stakes of intersectionality: as an emancipatory project, she insists, it should not be reduced to “a prescribed set of analytical moves” but should rather be used “to illuminate and address discriminatory situations that would otherwise escape articulation” (Crenshaw 2011, 233).

In my research, I draw upon intersectionality, above all, as a general lens through which to consider my research object. Following the tradition of critique from within feminism as articulated by Black and Chicana feminists, I seek to consider the feminist movement in Russia as a heterogeneous movement shaped by variously privileged and marginalized people. This means, for me, to recognize multiple differences within feminism in terms of power and privilege and to acknowledge political conflicts over issues of marginalization and exclusion. Furthermore, I draw upon intersectionality to ask how multiple marginalization impacts participation in the feminist movement. In practice, intersectionality has informed my sampling strategy, i.e. whom I have approached for interviews (cf. Chapter 4), as well as which issues I have focused on both in interviews and in subsequent analysis. It has also challenged me throughout my research process to seek ways to act in solidarity with participants whose marginalizations I did not share.

My commitment to intersectionality is both political and analytical, since I believe addressing issues of difference and exclusion is necessary for producing nuanced analyses that can serve emancipatory goals. Intersectionality has also come to resonate more deeply with my personal experience as my social position changed over the years. I will describe my position below both to clarify where I stand with regard to intersectional axes of power—and thus to my research field and my participants—and to illustrate some of the complexities inherent to applying categories of intersectional analysis to the context of Russia.

When the idea for this research first formed in my mind in 2012, I lived in Moscow, the city where I was born, as a straight, cis white Russian Jewish woman with an intelligentsia background and a university degree. I gradually lost some of my privilege as I first shed my straightness, then my cis-ness, and became a migrant by moving to Berlin. However, the position I have had for most of my life and from

which I have done much of my feminist activism was a position of relative privilege. Whereas part of my family is Jewish, I pass as Russian, and anti-Semitism has had no significant impact on my life. I grew up poor, yet in the 90s, a time of economic crises following the breakdown of the Soviet Union, poverty was a majority experience, including among the intelligentsia. Yet living as a trans migrant in Berlin, I found myself at an intersection of marginalizations, which has made me rethink what it means to be different in spaces where I used to fit well and belong, as well as in spaces conceived as emancipatory and inclusive. At the same time, I retain significant privilege, most notably in terms of educational status and whiteness.²⁹ Moreover, while being a migrant is a marginalization in Germany, it translates, I would argue, into a privilege in Russia, since the affiliation with a Western university provides me a higher symbolic status. My current position is thus one of privilege and marginalization; and whereas the shifts in my position over time have made me more sensitive to experiences of multiple marginalization, I also recognize that despite my best efforts, my privilege can produce biases and blind spots.

My example illustrates, I suggest, some of the challenges an intersectional approach entails in the context of Russia. There is little scholarship to draw upon in this area: to my knowledge, the only thorough academic treatment of intersectionality as applied to Russia is Olga Reznikova's discussion of gender and race in the context of anti-Chechen racism (Резникова 2014).³⁰ Based on her ethnographic work in Chechnya, Reznikova examines processes of racialization in the wake of Russian neocolonial wars in Chechnya and addresses the specific forms of intersecting oppression experienced by Chechen women (Резникова 2014, 37). She also considers the social and discursive construction of race in the Russian context, pointing out the crucial link between the concepts of "Russianness / non-Russianness"³¹ and racialization (Резникова 2014, 25). Indeed, researchers of race and racism in Russia concur that the language of race is not common in Russia due to the Soviet state's formal anti-racist policy: "the word race is rarely pronounced, even though the practices of racism are instrumental in nation construction" (Zakharov 2015, 6). Instead, it is through categories of ethnicity that the Soviet state has enacted its cultural racism (Шнирельман 2013, 98). In my interviews, too, participants have spoken of ethnicity rather than race. It is for this reason that I use "white Russian" to name my position of racial privilege and will further use the double term "race/ethnicity" to name this axis of domination.

29 Although some authors have claimed that in countries like Germany or Finland, migrants from the post-Soviet space are racialized (Panagiotidis 2020, 156; Krivonos & Diatlova 2020, 17), I strongly disagree: my experience both in Russia and Germany does not leave any doubts that people like myself hold white privilege. Following Alyosha Tudor (Tudor 2014, 141; 2018, 1058), I suggest that our position is best understood as white migrants: we experience migratism, a distinct form of marginalization, yet we are not subject to racism and are thus privileged over racialized migrants.

30 The article bears the title "The Role of Gender and Race in Researching Postcolonialism [sic] in Russia: Grievability and Chechen Feminism." It is also a significant contribution to Russian postcolonial studies, and I will discuss it in this quality in Chapter 9.

31 Russian: русскость / нерусскость.

Class is another category that appears somewhat more complicated in postsocialist Russia than in societies that have not gone through a socialist revolution and a subsequent class re-stratification (Salmenniemi 2013, 1). Above I have described my family's class position as *intelligentsia*, by which I mean holding educational capital but no material capital. In contrast to Bourdieu's classical theory (Bourdieu 1979, 196), these two components of class have often been in discrepancy in post-Soviet Russia (cf. Salmenniemi 2013, 7). They are also often in discrepancy in the feminist scene and among my participants. At the time that is my primary focus (mid-2000s—mid-2010s), as I will argue below, poverty and precarity³² have been typical among feminists, yet there have been significant differences in educational status, and this inequality has been a source of conflicts. I therefore refer to class/educational status as another double category to capture its complexity in Russia's society.

Beside these two categories and axes of domination, several more categories will be discussed in the following chapters, including sexuality, age, and dis/ability. I also address motherhood/parenthood and the inequality between the "capital cities," Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and the "regions," which represents, as I will argue, an extension of colonial relationships (cf. Chapter 9). This somewhat unconventional set of categories draws directly upon the political debates I have witnessed in the feminist scene. Thus my answer to the scholarly dilemma of defining categories for intersectional analysis is empirical: I address those categories I have observed being debated in the field I study and those touched upon by my participants in interviews. In Russia and in the Russian-speaking space, as I will describe below, it is in the contemporary feminist movement that the political and analytical language of intersectionality has been most thoroughly developed. Emancipatory discourses on disability, age, race/ethnicity, and other categories in Russia have either been articulated by grassroots feminists or strongly influenced by them. Therefore, to draw upon these debates also means engaging directly with the source of intersectional analysis in Russia and in the Russian-speaking space.

3.3. Feminist standpoint theory

According to Sandra Harding, one of its key creators, standpoint theory is a "feminist critical theory about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power" (Harding 2004, 1). Whereas standpoint theory concerns both social and natural sciences, its central claim with regard to social research is that in order to gain more objective knowledge on social reality, research should "start out from" the lives of unprivileged groups (Harding 1991, 124). This is necessary, standpoint theory suggests, because conventional scientific accounts have privileged frameworks and modes of explanation that serve the interests of dominant groups (Harding 2019, 178). Emerging from the feminist movement's intellectual endeavor, standpoint theory thus challenges positivist science and its claim to objectivity by exposing its entanglement in the politics of oppression; what standpoint theory suggests instead is rooting knowledge production in a politics of emancipation.

32 For a discussion of postsocialist precarity, see also (Suchland 2021).

At its core, feminist standpoint theory considers knowledge production as emerging from a struggle between dominant and marginalized perspectives and versions of truth (Hemmings 2012, 155). Whereas every knowledge is situated, i.e. produced from a specific social location that influences the knower's perspective (Haraway 1988, 575), standpoint theory suggests that knowledge generated from unprivileged social positions is likely to be "less partial and less distorted" than perspectives produced from dominant positions (Harding 1991, 121; Rolin 2009, 218). For instance, Nancy Hartsock argues that in capitalist patriarchy, women's perspective on the world is shaped by the material realities of their lives, in particular reproductive work, whereas men have a stake in ignoring reproductive work, which produces distorted perceptions (Hartsock 1983, 299). Patricia Hill Collins examines how alternative practices and knowledges are generated within Black women's communities to challenge dominant racist and sexist patterns and foster Black women's empowerment (Collins 2000, 30). Thus marginalized groups potentially hold what standpoint theorists have called epistemic privilege or epistemic advantage (Harding 1997, 388; Rolin 2009, 218).³³ As standpoint theorists emphasize, epistemic advantage neither implies that all marginalized subjects automatically acquire less partial knowledge by virtue of their social position nor that any knowledge claim by a member of a marginalized group must be accepted as true (Smith 1997, 392; Wylie 2012, 62). Rather, they suggest, it is through collective resistance that the potential for epistemic advantage can be realized (Harding 1997, 385; Collins 2000, 32).

The claim to epistemic advantage is not only often perceived as controversial because it challenges established scientific standards of neutral and objective truth, but also because it seeks to validate and uplift the subjugated knowledges of subordinate groups that standard science has tended to dismiss as illegitimate. For instance, as Collins points out, since Black women's experiences "have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge," her study of Black feminist thought considers "music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (Collins 2000, 251). Similarly, Dorothy Smith suggests that beginning social scientific inquiry from women's lived experience "gives access to a knowledge of what is tacit, known in the doing, and often not yet discursively appropriated (and often seen as uninteresting, unimportant, and routine)" (Smith 1997, 395). Building upon the suggestion to pay particular attention to what is "not yet discursively appropriated," Marjorie Devault argues that researchers drawing upon a feminist standpoint "must develop methods for listening around and beyond words" (Devault 1990, 101).

33 More recently, Harding has disavowed the term "epistemic privilege" due to the widespread misunderstanding it has produced; at the same time, she has reasserted the centrality of this argument for standpoint theory's claim to "strong objectivity" (Harding 2019, 182).

As is apparent from this brief recapitulation, feminist standpoint theory is intimately interrelated with intersectionality, most prominently through the work of Patricia Hill Collins who has made vital contributions to both, but also of authors like bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa. Referring to these authors, Harding observes that intersectionality is a resource that has enabled “feminists of color, multicultural and global feminisms... to analyze social relations from the standpoint of their daily lives, which were shaped by the mutually supportive or sometimes competitive relations between androcentrism, Eurocentrism, and bourgeois projects” (Harding 1997, 385).

In my research, I draw upon feminist standpoint theory in combination with intersectionality primarily as a lens and a tool to produce a feminist perspective on the feminist movement. The concept of knowledge as political and dependent on power dynamics informs both how I consider my practice of knowledge production in this research and the knowledges produced by the members of the feminist communities I study. Rather than claiming to produce neutral knowledge, I take a position of solidarity with the feminist movement and seek to contribute to its cause with my research. I suggest that with regard to the feminist movement in Russia, a primary and immediate application of a feminist standpoint is realized by the choice of research object. By choosing to focus on the grassroots feminist movement rather than on the Russian state’s neopatriarchal policies or the workings of gender and sexism in institutional contexts, I seek to address subjugated knowledges articulated by feminists who have no institutional channels to disseminate them, knowledges that are eclipsed in most accounts on feminism and gender in Russia. Following feminist standpoint theory, I suggest that considering grassroots feminists as producers of feminist knowledge and agents of emancipatory change can transform the established ways of understanding gender politics in contemporary Russia.

Furthermore, in order to produce less distorted knowledge on the feminist movement, I begin with marginalized participants, placing their voices and perspectives at the center of my research. I do this primarily through sampling, by approaching for interviews multiply marginalized feminists and those who do not find themselves in the spotlight within the feminist scene. Throughout the process of interviewing and analyzing, I pay particular attention to knowledge that is not considered knowledge, to perspectives, ideas, and criticisms not considered valuable or worthy of attention. I also focus on what remains unsaid, appears difficult to articulate, and on what emerges in practice but not in discourse. I thus rely on feminist standpoint theory both as an epistemology and a methodology (Harding 2004, 2). The concrete effects of feminist standpoint theory on my method will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

3.4. Postsocialist and postcolonial intersections

Postcolonial feminism is another major strand of theory that has challenged the concept of universal sisterhood and argued for an acknowledgment of difference in feminist politics and theorizing (Spivak 1988, 296; Mohanty 2003, 110). Although

studies of postsocialism and postcolonial studies are not usually considered as connected, over the last twenty years, scholars have increasingly attempted to make the postsocialist and the postcolonial speak to each other in meaningful ways (cf. Moore 2001; Boatca 2006; Adams 2008; Chari & Verdery 2009; Kulpa & Mizielińska 2011; Mesquita, Wiedlack, & Lasthofer 2012; Atanasoski & Vora 2018; Koobak, Tlostanova, & Thapar-Björkert 2021). Arguing that postsocialist societies can and should be conceptualized in postcolonial terms, researchers have followed two main directions of critique: on the one hand, they have analyzed the relationship between the “West” and Central and Eastern Europe, and on the other, theorized Russia as a colonial empire.

The basic concepts used in these discussions are subject to debate. For instance, authors have pointed out that “West,” “East,” “Eastern Europe,” or “Central and Eastern Europe” are all unclear and problematic: their geographic boundaries are contested and they are considered homogenizing. Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa suggest that concepts like “Central and Eastern European countries” lump together widely varying contexts and realities, while the term “West” is equally problematic since “what is perceived as Western is dominated by Anglo-American, or even just American thinking/theories,” whereas “non-English speaking countries” tend to receive considerably less attention (Mizielińska & Kulpa 2011, 15). On the other hand, however, authors point out the significance of the concept “West” as designating politically and economically hegemonic countries (Koobak & Marling 2014, 331). It is in this sense that I will also refer to the “West” in the following.

Researchers who bridge postsocialist studies with postcolonial theories critically scrutinize legacies and continuities of cold-war politics and discourses on the “East/West divide.” Drawing on postcolonial theories, they suggest that Western discourses construct “Eastern Europe” in ways similar to those criticized by postcolonial thought. Especially with regard to feminist and queer struggles, researchers speak of Western cultural hegemony and of the homogenization, exoticization, and objectification of Eastern European women and queers (Slavova 2006, 246; Mizielińska & Kulpa 2011, 20; Wiedlack & Neufeld 2014, 147; Wiedlack 2017, 253). Challenging established approaches in studies of postsocialism, they criticize narratives of transition, democratization, and modernization, pointing out their role in reinforcing Western hegemony over Eastern Europe. These narratives, they argue, construct the West as the norm and Eastern Europe as deviant, fallen out of “normal” history, and in need to “catch up” with it, and thus erase Eastern European history and agency (cf. Mizielińska & Kulpa 2012, 22; Koobak & Marling 2014, 333).

Does Russia belong to Eastern Europe in the sense of the dynamics outlined above? The postsocialist condition certainly implies several commonalities and shared experiences, both in terms of Western hegemony and other processes, e.g. renewed claims to whiteness and Christianity proliferating across the postsocialist space (Boatcă in Tlostanova 2021, 187). However, researchers have also increasingly

argued that Russia's relationship to several other postsocialist countries is postcolonial. A crucial role here belongs to Madina Tlostanova who has suggested a conceptualization of Russia as a "subaltern empire": secondary with regard to Western empires, yet at the same time a colonial empire dominating over its colonies (Tlostanova 2006, 638). Despite criticisms and doubts, researchers have provided compelling arguments for considering the Russian Empire, the USSR, and post-Soviet Russia in a postcolonial framework. Since the 19th century, they have argued, Russia has reproduced colonial practices developed by Western empires—and ranging from military violence through economic exploitation to discursive Orientalism—in regions like the Caucasus and Central Asia (Sahni 1997, 36; Tlostanova 2010, 64). The Soviet state, it has been argued, has continued colonial politics despite formal claims to anti-imperialism and anti-racism (Sahni 1997, 109; Suchland 2021, 17). Nancy Condee suggests that features like the territorial contiguity of Russia's colonies, its constructions of ethnicity, nationality, and race, and high centralization are characteristic of Russian colonialism (Condee in Spivak et al. 2006, 831). Moreover, she argues that the post-Soviet situation is shaped by "the simultaneity of Soviet postcoloniality and Russian colonialism" (Condee in Spivak et al. 2006, 830). Indeed, in Central and Eastern Europe, the question "Are we postcolonial?" is increasingly answered affirmatively (Shchurko & Suchland 2021, 72). In Chechnya, however, participants in Reznikova's focus groups argued that "neocolonialism" or simply "colonialism" were more adequate descriptions of their lived realities (Резникова 2014, 31). Thus whether a territory or a people has a colonial or a postcolonial relationship to Russia apparently depends on whether it has formal political independence—for instance, Kazakhstan is postcolonial, whereas Siberia is colonial—but also on whether Russia enforces its colonial domination over this territory or people. Thus Crimea has become colonial again, and Russia's war against Ukraine has been analyzed a colonial war (Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik 2015; 2021).³⁴ The fact that Russia still actively pursues colonial politics, including by military means, is probably the most relevant fact shaping debates over Russian postcolonial studies (cf. Annus 2012, 24; Koplatadze 2019, 473).

I suggest that both directions of postsocialist postcolonial critique are highly relevant for the discussion of the feminist movement in Russia. Following approaches to postsocialism that question Western hegemony, I take a critical distance from exoticizing and objectifying narratives on feminism and gender in Russia. In the following, I will examine how feminists in Russia think and speak of Western feminism(s), focusing especially on their agency in interacting (or choosing not to interact) with Western feminist knowledge. At the same time, I draw upon postcolonial approaches to Russia to address power dynamics between Russia's metropolitan centers, on the one hand, and colonial, postcolonial, and non-colonial

34 Whereas postcolonial approaches have been used productively for Ukraine (cf. Chernetsky 2003), some authors have also suggested that Ukraine's relationship to Russia is more complex than the term "colonial" implies, since it was in Kyiv, currently capital of Ukraine, that the Russian state (the Kyivan Rus') initiated in the 9th century (Прокопенко 2019).

peripheries, on the other. I rely particularly on the concept of subaltern empire to discuss Russia's role as a subject and object of domination and examine how these dynamics affect the feminist movement.

However, these theoretical considerations do not inform my perspective in the way other theories presented above do. Whereas I was initially aware of critical outlooks on Western hegemony and sought to include them in my approach, it was not until later stages in my research process that I engaged thoroughly with postcolonial scholarship on Russia. As a result, my research does not empirically address issues of coloniality in the feminist movement in Russia in the comprehensive way I now believe they require. This imbalance is doubtless shaped both by my sensibilities as a migrant scholar at a Western university and by my biases as a white Russian from Moscow. To use Samuel Beckett's phrase popular among scholars writing on intersectionality (cf. Haschemi Yekani, Michaelis, & Dietze 2010, 78), my engagement with postcolonial critique has been a process of learning to "fail better." However provisional, a discussion of colonial dynamics is, I believe, indispensable in an account of the feminist movement in Russia that seeks to foreground heterogeneity and difference.

Above I have addressed four major theoretical paradigms that provide me with a basis to think the contemporary feminist movement in Russia: social movement theory, including feminist movement studies, intersectionality, feminist standpoint theory, and theoretical approaches connecting postsocialist and postcolonial studies. Informed by these theoretical resources, my perspective on the feminist movement in Russia encompasses various forms of action, including those in discursive and cultural fields, centers marginalized voices and experiences, and highlights conflict and heterogeneity. What this theoretical approach entails for my research method will be discussed in the next chapter.

4. Method: doing feminist research on feminism

From a constructivist perspective, the analysis produced in the research process is shaped by this process and the researcher's position. Reflecting on these aspects is thus a crucial element of research. From a feminist perspective, moreover, I consider the research process just as important as the research results. How I proceed to obtain the data I seek, how I interact with participants is, I believe, a statement and an act of feminist politics.

It is on this premise that I have founded my considerations of method and methodology. Because I considered myself an insider to my research field, I asked myself how I can navigate it and balance my roles as a researcher and activist; how to produce knowledge that is both meaningful from an academic perspective and serves feminist interests; and how to design my research practice in a way that does not exploit or harm my participants.

Below I discuss the methodological foundations I have drawn upon to resolve these issues: feminist methodology and constructivist grounded theory. I further review the major questions and decisions I have confronted throughout my research process: from grappling with my position as a researcher through selecting sites for fieldwork to granting participants power over the research process. I also discuss how methodological considerations have shaped all major research procedures. I conclude with a reflection of the successes, setbacks, expected and unexpected outcomes of my fieldwork and method.

4.1. Feminist research methodology

As outlined in the previous chapter, I draw upon feminist standpoint theory both as an epistemology and a methodology. Disclaiming the positivist ideal of neutral, objective knowledge produced by an impartial, detached subject, feminist researchers argue that while all knowledge is partial and situated, positivist claims to neutrality tend to mask distortions and biases by disguising as unbiased a privileged perspective invested in protecting the status quo. Moreover, as they point out, conventional social research is based on a hierarchical relationship that positions the researcher above the researched "object." Thus the experiences and knowledges of marginalized groups are excluded or instrumentalized in classical social research (Grenz 2014, 61). By contrast, feminist methodology aims to "excavate" knowledge that has previously been suppressed and silenced, i.e. primarily knowledge of and by marginalized groups; it seeks to reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched in order to minimize harm and control in the research process; and it strives to produce knowledge that is of value for marginalized groups and advances social change (DeVault 1999, 30–31). Feminist research is thus engaged research. In methodological terms, this implies

that the researcher must take responsibility for their situated and partial perspective by carefully reflecting on its implications for the research process (DeVault 1999, 190; Binder & Hess 2013, 23).

As feminist scholars argue, any research situation is inherently shaped by a power imbalance, since the researcher has control over the research process, makes the decisions, and represents participants by writing about them (Grenz 2014, 72). For researchers who study marginalized groups they do not belong to, this power imbalance is increased by dynamics of social inequality. Feminist researchers have suggested a variety of tools and strategies to mitigate it by granting participants control over various stages of the research process. By opening research procedures to collaboration with participants, they have sought to overcome the objectification and instrumentalization of research subjects common to social research. In particular, feminist methods of collaborative research have included reviewing data with participants and introducing reciprocity by giving back one's time, labor, resources, or knowledge (DeVault 1999, 37; Gupta & Kelly 2014, 5). Whereas the results yielded by these strategies are often partial and imperfect, feminist researchers argue for continued experimentation with and reflection on research methods and ethics to minimize the negative oppressive effects of academic research (R. Edwards & Ribbens 1998, 4).

4.2. Constructivist grounded theory

Whereas I draw upon feminist methodology to articulate my general understanding of my position and interaction with participants, the more technical aspects of collecting and analyzing data in my research are shaped by constructivist grounded theory. Grounded theory (or more precisely, the grounded theory method) is a set of procedures for qualitative research meant to construct theories "grounded" in the data rather than by articulating hypotheses based on extant theories. This involves reasoning inductively, iterating between analysis and collecting further data, and using coding procedures and comparative methods to gradually build theories from the data (Charmaz 2014, 1). Grounded theory also suggests that researchers should postpone working with existing theories and start from empirical work in order to ensure that their analysis is based on empirical data rather than on previous theories (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 49). Whereas earlier formulations of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) leaned toward positivism, particularly in treating data as "objective facts about a knowable world" (Charmaz 2014, 237), constructivist grounded theory, by contrast, considers data as co-constructed in the specific research situation by the researcher and the researched. Rejecting the idea of the researcher as neutral and value-free, constructivist grounded theory suggests not only that researchers need to examine their privileges and biases, but also that "their values shape the very facts that they can identify" (Charmaz 2014, 13).

Grounded theory has been characterized as "always already implicitly feminist" due to its emphasis on lived experience, situatedness, and multiplicity (Clarke 2012, 391). Its constructivist version that foregrounds the researcher's positionality and

reflexivity throughout the research process forms an especially productive combination with feminist methodology. I have relied on several procedures suggested by constructivist grounded theory. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I distanced myself from existing theories for the empirical phases of my research to articulate my analytical concepts and ideas based on my data. I used coding procedures suggested by constructivist grounded theory, particularly initial line-by-line coding and coding incident with incident (Charmaz 2014, 124). The coding was done manually with no specialized software. Whereas I began coding in Russian to remain close to my data, I soon switched to English to expedite my analysis. This also allowed me to code with gerunds rather than nouns, which helped maintain a focus on action and processes (Charmaz 2014, 120). I also wrote analytical memos and kept a methodological journal to compare data and codes and develop emerging ideas.

I did not follow grounded theory procedures particularly strictly but rather attempted to adapt them to my specific research situation. For instance, it has proven difficult to fully realize the principle of going back and forth between collecting and analyzing data in the way grounded theory usually presupposes, since I was unable to stay in Russia for months at a time. Nevertheless, as I collected my data during two research trips in 2015 and 2016, I used the time between the two trips to adapt my interview guide based on the preliminary analysis of the first interviews. Moreover, during the second round of data collection, I complemented individual by group interviews. I will detail the rationale behind this decision and the specific methods I used below, yet precede the discussion of data collection by addressing my position as a researcher.

4.3. Researcher's position: an insider in the field?

Doing research on the feminist movement in Russia while belonging to this movement requires particular discussion. Does my activist background make me an insider to the field I study? How do I produce valid, credible knowledge from this position? Whereas the so-called “insider/outsider dilemma” in social research pertains to various studies of marginalized social groups, my focus on a social movement implies that in my specific case, this dilemma also overlaps with what Beate Binder and Sabine Hess describe as the question of “double loyalties” in engaged research (Binder & Hess 2013, 34): does my belonging both to an academic and a political field produce tensions and if so, how do I resolve them?

To the insider/outsider dilemma, feminist methodology suggests an answer that is both comforting and challenging. As Nancy Naples argues, outsidership and insidership are neither absolute nor static; rather, these statuses are fluid and constantly renegotiated through social interaction (Naples 2003, 49). It follows from this that any empirical research should include reflection on the researcher's biases and carefully examine their position vis-à-vis the field or individual participants in

specific research situations. In line with this approach, I will describe below my involvement in the feminist movement in Russia and discuss the various factors that make me an insider and outsider in my field.

I discovered feminism in 2010. From that moment until early 2014, I was involved in various feminist initiatives in Moscow, participating in and co-organizing protests, consciousness-raising and reading groups, and cultural events; of course, I also participated extensively in online discussions. Over the years, I have been part of several feminist collectives and attempted as best I could to make feminist critique visible and heard in public space.³⁵ When I moved to Berlin in 2014, I limited my participation, partly because it was harder to maintain at a distance, yet also because I consciously sought to take a step back in order to redefine my position as a researcher. Moreover, this was the moment I began identifying as trans, which, beside being an emotional upheaval in itself, made me feel uncertain of my position in feminist spaces. However, I have continued to follow online feminist debates and gradually became more active in them again. During my visits to Russia, I joined feminist cultural events, protests, and helped out in feminist spaces. My involvement in feminist discussions became more sustained since 2019 when I started a Telegram channel to share my research results in Russian (see below).

Whereas I could thus claim an insider position within the feminist movement since 2010 onward, I have long been, in fact, an insider in a specific circle of feminists. As I have described in the previous chapter, I did most of my feminist activism while living in Moscow from a position of relative privilege. For most of this time, my closest circle of fellow activists and friends has consisted of similarly positioned women. They were feminist organizers who initiated groups or protests, intellectuals and artists who had some public prominence as feminists, even though association with feminism made their status ambiguous in the public eye. Some of us were at the same time or had been previously part of socialist, anarchist, or LGBT groups. Several of my friends and myself enjoyed recognition within the feminist movement and had influence on the directions feminist debates took. To put it simply, I used to belong to the grassroots feminist leaders of the time. While most of my feminist friends lived in Moscow, I also knew several feminists in Saint Petersburg and had an idea of what was going on in the feminist scene there.

My long-term involvement in the feminist movement has provided me with extensive knowledge of the feminist scene and a deep sensitivity to feminists' debates and concerns. Whereas it is common for researchers who study feminism to share some form of feminist commitment, having been politically socialized in the same context as many of my participants grants me, I suggest, a more encompassing understanding of their political and cultural backgrounds, tacit assumptions, and

35 Whereas some of the initiatives I was involved in received some public attention, I do not provide any specific details on them because related materials mention my deadname, which I do not wish to become publicly known.

hidden logics guiding their actions and choices. Moreover, sharing common experiences with my participants makes it easier for me to emotionally connect and empathize with them.

However, my insider status is partial in several ways. First of all, it is bound locally to Moscow. In Saint Petersburg, my insider knowledge was already fractional, and in other places, it was non-existent. Moreover, there are several feminist communities where I do not have an insider status, for instance, those advocating an essentialist radical feminism. My academic affiliation as well as the fact that I do not live in Russia anymore have also increased my distance from my research participants. All these aspects have impacted both how much knowledge I could rely on while talking to them and, in turn, how they have perceived me.

My trans identity has been another major factor that has made my insider position in the feminist scene problematic. I came out as trans at the time of heated debates over the participation of trans people in feminist spaces, which have since continued to rage in Russia just as elsewhere. While my change of identity has in no way impacted my feminist commitment, my position in the feminist scene has become distinctly marginal due to my being trans. I cannot ever hope to have the kind of recognition I once had in the feminist scene as a cis woman, even if I wanted it. Naturally, my trans status has affected my fieldwork, as I will detail below.

Despite its partial character, my insider status in the field has implied a major challenge: namely, I have had to balance my political commitments, personal relationships, and academic aims. As mentioned above, I did this by reducing my involvement in the feminist movement for a while in order to find my perspective and voice as a researcher. Besides this, since I sought to negotiate relationships to my research participants in a way that would be both ethical and productive for my analysis, I ruled out interviewing people I had previously worked or been close friends with, so as to reduce the inevitable emotional messiness of fieldwork.

The dilemma of double loyalties has accompanied me throughout my research process. While I cannot claim to have a clear answer to it, I have attempted, in the various situations where it has been relevant, to respond to it from a place of accountability and solidarity. As an engaged researcher, I proceed from the fundamental intention of taking the side of the researched, which means for me primarily acting in support of the feminist movement and, as much as I can, in support of individual feminists. In contrast to my previous activist practice, taking this approach has also implied learning to listen more carefully and doing my best to understand and empathize with people whose perspectives I do not necessarily share or support. At the same time, I do not try to renounce my political beliefs or forego my interpretation. Quite on the contrary, I strive to make clear how precisely my position, political stance, and analytical interests shape my research practice and my argument. In the following, I will present in more detail how I have attempted to realize these principles in practice.

4.4. Collecting data: qualitative interviews and beyond

My core data are 13 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted during two trips to Russia in September–October 2015 (Saint Petersburg and Moscow) and May–June 2016 (Tomsk and Voronezh). Ten interviews were individual, three were held in groups of three to five people; in total, I spoke to 18 participants. My initial plan was to complement interviews by participant observation at feminist events which I would visit during my trips. However, I was unable to realize this: public feminist events do not occur often and are not usually announced earlier than a couple of weeks in advance. Since personal and technical restrictions did not allow me to stay in Russia for months at a time and since it was impossible to plan my trips in a way to make sure they coincided with events in each of the cities, I abandoned this idea. However, as I will describe below, I have used other observation as additional data.

I chose qualitative interviews as a method that makes space for participants' language, categories, and narratives, rather than forcing them into paths pre-defined by the researcher (cf. Reinharz 1992, 19; DeVault 1999, 33). My use of group interviews alongside individual ones had to do primarily with my sampling strategy. I sought to include various marginalized perspectives into my sample, which implied the need to have some acquaintance with the feminist scene and the people at each of my fieldwork sites. This was easily done in Moscow where I had a vast network of feminist connections as well as in Saint Petersburg where I had previously traveled several times. However, I had no previous knowledge of the feminist scenes in Tomsk and Voronezh. Therefore, I conducted group interviews in both cities (in Voronezh, participants could not find a single day that would suit everyone, so we arranged two groups). During the group interviews, I got some primary knowledge of the local feminist scene and relationships within the group and subsequently approached several participants for individual interviews.

To conduct group interviews, I used the group discussion method (Gruppendiskussionsverfahren, cf. Loos & Schäffer 2001): an open format that centers interaction among participants. Unlike focus groups, group discussions imply relatively little intervention from the researcher who does not determine topics for discussion but rather suggests directions, letting participants talk freely (Loos & Schäffer 2001, 13). As a rule, groups discussions are used with real groups, i.e. pre-existing collectives rather than groups put together by the researcher (Loos & Schäffer 2001, 13). Furthermore, I considered group interviews helpful to mitigate the power imbalance between myself and my research participants: interaction between a single researcher and a group of research participants (who already know each other) has better chances of relative equality than one-on-one interaction. This consideration seemed especially relevant for my fieldwork in Tomsk and Voronezh where my power as a researcher was combined with my Moscow privilege, as I defined it. From my perspective, this has worked well: all three group discussions I conducted were lively and participants seemed to feel comfortable during them. For

my own purposes, using the group discussion method has elicited rich data, allowing me to observe how participants interacted with each other. I was thus able to learn about their relationships in a way that would not have been possible if I had spoken to each of them individually. In this sense, the data I collected during group interviews partly compensated for the impossibility to conduct participant observation.

Both individual and group interviews were semi-structured. I chose this form, again, in order to let participants co-define the direction of the conversation. In this way, I sought to gain a clearer picture of what issues mattered to participants and at the same time to grant participants more power over the situation. My questions, on the other hand, were meant to stimulate the conversation, but also to explore directions of interest to myself. They concerned participants' feminist biography, their experiences in feminist collectives, and invited reflection on the feminist movement and its future. I asked questions on participants' age, class/educational status, identities, etc. at the end of the interview so as to limit the impact of this explicit positioning on their narratives during our conversation. Questions for group interviews touched upon participants' experiences in their feminist group and in the local feminist scene. I made amendments to the interview guide for the second round of interviews, with more questions inviting reflection and addressing the context of feminist action (e.g. on interaction with the state or on the meaning of public visibility for the feminist movement). However, I used the interview guides flexibly, as semi-structured interviews imply, recurring every time only to some of the questions from the guide and asking several unplanned questions in direct response to what participants told me.

Besides interviews, I rely in the following chapters on the knowledge I have acquired both offline and online over the years of my own activist involvement in the feminist movement. I do not refer to this means of obtaining data as participant observation since I did not apply rigorous research procedures to gain it. I nevertheless consider it a valuable source of information and use this knowledge to provide additional context to my findings and interpretations.

4.5. Geography: choosing sites for fieldwork

In order to explore processes and provide explanations pertaining to the feminist movement in Russia rather than in any specific location, it was necessary for me to collect data at multiple places. At the same time, as mentioned above, my intention to include people with various experiences of marginalization required some knowledge of the feminist scenes in the respective locations. This is why I began with the places where I already had this knowledge: Moscow and Saint Petersburg, which became my two first fieldwork sites.

I was also aware, however, of the unequal relationship between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, on the one hand, and the "rest" of Russia, on the other. Even though at that time, I had neither a clear theoretical conceptualization nor even a name for this

inequality, I believed it crucial to expand the geography of my research beyond the two “capital cities.” Luckily for me, my fieldwork coincided with the time local and regional feminist groups flourished on Vkontakte, a major Russian social networking site. I conducted a search on Vkontakte, looking for active independent grassroots feminist groups (i.e. not affiliated with formal organizations). From this list, I decided in favor of Tomsk and Voronezh. Tomsk is a city of 500 000 in West Siberia; Voronezh is located in Russia’s European South and has around one million inhabitants. Both in terms of geography and demography, this choice seemed to create the heterogeneity I was seeking.

Doing fieldwork in four sites, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Tomsk, and Voronezh, has enabled me to draw informed comparisons between widely different contexts. By drawing equally upon data collected in the four cities, I have tried to produce an analysis that displaces the notion that feminism is somehow more at home in Moscow than in the “rest” of Russia. Crucially, doing fieldwork in the “regions” has helped me directly address and analyze the dynamics of power between the “capital cities” and in the “regions.” Yet this choice of fieldwork sites is not optimal for a postcolonial analysis which, as outlined in the previous chapter, I have come to consider necessary for a discussion of feminism in Russia. Of the four sites where I conducted fieldwork, only Tomsk is a colonial context, while other cities either belong to the non-colonial periphery (Voronezh) or are metropolitan centers. My data thus provide little material for comparison on which to build a postcolonial analysis. A consistently postcolonial discussion of feminism in Russia should, I now believe, begin with and center (post)colonial subjects and contexts rather than prominently feature metropolitan perspectives (cf. Koplataдзе 2019, 484).

4.6. Sampling: who were the participants

For interviews, I approached people who identified as feminists and were members of grassroots feminist collectives or online platforms. Whether they engaged in specific forms of activism was not a criterion, neither were the feminist ideologies they subscribed to (with the only caveat that I did not approach those radical feminists whom I knew to be openly and actively transphobic). Consistent with feminist standpoint methodology, I sought to include people who were marginalized in terms of sexuality, gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, class/educational status, and other axes of domination. This required, as discussed above, some preliminary acquaintance with individuals and feminist scenes. To find participants in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, I approached people whom I had previously met at feminist events or in online feminist spaces; I knew none of them closely yet could easily contact them directly on social media. In Tomsk and Voronezh where I had no previous feminist acquaintances, I first sent messages on Vkontakte to people listed as contact persons in the respective online groups. With their help, group interviews were arranged, which I also used, as described above, to get to know the local scene and then ask some of the participants for individual interviews.

Guided by feminist standpoint methodology and its principle of centering marginalized perspectives, I have approached for interviews “regular” feminists rather than prominent feminist leaders. By prominent leaders, I mean feminist organizers, academics, artists, and journalists who have recognition both within and beyond the feminist scene and are cited as feminists in academic and media sources. By “regular” feminists, on the other hand, I do not only mean those who “simply” attend protests, comment on feminist online platforms, or follow them silently, but also organizers who bring together collectives and coordinate events or bloggers who articulate feminist critique by self-publishing on personal or collective feminist platforms. What distinguishes “regular” feminists in my understanding is the fact that they do not receive the kind of public attention enjoyed by prominent leaders. Indeed, while the feminist movement in Russia has had to struggle hard for public visibility, successes in this struggle have largely been claimed by the same group of people who have been repeatedly approached for interviews or authored influential publications of their own. Although their contributions to disseminating feminist critique in the public sphere have been significant, these people are a rather homogeneous group of relatively privileged feminists that forms but a small segment of the movement. In order to represent the movement in its complexity and heterogeneity, on the other hand, I consider it necessary to center “regular” feminists’ perspectives. Moreover, I suggest that this approach better suits a decentralized, self-organized movement like the feminist movement where leaders’ roles are not as critical as, for instance, in political parties. By interviewing feminists who do not enjoy public prominence—in other words, those who are marginalized within the feminist movement—I sought to produce a more nuanced picture of the movement and its members’ priorities and concerns. At the same time, the perspectives of prominent leaders are not completely absent from my research. First of all, I refer to their published statements, interviews, and projects as background sources. What is more, since it is largely within this circle of people that my own feminist socialization took place, my thinking inevitably contains traces of their perspectives.

Whereas I have not interviewed any prominent feminist leaders, my sample of participants is not homogeneous either in terms of leadership or other characteristics. Among my participants, there were several local leaders who, despite not enjoying public notoriety, were nevertheless reasonably well-known in their local feminist communities. The age of the 18 participants I interviewed individually or in groups ranged from 18 to 54, most were in their twenties. Most participants identified as (cis) women, three were in the trans spectrum, yet there were no trans women or people in the transfeminine spectrum. I did not approach cis men for interviews intentionally; however, one participant’s husband, a pro-feminist anarchist, joined the group interview that was taking place in their home. Several participants identified as lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual. Five were parents. One was disabled. In interviews or beyond them, several participants mentioned having experienced racialization; most, however, did not name a single racial/ethnic

identity. These various positions and marginalizations have certainly shaped participants' perspectives. Their relevance for and impact on their feminist politics and their participation in the feminist movement will be one of the major focuses in the following chapters.

4.7. Interaction with participants and in the field

As my observations of the feminist scene extend far beyond the two brief periods of my fieldwork, I do not attempt a description of the feminist scene here. Rather, I dedicate the next chapter entirely to this. In this section, on the other hand, I summarize my experience preceding, during, and in the wake of the interviews.

Generally, participants readily agreed to interviews. Some expressed surprise or embarrassment at my interest in including their feminist group or their personal voice in academic research. One person initially reacted skeptically and asked to learn more about how I was going to handle and disseminate the research results. We had known each other distantly before and had, indeed, sometimes disagreed politically; yet I understood her distrust to be caused by my position as an academic researcher rather than our previous contacts. Having reflected hard on the power imbalance in fieldwork and on how to share my findings with the feminist community, I was prepared for this reaction—in fact, I had expected to encounter it much more often—and the explanations I gave on my method and intentions resolved the participant's initial unease.

Individual interviews took place in cafés or in participants' homes. The duration of individual interviews varied from 40 minutes to four hours, while most took between one and a half and two hours. With some participants, I also spent time beyond interviews, talking, going to walks, and once, helping to clear up a room for a future feminist space they were preparing to open. Two participants I previously knew (one in Saint Petersburg and one in Moscow) offered to accommodate me in their homes, which I gratefully accepted.

Group interviews were held in a café, at a participant's home, and at a center for informal education participants sometimes used for their meetings thanks to a friendly relationship with the owner. The group interviews extended from two to almost four hours. All three group interviews went down very different paths. In Tomsk, the four participants at the group interview all belonged to the same stable feminist collective and, moreover, understood themselves as its core participants. In the discussion, they acted as a cohesive group and were keen to reflect on their collective's goals and achievements. In Voronezh, almost all participants belonged to the same collective, yet we met on two separate occasions, first with five of them, then with three more. At the first group interview, the dynamic was impacted by the presence of people who positioned themselves as outsiders vis-à-vis the group: a human rights activist who, despite being a member of their online platform, did not identify as a feminist at the time, and a cis male anarchist, husband of the participant who had offered their home as the interview venue. Due to the presence

of these two people, the discussion took a broad focus, addressing the feminist movement in general, its goals, tactics, similarities to, and differences from other movements. At the second Voronezh interview, participants were members of the same platform who, however, rarely had the chance to take part in meetings due to tough work schedules. They were most interested in talking about their experiences of sexism, and the discussion gradually evolved into the kind of collective venting and mutual validation typical of consciousness-raising groups. Although this direction hardly fit my research focus, I considered it paramount to sustain this moment of feminist solidarity and empowerment that was evidently a rare occasion for the participants. For most of the time, I did not try to steer the discussion to the issues of primary interest to myself but rather supported the direction they preferred.

My experiences during the two research trips I made differ widely since the first trip was to familiar settings and people I already knew, however fleetingly, whereas the second one led me to unfamiliar places and new people. In Saint Petersburg and Moscow, the fact that I knew a few things about my participants and they, conversely, knew a few things about me eased our conversations. I did not have to make particular efforts to earn their trust, since they already had an idea of my political views and previous activism. Moreover, we shared considerable concrete knowledge: of people, events, relationships, and developments in the local feminist scenes. At the same time, I was naturally more of a guest in Saint Petersburg than in Moscow and was perceived as such. This made my experience in Saint Petersburg partly similar to how I felt in Tomsk and Voronezh, namely, as an outsider. My participants in all three cities extended me a warm welcome, for which I am extremely grateful. They showed me around, took me for walks, introduced me to their friends, and we spent hours talking beyond interviews.

Both in Tomsk and Voronezh, I needed to introduce myself more thoroughly and get to know the people I was meeting. Although I had no knowledge of local developments, as a feminist and activist, I nevertheless shared several common experiences, concerns, and ways of thinking with my participants, which helped establish contact and trust. As a Muscovite and a new Berliner, spending time in provincial Russian cities was an intense experience. I had traveled to various places in Russia before, yet this was the first time I got the chance to get immersed in local life. While my Muscovite eye could not help but notice the desolate houses and potholed streets beside sparkling administration buildings, my generous guides in Tomsk and Voronezh also introduced me to a buoyant urban and cultural life at book fairs, in trendy cafés, art galleries, and hipster bars, and of course, to local political debates and feminist developments they were actively advancing.

Navigating my Moscow privilege has been my major concern during my stay in Tomsk and Voronezh. I felt that both for myself and my local counterparts, this aspect was the main difference between us. I tried to be mindful of my privilege at all times. Whereas several participants initially seemed to speak markedly mildly about

the capital city so as not to hurt my feelings, I clarified that I felt no discomfort about hearing them criticize Moscow and its inhabitants but was genuinely interested in their opinions. Whereas this did not eliminate the difference between myself and my participants, it has, as far as I could tell, nevertheless contributed to making our communication more open and honest.

Doing fieldwork while trans has been challenging both in terms of traveling across Russia and navigating feminist scenes. During both research trips, I still had my old papers bearing a female name. I was presenting masculine, and while my passing was ambiguous during my trip to Saint Petersburg and Moscow in 2015, I was read unfailingly as a young man in Tomsk and Voronezh in 2016. The discrepancy between my papers and looks was a source of increasing stress during my trips and culminated in an incident with a hostel receptionist in Tomsk, a middle-aged man who insisted to know precisely what I was and what I was doing in their city. In feminist contexts, I was aware that my being trans could also be a source of tension. As mentioned before, for interviews, I did not approach feminists whom I knew to be actively transphobic; I considered this a matter of basic personal protection. When I first contacted prospective participants, I disclosed my identity, assuming that if talking to a trans researcher was unacceptable for them or anyone in their group, they would let me know. Yet this did not happen; I encountered no direct anti-trans hostility against myself from participants. Indeed, most interactions have been quite smooth in this respect. In a couple of interviews, however, there were awkward moments, for instance when participants recounted incidents in which they had been criticized for being non-inclusive or downright transphobic. Both rejected the accusations, one person even laughed about them. This made me feel uncomfortable and confused; I expressed sympathy as I otherwise did in the interviews, acting as if these stories did not affect me as a person. Those were situations I was not prepared for. Besides these unpleasant moments, however, I was also lucky to experience, during my fieldwork, several moments of mutual understanding, support, and solidarity with trans and cis people alike.

4.8. Granting power to participants: authorizing quotes, agreeing on names

Throughout my research process, I have used several strategies to reduce the power imbalance between myself as a researcher and my research participants. Besides choosing qualitative semi-structured interviews and complementing individual by group encounters, I also made sure participants had control over their stories by means of consent forms, quote authorization, and pseudonymization.

Although no institutional requirements imposed a formal consent agreement in my research procedure, I considered this a necessary step to ensure basic research ethics. Before beginning the interview, I presented every participant with a two-part consent form. Its first part included the usual information on the research (project title, my name, university, and supervisor), on their right to stop participation and withdraw the consent to use their data, and details on how their data were going to

be handled. The second part asked whether they wished me to contact them subsequently to authorize their quotes I wanted to use in publications. Whereas consent to the first part was necessary to proceed with the interview, agreeing or declining in the second part was optional. Yet all participants answered both questions on the consent form with a yes. Therefore, as I began writing up my analysis, every time I wanted to use a quote from an interview, I have contacted the participant in question, briefly described the argument I was planning to make and asked whether I could use their words in this context.

My decision to offer authorizing every quote was motivated primarily by my desire to reduce possible harm, risks, or distortions in how I presented participants' statements and ideas. Furthermore, I meant this as a collaborative procedure: by summarizing my emerging arguments, I was offering participants a look into my analysis and an opportunity to respond or debate if they wanted. Although this procedure complicated my work on drafts considerably, I believed this was a fair price to pay considering the overall control I had over participants' stories as a researcher.

When I contacted participants for quote authorization, they went about it very differently. Some people wanted to see full quotes, others gave me a quick okay straight away after I outlined the topic. No one has objected against my using any quote. In a few instances, participants have made minor clarifications or asked me to strike out small details. Against my hopes, however, no extensive discussions of the issues I was writing about have occurred in this communication. At the same time, checking in with participants for quote authorization became a way of keeping in touch with them, exchanging news, and thus reviving or sustaining our mutual relationships. Yet depending on the relationship I had with the specific person, this could be welcome or rather awkward. Some participants were glad to hear from me and eager to chat, others remained politely reserved, and with time, I felt that the procedure was becoming increasingly burdensome for them. Several people discontinued the practice sooner or later, granting me a blank consent to use any quotes from their interviews; others have preferred to continue reviewing how I was using their quotes until the last drafts.

Consulting participants to authorize every quote has not only shaped how our mutual relationships evolved but has also affected my argument and the process of articulating it. Bearing in mind the prospect of authorization has effectively precluded me from saying anything participants were likely to strongly disagree with or that would present them in a negative light. I was conscious of this restriction and considered it a necessary expression of solidarity with my participants. I was writing about feminists in Russia, people who are routinely silenced, ridiculed, harassed, and vilified in everyday conversations, on the Internet, and in the media. If I were to criticize them (as I have done on several occasions in my writing), then I sought to

articulate my criticisms respectfully, from a place of solidarity, and in a way that did not expose specific people. Quote authorization has proven a productive tool that has helped me follow this approach consistently.

A seemingly minor aspect of my communication with participants which I, however, considered significant, was pseudonymization. As someone who has previously been interviewed by other researchers (an experience that proved helpful in several ways as I was designing my research method), I remembered how shocking and unpleasant it had sometimes been to see researchers quote my words and label them with a name that sounded nothing like what I could ever have imagined calling myself. With foreign researchers studying Russia, the matter was sometimes additionally complicated, I found, with lack of nuanced cultural knowledge that made them use unlikely names that sounded awkward or comical (which had surely not been their intention). While such small blunders are understandable, reflecting on them made me realize that by naming one's research participants, the researcher inevitably reproduces their own (mis)conceptions about participants' culture. Furthermore, my trans experience has made me deeply appreciate the power and politics of naming: how empowering it can be to gain control over one's name and how violent non-consensual naming can feel. Reflecting on my own experience of choosing a new name and observing self-naming practices among trans people has also made me aware of the intentionality of taking a name: choosing one's name as an adult is inevitably making both a cultural statement and a decision to highlight specific aspects of one's personality.

Even though choosing a name to bear in all or most of life's situations and deciding on a pseudonym for someone else's academic paper are two very different matters in terms of scope and impact, I still found it important to honor my participants' agency by suggesting that they choose what they would like to be called in my text. Some people welcomed this opportunity and promptly came up with pseudonyms. Others, on the other hand, found it hard to think of names for themselves and accepted names I suggested. Interestingly, all pseudonyms I offered were what I perceived to be more or less common Russian names. Several participants, however, chose various non-Russian names, thus highlighting specific aspects of their cultural identities. In my opinion, this additionally proves the importance of not taking the power of naming away from research participants. If I had assigned pseudonyms myself, I would have erased or substituted parts of their self-definitions. I believe the various sounds and associations evoked by participants' chosen names enrich my final text, bringing in some of their personalities. If some names sound unexpected, the reader can be assured that this is not by some unclarified voluntarism of mine, but rather by the bearers' intention.

With some participants, I have asked my question on pseudonyms several times because I was aware that their gender identity had changed. Of course, I also agreed with them upon their pronouns in my text. Participants knew that I was writing in English and several were happy to be referred to with "they," an option that is less

common in Russian. Besides pseudonyms for participants, I anonymize the names of other people, places, collectives, etc. by using random initial letters, such as “K* Avenue” or “P* Group.” I also do not always specify where the given interview was held or which cities participants are referring to in order to additionally protect their identities.

While most participants appear in my text under pseudonyms, three people have preferred being featured under the full names they otherwise use. I have respected this wish. Whereas I had suggested pseudonymization to protect participants’ identities from possible risks, using full names had the advantage of honoring their authorship of the ideas and analyses they had shared in interviews. Some of the participants made clear that this was their motivation. The downside of this decision is that it produces a hierarchy between participants featured under their full names and those appearing under pseudonyms. Indeed, those who declined pseudonymization had some, albeit limited, public prominence. Whereas this prominence was not as great as to qualify them as prominent leaders in the sense described above, it undoubtedly provided a reason for them to care about their authorship more than others did. Conceding that my decision in favor of flexible pseudonymization is not perfect in this regard, I nevertheless stand by it as a way of honoring participants’ priorities.

4.9. Transcription and translation

Transcription and, for multilingual research, translation are elements of the research process that are generally considered technical and receive little attention. However, neither is a mere technicality. As researchers have pointed out, transcription is both an act of interpretation and representation; by choosing what and how to transcribe, researchers make decisions that have political effects (Bucholtz 2000, 1441). In my research, transcription also had analytical significance. I transcribed all interviews myself, which allowed me to relive the interviews and, by listening to the same words over and over again, helped me understand some of the meanings or aspects of interaction clearer than I did during the interviews. Moreover, the process of transcription sparked some initial interpretations, focuses, and analytical questions.

As all interviews were conducted in Russian, I have translated the fragments I was planning to quote into English. Both in transcription and translation, I sought to be as precise as I could and introduce as little change as possible. In my transcription, I attempted to preserve several aspects of oral speech, such as hesitation pauses, stuttering, stumbling, and self-corrections—an approach known as denaturalized transcription (Bucholtz 2000, 1439). This approach proved to have important advantages during coding, since the irregularities I recorded in transcripts sometimes revealed moments of uncertainty, doubt, or indicated the process of reflection, which was all meaningful for interpretation.

In a similar way, as I translated fragments of transcripts, I have tried to render all elements of speech just as precisely. Due to my background in linguistics and professional translation, I was probably particularly inclined to reflect on the choices I made during translation and on the relationship between language and social processes, which will be apparent in the following chapters. When translating quotes, I was concerned with preserving the style, tone, and connotations of participants' utterances. For some colloquial expressions or terms of particular significance for the feminist community, finding a satisfactory English equivalent has sometimes been a long process of creative exploration. In the following chapters, I provide comments for some of these terms and phrases to amend for the inevitable linguistic discrepancies.

Whereas I initially planned to also preserve all the irregularities of oral speech from the transcripts in my translations of interview quotes, I became wary that by juxtaposing quotes in this form to the standard language of my writing, I would exoticize my participants' voices and construct them as lay or simple against my own academic authoritativeness (cf. Standing 1998, 190). To reduce this imbalance, I have edited the quotes to bring them closer to written style. However, I have preserved some of the hesitation pauses to make the moments of reflection during interviews visible to the reader.

4.10. Giving back or reentering the conversation: blogging about the feminist movement

As a form of engaged research, feminist research is not supposed to remain confined to academia; rather, it is meant to be used to advance social struggle (DeVault 1999, 31; Binder & Hess 2013, 35). In my research, I have considered sharing results with participants and, more broadly, with the feminist community in Russia and in the Russian-speaking space as a necessary phase of my research process. Besides making academic research politically useful, sharing results is also one of the ways of "giving back" to the researched community, which is supposed to mitigate the unequal character of academic research by introducing reciprocity (Gupta & Kelly 2014, 2). However, some researchers have criticized the concept of "giving back" as paternalistic and reinforcing the dichotomy between the researcher and the researched (Goldberg 2014, 4; Tallbear 2014, 2). When I reflect on my research practice, I feel uneasy about the term "giving back" for similar reasons. As I have attempted to realize a form of reciprocity in my research, this has rather led me to reenter the feminist movement by stepping out of my role as a researcher.

To share my research results with the feminist community, I decided to create a blog where I would present them in Russian and in an accessible, non-academic language. I was aware that the task was huge and that I was accordingly unlikely to realize it in full, yet I also felt compelled to attempt it. I started the blog in 2019 on Telegram, which was one of the popular platforms for this kind of feminist content

at that moment.³⁶ I tried to post with some regularity on a variety of topics I was addressing in my research. I also notified all my research participants and invited them to read and debate. A few of them were interested and even eager to accept; however, most readers were and are people who did not participate in my research directly.

Sharing my research in this way has been a rewarding and unexpectedly illuminating experience. I soon realized that writing for a blog implied much more than merely retelling academic papers in a different language. I needed to attract an audience and keep it engaged—not out of a desire for recognition but rather because I sought to satisfy others’ need for knowledge rather than my own. I needed to adapt my writing to readers’ interests, otherwise my endeavor of sharing the knowledge I had gained through research would be a self-congratulatory but empty exercise.

Adapting my analysis to a blog addressing a wide feminist audience has required two major shifts: firstly, approaching issues from a perspective that began and ended in political praxis, and secondly, foregrounding personal, emotional aspects of writing. Whereas I initially tried to confine myself to the issues I discussed in my academic drafts, the logic of addressing the interests of the audience has increasingly led me to share my personal reflections on activism or thoughts on current developments in and around the feminist movement. This, in turn, has made me reconsider the nature of the exchange that had occurred during my fieldwork. In fact, what my participants had shared with me had not at all been limited to knowledge or information; rather, much of what they had shared had been personal, sometimes quite deeply so. It was logical, then, for me to reciprocate this through my blogging, which implied that I had to get out of my role as a researcher. Whereas I had actively sought this role at the early stages of my research process and taken a step back from the feminist movement in order to define this role for myself, writing a blog on the movement has led me to rediscover and reconnect with my activist persona.

As of August 2021, my blog on the feminist movement has somewhat over 700 followers. It has not been a roaring success, yet several posts I have published there have sparked lively responses and engaging conversations with readers. Besides being a gratifying experience, I therefore consider it a productive bridge between academic and activist feminisms and hope to further maintain it in this function.

4.11. Reflection on the fieldwork and method

Drawing upon feminist research methodology and constructivist grounded theory, I have tried in this research to adopt and create a set of tools that would help me produce a nuanced analysis and conduct feminist research ethically on the grounds of solidarity with the feminist movement and my participants. Several tools have fulfilled their purpose well. For instance, group interviews have proven an excellent

³⁶ The blog is called *Феминистский чиж*, Feminist Finch, a play of rhymes with the word *движ* (a colloquial abbreviation of *движение*, i.e. “movement”), and can be accessed at <https://t.me/femchizh>.

way to level the power imbalance between myself and my participants and yield rich discussions that were engaging and informative for all of us. Some methods I have used, however, have worked less well or not quite as I had expected.

As preoccupied as I was with reflecting on my position vis-à-vis my research participants, I have focused on my power and privilege, disregarding my vulnerability. I believe I have generally succeeded in ensuring ethical, respectful interactions and granting my participants power over the research process at several important junctures. At the same time, I was not sufficiently prepared to being confronted either with overt or subtle cissexism and transphobia, which made my fieldwork emotionally taxing in ways that could probably have been mitigated if I had given the matter enough thought in advance.

Authorizing every quote has turned out to be a very complicated procedure. It has worked well when there was a friendly relationship between the participant and myself and the participant had some interest in the research topic. Where this has not been the case, contacting participants regularly about the interviews they had given me several years ago has ostensibly been asking too much of them. I believe this procedure has had important advantages. First of all, it has given participants control over how I was using their words, which all of them were initially interested in. Moreover, it has helped me maintain contact to participants. At the same time, I have realized in retrospect that one of the reasons why I came up with this complicated procedure was because I was not quite prepared to assume the power and full authority of a researcher. Yet in fact, I have been the single author all along. Even if I voluntarily ceded my power, I remained the one making decisions and being in control of the research in institutional terms. Going back to participants for every quote has partly meant shifting the burden of responsibility for making decisions from myself onto them, which rather damaged the spirit of solidarity and collaboration I sought to establish between us. Reflecting on this ambiguous experience, I realize now that to act ethically and in solidarity with participants should not mean expecting them to make the researcher's decisions for the researcher, but rather accepting one's power and using it responsibly.

When I designed my research method, I imagined a rather utopian collaborative process. By offering my participants various opportunities for control and feedback, I aspired to enable an ongoing collective, dialogical reflection on what the feminist movement in Russia was, what it should be, and how this could be achieved. In reality, various participants had largely varying priorities and most had little interest in engaging in the sustained reflective discussion I had imagined. However, what has not been fully realized in an academic setting during interviews or subsequent communication (notably through the process of quote authorization) has worked well on social media. Adapted to the form of blog posts and framed by a more decisively activist perspective, my analysis and ideas about the feminist movement have elicited keen responses from several feminists, including some of my partici-

pants. Thus for my research to become more fully collaborative, it has been necessary to leave the academic realm and meet the people I was addressing on their communicative territory.

My relationships with participants have evolved in various ways during the research process. Some have never developed beyond the formal level. Some even became more distant as a couple of people eventually took on outspoken trans-exclusionary stances. However, I have remained friendly with several participants and with a few, encounters during my fieldwork have laid down a base for close and trusting relationships. This has been one of the several ways in which doing this research has transformed and enriched my life, for which I am deeply grateful.

5. Overview of the contemporary feminist movement

This chapter opens up the empirical discussion on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. Before presenting my analysis, however, I begin here with providing a general overview of the feminist movement. This chapter is meant to offer a context for those processes and events that will be addressed further, but also to outline some of the areas that will not be discussed in detail in further analysis. Ultimately, this account seeks to present a general picture of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia by outlining briefly its recent history, structure, resources, and relationships to other movements and institutions, as well as providing an overview of the feminist scene, of the knowledge production and key ideological debates that have taken place within it.

This account is based primarily on my observations both during and beyond fieldwork. It draws on my experiences during my own direct activist involvement, as well as on face-to-face and online conversations and developments I have participated in or witnessed in the feminist scene. I will also refer to existing scholarship on feminism in Russia and to media sources, as well as to sources from the feminist scene (such as feminist websites and blogs). I treat external sources with caution, since they tend to only illuminate a small part of the feminist scene by focusing on prominent feminist leaders and on conventional political action. By drawing on my observations and intra-movement sources, I seek to complement the picture produced by media and scholarly accounts. Whereas I am aware that despite my best efforts, my perspective is equally not without bias, I hope that by combining these various sources, I can provide below a meaningful account to contextualize the findings I will present in the following chapters.

5.1. The movement's beginnings and major events

When did the contemporary feminist movement in Russia begin? Based on available data, I suggest that the answer is the mid-2000s. Several milestones mark this moment. In 2006, on the International Women's Day, the grassroots anarchafeminist protest I have described in the Introduction was held in Moscow (Open Women Line 2006). This was, to my knowledge, the first demonstration of its kind since the 1990s when protests were staged by women's rights organizations. Earlier still, the first feminist online collective spaces appeared on the Livejournal blogging platform: in 2004, the Ukrainian community "Feminism_ua,"³⁷ then, modeled after it, the Russian "Feministki" ("Feminists") in 2005 (Frau_derrida, Isya, & Myjj 2009, 107). These were not isolated events. Following the 2006 protest, similar grassroots demonstrations were held on the International Women's Day in Moscow, Novosibirsk, and Omsk (ИА «ИКД» 2008a; ИА «ИКД» 2008b; Грани.Ру

37 "Feminism_ua" was bilingual (Ukrainian and Russian) from the very beginning and thus also belonged to the Russian-speaking Internet ("Runet"). For a discussion of the Runet and the Russian-speaking online feminist community, see Chapter 6.

2009). Online feminist platforms proliferated in the following years as well. Both the 2006 protest in Moscow and the first feminist online platforms on Livejournal have thus laid down the basis for sustained feminist activities. This is why I argue that the beginning of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia should be placed in the mid-2000s rather than in the 2010s, as has been suggested before (Sperling 2015, 48; Senkova 2018, 3).

In a cultural and political context where “feminism” was generally known to be a “dirty word,” these first grassroots feminist endeavors were distinctly marginal. A veteran member of Feministki once told me in a personal conversation that back in those early days, to join this space on Livejournal and thus openly admit to one’s interest in feminism was scary and felt like crossing a boundary. On the Internet, feminists were routinely ridiculed and attacked. As to the first street protests, they went largely unnoticed by the media and the public.

Yet it was precisely this general public attitude that the first feminist initiatives sought to change. In contrast to the previous feminist generation, they were addressing a wide audience. Elizaveta Morozova, the founder of the Feministki community on Livejournal, explained that she conceived this platform as a kind of online consciousness-raising group where members could discuss their everyday experiences (Morozova in Frau_derrida, Isya, & Myjj 2009, 108). A focus on regular women and their everyday life paired with disseminating educational materials on feminism was characteristic of numerous feminist online platforms that proliferated over the following years. This was paralleled by offline groups and initiatives that soon emerged across the country and sought to reintroduce a feminist critique in public space. In Chapter 6, I provide a detailed overview of various forms of feminist action: contentious action (i.e. public protest), online activities, offline discursive and cultural action, and feminist community building. In this chapter, on the other hand, I will cite some of the major events that have shaped the feminist movement and the public discussion of feminist issues. With this account, I do not claim to provide a coherent history of the contemporary feminist movement. Such a history should, I believe, be written, yet this task requires additional careful research and a thorough methodology. What I offer below are several examples of feminist campaigns and public debates that have been widely discussed in the feminist scene and/or that my feminist interlocutors (including but not limited to research participants) have cited as significant. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a provisional overview of the feminist movement’s recent history meant to demonstrate the scope of the issues it has addressed.

The abortion rights campaign in 2011 was probably the first instance where feminists from several places staged joint public protests and managed to achieve some media visibility. The campaign emerged in response to the law draft to restrict abortion rights that has been discussed in Chapter 1. As soon as the law draft was introduced into the federal parliament in early 2011, several members of the Feministki community on Livejournal formed an initiative group to stop the law. In

the following months, feminists held coordinated protests in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, collected several thousands of signatures under a petition which they subsequently delivered to parliament members, and did extensive public educational work advocating for reproductive rights. The campaign was joined by a couple of women's rights organizations (the Russian Association for Population and Development in Moscow and the Crisis Center for Women in Saint Petersburg) as well as human rights and leftist activists in Voronezh and Perm (За свободное материнство!, n.d.; Sperling 2015, 255). Organizations helped connect feminists with medical doctors and demographers who were willing to act as the campaign's public faces. Indeed, it is their names that appear in media publications about the campaign, whereas the word "feminism" or the existence of a grassroots initiative group are hardly ever mentioned (Власова 2011; Янович 2011). In the end, the law was still passed, yet the most drastic restrictions (such as requiring the husband's permission for abortion) were dropped. Even though much of feminists' contribution to this remained publicly unacknowledged, the campaign was a major moment of mobilization and cohesion in the feminist movement. In Saint Petersburg, feminists interviewed by Perheentuppa have suggested that the local feminist movement formed during the 2011 campaign (Perheentupa 2019, 76).

The later stages of the abortion rights campaign coincided with another series of events of major importance for feminism in Russia: the first performances by Pussy Riot. The public interventions by the feminist punk band *cum* art collective (Wiedlack 2016, 412) since late 2011 and their subsequent persecution after the 2012 "Punk Prayer" in the Christ the Savior Cathedral turned the international spotlight on feminism in Russia (Hinterhuber 2012a, 141). Researchers have argued that Pussy Riot's main feminist contribution has been in directly challenging both the Russian state's neopatriarchal policies and its symbolic "masculinity politics" (Johnson 2014, 54). In their performances and interviews, Pussy Riot connected feminism to a wider political agenda and asserted their agency as an all-women political art collective (Sperling 2015, 230; Yusupova 2014, 605). In the feminist scene, however, Pussy Riot were met with ambivalence. Several feminists who had relative prominence within the scene at the time criticized the group for recurring to sexist language and imagery, and some even claimed that what Pussy Riot did was not feminism (Sperling 2015, 226). I admit I was among those skeptics at the time, yet in retrospect, I would rather argue that this annoyance among feminists had much to do with Pussy Riot's instant and unprecedented publicity. Whereas other feminists struggled for media attention but had very limited success in getting it, Pussy Riot's media savviness, strategic use of provocation, and references to a variety of established discourses ensured them an unmatched global acclaim (Wiedlack 2016, 411; Mason 2018, 10). Whatever the initial reactions, feminists unanimously supported Pussy Riot when they were persecuted by the state (Mason 2018, 12; Sperling 2015, 259). I have since spoken to several feminists who found

inspiration and empowerment in Pussy Riot's performances. For the public in Russia, they certainly played a significant role in reintroducing the word "feminism" and the notion of women's agency into public debate.

Another event that activated public discussions on feminism and sexism, this time with a specific focus on everyday practices and language, was what became known in the feminist scene as the "Chickgate."³⁸ In 2015, Meduza, a major liberal media outlet, published an article on sexism, quoting a range of experts, including feminist journalist Bella Rapoport. On Twitter, Meduza introduced the publication with a post that read as follows: "Guys, here is a manual on how not to offend chicks." The Russian slang word for "girl" they used means literally "young female cow"³⁹ and is located, from a pragmatic perspective, somewhere between the English "chick," "bimbo," and "hoe." Rapoport responded in a column, offering a fully-fledged critique of Meduza's misogyny and the overall sexism in Russian media (Рapoпорт 2015). Hot debates on various media ensued over what should count as sexism and whether the liberal media were indeed as liberal as they wanted to appear (Семендяева 2015). The first serious discussion of sexism on this scale, the "Chickgate" was arguably a major feminist breakthrough that provoked collective reflection on an unprecedented scale. In its aftermath, several media gradually changed their approach to issues of sexism.⁴⁰

This change deepened further in 2016, as the online flashmob⁴¹ #янебоюсьсказать / #янебоюсьсказать, variously translated as #IAmNotAfraidToSay or #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak (Aripova & Johnson 2018, 487; Sedysheva 2021, 303), drew public attention to sexual violence. The flashmob was started by Ukrainian feminist Anastasia Melnychenko who shared her story as a survivor of sexual violence and called on others to do the same. The initiative quickly went viral, surpassing ten thousand original posts in the first two months (Aripova & Johnson 2018, 488). Joining the flashmob, women and people of other genders shared their stories as survivors of harassment, rape, and other forms of sexual assault. #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak was widely discussed both on social and conventional media and produced a mass controversy, with numerous commentators blaming the survivors and relativizing the violence (Aripova & Johnson 2018, 496; Sedysheva 2021, 304). Yet for many, this became an eye-opening moment revealing the ubiquity of sexual violence and its impact on survivors. #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak had thus several similarities with the #MeToo campaign that started a year later, in 2017.⁴² Comparing both campaigns, Sedysheva

38 Russian: телочкогейт.

39 Russian: телочка.

40 Meduza was among them: having eventually apologized to Rapoport, it became considerably more open to feminist issues. Yet in 2018, a sexual harassment scandal broke out among the staff as editor-in-chief Ivan Kolpakov assaulted an employee's wife. Kolpakov resigned at first but was reinstated by the publishers (RuNetEcho 2018).

41 In the following, I also refer to this form of action simply as "flashmob," which is how it has been called in Russian sources (Sedysheva 2021, 309). In English, similar online action has also been described as hashtag campaigns (cf. Williams 2015; Clark 2016).

42 Sedysheva observes that the media in Russia have described #MeToo as "the American #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak" (Sedysheva 2018, 195).

notes that a major difference between them was the fact that #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak was a grassroots campaign initiated by an activist rather than a celebrity, as was the case with #MeToo (Sedysheva 2021, 312). She argues that the flashmob's impact was in introducing feminist discourse into wide public debate, empowering its participants, and laying down the ground for further feminist activism (Sedysheva 2018, 195; 2021, 312).

Another feminist issue that has increasingly taken center stage in the feminist agenda in Russia is domestic violence. To this day, Russia has no law on domestic violence, nor has it ratified the Istanbul Convention (Sundstrom, Sperling, & Sayoglu 2019, 171). Moreover, in 2016, the parliament debated a law draft to decriminalize simple battery,⁴³ an article under which domestic violence could be prosecuted before (Semukhina 2020, 15). Whereas parliament members claimed that the law draft was meant to reduce the burden on courts and prisons, feminists saw this as a dangerous symbolic move legitimizing domestic violence (Сорокина 2017).⁴⁴ They staged a protest campaign that included demonstrations in several cities, from Stavropol through Moscow to Irkutsk (Wonderzine 2017; Галеева 2017; Сепреева 2017), a petition addressed to the parliament, and numerous public events and interviews (OpenDemocracy 2017). Despite these efforts, the law was adopted in early 2017, replacing criminal punishment with fines for first-time offenders (Walker 2017). However, the wide public debate feminists initiated did not die out. It resumed again in 2018 with the case of the Khachaturyan sisters. The three teenage girls killed their father after years of brutal physical and sexual abuse and were put on trial for premeditated murder (Luxmoore 2020). A feminist campaign in support of the Khachaturyan sisters claimed that the killing was in self-defense, demanded their immediate release and an adoption of a law on domestic violence to protect other victims (Safonova 2019; Perera 2019b). Whereas the Khachaturyan case provoked hot debates and even antifeminist counter-protests, support for the young survivors as well as in favor of protective legislation was also unprecedented. According to feminist lawyer Mari Davtyan, the campaign in support of the Khachaturyan sisters has changed public opinion on domestic violence which is now increasingly perceived as a violation of human rights (Davtyan in Luxmoore 2020).

This brief overview of significant events is, as mentioned above, far from exhaustive. Several more mediatized cases of sexual and domestic violence, feminist protest campaigns and cultural events could be included in it. At the same time, numerous feminist discussions that did not depend on any specific event have produced considerable impact as well; an example is the debate over feminist language and so-called "feminitives"⁴⁵ in Russian that feminists have introduced with increasing success (Sperling 2019; Kirey-Sitnikova 2021). Whereas for this account, I have chosen single events for their impact on the feminist scene and wider society, this

43 Russian: побои.

44 According to later research, this is precisely what happened when the law was passed: it was found to be inefficient in preventing violence while placing an additional burden on families (including survivors) to pay the fine (Куркин 2018b).

45 Russian: феминитивы.

approach inevitably produces bias in favor of events that happen in or involve Moscow as the center of formal and symbolic power. Moreover, it privileges debates and forms of action that are recognized as noteworthy by the media. However, this is not the only way to assess significance in and for a social movement. In the following chapters, I will discuss which forms of action feminists consider legitimate and useful and how the power imbalance between the capital cities and the regions impacts the feminist movement.

5.2. What does a Russian feminist look like?

For several years, the feminist scene in Russia has had no visible subculture. Coming to a feminist event usually meant finding oneself among people who mostly looked casual, often somehow alternative, yet not necessarily in trendy ways. If there was any tendency in the feminist visual style, it was probably to recur relatively less to the paraphernalia of conventional femininity like make up or high heels. Yet proper ladies with lipstick and neat purses could be seen at feminist events, alongside short-haired, visibly queer women in lumberjack shirts, anarchist punks covered in buttons and patches, and the general crowd wearing inconspicuous jeans.

With time, the feminist movement has increasingly used visual markers like the Venus symbol with a fist and the colors purple and hot pink. A part of the feminist scene has adopted distinct subcultural style elements like brightly dyed hair, piercing, tattoos, and colorful make up. However, these elements do not specifically distinguish feminists but are also characteristic of the queer scene and a broader alternative youth scene. Of the visual elements that send a clearly feminist message, besides text or pictures on clothing, the most important is probably natural body hair, although it has no universal currency among feminists either.

Authors who have written on contemporary feminists in Russia have labeled them “intellectual” and even “elite,” associating feminism with class privilege (Gapova 2014, 25; Sperling 2015, 218; Hemment 2016, 151). My observations differ starkly from this assessment. Most feminists I have known have been poor. Indeed, poverty has been and largely remains a common, self-evident reality members of feminist communities are continuously aware of. From my own activist experience, I remember numerous feminist meetings held in the cheapest cafés where hot water for tea was freely available; the common practice was not to buy anything there but to bring our own teabags to save money. Feminist “free markets” or swaps have been a popular form of event, not only due to their anti-consumerist ideology and the sense of community they provide, but also because it is an accessible way to actually get new clothes. In my activist days, having a steady, well-paying job was rather exceptional for a feminist. Most feminists I knew earned their living doing precarious jobs, and those who were steadily employed earned barely enough to make ends meet. This seems to have changed somewhat as the movement has grown. At least in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, people in more stable financial situations now identify with feminism as well. The movement also has been and remains heterogeneous in terms of educational and cultural capital. Whereas there

are many students and people with university degrees among feminists, there are also many working-class people, those with no higher education, those who work as salespeople, at factories, or doing odd “unskilled” jobs.

Despite this section’s provocative title, a Russian feminist is not necessarily Russian either in terms of citizenship, country of residence, ethnicity, or culture. A Russian feminist is also not necessarily white. If the phrase “Russian feminist” makes any sense at all, then probably as a reference to language. The Russian-speaking online feminist community includes people from all over the post-Soviet space and beyond it (cf. also Chapter 6). Within Russia, the Moscow feminist scene as I knew it has been shaped by Jewish, Buryat, Georgian, and Roma feminists. Whereas I refer to Moscow as the place where my observations have been longest, this does not imply that this is where feminism concentrates. Feminist activity across Russia has become increasingly visible since around 2014 with the emergence of numerous online groups organized along the local or regional principle and a parallel proliferation of offline protest and cultural events (cf. Chapter 9).

In terms of age, the feminist scene appears to have experienced a change roughly at the same time. Whereas in the beginning, most feminist gatherings consisted of people in their twenties and thirties, teenage participants eventually became more numerous. However, people in their forties and older have also been present and active in feminist spaces. While some of them have already belonged to the women’s movement in the 90s, others have become feminists more recently.

Feminist spaces have been and still are understood primarily as women’s spaces. Yet some cis men have also been interested and, indeed, active in the feminist movement. While they have always been in minority, in the early years, they sometimes assumed leading roles, organizing feminist events and protests or moderating online feminist spaces. This practice has been increasingly questioned over the years. Whereas some feminists have adopted hardline separatist stances, others have continuously welcomed cis men’s interest in and support of feminism. Parallel to similar debates over straight people’s involvement in the LGBT movement that happened roughly at the same time, a concept of allyship has been gradually articulated in the feminist movement.

Lesbians, trans and non-binary people have long been part of feminist spaces as well. Whereas the former have been visible in grassroots feminist collectives since their emergence, shaping their ideologies and agenda, trans and non-binary people rather remained in the shadows until 2013 when major conflicts over trans inclusion broke out in the feminist scene. I will address both lesbian and trans presence in the feminist movement in more detail below. By naming these and other groups, I seek to demonstrate that the feminist movement in Russia should not be imagined as a predominantly white Russian movement of educated straight middle-class women from the capital cities. Even though this particular group may be more visible in

some media or academic accounts, the reality of the feminist movement in Russia is much more heterogeneous. This heterogeneity, moreover, produces internal tensions and political conflicts, which will be a major focus of the following chapters.

5.3. Movement structure and resources

On a structural level, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is primarily a loose network of people who know and talk to each other. Formal organizations have not been part of the movement until the mid-2010s⁴⁶ and are still rather untypical. As a rule, feminist collectives come together online or offline, at least initially, “just to talk,” as one of my participants put it. People join these groups to discuss feminist issues, support and empower each other; sometimes, especially in the early years, these groups were framed explicitly as consciousness-raising groups.⁴⁷ With time, some of them proceed to joint collective action directed “outward,” while others dissolve. In the Moscow feminist scene, my observations correspond to the account provided by Sperling: in 2010–2013, she details how what was initially one collective, the Initiative Group “For Feminism,” split twice in six months, and a parallel project, School of Feminism, sprung up in May 2011 to divide in early 2012; yet in late 2012, several participants of these split collectives formed a joint coalition under the name of Feminist Initiative (Sperling 2015, 250–52). This account is a characteristic example of the common dynamics in feminist collectives. If these highly informal, volatile groups should be taken to define the movement’s structure, then its structure is constantly changing. However, people tend to remain in the movement much longer than a given group exists; they may join other groups, opt for other forms of participation, or start their own projects.

In the early years, feminist groups had no material resources whatsoever and relied on whatever members had access to or could contribute. In my own activist practice, leaflets to distribute at demonstrations were commonly printed at home or at work, banners and signs were drawn on old bedsheets or pieces of cardboard. To have a budget for activism was hardly imaginable. Paid activism was, quite simply, an oxymoron. Given how unacceptable references to feminism were in virtually all public spaces in the 2000s and early 2010s (cf. Chapter 1), feminism was generally not perceived as a career option. Lack of infrastructure has also long been a major issue for feminist groups: they have had no places to meet or hold events. Commercial spaces like cafés are problematic in this regard since, as outlined above, money is a scarce resource for many feminists. Sometimes, feminists have used the facilities of NGOs or cultural venues like bookstores or educational centers. This use has been possible, in my observations, largely due to personal contacts of individual feminists and rather in spite of their feminist identification. The general attitude of organizations toward grassroots feminist collectives has initially been skeptical rather than friendly.

46 An example is the Moscow-based anti-violence center “Nasiliu.Net” (*No To Violence*), established by lawyer Anna Rivina in 2015 (Насилию.нет n.d.). In 2020, the organization was listed as a “foreign agent” by the Russian ministry of justice (The Moscow Times 2020).

47 Russian: группы роста самосознания.

The feminist movement's early years were thus characterized by a desperate resource deficit. Of the resource mobilization strategies otherwise known from movement history, most were unavailable to feminists. Membership fees were out of question, since this would create a barrier for participation that would be unsurmountable for some and alienating for others. Donations from individuals or businesses were not practiced in Russia, and due to feminism's bad reputation, it was unimaginable that anyone would want to donate for feminism. To my knowledge, neither of these strategies was seriously debated in the feminist scene at that stage. The only possible formal way of getting material resources was to apply for grants at NGOs or foundations. Whereas this, in turn, required special competences and time, some have managed to do this. In parallel, feminists' efforts to attract supporters have eventually enabled informal support of friendly organizations. Due to this, larger-scale feminist projects and first dedicated feminist spaces have appeared across Russia since around the mid-2010s. For instance, a project entitled *Eve's Ribs*⁴⁸ emerged in Saint Petersburg first as a feminist theater festival and evolved later into a feminist community center which, in turn, became a base for several more projects (Гарина 2020). *FemInfoteka*, an anarchafeminist library also based in Saint Petersburg, has been operating since 2016 in a room within the Open Space, an activist center and platform for grassroots activism (Куркин 2018a).

Leadership and public prominence

Since formal organizations are rare in the contemporary feminist movement, there is also little strict hierarchy. Grassroots feminist collectives rather tend to value horizontal structures and strive to share responsibilities equally. However, this approach does not preclude the emergence of informal leaders. In feminist communities, such leaders are often organizers: those members who bring collectives together, create platforms, and take over organizing tasks. At the same time, leadership can be associated with cultural and discursive production: feminists leaders are also those who write texts or otherwise produce feminist content that becomes influential and popular in the feminist scene and beyond it. This kind of leadership generally requires cultural capital, and feminists who become leaders in this way are often journalists, artists, or scholars. Often, prominent feminist leaders combine organizing and discursive functions. For instance, theater director Leda Garina established the aforementioned *Eve's Ribs* (Гарина 2020), and poet Daria Serenko initiated *Quiet Picketing*, a protest *cum* art project, and later co-organized *Femdacha*, a anti-burnout activist retreat near Moscow (Simakova 2016; Khurshudyan 2021). In parallel, both of them, like other prominent feminists, have written and spoken extensively on feminist issues in their personal blogs and on social media.

48 Russian: Ребра Евы.

Increasingly, and especially since the mid-2010s, feminist leaders are approached by journalists for interviews or invited to speak publicly as experts on feminism and gender. Thus feminist leadership has largely to do with disseminating feminist critique. As feminist leaders become more prominent and expand their contacts to the media, they gain access to ever more influential platforms and introduce wider audiences to feminist perspectives. In contrast to several other movements, leaders in the contemporary feminist movement do not make decisions that concern the movement as a whole. Whereas they may use their cultural and social capital to increase the visibility of feminist campaigns or events, they do not lead the movement in the way trade union or party leaders do. Neither do they set the movement agenda, which is rather defined in ongoing collective ideological debates on feminist platforms.

5.4. Knowledge and ideologies

Feminist knowledge and the feminist “manual”

Since their emergence in the mid-2000s, feminist initiatives in Russia have sought to articulate a political understanding of women’s lived experience, which was conspicuously lacking in the Russian-speaking information space. Feminist knowledge and critique already existed in Russian thanks to the efforts of the 90s women’s movement. However, preserved and produced in the enclaves of academic feminism and women’s rights NGOs, they were hardly accessible to the wide public. Moreover, the focus of academic articles or NGO brochures was not always relevant for personal emancipation or helpful for articulating the personal as political, which was of primary interest to the new generation of feminists. How do I recognize abuse in romantic relationships? Do beauty standards oppress me? What does a fair distribution of housework look like? These kinds of questions concerned participants at feminist online platforms and in grassroots collectives.

In their quest for answers, feminists began compiling what became known as “the manual.”⁴⁹ Initially Internet slang for a complex of universally accepted, fundamental knowledge on a given topic, this term has been adopted by the Russian-speaking online feminist community to designate the body of authoritative, foundational knowledge on feminism. The “manual” largely consisted of two kinds of sources: translated Western, primarily “second-wave” texts and Russian literature on women and gender produced in the 90s. Characteristic examples are provided by two standalone feminist websites: Ravnopravka.Ru⁵⁰ created in 2011 by the Moscow Feminist Group, an intersectional feminist collective, and Womenation.Org, a

49 Russian: *матчасть*. The English word “manual” is commonly used in this sense as part of the expression “RTFM” (“read the fucking manual” or “read the following manual”) to point out a novice’s ignorance of basic information (Wikipedia n.d.). The Russian equivalent is *учи матчасть*. Despite being functionally very close to the English expression, it appears to have an unrelated history, originating from a Soviet war movie (*Луркоморье* n.d.).

50 The name of the website is the self-designation used by Russian feminists before the 1917 Revolution. The Moscow Feminist Group thus tried to establish a continuity with Russian feminist history.

radical⁵¹ feminist website that sprung up from an eponymous collective blog on Livejournal in 2013.⁵² Both websites published foundational texts in Russian translation alongside original Russian texts. The lists of foreign authors partly overlap: for instance, both platforms have published translations of Virginia Woolf, Gloria Steinem, and Marilyn Frye. Womenation also features prominently authors like Betty Friedan, Andrea Dworkin, and Sheila Jeffreys. Ravnopravka, on the other hand, prefers Adrienne Rich, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde. Alongside “second-wave” authors, an important part of the “manual” consisted of feminist and pro-feminist self-help books on violence and abuse, such as *Men who Hate Women and the Women who Love Them* by Susan Forward (ANNAmain 2011) and *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft (Бэнкрофт 2010).

Various feminist collectives created their own versions of the “manual” in the form of online libraries, vocabularies, or informal syllabi of feminism. A typical example is a post entitled “An ABC of Feminism” in the collective blog Fem_City (Kuminova 2014). It contains links to other feminist blogs and websites with translated and original materials on issues like privilege, violence against women, sexist stereotypes, and reproductive rights, along with archival materials on women in Russia and the USSR and links to *Gender For Dummies*, a two-volume collection of articles by Russian gender researchers (Тартаковская & Попкова 2006; Тартаковская 2009). A rare if not unique example of a popular publication on gender meant for a wide rather than scholarly audience, this book is a crucial bridge between the contemporary feminist generation and its predecessors. It is written in an accessible language and focuses on Soviet and post-Soviet society and culture. Other works by post-Soviet feminist and gender researchers have also played an important role in the “manual”; notable examples are the *12 Lectures On Gender Sociology* by Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova (Здравомыслова & Темкина 2015), and *Russian Feminism as a Challenge to Modernity*,⁵³ a history of the Russian women’s movement in the 19th century by Irina Iukina (Юкина 2007).

As is apparent from these examples, various platforms have defined what belongs to the “manual” differently. The term itself seems to have somewhat lost in popularity with time, as feminist platforms have proliferated and sources of feminist knowledge multiplied. Whereas even in the 2000s, not all members of feminist communities engaged thoroughly with this body of texts considered seminal, it has apparently become even more common over the years to learn the political and analytical language of feminism through original content feminists publish in blogs and social media rather than by going back to the classics.

This development has been possible, of course, because feminist knowledge production has always run in parallel with compiling and disseminating the “manual.” Alongside reading Western theory and Russian gender studies, feminists have also produced their own analyses in online posts and discussions. Since their

51 The labels “radical” and “intersectional” will be discussed below.

52 The dates are provided according to the Internet Archive (Internet Archive n.d.).

53 An alternative translation is *Russian Feminism as a Challenge of Modernity*.

very inception, discussion and dialogue have been the main focus of feminist online platforms. For instance, in a rare published document on the early years of the contemporary feminist generation, the moderators of the Feministki collective blog on Livejournal reflect on the “benefits of conversation,” which they suggest as the central rationale for the existence of the collective space (Frau_derrida, Isya, & Myjj 2009, 107). Producing original knowledge has been an inextricable part of feminist collective action. For example, in the 2011 abortion rights campaign discussed above, feminists drew up a detailed analysis of the law draft they were resisting (За свободное материнство!, n.d.), but also articulated feminist arguments for protecting reproductive rights in a way that was compatible with historical discourses on abortion in Russia (Rivkin-Fish 2018, 26). Much of feminist knowledge production has also been dedicated to ideological debates, which will be the focus of the next section.

Ideologies: radical and intersectional feminism

In social movement studies, a movement’s ideology is defined as a set of values and beliefs associated with the movement (Snow 2004, 396). Some researchers consider ideology to be the most central element of a social movement; this view is manifest in the definition of movement behavior as “ideologically structured action” (Zald 2000, 1). An integral element of a movement’s collective identity, ideology is one of its aspects whereby the movement is recognized by outsiders; within the movement, just as other elements of collective identity, it is subject to ongoing debates (Flesher Fominaya 2010, 397).

In the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, ideological debates are multiple. They were relatively contained in the early years when the feminist scene was small and cohesion and mutual support were paramount. However, as more people joined the feminist movement, ideological differentiation became more pronounced. Several ideological conflicts broke out around a wide variety of issues and led to splits in online and offline feminist collectives.

A major ideological division that structured the feminist scene around the mid-2010s and still impacts it today is the conflict between radical and intersectional feminists. In the early years, “radical feminism” and “intersectional feminism” were not perceived as incompatible labels. For instance, the Moscow Feminist Group, created in 2008, used both terms to describe its political stance (Равноправка n.d.). Although debates and disagreement around the concept of privilege or the idea of intersecting oppressions had occurred at that time, it was not until 2013, as far as I am aware, that intersectional and radical feminisms emerged as two distinct and opposed ideological camps. This major division of the feminist scene was fueled by the articulation of a trans feminist perspective. In 2013, trans feminist Yana Kirey-Sitnikova posted several texts on feminist platforms, arguing for an inclusion of trans perspectives in the feminist struggle (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016, 169). Some feminists supported her, while others mounted a vehement opposition. This was a conflict over who counted as a woman, what oppression was, and what the central

goal of feminist efforts should be. Building on previous debates on privilege, women's experience, and the focus of the feminist struggle, this conflict made the trans issue into one of the primary points defining one's stance within the feminist community. For instance, when Check Your Privilege, a major intersectional platform, published an "FAQ" to elucidate the central aspects of their ideology, they included the question "Where do you stand on transgender?"; trans people were also the only marginalized group mentioned explicitly in the text (Тай & Блюме n.d.).

The trans issue has thus played a major role in the "intersectional vs. radical" debate, even though this controversy has encompassed a wide variety of issues, including but not limited to sexuality, race, class, disability, age, and size. Whereas intersectional feminists called for considering various axes of domination and oppression, radical feminists perceived these calls and the very idea of women's privilege as divisive. For instance, an article on Womenation argues that "the slogan 'Check your privilege'... has turned into an excellent tool for silencing feminists who venture too far" (Хасанова 2015). In another article, the same author calls intersectionality "the still-born child of the 'third wave'" (Хасанова 2014).⁵⁴

Thus the political debate that, in contexts like the US or UK, is commonly associated with waves of feminism (Mann & Huffman 2005, 57; Evans 2016; Wu 2018, 490), runs in the Russian-speaking feminist scene within the same political generation. Rather than emerging successively, both major feminist ideologies have formed in the Russian-speaking context simultaneously and largely in response to each other. They have encompassed, moreover, the trans debate, which feminist scholars usually consider to be even more recent (Hines 2020, 700). Nevertheless, references to feminist history and specifically to the narrative of waves of feminism are often used in debates between intersectional and radical feminists in Russia. Radical feminists trace their ideological genealogy back to the Western "second wave," which they present as the true feminism, and suggest that the "third wave" is an unnecessary deviation or even that it has "killed feminism" (Elkballet 2014). Intersectional feminists, on the other hand, may recur to the same metaphor of waves to suggest that radical feminism is outdated (Check Your Privilege moderators in Зайцева 2014). Western feminist history, or rather the mainstream narrative thereof, appears in such references as a model and symbolic ally, even while its heritage may be interpreted in polar ways to support opposing political stances. This reveals a complex and at times paradoxical stance toward Western feminist tradition, which I will explore in detail in Chapter 9 along with other aspects of the relationship between Russian and Western feminisms.

54 The harsh tone of these quotes probably testifies to how heated this ideological debate is, yet it also appears common to the radical feminist scene. Most intersectional platforms, by contrast, adopted a markedly reserved tone: for instance, the moderators of the aforementioned Check Your Privilege have characterized the debate with radical feminists as a "rather intense confrontation" (Тай & Блюме n.d.).

Although apparently central, the conflict between radical and intersectional feminists is not the only ideological divide that structures the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. There are several more ideological discussions, as further labels reveal, e.g. liberal, marxist, queer, or sex-positive feminism. Most of these discussions, just like the “radical vs. intersectional” debate, do not produce clear dichotomies: whereas every stance has its strong proponents, individual feminists or feminist collectives may use some of these labels while not agreeing with them completely or distance themselves from a given debate and try to find a middle ground. Some examples of such complicated positions will be discussed in the following chapters.

5.5. Relationships

The previous feminist generation and its organizations

As discussed in Chapter 1, the 90s women’s movement became rather quickly professionalized. Several of its organizations—most notably gender studies centers and women’s rights NGOs—were still functioning in the 2000s when the new feminist generation emerged. Yet there has been virtually no direct continuity between the two feminist generations. Based on her Moscow material, Sperling describes this relationship as a “generational gap” (Sperling 2015, 215), noting that “older” feminists largely ignored the existence of “new feminists,” whereas the latter found their predecessors presumptuous (Sperling 2015, 218). My observations both in Moscow and in other places largely support this description. Based on what I have witnessed and heard, feminists of the new generation are often keen to establish contacts with their activist foremothers, most notably those who work at women’s anti-violence crisis centers. They seek out these organizations looking for a feminist tradition, knowledge, and experience. This interest, however, is rarely reciprocated. For instance, two participants told me about visiting an open regular meeting at their local women’s crisis center: the “older feminists” they met there only addressed each other without paying any attention to the new faces. My interlocutors did not come to those meetings again.

This disinterest on the part of the previous generation can probably be explained by the fact that they operate in an institutional, professionalized framework, which influences their motivations and priorities. Even when they consider their work to be political, their politics rather take place at roundtable discussions with parliament members (cf. Sperling 2015, 215) than in the picket lines or on social media. The two feminist generations thus differ considerably in their methods, but also in their fundamental definitions of political goals. Unlike the 90s women’s movement, the new feminist generation does not collaborate with the state, which it perceives as its clear opponent. Its focus on politicizing the personal, on addressing gender injustice in the everyday, on changing consciousness by disseminating feminist critique does not directly fit with the previous generation’s political priorities.

The situation has been similar with academic gender studies organizations. For all its thirst for feminist knowledge, the contemporary feminist movement has had few contacts to gender scholars. In interviews, when I asked participants about their local gender studies organizations, many told me they did not perceive any connection to the feminist scene, while some were not even aware if there were any such organizations in their respective cities. As one participant summarized: “These are different worlds.”

The divide between the two feminist generations in Russia thus cannot be mapped onto the metaphor of “waves of feminism.” Neither the 90s women’s movement nor the contemporary feminist movement in Russia fit well with how the distinct waves of feminism are usually conceptualized in Western feminist tradition. The generational divide in Russia runs over a difference in tactics and relationships to institutions rather than over ideology. Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, the ideological conflict that largely corresponds to the one between the “second” and “third waves” of Western feminism has occurred in Russia within the same feminist generation. In light of this, I suggest that the Russian case provides additional evidence against thinking of this ideological conflict in generational terms. Other authors have already noted with regard to Western European contexts that such associations can be problematic since the label “third-wave feminism” has limited applicability in local feminist movements (Dean & Aune 2015, 380). Even in the United States where the concepts “second wave” and “third wave” have their origin, researchers have pointed out that the respective ideologies have developed simultaneously and in parallel rather than in succession (Naples 2015, 221; Stryker 2017, 4). Examining the continuities between the “second wave” and “third wave” of feminist activism, Nancy Naples argues for reflective dialogue and intergenerational practice (Naples 2015, 230).

Intergenerational collaborations and contacts have occurred in Russia as well, despite the wide differences between the two feminist generations. A few feminists of the previous generation have participated in new feminist developments, coming to feminist events and joining feminist discussions on social media. The Center for Independent Sociological Research, an academic institution in Saint Petersburg, has hosted events on feminist issues, promoting collaboration between researchers and activists. In Moscow and Kazan, feminists of the new generation have joined women’s crisis centers as volunteers and employees, supporting them with fundraising and publicizing their work. Besides this, feminists of the new generation established intellectual continuity with gender scholars by reading and disseminating their work. As discussed above, several books and articles written, translated, and published by gender researchers of the previous generation remain popular in the contemporary feminist scene.

The LGBT movement

Just as the women's movement and many other movements in Russia, the LGBT movement emerged in late Soviet times, with first groups organizing as early as in 1982 (Nemtsev 2008, 40). A major goal in its early years was decriminalization of male homosexuality (Nemtsev 2008, 20). After this occurred in 1993 (Kondakov 2013, 409), the movement entered what researchers describe as a phase of invisibility, shifting its focus to community support and services (Lapina 2013, 39). At the same time, the Internet emerged as a key means for the LGBT movement to increase cohesion, build a community and a collective identity (Buyantueva 2018, 461). Since the mid-2000s, the LGBT movement experienced a new upswing, as several new organizations formed, including GayRussia, organizer of the Moscow Gay Pride, and the umbrella crossregional Russian LGBT Network (Buyantueva 2018, 463). Some of these new organizations focused on demanding equal rights, while others emphasized changing public opinion on homosexuality (Lapina 2013, 64; Buyantueva 2018).

It was at the same time that anti-gay legislation was reintroduced in Russia in the form of "gay propaganda" laws,⁵⁵ the first one being the 2006 law in the Ryazan region (Lapina 2013, 41). The LGBT movement responded by increased mobilization, opting for more visible protest and public activity (Lapina 2013, 103). Crucially and somewhat paradoxically, as researchers have noted, the propaganda laws have re-politicized the issue of homosexuality and LGBTIQ rights in public discourse (Patalakh 2020).

According to my observations, connections between the feminist and LGBT movements have been very close. Feminists and LGBT activists have staged joint protests, most notably during the campaign against propaganda laws; some examples for Moscow can be found in (Sperling 2015, 252).⁵⁶ Feminists have also collaborated at cultural events like the Festival of Queer Culture in Saint Petersburg (Сабунаева 2011; Plungian 2013). In my fieldwork, several participants mentioned belonging both to feminist and LGBT initiatives, and some found it hard to specify which was more important for them. Thus both movements overlap considerably, and there appears to be no clear boundary between them.

The reasons for this are likely both biographical and ideological. Lesbians have played a major role in the contemporary feminist movement since its beginnings: both collective blogs like Feministki on Livejournal and first standalone feminist websites like the separatist *Lysistrata's Path* ("Путь Лисистраты" n.d.) have been shaped by lesbians. The lesbians who stood at the origins of the grassroots feminist initiatives in the 2000s have ensured that lesbian feminist perspectives took a stable and prominent position in the landscape of feminist knowledge and ideology. The cooperation has not always been smooth: especially in the 2000s, there were conflicts over homophobia in the feminist scene and over misogyny among gay

55 For more detail on the gay propaganda laws, see Chapter 1.

56 Sperling also notes that support for LGBT issues is one more difference between the contemporary feminist movement and the 90s women's movement (Sperling 2015, 293).

activists. Yet both movements have articulated their central ideological pursuits, namely challenging sexism and homophobia, as interconnected (“Квирфест — Искусство быть собой” 2012). Both have also increasingly found themselves directly targeted by the state ideology of “traditional values” and ensuing repression. A recent example is Yulia Tsvetkova, an artist and educator from Komsomolsk-on-Amur, who was charged in 2019 with “distributing pornography” for body positive cartoons she published on social media (Sherwin 2020). A second charge under the “gay propaganda” law was added to her case in 2020 for a drawing entitled “Family Is Where Love Is” and depicting two queer couples with children (“Free Yulia Tsvetkova” n.d.). Tsvetkova was thus targeted both for feminist and pro-LGBTIQ messages in her art. In the transnational support campaign that ensued, she has been described both as a feminist and an LGBT activist (ILGA Europe 2020; “Free Yulia Tsvetkova” n.d.).

Leftist movements

When one speaks of leftists in Russia, a major differentiation suggests itself between what has been characterized as the “old Left” and the “new Left” (Rethmann 2012, 30; Berg 2014, 25). Represented primarily by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation as well as a range of smaller organizations, the “old Left” has been described as Stalinist, socially and culturally conservative, and nationalist (Heyden & Weinmann 2009, 56; Berg 2014, 25). Alongside and in opposition to it, the “new Left” has claimed an anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist stance (Berg 2014, 31). Consisting of independent Marxists, Trotskyists, anarchists, antifascists, radical intellectuals and artists (Heyden & Weinmann 2009, 56; Berg 2014), the “new Left” has focused on protests and initiatives on social, labor, and ecological issues (Heyden & Weinmann 2009, 68) and acquired some public visibility as it joined the 2011–2012 anti-Putin protests (Gabowitsch 2013, 126).

Some of the “new Leftist” groups have actively supported feminism. For instance, the anarchist Jerry Rubin Club in Moscow, established in the 90s, has held events on the International Women’s Day (Heyden & Weinmann 2009, 115), and in 2006, the feminist demonstration in Moscow was co-organized by anarchists (Open Women Line 2006). Feminists have equally participated in yearly 1st of May demonstrations and other leftist protests. Just as with the LGBT movement, the boundary between the feminist and leftist movements is not always clear, with several socialist feminist and anarchafeminist groups belonging to both.⁵⁷

However, the relationship between leftists and feminists has also been rife with conflict. Feminists have criticized sexist and machoist practices in the leftist scene (cf. Еропова 2013), whereas several leftist groups have explicitly rejected feminism, arguing for the primacy of class struggle over “superstructure” issues like sexism. Critiques of sexism in the Left have been paired with critiques of homophobia, and the appearance of challenging slogans and rainbow flags at joint demonstrations has been met with threats and even physical violence by some leftist groups. I witnessed

⁵⁷ For examples, see e.g. (Mason 2015; Яценева n.d.).

physical altercations like this at the 1st of May demonstration in 2011 in Moscow and was told of several similar incidents in Saint Petersburg. The controversy between leftist supporters and opponents of feminist and LGBTIQ politics peaked in 2013 when Autonomous Action,⁵⁸ a major anarchist platform, split in two and a large wing of hardline machoists left to establish their own association (Волчек 2020). This split has deeply affected the leftist scene in various places. In my interviews, leftist participants in Saint Petersburg and Voronezh have cited it as a major event. While for many, it has meant divided collectives and shattered friendships, it has also established feminist and LGBTIQ issues as key elements in leftist politics.

Above I have attempted to sketch an overview of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. However provisional, this account can hopefully provide some necessary context for the subsequent discussion. In the following, I will try to illuminate some of the underlying dynamics in the feminist movement. Why does feminist collective action take the specific forms it takes? What are the mechanisms that allow the feminist movement to sustain itself and win new ground in a context where both society and the state are hostile to feminism? How does the feminist movement deal with its internal heterogeneity and with conflicts over identities? These questions will guide the discussion in the following chapters.

58 Russian: Автономное действие.

6. What is “real action”? Articulating definitions of action and politics

While academic sources insist on describing the contemporary feminist movement in Russia either as non-existent or “small” (Sperling 2015, 169, 215; Muravyeva 2018, 11; Sundstrom 2018, 226), it is not uncommon even within the feminist scenes in Russia to question whether they constitute a movement.⁵⁹ I suggest that these doubts over the existence or scope of the feminist movement are rooted in an understanding of politics that disregards crucial areas of feminist political action. Contrary to these assumptions, I will attempt to demonstrate below that feminists in Russia do act politically and, moreover, that their practice has far-reaching implications for the social, cultural, and political reality in Russia. In this chapter, I will trace how a new understanding of action and politics emerges from feminist practice and is articulated through a conflict over what is considered “real action.” I will provide an overview of the forms of action used by the feminist movement and then focus on how feminists speak about these forms of action, what meanings they attach to them, and which external discourses shape their reflections.

To introduce the central concepts and divides that inform the debate under consideration, I will begin with two interview quotes. The first one is by Nadezhda, a feminist from Voronezh who responded to my question on the feminist movement’s current challenges as follows:

What we lack is adequate distribution of efforts and resources. I mean, where are all our resources going at the moment? To squabbles⁶⁰ on the Internet, by and large. As to real action—where is action?

This quote is a perfect summary of the “real action” debate as it plays out in feminist scenes. While feminists identify numerous gender-related issues that require urgent action, they are often concerned that the movement as a whole does little to act upon them as a collective political actor, a “real political force,” as some call it. As a rule, “real action” is understood as contentious politics, i.e. making claims to the state by means of public protest, or as providing direct support to those who suffer most under patriarchy, i.e. primarily survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Both forms of action are associated with actual change and tangible results. They are contrasted to online debates and conflicts, which, in turn, are commonly seen as useless and destructive, dividing the movement and undermining its ability to act collectively. Those feminists who spend their time online are often portrayed as “doing nothing” and called “armchair feminists.” It is this idea that another feminist, Ellie, referred to when I asked her about the first demonstration she attended:

59 Some of the data and arguments in this chapter were first published in (V. Solovey 2018).

60 In Russian: *срач*. This colloquial and rather strong word is widely used by feminists when they criticize online conflicts. Whereas in some contexts, it can be translated as “quarrel” or even “shitstorm,” this context strongly emphasizes pettiness, which is why I believe “squabble” to be a better fit.

Vanya: But how did you make up your mind to go? I mean, this was your first street protest, wasn't it?

Ellie: I thought (*laughs*), enough being an armchair feminist, I should do something... I thought if I considered myself a feminist, I had to help others somehow after all, take some sort of action, not only for myself.

In her answer, Ellie contrasts being an “armchair feminist” to “doing something,” thus excluding online activities from what she considers “action.” After spending months reading feminist content on social media, her decision to take to the streets, as she describes it, is guided by the feeling of a moral duty to take action for others' sake. She associates this duty with feminist identity: in her perspective, it does not simply rely on personal empowerment, but rather implies requirements to engage in certain kinds of action.

The feminist collective identity will be a major concept of interest in this chapter. I argue that the “real action” debate is part of the feminist movement's collective identity process because negotiations of methods and tactics belong to a movement's self-definition and, moreover, because it touches upon the ideological contents of feminist action. In other words, I argue that the “real action” debate does not only bear upon what the feminist movement does (and whether it does anything), but also upon what kind of feminism it primarily stands for.

6.1. Heroes or layabouts? Feminist contentious action

I will begin the examination of the feminist movement's tactics with contentious action as the most paradigmatic form of action primarily associated with social movements. Following literature on social movements, to describe what the movement does, I use the words “activism,” “action,” and “politics” as contextual synonyms. As outlined in Chapter 3, social movements theorists speak of contentious politics as making claims to those in power, primarily governments, by engaging in public collective protest (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 7; Tarrow 2011, 9). Protest, also termed contentious or confrontational action, usually means disruptive tactics such as demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, etc. (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 11). Considering protest as core to social movements, contentious politics scholars have analyzed movements by means of “protest event counts,” relying on media reports to assess protest numbers and strength (Koopmans & Rucht 2002). The contentious politics approach to social movements relies on a definition of politics that centers governments (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 8; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly 2009, 262), relegating other movements and movement activities into the sphere of culture deemed “non-political” (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 9). As discussed in Chapter 3, all these premises of the contentious politics approach are problematic when applied to feminist movements. This is not to say, however, that contentious action has no place in the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. To discuss its complex role, let us first examine how contemporary feminists have used contention.

Ranges of feminist contention

The 1990s women's movement in Russia is not known for its contentious tactics. Relying on institutional and professional channels to push for change (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 259; Sperling 1999, 27), it maintained a markedly conciliatory rather than confrontational approach toward activism (Sundstrom 2018, 220). The consistent avoidance of public conflict and mass mobilization by women activists in the 1990s is due, as researchers argue, to the fact that the movement took shape toward the end of the 1989–1991 protest cycle, at a moment when contentious politics were being increasingly associated with revolt and bloodshed (Sperling 1999, 47, 180). The political opportunities available to the women's movement were thus restricted, which made women activists generally prefer conferences and seminars to marches and rallies. Women activists in the 1990s and early 2000s worked with the state when they could; at the same time, many even avoided openly identifying with feminism, since they did not embrace feminism as a politics and an identity or found it too radical and potentially dangerous (Sperling 1999, 59–64; Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 553; Hinterhuber & Strasser-Camagni 2011, 150).

Although contentious tactics were not favored by women activists, public protest did occur. Researchers report several women's protests in Russia between 1996 and 2003 held by various women's organizations and aiming to raise awareness on feminist issues, most prominently on domestic violence (Sperling 1999, 19; 2006, 169). As such, it would be incorrect to attribute, as some authors have, the first feminist demonstration in post-Soviet Russia's history to 2012 (Johnson 2014, 587; 2018, 125). As already described above, the first grassroots feminist protest known to me dates back to 2006 (Open Women Line 2006). As such, protests on gender-related issues in post-Soviet Russia have apparently taken place continuously with hardly any interruption. However, contentious politics certainly play a different role for the new feminist generation than for its predecessors: it holds protests on a regular basis and at a much larger scale than their predecessors.

It is possible that bold grassroots protests similar to the one in 2006 took place before. To uncover them, however, one would need to do extensive archival research or look for eyewitnesses. Published sources do not tell much on feminist protest in Russia. As described in Chapter 1, the media in Russia have long shared and, indeed, actively reinforced an antifeminist consensus. In particular, they ignored feminist demonstrations in the 1990s and early 2000s (Sperling 2006, 169) and continued to do so afterwards. Yet this says more about the hostility to feminism in society and specifically in the media than about the scope of feminist contention. After years of feminists' bitter struggle for recognition, the media have gradually become more responsive to feminism since around 2018 and coverage of feminist protests has somewhat improved, which is why I can provide some recent media sources on feminist mobilizations below. However, especially with regard to the 2010s, the

evident antifeminist bias in the media makes it impossible to study feminist mobilizations by means of protest event count, an otherwise established method in social movement research (Koopmans & Rucht 2002).⁶¹

Based on my monitoring of feminist online platforms from 2010 onward, I estimate the number of public feminist protest activities in Russia at several hundreds. The forms they have taken include “authorized” and “unauthorized”⁶² rallies and marches, picket lines, putting up banners, leaflets, graffiti, and blocking streets. Alongside conventional protest, feminists also widely use various creative methods, notably visual arts and performance, producing events that combine contentious politics and political art (cf. Perheentupa 2019, 132).

The geography of feminist protest is by no means limited to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. To provide some examples, a series of protests against rape culture in autumn 2014 encompassed Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk, Tula, Yaroslavl, and Yekaterinburg, besides the two capital cities (Гринева 2014).⁶³ In 2015, protests on the occasion of the International Women’s Day were held in Murmansk, Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Togliatti, Novosibirsk, and Irkutsk.⁶⁴ In 2020, the geography of feminist events (both contentious and cultural, such as various festivals, public talks, concerts, etc.) on the International Women’s Day extended to 41 cities from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok (Россман 2020).

Recurring occasions such as the International Women’s Day on March 8, Labor Day on May 1, and International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25 remain major dates in the feminist calendar; several protests take place on these days every year. Whereas the yearly November events primarily focus on gender-based violence, both former occasions are used to articulate a wider feminist agenda. Labor Day is primarily honored by leftist feminists who take to the streets in coalition with socialist and anarchist groups. Apart from recurring occasions, feminist use contentious tactics to demand legislative reforms (protection from violence, labor and reproductive rights, etc.), protest against specific instances of discrimination as well as the state’s overall neopatriarchal policies, to demand justice for survivors of gender-based violence and persecuted feminists, and generally raise awareness of feminist issues.

The number of participants at collective protests ranges from dozens (Радио Свобода 2020) to several hundreds (Пяри 2017; Дударова 2020). However, individual protests are common as well. The scope and forms of feminist contentious action are influenced by changing political opportunities, which include government policies regarding public protest, general waves of mobilization, and related cultural processes of protest legitimation (cf. Chapter 1). I argue that for feminists,

61 However, the protest event count method has also been criticized for media ideological bias (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 268).

62 The problematic authorization of demonstrations in Russia has been discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

63 Spilling over national borders, as feminist protest often does, this campaign also included a demonstration in Kyiv, Ukraine.

64 According to my monitoring of social media.

contentious action is both a highly legitimate and highly controversial form of action. While they classify protest as “real action” and even tend to consider it to be their duty, both actual risks of persecution and an influential state-sponsored delegitimizing discourse on protest inhibit feminist contentious action. Moreover, some feminists question how useful protest is in terms of the feminist movement’s central goals.

Protest as “real” and legitimate action

In interviews with feminists, contentious action proves to be one of the most legitimate forms of action. Its legitimacy is such that even those who do not engage in it speak of it as a central tactic for the feminist movement. An example of this paradoxical attitude is provided by Katerina Maas, a feminist journalist and blogger from Tomsk, Siberia, who founded a feminist group which first existed online and then went on to hold face-to-face meetings and public talks. In the following quote, Katerina reflects on her own role and chosen methods:

I have set the goal for myself... that I’m an organizer and I help. I mean, I provide inspiration. (*Laughs.*) And I chat with people. I won’t go put up leaflets. That’s not for me. I mean, that’s not interesting for me, I don’t find... that it impacts anything. I will hardly take to the streets, for instance, because I’m, well, a coward. (*Laughs.*) Can this be helped? I won’t go and hold a picket sign, I’m really afraid. I don’t know, what else? Well, helping women who have suffered from violence—I mean, I’m not a counsellor, how can I help? I can provide emotional support to a friend but... if it’s a strange woman, I believe it’s professionals who should help.

Citing activist tactics she does not use, Katerina begins with contentious methods: putting up leaflets and protesting in the streets. She justifies herself for the fact that she neither uses contentious methods nor provides direct help to abuse survivors. However, she simultaneously judges herself for this choice, calling herself a “coward.” Nothing in the previous conversation has prompted this; in fact, contentious action has not been mentioned once until that point. In light of this, the fact that Katerina constructs her reflection in a polemic manner suggests that there is an extant argument or discourse she feels compelled to address. This argument introduces a hierarchy of activist methods that places Katerina’s chosen kind of activism, namely feminist community organizing, in a third-rank position after contention and direct service provision. To justify her choice, Katerina cites two compelling reasons: she refers to her fear of contention and expresses doubt in its impact.

Tatyana Bolotina, a full-time feminist activist from Moscow and organizer of numerous projects and campaigns, mentioned “activism in real life”⁶⁵ early in her interview. When I ask her to explain the term, she cites examples in the following order:

65 Russian: активизм в реале.

Well... the most obvious, I guess, is holding protests... which is getting increasingly hard in Russia and especially in Moscow... I mean, right now, this year⁶⁶ they simply aren't authorizing anything anymore... anything at all.⁶⁷ [...] While in the regions, I see people organize mass protests, this means this wave must not have reached them yet. In Saint Petersburg, it's easier too, although... not really anymore. But in Moscow it's very hard. Yes, but that's actually only one area. Apart from that, one can create women's spaces... training courses, language courses, programming, women's self-defense. [...] I'd also like to create psychological support groups and consciousness-raising groups. [...] Then there are illegal things: graffiti, for example... putting up leaflets... squatting buildings.

Unlike Katerina, Tatyana is not afraid of street protests. Quite on the opposite, her business-like reflection reveals a practical approach of an experienced protester who is well aware of the current political opportunities and closely follows how they change across Russia. Since Tatyana is an anarchist, she makes a point of emphasizing DIY and direct-action tactics. Although she also cites community-oriented activities, such as creating women's spaces and consciousness-raising groups, she, too, puts contentious methods at the forefront. In contrast to Katerina, however, Tatyana places "illegal" contentious action in a separate category which she distinguishes from the "obvious" authorized protests. This clearly reflects her personal experience and feelings about both kinds of action: whereas authorized protests are routine in her activist practice, guerrilla direct-action tactics are not and therefore feel distinctly more dangerous to her (this is different for Katerina who is not used to either form of contention). Still, all the methods Tatyana cites fall under the label of "activism in real life," which, as she emphasizes throughout her interview, is not as popular with feminists as it should be, in contrast with online activism.

Although "activism in real life" may appear to be a purely technical term highlighting the distinction from "online activism," Tatyana also uses "real activism" elsewhere in her interview, which suggests a judgment. Moreover, she speaks of a need to build a "real feminist movement." In a similar vein, other participants mention "real action" and an "actual political force" they wish feminism to be. All these expressions imply a moral dimension: not only is contentious action central and paradigmatic, but it is also what activists must do—otherwise they are considered, indeed, "cowards."

Far from being peculiar to feminist scenes, this sense of moral duty around public protest is rather common to those political scenes in Russia that understand themselves in opposition to the state. Whereas the state continuously attempts to outlaw and discursively delegitimize contentious action, these activist scenes

66 The interview took place in October 2015.

67 "Authorized" protests did happen in Moscow in 2015; in fact, elsewhere in the interview, Tatyana mentions several protests she organized or attended that year. Yet this does not contradict her assessment of the additional difficulties of getting the official "approval."

construct their own counterdiscourse that both glorifies protest and demands it. Constructing protest as heroic and necessary self-sacrifice, this discourse seems to acquire an increasingly moral character as repression builds up.⁶⁸ Feminists clearly share this discourse with other activists in Russia. Whereas the previous generation of women activists did not generally rule out collaboration with the state, there is no ambiguity among contemporary feminists about the state's role as their opponent. In the face of consistently neopatriarchal policies, the general consensus in the feminist scenes is that organized resistance is necessary and that, to the extent that "real" change in terms of gender equality can be achieved, it will probably happen through conflict rather than friendly negotiations—at least as far as the area of state policies is concerned.

As such, centering contentious action in discussions of "real action" or "feminism as a real political movement" also advances an understanding of politics that focuses on the state. In this logic, feminist action is only political if it has to do with making claims to the state, for instance by demanding a law against domestic violence or abolition of gender-based labor discrimination. I suggest that it is this understanding of politics, which also lies at the heart of the activist glorifying discourse on protest, that serves as the main source of legitimacy for contentious action in feminists' eyes. To put it simply, if one thinks of politics as the sphere of the government and one does not agree with the government's policies, then one must protest publicly in order to achieve change.

Protest as risky and delegitimized action

To speak of contentious action as having high legitimacy in Russia may seem unconventional. Indeed, if activists need to produce their own discourse to legitimize protest, this is to resist an arguably more influential and entrenched state-sponsored discourse that delegitimizes protest. As described in Chapter 1, this discourse dates back to the 1990s, a time of unprecedented social mobilization, but also of crises and brutal repression. Arguing against contentious action, this discourse constructs it as simultaneously pointless and dangerous, and protesters as irresponsible layabouts.

The argument on the danger of protest evokes several layers of collective memory: the bloodshed of 1993 that brought an end to the Perestroika mobilization, but also earlier history of Soviet repression. However, in the face of a growing body of anti-movement laws and increasing persecution and violence against protesters, the association of contentious action with heightened risks is not merely discursive.

Several of my participants have mentioned fear with regard to contentious action. They have provided various explanations, the most common being the risk of being detained and subjected to police violence and the risk of losing their jobs. Maria, a feminist in her fifties who, in contrast to most other people I have interviewed, had the chance to experience the turmoil of the 1990s as an adult, says:

⁶⁸ This analysis builds upon a discussion on activism and repression in Russia and Turkey with Pelin Dincer and Betül Yazar, whom I thank.

Yes, I'm afraid, too, that this turn, like I say, back then we survived the 90s... back then we believed we were strong, we could do anything, but now it's all happening for the second time. [...] I mean, feminists have gone out here, haven't they? I think it was once against abortion restrictions, and they haven't been detained. But all the others have, brutally... Retired women, too... That is to say, they've shown that nobody is safe! Don't think because you're old they'll take pity of you. [...] And what's the point of going out like that? What, for whom? People will go by and say: "Look, they've got nothing better to do." Because most people are like: "Haven't you got anything better to do?"

Beginning her monologue with referring to her fear, Maria compares the current⁶⁹ crackdown on protest with the 1990s crackdown and ensuing demoralization. The comparison suggests that Maria now feels dispirited, powerless, and tired. She recalls a local feminist protest that went down without detainments but considers this example to be an exception from the general rule, and it does not, therefore, alleviate her fear of taking to the streets. To substantiate her claim, she evokes a brutal detainment of retired women on a different occasion. This extreme example of violence against particularly vulnerable people is used by Maria as powerful evidence to support her claim that "nobody is safe." Finally, Maria also questions protest usefulness and contends that most people condemn protesters as layabouts. This makes it impossible to get the protest message across to a wider public. Weighed against the perceived risks, it makes protest essentially not worthwhile.

Several elements of the delegitimizing discourse on contentious action are apparent in Maria's reflection. She refers explicitly to the 1990s and thus reproduces the disillusionment argument that evokes previous times of collective elation, enthusiasm, and hope only to point out that it has brought nothing and to draw the conclusion on the fundamental futility of all protest. She also uses, just like Katerina in the above quote, the pointlessness argument, putting it in the mouth of hypothetical onlookers who supposedly despise protesters. The stigmatization of protesters typical for the delegitimizing discourse on protest is also apparent in Maria's statement: by choosing to describe protest and its effects from a bystander's rather than a participant's perspective, Maria appears to identify, at least in this instance, with those "normal citizens" who distance themselves from contentious action and consider it unacceptable.

Fear of repression plays a central role in Maria's reflection. Just as she refers to brutally detained retired women, several participants tell stories of state persecution and police violence to justify their fear of taking to the streets. One common reference is repression against Pussy Riot, but besides this, participants cite a variety of other recent cases featuring feminist and non-feminist protesters alike; they also use historical references to Soviet GULAG and Great Terror. When current policies are mentioned in these narratives, they are sometimes distorted or exaggerated, for instance when participants claim that "nobody will allow us to hold

69 The interview took place in 2016.

a demonstration” or “congregations in groups of more than three are banned now.”⁷⁰ Combining history with the present and piling up horror stories of police brutality, sometimes told in gruesome detail, the narratives on the dangers of protest produce the impression of unchanging, indiscriminate repression but do little to help realistically assess the risks of contentious action. This suggests that they do not only justify the fear of protest but also produce and reinforce it. Ultimately, reproducing the discourse on repression, disillusionment, and pointlessness forms a powerful construction against protest: as Maria’s reflection demonstrates, even knowledge of contradicting facts, namely of a feminist protest that has gone down peacefully and safely, fails to outweigh it.

That said, contentious action does entail higher risks compared to several other forms of activism, and the risks of contentious action in contemporary Russia are considerable indeed. Even though Russian law still allows not only congregations in groups of more than three, but also rallies and demonstrations, it is true that to hold them legally has become increasingly difficult over the years (Smirnova & Shedov 2018). In addition, whereas several dozens if not hundreds of feminist protests have gone down without any major conflict, feminist activists have also been targeted by state persecution as well as threats and violence by state-sponsored conservative and religious organizations.

As such, for many people in Russia, feminists included, contentious action is not an option. To take to the streets for the first time thus often implies a moment of transgression, a considerable change of mindset.⁷¹ To make this change possible, various resources are necessary (cf. Chapter 8); moreover and no less importantly, the delegitimizing discourse on protest needs to be challenged. Aware of what it may take to enable this transgression, Tatyana Bolotina argues for promoting the activist legitimizing discourse on feminist online platforms:

Tatyana: Of course, I understand that many people have a strong barrier that prevents them from... becoming activists, going out and joining a protest for the first time, joining a group, this is quite hard. And this is why when there is no... atmosphere, including on the Internet, about how interesting activism is...

Vanya: So do you mean if there’s more talk about real activism, more information about it, if it’s more discussed online, this could help people?

Tatyana: Yes, I believe so. I mean, this would create this kind of atmosphere... a breeding ground.

Arguing for creating a “breeding ground” for contentious action online by discursive means, Tatyana inadvertently also addresses online discursive activism, which will be discussed in detail below. Meanwhile, in this quote, she uses the terms “activism”

70 This is a variation of a set phrase (больше трех не собираться) that appears to date back to anti-mobilization laws in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire.

71 In the quote cited at the beginning of the chapter, it is this moment I assumed Ellie to have experienced when she told me about her first protest. Yet, as her answer indicates, her decision has already been informed by the activist discourse on protest as a duty. If her ideas about protest did change, therefore, this happened before the moment discussed in our dialogue.

and “activist” only with regard to contentious action, thus once again affirming its centrality in her perspective. In a way, this choice of words stands in opposition to the delegitimation of contentious action Tatyana criticizes: whereas the dominant discourse constructs contentious action as unworthy and disgraceful, centering it as Tatyana does reasserts its importance and worth.

Above I have argued that for feminists in Russia, contentious action is both delegitimized and highly legitimate. Increasingly restrictive policies and state repression heighten the risks of contentious action and consequently inhibit feminist contention. It is further inhibited by an entrenched state-sponsored discourse that delegitimizes protest. At the same time, well aware of the state’s consistent neopatriarchal policy, feminists understand themselves in opposition to the state, which places them in a broader context of social movements in Russia that challenge the status quo from a variety of perspectives. They thus also share a discourse common to this larger activist scene that, in turn, legitimizes and even glorifies protest, constructing it as an activist’s moral duty. I argue that this produces a paradoxical situation where even those feminists who do not participate in contentious action consider it central and “real.” Whereas sharing this general activist discourse may play a role in strengthening ties of solidarity and enabling broad coalitions between feminist and other movements, the idea of contentious action as “real” also entails downplaying other forms of action. Below I will discuss those forms of action that tend to be disregarded in the “real action” argument. However, I will first address another form of feminist action that enjoys high legitimacy for very different reasons.

6.2. Direct anti-violence help as legitimate action

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Nadezhda who criticized fellow feminists for wasting their efforts on “squabbles on the Internet” rather than focusing on “real action.” Contrary to what one might assume in light of the previous sections, however, it was not protest she meant by referring to “real action.” As she explained in response to my question: “What I mean is targeted action that will help a specific person.” The idea of helping specific people features prominently in feminists’ interviews. In the above quote, Katerina, too, mentions “helping women who have suffered from violence.” It is this kind of action that feminists usually mean when speaking of help: supporting survivors of gender-based violence, the sort of work done in women’s crisis centers.

Women’s crisis centers are probably the most eminent and long-lasting outcome of the work done by the previous feminist political generation in Russia. Whereas on the whole, the 1990s women’s movement did not unanimously embrace feminism, anti-violence activism maintained a more decidedly feminist position (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 550–51). Women activists involved in anti-violence work established a network of women’s crisis centers across Russia that provided psychological, legal, social support, and, in some cases, shelter to survivors of violence. They also managed to raise awareness on gender-based violence and women’s rights among

state actors (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 561) despite experiencing increasing pressure on the part of the state to cease all political activity (Davidenko 2020, 1341). Crisis center feminists promoted an ethics of direct help as activism (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 555), and they were still around when the next feminist generation came looking for role models and activist traditions.

For the new generation, crisis center feminists were their symbolic foremothers. Their activism, namely social support grounded in feminist politics, is by definition immune to the arguments used to undermine the legitimacy of contentious action: it is non-confrontational and thus cannot be deemed to “destabilize” the regime,⁷² and as their work has tangible results, anti-violence activists can hardly be labeled “layabouts.” Crucially, from a feminist perspective, anti-violence activism addresses a central, fundamental issue on the feminist agenda, one that all feminists agree on, whatever debates they might lead on other subjects.

As the contemporary feminist movement expanded, new-generation feminists across the country discovered and came to their local crisis centers to get to know “older” feminists, learn from them, and work with them. The results of these intergenerational contacts varied: some yielded fruitful collaborations (e.g. the Fatima crisis center in Kazan and Syostry (“Sisters”) in Moscow), in other cases, the generational divide proved too large to overcome. On the whole, however, direct help to survivors of violence remains a highly legitimate form of activism in feminists’ perspective. Among my participants, many expressed the wish to work at a crisis center as a volunteer, and some talked about their dream to establish their own crisis center or shelter.

This dream, however, is hard to realize: establishing a feminist crisis center requires considerable material resources, specialized professional competences, and time, all of which most grassroots feminists lack. Moreover, the current political climate for opening an independent feminist NGO is notoriously unfavorable in Russia (Davidenko 2020, 1329). Thus, whereas in contrast to contentious action, there is no controversy among feminists about the legitimacy of direct help to survivors of violence, this kind of activism is inhibited, just as contentious action is, by lacking resources and restricted political opportunities.

As I have attempted to demonstrate above, both major forms of activism feminists typically cite as “real action,” namely contentious action and direct help, are highly legitimate in feminists’ eyes. In both cases, legitimacy comes from outside of the contemporary feminist movement: contentious action is legitimized by the broader activist discourse, and direct help through the efforts of the previous feminist generation. This is a common tendency in social movements: as researchers observe, legitimacy as a moral resource is not usually generated by the movement but is “bestowed by an external source known to possess” it (B. Edwards & McCarthy

72 Although opponents of anti-violence activism, such as religious fundamentalist and “pro-family” groups, accuse it precisely of destabilizing the institution of family, this argument obviously cannot affect this activism’s legitimacy in feminists’ eyes.

2004, 126). If contentious action and direct help to survivors are two most legitimate forms of action for the feminist movement, is legitimacy what makes them “real” or are there other reasons to consider them more “real” than others? In the following, I will examine online activism and other forms of feminist practice that are typically perceived as “doing nothing” and attempt to establish what significance they have for feminists and beyond the feminist movement.

6.3. “Internet squabbles” and “armchair feminists”: online discursive action

Although often disregarded in social science accounts of feminist movements, discursive politics have arguably always played a major role in feminist practice (S. Young 1997, 17; Shaw 2012, 374). Proceeding from an understanding of power as dispersed and permeating all levels of society rather than only emanating from the state, feminists have addressed language and consciousness to resist it (Katzenstein 1998, 17; S. Young 1997, 12). Whereas in the previous decades, feminist discursive politics relied largely on speech and print (Katzenstein 1998, 17), the advent of the Internet has opened the way to online discursive politics (Shaw 2012, 375; Clark 2016, 790). In contrast to offline channels of discursive politics, digital platforms have minimal entry requirements, no institutional barriers, and provide access to wide audiences. They are thus a perfect tool for grassroots and multiply marginalized activists who seek to make themselves heard.

In post-Soviet Russia, feminist discursive politics used to be mostly restricted to professional and academic settings, such as universities, gender studies centers, and NGOs (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 266). The new feminist generation, on the other hand, has addressed a wide audience from the very beginning of its activities, and it has largely relied on digital tools to do this. In the following, I will first describe the recent history of online feminist activities in Russia and in the Russian-speaking space and then address how feminists think and speak of online action.

Ranges of online feminist activism

Russian-speaking feminists first went online in the 1990s as the women’s movement organizations launched their first websites. A major relic of that era is the Open Women Line portal (Open Women Line n.d.): still accessible in 2021, it offers an impressive catalogue of women’s movement organizations and resources, event announcements and publications on gender and women’s rights (with earlier archival materials dating as far back as 1999). However, since the women’s movement did not focus on reaching out to a mass public (Sperling 1999, 272), the online resources it created were meant for professional NGO workers or gender studies researchers rather than wider audiences (Frau_derrida, Isya, & Myjj 2009, 107).

Grassroots feminist online activism started at least around the mid-2000s with “communities”⁷³ on Livejournal, which was then the most popular and influential blogging platform on the Russian-speaking Internet (Asmolov & Kolozaridi 2021, 284): in 2004, the Ukrainian feminist community “feminism_ua” was established, then the Russian “feministki” (“Feminists”) in 2005 (Frau_derrida, Isya, & Myjj 2009, 107), soon followed by dozens of other online groups. Later, standalone feminist websites appeared, such as the Ukrainian anarchafeminist *Free!* (“Свободна! – Анархо-феминистский проект о свободе” n.d., 2007-2016) and the Russian radical lesbian *Lysistrata’s Path* (“Путь Лисистраты” n.d. since 2009).⁷⁴ These early feminist online initiatives focused on education and consciousness-raising by publishing original and translated feminist analyses and fostering discussion among an increasingly wide public interested in feminism.

As is immediately apparent from this initial description, feminist online activism was in no way limited by national borders but has rather existed from the start in what is known as Runet (Asmolov & Kolozaridi 2021, 278), a sector of the Internet defined primarily by the use of Russian as a common language and bringing together users from the post-Soviet space and those living in diaspora all over the world. To specify this in postcolonial terms, Runet in general and Russian-language online feminism in particular relies on Russian (post)colonial hegemony.⁷⁵ (Post)colonial relationships have implied close ties between various post-Soviet feminists, enabling joint action, such as the notorious #янебоюсьсказать / #янебоюсьсказать (#IAmNotAfraidToSpeak) online flashmob against sexual violence which started in Ukraine in 2016 and then spilled over to Russia and Kazakhstan (Sedysheva 2018, 197; Aripova & Johnson 2018, 488). On the darker side, however, (post)colonial power relations persist as well, which translates to this day into unequal distribution of symbolic power within online feminist communities (see Chapter 9).

As social media sidelined blogging platforms on the Russian-speaking Internet, feminists made use of these new online tools. Livejournal and other blogging platforms thus had to make way for Vkontakte and Facebook. Vkontakte,⁷⁶ a Russian social networking site modeled after Facebook (White & Mcallister 2014, 77), came to dominate the online feminist landscape for several years, just as it dominated the world of Russian social media as a whole (Asmolov & Kolozaridi 2021, 283; Baran & Stock 2015, 573). According to my observations, the Vkontakte feminist scene grew to tens of thousands of active members in hundreds of “groups” and “public pages.”⁷⁷ A smaller but still considerable feminist community populated Facebook, even though it enjoyed a far smaller overall popularity among Russian-speaking users

73 On Livejournal, a “community” (сообщество) was a term to designate a collective blog.

74 The dates are provided according to (Internet Archive n.d.).

75 The brackets are meant to indicate persisting colonial power dynamics, cf. Chapter 9.

76 VK.com, the name means “in contact” or “in touch.”

77 Russian: группы; публичные страницы, паблики. The two forms of collective spaces also exist on Facebook: public pages (called simply “pages” on Facebook) center on content posted by moderators which can then be discussed in comments; groups allow posts from all members and promote more horizontal communication.

than Vkontakte (White & Mcallister 2014, 77). These two social media were the most popular among feminists at the time I conducted my interviews in 2015 and 2016; both platforms are mentioned frequently by participants. Although no index of a grassroots movement can be complete, some idea of the scope and variety of online feminist groups and initiatives may be gained from the catalogue of Russian-language feminist resources hosted by the ONA collective (Ясенева n.d.).⁷⁸

Beyond Vkontakte and Facebook, feminist online activities have since expanded to a wide variety of platforms, including YouTube, Telegram, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Overall, the growth of online feminism seems even more sustained than the growth of feminist contentious action. In 2010, an active feminist could easily cite all the major Russian-language online feminist resources, and there was definitely not more than a dozen of them. By the mid-2010s, the non-exhaustive list of feminist resources and initiatives compiled by Alexandra Yaseneva (Ясенева n.d.) already comprised 28 pages. Today, attempting to create such a list seems futile: there are just too many feminist online resources.

What do feminists do online? A major role is still played by discursive politics: publishing and disseminating feminist analysis and critique. Whereas the first online spaces tended to publish all information related to feminism and gender, the expansion of the online feminist network has brought more specialized resources, organized both individually and collectively, that focus on specific issues (e.g. motherhood, body positivity, reproductive rights, etc.) or subjects (e.g. feminist critique of cinema and literature, transnational news on feminism, etc.). Feminist online resources have thus sought to fill the huge void of absent information on feminism and gender in the Russian-language information space. For most of my participants as well as numerous other feminists, the Internet was where they first discovered feminism.

Feminist online discursive politics are inherently dialogical, and debates have always been an integral part of feminist online life. With varying degrees of heat, feminists hold external debates with those who do not identify as feminist in order to promote and defend feminist values. At the same time, internal debates on ideology help articulate the feminist agenda, goals and methods, thus ultimately crystallizing the feminist collective identity. While the feminist scene was small, differences were easily overlooked, whereas sharing the overarching feminist identity mattered more. As the scene grew, however, major ideological conflicts shaped and delineated several strands, including liberal, socialist, anarchafeminists, radical, intersectional and queer feminists. Conflicts have also led feminists to clarify and articulate their politics with regard to specific issues, such as homophobia/heterosexism, transphobia/cissexism, motherhood, sex work, racism, colonialism/coloniality.

78 This collective has also visualized some feminist groups as the “Feminist Map of Russia” (РФО “Она” n.d.). According to the Internet Archive, the map was uploaded on the website at least in 2016 and the catalogue in 2018 (Internet Archive n.d.).

Besides what might be considered purely discursive goals, a significant cluster of online feminist resources is devoted to building and maintaining communities and networks. This is most apparent on Vkontakte where online spaces are used to organize locally, with several dozens of groups and public pages bringing together feminists in specific cities or regions. Several more aggregating platforms on Vkontakte gather information on feminist groups and events across Russia, thus enabling cross-regional networking and cooperation and helping feminists in various places find each other.

Various means of cultural production and entertainment occupy an increasingly noticeable place in online feminist spaces. Resources devoted to feminist poetry, cartoons, humor, memes, and music have proliferated, and feminists use increasingly diverse creative tools to have fun together and to promote feminist ideas through artistic production. Technological developments have contributed to this, for instance, with the advent of social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube that encourage users to produce visual content. However, a major role was also certainly played by the expansion of the feminist online community which now includes numerous skilled and inspired feminist cartoonists, designers, illustrators, writers, poets, musicians, comedians, etc.

Just like women's organizations used the Internet for online self-presentation in the web's early days, so does the new feminist generation also use online platforms to support offline activities. It is common for feminists to first establish a local online group or chat (e.g. after finding each other at general feminist resources) and then proceed to hold face-to-face meetings, organize events and protests. Numerous feminist collectives operate offline and online, sometimes across several social networking platforms. The opposite scenario is not unusual either: after a face-to-face event, the online space initially created to inform about it may live on as a platform for online communication. This entanglement of the online and offline is, as researchers have observed, typical of contemporary Internet use: rather than a distinct virtual or cyberspace, the Internet is experienced in contemporary society as embedded in the everyday (Hine 2015, 14).

The online feminist life is vibrant, ever-growing and multifaceted. Yet whether it has anything to do with activism and politics remains an open question for many. In the next section, I will examine the meanings feminists attach to online action.

Online activism: significant but lacking legitimacy

Despite the considerable place online activities occupy in the everyday life of feminist scenes, online feminist action remains a contested method both outside and within feminist scenes, and its significance and impact are continuously questioned. It is common to think of online activities as taking place in the "virtual," which is imagined as detached from the "real world." Consequently, online occurrences are often contrasted in interviews to "real" action or activism or "actual" change. While talking to Alexandra, I asked her how feminism had affected her everyday life. After thinking hard and citing a number of examples, she paused and said:

Actually, this is a good question. (*Laughs.*) Facebook squabbles... Facebook squabbles, that's all fine and clear, isn't it? You became a feminist so now you... But what about personal life, what has actually changed there? (*Laughs.*)

Alexandra trivializes "Facebook squabbles," constructing them as a routine and self-evident feminist activity, common for anyone who became a feminist. She contrasts them to what might have "actually changed" in one's personal life, implying that online debates do not produce any "actual" change. By drawing this comparison, Alexandra effectively reframes my initial question on personal feminist empowerment in terms of the so-called "real feminist" debate:⁷⁹ which requirements should one fulfill to deserve to be called a feminist? From this perspective, "Facebook squabbles" are both trivial and insufficient: as they allegedly deliver no tangible result, they are, indeed, a "waste of efforts," as Nadezhda put it in the first quote of this chapter.

Concern that the movement is wasting time and energy on useless online discussions and conflicts is common both among my participants and in feminist scenes more generally. Imagined as "virtual," the Internet is thought to have no materiality and no consequences for the "real world." Hence, all online discussions are equated to "doing nothing." However, this idea of the Internet has little to do either with how feminists actually use it or with how they experience what happens online. As outlined above, a considerable portion of feminist online activities is closely tied to offline feminist life: online tools are used to prepare face-to-face events and to stay in touch afterwards, while feminist initiatives go back and forth between existing online and offline. Thus, online communication precedes, supports, and complements face-to-face interaction. When participants describe their experiences, online and offline interactions seem to intertwine and flow into one another in their stories rather than exist in a mutual opposition. Debates that start online are continued face to face, and online communication often has the same affective impact as offline.

Indeed, it is again in Alexandra's interview that a telling example of this comes up. The interview took place shortly after Alexandra's previous activist group fell apart due to a series of political conflicts. Alexandra's account of these events was marked by feelings of misery and profound discouragement. As it turned out, these feelings equally pertained to online and face-to-face communication.

Vanya: It seems like a significant part of feminist socializing takes place on Facebook after all, doesn't it?

Alexandra: Yes. Yes. A huge part. Huge, but I feel like now everybody has sort of... burnt out, worn out—I don't know, I mean... it has become sort of shallow.

Vanya: Shallow?

79 The "real feminist" debate is another collective identity process in the feminist movement in Russia. As the term (*настоящая феминистка*) suggests, it attends to a central aspect of the feminist collective identity. Like other identity debates, it also produces considerable anxiety, unease, and frustration. Several of my participants referred to "arguments over the 'real feminist'" and emphasized they were tired of them. Cf. also Chapter 7.

Alexandra: Well, shallow, yeah, I mean... it used to be kind of deeper. There used to be posts or reposts, translations that everyone... would read and discuss. [...] And now it's somehow... now it's all somehow gloomy. [...] But you can see this by our meetings too. [...] Anyway, Facebook is definitely very much... You know, if it's important for activists who liked whom and when (*laughs*), this means basically... Yeah, we used to argue with R* publicly on Facebook before, too. And go to the J* Group and... tell them they were sexist...

In this dialogue, online communication appears extremely ambiguous. In response to my direct question, Alexandra confirms the significance of online tools (in her case, Facebook) in feminist communication; however, the idea that online communication amounts to nothing also finds reflection in her words. Crucially, Alexandra explicitly draws a parallel between Facebook interactions in her social circle and face-to-face meetings in the wake of her group's dissolution. The profound disheartenment among the people affected by the conflict appears to equally impact online and face-to-face communication.

Previously in the interview, Alexandra recounted witnessing an argument between two more feminists: one criticized the other for liking a Facebook post by a male activist whose views were, according to the former, problematic. Alexandra was amused by this "liking politics,"⁸⁰ as she called it: arguing over Facebook likes clearly seemed petty to her. She refers to this story again in the above quote to illustrate how important others find Facebook. Her laughter indicates that she does not subscribe to this perspective: apparently, she still considers Facebook likes to have no material or real existence. In the last few sentences, however, Alexandra recalls collective action her group undertook on Facebook, debating politics with other activists and groups and calling them out about their sexism. While these activities are characteristic examples of the infamous "Facebook squabbles," Alexandra recalls these moments when her group acted together with obvious nostalgia and regret: they clearly feel significant to her. I suggest that this significance is more than emotional affinity to the small community Alexandra lost: since the examples of online collective action are brought up to illustrate the idea that Facebook interactions have lost their depth and meaning, they function as examples of politically meaningful action. Thus, whereas Alexandra's account evokes the idea of the insignificance of online action, it simultaneously shows that online communication matters to her both emotionally and politically.

Whereas some feminists doubt whether what happens online has any importance, others, quite on the contrary, consider the Internet to play a crucial role in activism:

Zhenya: Basically, what doesn't exist online doesn't really exist for me. I mean, if there is a group of people who are doing something but (*laughs*) they don't have a sort of fixed, well, internet community, this sort of label, then it's hard for me to understand whether they exist or not. [...] I mean, it's rather one plus one. If there is an online group and if there is the real, something that really

80 Russian: политика лайков.

happens in life, this is activism. And if there is simply activism without even a bit of this institutionalization, or if there is an online group where nothing goes on in reality, then this is not activism to me yet.

Vanya: Uh-huh, so do you mean activism should combine the online and the offline?

Zhenya: Yes. Feminism in Russia, I mean, contemporary feminism, it all sort of stems from the Internet.

Articulating a decidedly pro-Internet stance that seems rather unconventional in light of the “real action” debate, Zhenya argues that online and offline action are equally important for activist initiatives. Although apparently radical, Zhenya’s insistence that an internet presence is necessary for an initiative to count as activism or, indeed, as “existing,” is also highly relatable to contemporary active Internet users. Interestingly, Zhenya describes establishing online presence as “institutionalization.” Rather than relating to any institutions, I suggest that this term should be understood in connection with the words “fixed” and “label” as standing for a process by which a feminist group acquires a relatively stable identity. Indeed, for the highly informal and thus, by definition, unstable grassroots groups that constitute the feminist movement, it is not uncommon to come together for a single occasion, e.g. to hold a one-time event, and dissolve afterwards. Establishing a collective online platform thus often feels like somewhat more of a commitment. Despite explicitly arguing for the Internet’s importance, however, Zhenya, too, contrasts “reality” to the online world.

One of the strongest advocates for “real action” among my participants, Tatyana Bolotina moderates several online feminist spaces alongside her offline activities. Unexpectedly, her attitude toward online action also proves ambiguous:

As to my own public pages, well, the feminist ones... I have an activist public page, A* Platform, that I am developing, when did it start? Well, the public page started in April [2015 — V. S.], early in April. Now it has a little over 400 participants. It’s a public page that focuses on activism in real life. Well, a little over 400 people in six months, this is actually few (*laughs*). Compared to other public pages where, say, they write fundamental articles about how this or that is sexism... This rather upsets me, of course, because it follows that people seem to read by and large the same information, and only very few are ready for action.

Making an argument in defense of “activism in real life,” Tatyana clearly contrasts it to online activities. Again, she uses “activism in real life,” “activism,” and “action” interchangeably, and admits feeling frustrated at people who choose general feminist educational resources instead. Yet in order to measure the relative popularity of “activism in real life” and “fundamental articles on sexism,” it is subscriber numbers at online resources she takes as a reference. Thus she inadvertently shows how much online tools matter to her in practice. Even though Tatyana insists on the need for mass “activism in real life,” she also acknowledges

the potential impact of online discursive activism: not only does she advocate for encouraging “real activism” by online discursive means (creating a “breeding ground,” in her words), she also practices this kind of online discursive activism by developing her “activist” public page.

As the above quotes demonstrate, feminists’ view of online action is marked by a paradox: while de facto, it plays a significant role in feminist activist life, this role is often denied in speech. Feminists acknowledge various kinds of online discursive action and its potential impact on activist scenes as well as wider audiences. Nevertheless, they routinely contrast online practices to “action” and “activism.” This invalidation of online action clearly relies partly on the idea of the Internet as “virtual,” an immaterial sphere with no connection to the “real world.” However, if compared to those forms of action that are deemed “real,” namely contentious action and direct help to survivors of abuse, another major difference comes to the fore: whereas these forms of action have legitimacy conferred upon them from external sources (namely, the activist glorifying discourse on protest and the previous feminist generation, respectively), online practices have no such external source of legitimacy.

The risks of online action

Whereas for contentious action, risks are a big issue both in practical and in discursive terms, what are the risks of online action? Discursively, online practices are not often constructed as risky, especially since they are widely not considered to be “action.” Yet in practice, as the Russian state increases its control over the Internet, the risks of online activism in general and feminist online activism in particular increase as well.

While the early Internet in Russia was notoriously free from state censorship, the authorities increased regulation and control over online media after the mass mobilization of 2011–2012 (Asmolov & Kolozaridi 2021, 286). This has meant, notably, blocking information on political issues on social media (Shedov, Smirnova, & Glushkova 2019) and prosecuting social media users on charges of “extremism” and “endorsement of terrorism” for posts, reposts, and likes (Gabdulhakov 2020, 288). In addition to this, the 2013 ban on “gay propaganda to minors” introduced censorship on LGBTIQ topics and raised the question of minors’ access to online content (Stella & Nartova 2016, 29; Buyantueva 2018, 473).

My participants were aware of the risks and took precautions. Some made sure to add the label “18+” to their online platforms’ names, just as several LGBTIQ online platforms did, in an attempt to protect themselves from possible accusations of “propaganda.” Others regularly cleaned their online groups’ history, deleting older posts on previous meetings and events. Apparently, they were right in trying to protect themselves, as the state has indeed used repression against feminists for their online activities. For instance, Yulia Usach from Krasnodar and Lyubov

Kalugina from Omsk⁸¹ have faced charges of extremism for “inciting hatred against men” (Голос Кубани 2016; Stahl 2018). Yet the best-known case of repression against feminists is certainly feminist and LGBT activist Yulia Tsvetkova from Komsomolsk-on-Amur who has been charged with “distributing pornography” and “gay propaganda” for cartoons she published on social media (Sherwin 2020). Tsvetkova spent several months under house arrest. Her trial started in April 2021 and is still ongoing as of August; she may go to prison for 2 to 6 years (Cascone 2021). As a feminist and LGBT activist, she has received unprecedented support from feminists, the media, and human rights organizations across and beyond Russia (ILGA Europe 2020; “Free Yulia Tsvetkova” n.d.).

These cases of repression demonstrate that even if feminists do not always consider online action to be political, the state does define it as such. Although online communication used to be relatively risk-free until 2012, risks associated with it have drastically increased since, reducing the difference between offline and online activism in this respect. However, in contrast to contentious action, there is no entrenched discourse on the dangers of online activism as such.

6.4. Falling off the discursive grid: offline discursive and community-oriented action

If the above discussion has focused on three forms of action (contention, direct help, and online discursive action), this is not to suggest that they exhaust the feminist movement’s repertoire. Rather, I began with examining them because they are the three major references in the “real action” debate, which, I argue, expresses a fundamental conflict around definitions of action and politics. Before exploring this conflict in detail, however, it is necessary first to complete the picture of feminist practice. I will do this in this section by briefly considering two more forms of action that fall off the grid of the intra-movement “real action” debate: offline discursive action and community work.

Indeed, what feminists do offline is not limited to protest and helping abuse survivors. They also hold public talks and discussions, movie screenings, concerts, festivals, theater plays, and various other non-contentious public events that target wide audiences and aim to raise awareness on feminist issues and promote the feminist agenda. To what extent such discursive and cultural action can be considered non-contentious is open to debate. Indeed, social movement research suggests that all tactics used by social movements by definition include elements of contestation or protest, insofar as they aim to produce change in power relations (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 268). Unlike typical contentious action, however, these

81 Radical feminist Lyubov Kalugina is an infamous figure in the feminist scene in Russia and, arguably, in the Russian-speaking space. On her online platforms, she not only vehemently attacked men, but also women she judged patriarchal, queer and trans people, and intersectional feminists. Although a large part of the online feminist community felt quite bitter toward her, many still supported her during her extremism trial.

discursive and cultural tactics do not primarily make claims to the state but rather target society at large by introducing new concepts, meanings, and cultural practices (Melucci 1996, 183).

As outlined above, a segment of online feminist platforms aim at building and maintaining feminist communities. These are non- or semi-public online spaces, mutual support platforms, etc. Of course, community-oriented activism also occurs offline: feminists hold non-public meetings, reading groups, camps, workshops, self-defense classes, groups for playing sports or board games, etc. For contemporary feminists in Russia, community building plays a crucial role: it helps articulate the feminist collective identity, provides emotional support and shelter from outside hostility. Due to their importance for the feminist movement, I examine feminist communities in more detail in Chapter 7.

In contrast to online discursive action, offline discursive/cultural and community work is not immediately targeted in the “real action debate”: whereas the former is directly disparaged as “Internet squabbles,” both latter do not typically fall under scrutiny by proponents of “real action.” Yet, just like online discursive activism, these forms of action are routinely equated to “doing nothing.” Consider the following excerpt from the interview with Natasha whose group holds non-public meetings and public talks, the latter being Natasha’s personal responsibility:

Vanya: Ideally, would you like the media, for instance, to cover what you do?

Natasha: Well... that’s the thing, we don’t do anything much. I mean... how should I put it? Any specific projects, like... (*clears her throat*) a center or some volunteer projects. The only thing we do is public talks. That’s not much. In news... we had a bit of coverage, no more. But why does anyone need to know there’s a group that doesn’t do anything? (*Laughs.*)

From Natasha’s perspective, the work she and her feminist group do is not enough to qualify as “doing something” and thus not worthy of media coverage. To explain which action deserves promotion in the media, she evokes “a center,” “projects,” and “volunteers”: characteristic NGO jargon. This brings her reflection close to the argument on direct help to survivors as “real” action: indeed, supporting survivors of violence is a typical, but by far not the only kind of work done by women’s and other NGOs. Whereas professionalized NGO work has legitimacy, her own activities do not, and thus, apparently, do not deserve media coverage, even though they aim at raising awareness and thus would logically seem to benefit from additional promotion.

As this example demonstrates, it is not just online discursive activism that is contrasted to legitimate forms of action like professionalized NGO work. I argue that just as online discursive activism, offline discursive action and community building lack legitimacy in feminists’ eyes because there is no established discourse that would substantiate their significance for the feminist movement. Instead, all these

forms of action are imagined as “just talk” or “doing nothing,” in other words, they are excluded from the sphere of “action.” Consequently, feminists who focus their efforts on these forms of action often find their contributions invalidated.

6.5. The “real action” debate and feminist collective identity

As I have argued above, the “real action” debate contrasts legitimate forms of action, namely contentious action and direct help to survivors of violence, to those forms of action that lack legitimacy: primarily online discursive activism, but also, more implicitly, offline discursive action and community building. Having provided above an overview of each form of action and associated meanings and discourses, I will now examine more closely the debate as such and its relationship to the feminist collective identity process.

The “real action” debate does not always play out in plain sight. Unlike overtly ideological debates, e.g. over trans people or sex work, that tend to be recurring and sometimes extremely vehement, this conflict often runs latently and implicitly. It manifests itself in subtle ways—for instance, as illustrated by quotes in the above sections, through the choice of words, when “activism,” “real activism,” and “activism in real life” are used interchangeably. Yet at times, feminist activists also recur to explicit shaming directed against those who do not do “real activism,” which may be expressed in harsh, judgmental labels like “cowards,” “passivists,” or “armchair feminists.”

The phrase “armchair feminist”⁸² is a feminist adaptation of the ironic expression “armchair activist.”⁸³ In both cases, the irony is predicated on the idea that politics cannot be practiced out of the comfort of one’s home. Activists who use these labels have their reasons: first of all, the general feminist consensus is that the overall situation regarding gender equality in Russia is abysmal, thus both contentious action and direct help of the type done by NGOs are considered urgently necessary to push for change in state policies and compensate for the lack of state social support. At the same time, as demonstrated above, feminist contentious action entails high risks, which can make activists feel that they are sacrificing their safety for a common goal. This is clearly reinforced by the activist discourse that frames contentious action as necessary and heroic self-sacrifice. As a result, when fewer people turn up or support their initiatives than expected, feminist organizers understandably feel frustrated and tend to interpret this as lack of solidarity.

Yet those who are labeled “armchair feminists” have their own accusations to wield. This is how Simha, a trans person and moderator of an online support group, sees the matter:

82 Russian: диванная феминистка, literally “sofa feminist.”

83 Russian: диванный активист. Other related common expressions are “sofa troops” (диванные войска), used primarily in the context of wars, and “sofa expert” (диванный эксперт).

When there is something really huge and horrible going on, this prevails over my fear, of course... but... all in all, I believe I can do more useful work... sitting at home, however paradoxical this may sound. I've noticed this trend in contemporary Russian feminism that if a person goes out to street protests, this ranks very highly, you sort of win points within the scene, so to speak, right? And if you sit at home, you are called an armchair feminist straight away, and that's it. It's like a label. And all the way... people say: "Oh, we're inclusive, we take you all into account," but they can't even acknowledge that someone can't take to the streets simply because of their disabilities, or even due to fear. Fear is not considered something serious. Well, everyone should be fearless, of course, and go and burn down to the ground. There is no concept of someone who participates as far as they can. With their contribution being valued. I mean, there are only two categories: either you burn out doing this work, or you're a nobody, a complete non-entity. This pains me, of course. Very much.

Previously in the interview, Simha explained that his chronic illness prevents him from participating at loud and crowded protests (cf. Chapter 8). He bitterly criticizes the perspective that centers contentious action, highlighting how it glorifies protest while downplaying other forms of feminist action. By pointing out structural barriers to protest, he addresses how centering protest unfairly excludes several groups of potential supporters. While Simha admits his fear, just like several other participants, he does not apologize for it but rather suggests that fear may have valid reasons. Simha also challenges the hierarchy of activist tactics he observes in the feminist scene and argues instead for acknowledging every contribution, whatever its form.

Simha's argument reveals a direct connection to feminist thought. Indeed, the ideas of acknowledging invisible work, of respecting people's various needs and limitations are widely discussed in Russian-speaking feminist scenes with regard to a wide variety of issues beyond forms of action. Speaking as someone who experiences multiple intersecting oppressions, Simha defends his own chosen form of action, namely online community building, by arguing for respecting difference. He articulates, in fact, a feminist critique of the perspective that centers contentious action.

This critique illuminates the deeper meaning of the "real action" debate and showcases its direct connection to the feminist collective identity process: not only does this debate pertain to the movement's chosen methods, but it also touches upon the ideological content of feminist action. The collective identity process is understood as a process whereby a movement develops a self-definition, which includes shared language, practices, cultural artifacts, as well as definitions of goals and tactics (Melucci 1996, 70–71). The "real action" debate is integral to this process of negotiating a collective understanding of "who we are as a movement." Several sources are available to feminists who seek to define this. As a movement, a

collective actor of change, they can draw from the general activist discourse that centers contentious politics. As a feminist collective actor, they can draw from the immediate feminist tradition and follow the path of professionalized help as activism paved by the previous feminist generation. Finally, they can also draw from their own practice and center those forms of action, albeit inconspicuous and easily dismissible, that occupy a major place in their activist everyday. These possible choices, in turn, can be linked to distinct strands of feminist thought. For instance, whereas the contentious politics approach per se does not rely on feminist arguments, there is certainly empowerment in doing contentious politics as a woman (or a trans or non-binary person) since this implies claiming social space and agency as a political subject. The approach that validates discursive and community-oriented activism, on the other hand, can draw on the feminist idea of acknowledging and respecting difference.

Several participants quoted above have touched upon what I suggest can be labeled the relative usefulness of various forms of action. What makes feminists argue that they “can do more useful work... sitting at home” or doubt whether contentious action “impacts anything”? How are these concerns connected to the issue of “real action”? The link between them, I suggest, are the feminist movement’s goals, which will be the focus of the next section.

6.6. Useful tactics and feminist goals

A movement’s goals are arguably the most prominent element of its collective identity. In a way, for outside onlookers and movement members alike, the movement is its goals. The movement’s tactical repertoire, in turn, depends directly on how goals are defined, and tactics are judged useful or worthwhile⁸⁴ to the extent that they help achieve the movement’s goals.

The major forms of action in the “real action” debate correspond to different goals. Contentious action is meant primarily to make claims and demands to the state (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 9–10).⁸⁵ For movement actors who are situated outside of the political system and have no access to institutional channels of claim-making, contentious action is often the only or the most readily available channel to convince governments to adopt the policies they want (cf. Snow, Soule, & Kriesi 2004, 6–7; Tarrow 2011, 7). In the specific case of feminist movements, contentious action is well-suited to demand policies aiming for more gender equality, from votes for women to equal pay.

However, feminist goals have historically been broader than this. Rather than only demanding more equal representation within the political system or specific legal protection, feminists have sought to challenge power as it manifests itself at all levels

84 The term “effective” suggests itself here. Following some of my participants, however, I prefer to avoid it due to its neoliberal connotations.

85 To describe the wide variety of social movements, researchers specify that states can be involved at later stages or in other roles than targets of action (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 7). As my focus is feminist movements, however, I do not consider these options in detail.

of social interaction (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 264; Lloyd 2013, 117). These are discursive goals bearing upon language and consciousness, and they call for discursive and cultural action (S. Young 1997, 13; Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 46). While laws and state policies also shape discourse in major ways, changing the way society thinks about gender and power requires a variety of discursive tactics that go beyond struggles over legislation.

Community-building is a primarily internal activity directed at the movement itself. This is supportive work which aims, above all, to enable other forms of action by building and maintaining the movement's collective identity (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 113). As to direct help to abuse survivors and other forms of feminist social support, to the extent that they occur within a feminist framework,⁸⁶ their goals, too, concern transforming the tissue of social relationships by empowering marginalized people and resisting patriarchal violence rather than confronting governments.

Of course, a given form of action can work toward several goals at once. For instance, contentious action can and often does produce discursive and cultural impact (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 269; Meyer 2003, 35). The relationship between goals and tactics is thus not one-to-one. However, if a movement's primary goals are not related to making claims to authorities, the relative usefulness of contentious action compared to other forms of action can be questioned. To see whether this is the case of the feminist movement, let us examine how feminists speak about the movement's goals.

Discursive goals

There are clear claims concerning policy on the current feminist agenda in Russia, such as the law on domestic violence or securing abortion rights. However, when I asked feminists directly about their goals, this was not what most of them cited, either with regard to the movement as a whole or to their particular groups or initiatives. This is how Natasha who organized public talks with invited speakers and whose group also held non-public meetings spoke about her group's goals:

Vanya: How do you define what the aim of these talks is, for example? Or of your group in general?

Natasha: Yeah. We've thought about this... a lot. But we decided that our group would be firstly... a community and a platform where people can meet and discuss... interesting topics with like-minded people, and secondly, an educational platform. Because... there's no freaking base, I mean, no people who have established opinions, who could do something or go vote, I mean, we must freaking educate—this is ground zero, the very base.

Natasha identifies the group's goals as discursive (education) and community-oriented; at the same time, she also holds a contentious agenda in sight. She makes it clear that a collective reflection took place in the group to set goals, and her use of

⁸⁶ As opposed to those institutionalized NGO settings where social support becomes depoliticized, cf. (Ghodsee 2004, 728; Johnson 2018, 135).

the adversative “but” (“but we decided”) subtly hints that there must have been differences of opinion.

As Natasha points out, both community work and public education are necessary to lay the basis for other, including contentious, forms of action. Again, she echoes the “real action” debate by mentioning “people who could do something”; she also brings up voting as a conventional channel of political participation. Natasha thus envisions a wide spectrum of possible ways to bring about change and considers all of them desirable but believes feminists currently do not have enough resources to use them. The impatience she expresses (“we must freaking educate”) suggests that she, just as many other feminists, considers the current situation urgent and feminist interventions overdue. The discrepancy between the wide range of needed action and lack of resources is probably what explains Natasha’s “but”: although she and her group support various forms of action, they decide against them for the time being, focusing on community-oriented and discursive tasks as ways to strengthen the feminist collective identity and recruit more sympathizers and, potentially, members—in other words, to mobilize cultural and human resources (B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 126–27).

Many of my participants consider education a central goal not only for their specific groups, but also for the feminist movement as a whole. These are, in essence, discursive goals, but the term “discursive” is rarely used to describe them. In fact, there is no single, widely-accepted expression to designate this set of goals and corresponding practices: participants use words like “education,” “awareness-raising,” or “promotion.”⁸⁷ This adds another detail to the picture of discursive politics as a type of politics that lacks legitimacy: if discursive action is not even considered action, it is logical that it has no specific name. Despite lacking legitimacy, however, discursive goals clearly matter immensely to feminists. As explained by Zara, a feminist who is mostly active on the Internet:

Vanya: In your opinion, what are feminism’s goals at the moment?

Zara: At the moment, I believe it’s raising awareness. Because there are... absurd stereotypes on feminism, especially on the Russian Internet, but actually everywhere. And people should get information on feminism from feminists first hand. [...]

Vanya: Uh-huh. So you say raising awareness. To be more specific, what exactly should it be about? I mean, if we speak in terms of an agenda, what do you find—

Zara: Everything, everything of interest for feminists... Spreading any information that has to do with feminism, I mean, news, and history too... Just everything, from reposting articles to writing our own. Just talking to friends, explaining theory to newcomers... Everything. Raising awareness in any and every way.

87 Russian: просвещение, распространение информации, популяризация. Some possible alternative translations are “enlightenment,” “outreach,” and “spreading information.”

Zara argues for raising awareness as the feminist movement's central goal by pointing out that the mainstream public idea of feminism is distorted and formed by people with no first-hand knowledge on the subject. She thus identifies a vast discursive field of action where feminists need to intervene. By emphasizing the equally encompassing need for discursive action in all forms and spheres, Zara conveys a sense of urgency similar to the one discussed above with regard to state policies and contentious action.

Yet while Zara suggests a wide array of both online and face-to-face discursive interventions, she does not cite any contentious tactics. Nor does anything in the spectrum she describes point toward an interaction with the state. It seems that Zara is uninterested in that kind of politics, focusing exclusively on the politics of discourse. In this sense, her perspective differs from Natasha who considers community building and discursive activism as tools that may enable more conventional political action in the future. For Zara, on the other hand, rather than being an accessory, discursive change is apparently a goal in itself.

The discrepancy between how much feminists focus on discursive politics in practice and how little discursive goals and action are acknowledged produces considerable confusion around the feminist movement. Among my participants, this confusion was articulated by Natalia Zviagina, a human rights activist and lawyer from Voronezh. Despite being a member of a feminist online chat, Natalia did not identify as a feminist at the time of the group interview she attended. This yielded a captivating discussion during the interview, as Natalia eagerly asked other participants to explain the feminist movement to her. She also had her own observations, which she summarized at one point as follows:

I believe there is a... search for new ways going on right now, for new... forms of existence of movements, when it's enough to express solidarity by showing up in some horrible comments section and shouting down some horrible sexists... This is much more useful than, I don't know, going to a demonstration and standing on a square.

Speaking as a curious and sympathetic outsider, Natalia shows appreciation for feminists' preferred tactics. She contrasts discursive and contentious politics and suggests that the latter may not be needed any longer. Although she, too, reproduces a perspective that centers contentious politics (the phrase "it's enough" implies that online discursive action is somehow inferior to physically taking to the streets), she nevertheless explicitly submits that discursive action is "much more useful," therefore acknowledging the centrality of the feminist movement's discursive goals. Interestingly, the example of discursive activism Natalia provides is overtly confrontational. By contrasting a purely discursive confrontation to a confrontation in the sense of contentious politics, Natalia effectively suggests that it is in the "horrible comments sections," rather than on the squares, that the "real" feminist fights take place nowadays.

Whereas most above quotes explicitly address issues of tactics, the underlying meaning of feminist discursive politics remains rather implied in them. To showcase the feminist desire to change language and cultural practice, I will cite Theo,⁸⁸ a long-time feminist who is mostly active online.

Vanya: What do you wish for feminism as a whole? Do you have some sort of—

Theo: I really wish, not just for feminism, but for humanity, you know? I wish (*laughs*) that everyone suddenly realizes magically that... all are equal. And no one has to serve others or arrange their lives better than they do for themselves. I think... I even see it sometimes as... a picture where people suddenly freeze on the spot and this truth descends on them, and they think: “My goodness, how could we have done that before? It’s so obvious and simple that this woman, she... doesn’t have to do all that, she doesn’t owe me anything, she... doesn’t have to give up her life, how could I have done all that to her?” And that’s it, and then... (*Laughs.*) This is what I wish for.

The question I asked was purposefully unspecific, aiming to encourage reflection without pre-defining participants’ priorities. In response, Theo turns to a vision of an ultimate feminist utopia, imagining an instantaneous realization of feminism’s central goal. Whereas elsewhere in the interview, Theo emphasized how hard and bitter feminist activist work often is, in this fantasy, the major goal is achieved without any effort on feminists’ part. Rather more ambitious than adopting a law on domestic violence or securing abortion rights, this goal consists, in fact, in making people change their minds and refuse gender-based exploitation. The mass epiphany as Theo envisions it is both collective and personal: beginning with a “we” (“how could we have done that”), it seems first to refer to systemic relationships between the groups of oppressors and oppressed, but turns then to how oppression manifests itself at the interpersonal level (“this woman,” “how could I”). Crucially, this fundamental message of equality and justice is articulated at a global scale, intended neither for the authorities, nor even for the elites, but for “humanity.” Just as the message is global, so must be the effect: although the fantasy is sketched very briefly, it is nevertheless clear that, should any such mass change of consciousness ever occur by miracle or some other, more ordinary means, the impact would be huge, encompassing all levels of social, cultural, and political life.

The unconventional framing notwithstanding, the core of Theo’s vision can be shared by many feminists. Indeed, the idea that at least one of feminism’s central goals is discursive, that is to say, has to do with communication and dissemination of ideas and values, is recurring among feminists, as demonstrated by the above quotes. Whereas in Theo’s fantasy, the goal is achieved instantly and any application of specific tools is skipped, in the bleaker reality, it is clearly discursive tactics that are useful to convey the feminist message.

88 This is the participant’s preferred spelling. The final o is pronounced as an “o.”

Contentious goals

Whereas discursive goals occupy a central place on the feminist agenda, contentious goals are not absent from it either. The feminist movement's central claim to the Russian government is certainly the adoption of a law on domestic violence. A target of sustained efforts by feminist activists since the early 2000s, this claim is still regularly articulated through feminist contentious action (Галеева 2017; Меркурьева 2020). However, it has still not been met (Sundstrom 2018, 227), nor has Russia ratified the Istanbul Convention (Sundstrom, Sperling, & Sayoglu 2019, 171). Moreover, in 2017, the Russian state decriminalized simple battery,⁸⁹ an article previously used to prosecute domestic violence (Semukhina 2020, 15). Since the state pursues neopatriarchal policies grounded in explicit neopatriarchal ideology, there seems indeed to be few opportunities for implementing feminist reforms. Arguably, the feminist movement has been more successful in preventing further legal entrenchment of gender inequality—a striking example is the 2011 abortion rights campaign that has successfully stopped several harsh restrictions on access to reproductive rights from being imposed by law (cf. Sperling 2015, 255; Rivkin-Fish 2018, 22).

Yet demanding reform is not the only end feminist contentious action can serve. Feminists also use contentious tactics to pursue more specific, clearly delimited goals, for instance to support feminist activists or survivors of gender-based violence persecuted by the state. Tatyana Bolotina recalled in her interview the solidarity campaign to support Tatyana Kulakova, a survivor of domestic violence who killed her husband in self-defense and was sentenced to four years in prison: with fellow feminists, Bolotina organized a picket line in front of the court building during the appeal hearing and started an online petition demanding Kulakova's release. Indeed, Kulakova was pardoned and released at one of the following hearings in 2015 (Чалова 2015). Mari Davtyan, a feminist lawyer and co-author of the most recent law draft on domestic violence still pending consideration in the State Duma, attributes equal credit for Kulakova's pardon to her lawyer and to feminist activists. According to Davtyan, this was one of the first feminist solidarity campaigns that has directly impacted a gender-related court case (Ходырева 2020). A later widely-known case that also became a milestone for the feminist movement was the case of the Khachatryan sisters, teenage survivors put on trial for killing their abusive father (cf. Chapter 5). An unprecedented feminist solidarity campaign to support the three sisters included numerous protests across Russia and abroad (Safonova 2019; Perera 2019a).

As these examples demonstrate, feminist contentious action can produce immediate impact, especially in reaching specific, clearly defined goals related to justice for individuals. Yet due to the Russian state's overall policy and unwillingness to engage in dialogue with society, the fruitfulness of large-scale contentious action remains unclear and questionable. Meanwhile, even the more obviously successful examples

89 Russian: побои.

cited above are not purely contentious: the Kulakova campaign included an online petition alongside a picket line, and the Khachaturyan campaign encompassed several non-contentious cultural events (Васякина 2019). In both cases as well as numerous others, feminists' efforts were directed at attracting media attention, as it is believed that publicity can sway the court's decision in favor of violence survivors.⁹⁰ These campaigns are thus both contentious and discursive in their tactics and goals. Indeed, feminist support in self-defense cases like those of Kulakova and the Khachaturyan sisters frames the survivors' individual stories as systemic, combining demands of pardon and release with an articulation of broader feminist critique of gender-based violence and victim blaming (Торочешникова 2015; Митрофанова 2019).

When feminists speak about the movement's general goals, discursive considerations tend to outweigh contentious ones. Whereas some view discursive action as a tool for mobilizing human resources and thus, ultimately, for ensuring more fruitful action on conventional political arenas, many perceive discursive change, framed as "education" or "awareness-raising," as a goal in itself. Although contentious goals are also part of the feminist agenda, they are largely inscribed in an overarching discursive framework.

Examining how feminists articulate the movement's goals and the relative usefulness of various forms of action provides additional context to the understanding of the "real action" debate. If one were to define as "real" those forms of action that are more useful to advance toward the movement's goals, it is certainly discursive politics that would be considered "real." In fact, however, it is legitimacy based on external sources (cf. B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 126), rather than the movement's goals, that defines "real action."

6.7. Collective identity and definitions of politics

In the above sections, I have pursued two interrelated goals: to provide an overview of the scope and variety of feminist action and to analyze why some forms of action matter more than others in feminists' eyes. I have tried to demonstrate that what is considered "real action" depends on the legitimacy of a given form of action rather than any other considerations. Ultimately, I have argued, the "real action" debate is an important part of the feminist collective identity process, as it touches upon the feminist movement's tactics as well as on the ideological contents of feminist action.

The "real action" argument represents the feminist movement as divided into those who sacrifice themselves by protesting or by providing direct help and those who do nothing but argue on the Internet. Yet feminist practice is different. Firstly, there are more forms of feminist action than this debate suggests, notably community-

90 Recent campaigns of this kind, such as the one in support of the Khachaturyan sisters, have been held transnationally (Perera 2019a). As a rule, activists try to secure as much support as possible. The risks of symbolically associating the campaign and the person it focuses on with the West are generally considered less relevant than the goal of signaling to the court that the public cares for the person's fate.

oriented and offline discursive and cultural action. Secondly, various forms of action are not mutually exclusive. Online and offline activities are closely intertwined and complement each other, and one form of action may fulfill several goals simultaneously. Finally, the same people can embody, to various extents, both sides of the debate at once. Most quotes cited above indicate a simultaneous presence of discourses that legitimize certain forms of action and appreciation of forms of action rooted in everyday feminist practice. Thus feminists recognize the legitimacy of established forms of action but are also aware of the advantages offered by less established forms.

What sense does it make to argue over “real action”? Indeed, isn’t this debate just another petty “squabble” feminists would do better to leave aside to focus on more worthwhile tasks? Although this conflict, as any other, may be tiring and frustrating, I suggest that it is essentially productive rather than harmful. As feminist researchers have argued, conflicts and debates over definitions are central to the movements’ collective identity process: it is through conflict that multiple experiences are made visible and new forms of social life produced. Accordingly, conflicts are neither side-effects nor encumbrance, but signs of the movement’s vitality and relevance (Whittier 1995, 18; Maddison & Shaw 2012, 418). The “real action” debate belongs to the feminist collective identity process since it negotiates what the feminist movement does and what it considers worthwhile to do. This debate thus touches upon the definition of politics, which potentially has implications reaching far beyond the feminist movement.

To the extent that “real action” is understood in terms of contentious politics, there is, indeed, a clear understanding of politics involved as well. As illustrated by Katerina Maas from Tomsk:

Vanya: And you said that you don’t define your group and how you talk there, you don’t consider this politics, do you?

Katerina: No, I don’t. We’re a club. It’s just that if we say we’re a political group, we have to do something. And we’ve got a whole Tomsk parliament full of people who define themselves as politicians and effing do nothing at all, so... well... I don’t see the point. Politics is... (*sighs*) if, say, tomorrow we start a campaign for abortion rights, then we’ll become a kind of... group in Tomsk that promotes that. But as long as we come together and discuss how to get rid of internalized misogyny, we’re not a political group...

For Katerina, politics are directly tied to the government and professional politicians, whom she deeply distrusts. If political action is possible outside of the institutional realm, according to her, then it is contentious politics like a campaign against abortion rights. Although Katerina has started a group that comes together in non-public meetings to “discuss how to get rid of internalized misogyny,” although these meetings clearly matter enough to her to invest her organizing efforts, these activities are not “political” in her eyes.

On the other hand, different understandings of politics can sometimes be articulated precisely in this kind of community-oriented groups. This is what the following dialogue between Natasha and Maria demonstrates:

Natasha: And overall... I've said before that the fact that our group exists already shows people a sort of alternative.

Maria: Yes.

Natasha: That there is a different... And that you can watch, read, learn something new, a new way of life.

Maria: As to me, I rather feel, you know, that it is nevertheless a unit of a civil society. What we're being prevented from doing. Which is so very frustrating. Just really. I mean, how long can this go on? In the 90s, we thought we'd escaped, so to say, we thought we'd at least ensured our children—but now look at what's happening!

In the above sections, I quoted Natasha maintaining that her group “did not do anything much” and pointing out the importance of discursive and community-building work for mobilizing human and cultural resources (“we must freaking educate”). In this dialogue, she highlights the directly discursive function of community building: even if a feminist group does not do anything publicly, its existence is already a message to the larger society. Namely, by its mere existence, a feminist group sends a critical message on the patriarchal status quo and on the possibility of resistance. As Natasha suggests, this resistance is closely tied to being exposed to discursive and cultural sources (texts, movies, knowledge) and alternative practices (“a new way of life”). Maria, in turn, reacts to Natasha's words by further emphasizing the idea of resistance and placing their group in the realm of politics: even though she does not say this word, she makes references to political concepts by bringing up “civil society” and state repression. Again, she references the 90s, here as a time of freedom which is now lost. A non-public group that, in terms of the “real action” debate, would not seem to take any “action,” appears here to be “nevertheless” an island of political resistance.

Reflecting on the significance of their feminist group, Natasha and Maria contradict a narrow definition of politics that only acknowledges action targeting the state. It is in discussions like this one, I suggest, that the “real action” debate proves productive: grounded in feminist practice, reflection on why they do what they do brings feminists toward a broader definition of politics. They acknowledge that community-oriented work is not only supportive for the feminist movement, but also directly political as it produces change by challenging the patriarchal status quo. Reflection grounded in practice thus potentially represents an independent source of legitimation for those forms of action that lack legitimacy.

Raising the question of how politics are defined, the feminist movement's “real action” debate parallels scholarly discussion in social movement research. Indeed, it is precisely the narrow focus on the state and institutional politics inherent to much

of social movement research that has come under criticism from theorists of new social movements (Melucci 1985, 798) and feminist scholars (Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 39; Shaw 2012, 377; S. Young 1997, 226). The classical contentious politics paradigm of social movement research conceives of politics as only concerning the state (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 10), which makes researchers overlook movements' discursive action (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, 268). Accordingly, and notably with regard to feminist movements, researchers tend to claim that the movement has subsided or is "dead," even as the movement continues to strengthen its networks and secure long-lasting change at society's various levels (Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 48; Whittier 1995, 51).

I argue that this issue has also shaped scholarship on contemporary feminism in Russia. If authors have written that feminism in Russia has "failed" (Turbine 2015, 327) or is "non-existent" (Muravyeva 2018, 11), this is largely because they conceive of movements in terms of contentious politics. As they expect to see federal organizations with formal membership, funding, and centralized campaigns, the local, informal, and volatile feminist collectives do appear "small" (Sperling 2015, 216; Sundstrom, Sperling, & Sayoglu 2019, 41). As researchers focus on the Russian state's gender policies and the elites' gender performances, the grassroots initiatives do seem too insignificant to present a challenge (Sperling 2015, 4; Johnson 2018, 125). Yet this picture leaves out the feminist movement's actual goals, field of action, and tactics, which are largely discursive rather than contentious. Unnoticed, unrecognized by the state, the media, and the academia, feminists have been doing the fundamental work of challenging power as it is woven into the very tissue of social reality. Feminist researchers have long called for rethinking social movement theory in feminist terms and specifically for broadening the definition of politics and power (Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 48). This reconceptualization is necessary to see feminist movements, in Russia as elsewhere.

7. Feminist communities: shielding and nurturing the movement

The fact that Russia's state policies are explicitly neopatriarchal and antifeminist and that Russian society is largely unsupportive of feminism has been repeated so often both in academic and media sources that it seems to have become cliché.⁹¹ As I have argued in the above chapters, this discourse has the problematic consequence of constructing antifeminism in Russia as monolithic and unsurpassable, and feminist resistance, accordingly, as an exception or aberration. In order to challenge this perception while at the same time acknowledging the impact of the social and political environment on the feminist movement, I ask in this chapter what it is that enables feminists to do feminist politics in an undeniably hostile context.

In almost all interviews, my participants have spoken of the importance of being around other feminists, of not feeling alone, of finding a group of people who speak your language, provide empathy and support. They have described the value they saw in being able to withdraw to a collective space separated from the larger society that can shield them from the aggression that often occurs there. I argue that these considerations are best understood through the concept of social movement community: an informal collectivity that is based on the movement's collective identity and is at the same time co-constitutive of it. By fostering emotional bonds and enforcing specific rules of interaction, I suggest that such feminist groups empower their members, providing them with the necessary resources to withstand hostility. Moreover, by articulating feminist understandings and introducing feminist practices, I argue that these groups also directly produce political innovation, which has potential implications for larger society as well.

In the following, I will examine how participants reflect on the feelings of belonging and togetherness they experience in their feminist collectives and which practices they use to create and maintain them. I will then bring these findings into dialogue with social movement theory and argue for using the concept of social movement community to address the specific character and functions of these groups. Further, I will discuss how feminists contrast their collectives to the wider environment beyond them and examine antifeminist hostility and feminist everyday discursive politics outside of dedicated feminist spaces. My assessment of the levels of hostility against feminism is based primarily on the data collected in 2015 and 2016 as well as my earlier observations; later observations, on the other hand, suggest an ostensible change in attitudes toward feminism. I discuss this at the end of the chapter along with the meaning of feminist communities for feminist collective identity and for other forms of feminist political action.

⁹¹ Some of the data and ideas presented in this chapter first appeared in (Solovey 2019a).

7.1. The gains of togetherness: understanding, support, shelter

Some feminist groups are created for specific purposes like holding a protest or a festival. In other cases, feminists come together “just to talk,” as one of my participants put it. Even in the first scenario, however, if the collective endures for some time, its members often come to value it for something more than its explicit purposes. A remarkable example that summarizes these additional values feminists find in their collectives is a fragment from a group interview where most participants belonged to the same feminist group. Previously in the interview, they told me their group’s history: they started out as an online chat and then organized face-to-face meetings and cultural events.

Vanya: Listen, so this chat of yours, and your meetings, and your movie screenings, do you like how it all has been going along until now?

Alisa: Yeah. [...] I mean, there is this sort of moral support, and I used to miss this a lot before. [...] I mean, this sort of resonance and understanding for what you’re saying, being able to discuss these things with someone who actually gets what you’re talking about. And is willing to understand you.

Zhenya: Yeah, a girl who once came to our meeting wrote to me recently that among the people she sees every day, she has no one to support her in these ideas, so she’s happy to know there are such people and she can talk to us whenever she needs. But when we just started getting together, it was really... well, to me personally it felt so weird to be able to say certain words—and to see that people get you. (*Laughs.*)

Alisa: And don’t throw shit at you.

Zhenya: (*Laughs.*) Yeah.

Alisa and Zhenya cite the major reasons why feminist groups are needed and valued beyond their eventual explicit purposes: understanding, emotional support, and shelter from outside hostility. Their dialogue revolves around contrast: belonging to a feminist group is compared to previous life (“I used to miss this a lot before”), to current life outside of it (“among the people she sees every day, she has no one to support her in these ideas”), or to one’s own expectations (“it felt so weird”). As will be apparent below, most statements on the meaning of feminist groups to their members contain contrast in explicit forms, like negations and comparisons, or implicit ones, like expressions of surprise. In this way, descriptions of experiences in feminist collectives draw the boundaries between “us” and “them,” the feminist collective and the larger society. At the same time, these narratives of contrast shed light on feminists’ experiences outside of feminist spaces. To analyze these narratives is thus helpful for understanding both the role of feminist collectives for their members and the political context in which feminists live and act. These two aspects will be discussed below.

Understanding: sharing language and politics

In the above quote, both Alisa and Zhenya name understanding as an important gain the group gave them: being around people who “get you,”⁹² as they say, is what they like about it. At a most basic level, to “get” someone means, as Zhenya suggests, sharing a vocabulary. Later, Zhenya expands on this, referring to their group’s first meeting:

We talked and I realized we even had a kind of common language. [...] I mean, none of us actually had feminist friends, not in person. I was surprised that we somehow... we didn’t know each other but we had a common... vocabulary. I mean, we used the same concepts.

Zhenya notes here that the experience of discussing feminist issues face to face was new to all who came. Using the same words and concepts provides a basis for mutual understanding that feels surprising, even weird. If Zhenya speaks of sharing a language, this is not meant in a merely technical way. Rather, sharing a vocabulary translates into sharing political beliefs. Further in the interview, Zhenya cites examples: during this first meeting, words like “abuse,” “misogyny,” or “body positivity”⁹³ were some of the key concepts that helped them connect instantly with new people and identify common interests. Each of these words has a political argument behind it, and using it implies subscribing to this argument. Moreover, because all these terms are part of the feminist jargon, they also function as markers of belonging to a larger feminist scene. In this sense, they are, I suggest, one of the means whereby feminists draw boundaries between themselves and those they identify as non-feminists.

Thus, for Zhenya and their group mates, this first meeting is not the moment of discovering feminism: all of them have already been following feminist discussions online, which is how they have learned this common language. As mentioned before, the Internet is where most feminists in Russia discover feminism. For many, the online space is the main or even the only space for feminist communication. However, my data indicate that meeting other feminists in person produces stronger emotions. Those participants who initially engaged with feminism online describe their first face-to-face encounters with another feminist or a group of feminists as particularly moving events.

Besides establishing one’s belonging to a larger feminist scene, using specific feminist terms may also help identify common priorities within feminist politics. Tatyana Bolotina, for instance, cites different concepts when I ask her what has changed in her life after she discovered feminism:

I found my social circle to a certain extent, at least in the beginning, I could feel it very, very strongly... I mean, a circle of people who understand what psychological violence is... who know what discrimination is, and who you can

92 Russian: понимают.

93 Russian: абьюз, мизогиния, бодипозитив.

talk to and... if you tell them about your problem, it doesn't get invalidated all the time.

Like Zhenya, Tatyana points out the centrality of certain concepts for defining what she describes as her “social circle.” Yet besides serving as keywords to identify like-minded people, the specific concepts cited by Tatyana—“discrimination” and especially “psychological violence”⁹⁴—also suggest rules of interaction within the collective. For Tatyana, people’s familiarity with these concepts implies that she can share her problems with them relatively safely and count on an attentive and respectful response.

However, Tatyana’s remark “at least in the beginning” suggests that the initial bliss of mutual understanding in her feminist “social circle” has not been permanent. In her interview, Tatyana mentions having experienced several conflicts in feminist collectives. This is an experience most feminists can probably relate to, and indeed, the practice of identifying like-minded people by the language they use can also result in frustration and conflict. Whereas language serves as an important tool for distinguishing feminists from non-feminists, these distinctions are not always drawn in clear, uncontested ways. The question of who is to be considered a “good,” “real,” or “proper feminist” is continuously debated in the feminist scene, as briefly mentioned in the previous chapter. In debates on controversial issues where no general feminist consensus has been achieved, those on one side may label their opponents as non-feminist. Importantly, which side one takes in such controversies can be identified by language. A notable example is the “prostitution vs. sex work” debate where the terms that are supposed to name the main subject imply opposing feminist arguments. Consequently, using either term is generally interpreted as claiming allegiance to one of the two discursive camps.⁹⁵ Thus, distinguishing between feminist and non-feminist language and politics may quickly lead to distinguishing between strands of feminism, and where some enjoy commonality and understanding, others may easily encounter conflict and alienation.

Emotional support: being willing to listen and empathize

In the above quote, Tatyana links understanding among feminists to issues of vulnerability and empathy: the possibility to share something personal and count on a caring response. This echoes Alisa’s words cited above: “being able to discuss these things with someone who actually gets what you’re talking about. And is willing to understand you.” In this quote, Alisa differentiates between what might be called technical understanding, which implies understanding someone’s language, following their argument, and *willingness* to understand, i.e. the motivation and readiness to listen and empathize.

94 Russian: дискриминация, психологическое насилие.

95 In fact, this is not always the case: in my interviews, I have encountered more complicated positions that did not neatly fall under either side of the dichotomy. In general, however, the “prostitution is violence” argument has long dominated the feminist discourse in Russia. The pro-sex worker argument used to rather occupy a marginal position. However, it seems to have recently gained more discursive terrain.

For Alisa, being willing to listen and provide compassion is a central benefit of her feminist group. She describes it as “moral support” (cf. also the above quote):

It [the group’s online chat and meetings — V. S.]’s cool because of the support. Because there are things you can’t really explain... to outside people... or to guys, for example. I mean, I’ve got a quite good male friend, B*, we are pretty close. [...] He doesn’t always get it all either, because it’s a peculiar experience and he’s not always ready... to listen, and I’m not always ready to discuss these things with him. [...] And there [in the feminist group — V. S.], they seem to get it. And understand what’s what. And... sometimes you see some horrible stuff and you can say to them: “Fuck!..,” and they seem to get you. And you feel better. (*Laughs.*)

Contrasting talking to her male friend to discussions in her feminist group, Alisa argues that the lack of understanding in the former case comes both from lack of shared experience and lack of willingness to learn and provide support. She also hints at a lack of trust on her part. By contrast, she describes talking to her feminist group as the opposite: she does not even need to relay the issue at hand in much detail, as her feminist friends are able and willing to empathize with her emotion, namely, in this particular example, her feminist outrage.

Understanding provided by a feminist collective relies on sharing words, concepts and arguments, but also emotions. Conversely, sharing emotions also creates emotional bonds within the given feminist group. Indeed, it is common for feminist collectives to forge friendships: people who meet at feminist gatherings often proceed to spending free time together, celebrating holidays together, and helping each other in various situations. Thus empathy and personal, emotional ties both produce the collective and are produced by it, becoming its desired, sought-after effect.

Safe(r) spaces? Providing shelter from outside hostility

A third important function of a feminist collective participants cite is providing a shelter from outside hostility. In a nutshell, this is summarized by Zhenya and Alisa in the above quote when they describe their feminist group as a space where “people get you—and don’t throw shit at you.”

First and foremost, feminist collectives shelter from hostility directed specifically against feminists. In the following quote, Lena describes feminist group meetings as her refuge from the sort of communication she has to endure otherwise:

I come to the meetings and we talk... But this is mostly for myself [...] because personally, I used to miss this sort of safe place, people I could talk to without sexism, without attacks. Because most of my friends are men and they know about my views, and I need to constantly defend myself from them.

For Lena, the primary value of her feminist group lies in the fact that it is a “safe place.” What she finds hard outside feminist spaces, by contrast, is not only the sexism she faces, but also “attacks” from her friends, i.e. aggression directed specifically against her as a feminist. Lena’s experience is typical: articulating feminist criticism or simply calling oneself feminist usually entails facing hostile responses, which may range from casual jokes or unpleasant remarks to harassment or threats. The shared experience of attacks provides a powerful basis for empathy and mutual support, and it arguably motivates many members both to value their feminist groups and invest their resources into maintaining them.

Lena’s use of the word “safe” evokes the feminist concept of safe or safer space:⁹⁶ a space that protects marginalized groups from violence and harassment (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1346). Indeed, although Lena’s wording here is slightly different,⁹⁷ providing shelter from outside hostility is what effectively makes feminist collectives into safe(r) spaces. This also inevitably implies the tensions and contradictions associated with this concept (Clark-Parsons 2018, 2128; Kokits & Thuswald 2015, 90).

Besides direct attacks against feminists, feminist collectives also protect from less specific misogynist hostility. For Katerina Maas, part of the value of her feminist group lies in its difference from non-feminist women’s spaces:

We simply show that it’s actually possible, this... women’s community (*laughs*) without... mutual insults, threats or anything... I mean, not what we’ve been... shown for a long time as the norm but something more modern and something that doesn’t revolve around... I don’t know, chasing for a husband or some similar nonsense.⁹⁸

In contrast to Lena who associated sexism with talking to men, Katerina addresses in this excerpt normalized misogyny in communication between women.⁹⁹ She juxtaposes friendly and respectful interactions in her feminist group to otherwise familiar features of women’s communication, which include mutual hostility, competitiveness, and heterosexist man-centering. It is these aspects of feminist communication, according to Katerina, that make their feminist group a “community”¹⁰⁰—a word she uses with certain embarrassment, as her laughter indicates.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, while Katerina describes the conventions of women’s communication as absurd and contrary to good sense, she also associates feminist

96 As feminists increasingly argue, “safer space” is a more accurate term since safety is never a given, see below.

97 Lena says “safe place” (безопасное место) rather than “safe space” (безопасное пространство). The latter is an exact equivalent of the English term and it is widely used in the Russian-speaking feminist scene.

98 Russian: ерунда.

99 Both participants’ statements thus remain within the binary definition of gender.

100 Russian: сообщество.

101 This embarrassment to use apparently big words like “community”, “activism”, or “politics”, specifically to apply them to one’s own life and work, is common to most feminists I interviewed. I discuss this apparent shyness and its possible connections to experiences of marginalization in Chapter 8.

communication with modernity. I suggest that this association is far from trivial but belongs to a discourse that places feminism within a specific narrative of progress.¹⁰² Katerina's feminist group, according to her, is thus effectively a herald of modernity that conveys a certain message symbolically by the mere fact of its existence, as it provides a visible alternative to the misogynist norm.

On a more general level, practices of acceptance and respect in feminist collectives appear to distinguish them from various other groups, as attested again by Katerina:

If there had been a community like this in my... student past, I would've gone there. You know... somewhere safe, accepting and... a sort of place where they don't mock you for anything. I, for one... for as long as I can remember, maybe since second grade I've been constantly mocked for something. This is why it's important for me that I can come and nobody mocks me, not for the movies I like, not for the books, not for anything.

What Katerina describes are not attacks for being a feminist, but rather for other aspects of her personality that do not necessarily characterize her as a rebel.¹⁰³ In this instance, what she finds in her feminist group is general acceptance. Thus, the group's relevance is not limited to being a shelter for people brought together by similar experiences of harassment for their political ideas, but rather simply as a space of respectful communication. A similar observation is made by Tatyana who compares feminist and non-feminist online spaces:

Tatyana: If you go from a feminist public page¹⁰⁴ to any non-feminist one, you see it right away. Once I found a public page of my neighborhood (*laughs*), that was really something. I mean, the communication standards were so much, like, ten times lower...

Vanya: Do you mean in terms of aggression?

Tatyana: Yes, in terms of aggression. In terms of aggression, lack of understanding, generally very toxic communication, really, really toxic communication compared to feminism.

Just like Tatyana, several participants find that feminist collectives stand out among other groups. How is this difference produced? To answer this question, I dedicate the next section to the rules of interaction that are meant to make feminist collectives into spaces of mutual respect and support.

102 This narrative will be the focus of Chapter 9.

103 Of course, the line between hostility toward feminists and more general hostility may be blurred, especially since an attack on a feminist is often, in fact, an attack on a gender rebel.

104 The term "public page" (публик) is primarily used on Vkontakte, cf. Chapter 6.

7.2. Maintaining feminist collectives: rules of communication

When people who share a common identity or interest come together, they may rely on this shared identity alone to enable satisfactory communication. Yet many feminist collectives set specific rules to ensure they function as safe(r) spaces by encouraging or preventing certain behavior. Indeed, as theoreticians of safe(r) spaces note, maintaining safe(r) spaces requires ongoing work, which is understood to be both productive and paradoxical (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1348). The process of establishing and implementing rules is not always smooth, and negotiations of rules shed light on what kind of politics the given feminist collective seeks to promote.

When they speak of feminist collectives in general, feminists observe that it is the presence of explicit rules and moderation that sets them apart from other kinds of collectives and online groups. Typically, rules in feminist spaces disallow rudeness, insults, overt aggression, as well as discriminatory language and behavior. Various feminist groups use similar or largely intersecting sets of rules. In the following quote, Katerina compares a feminist online group on motherhood where she sometimes posts general feminist content to non-feminist online cinephile groups:

As to them [the motherhood group — V. S.], yes, they have rules of communication, they have it really strict in the comments, I mean, they watch for everything: racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, it's all... weeded out. If I come, say, to a Marvel group or the O* group, that's a cinema magazine I read, all kinds of things can happen there, people curse others just like that. Plus they can also say stuff that's not insulting as such, but you know it's really an insult. There's especially this address (*speaks through set teeth*): "Darling."¹⁰⁵ As in: "Darling, what can you possibly understand about cinema?"

In this fragment, Katerina cites two cinephile groups as examples of online spaces where people come together based on a principle other than feminism. As she makes clear, in feminist spaces, what counts as unacceptable is not only hate speech and discriminatory language, but also plain rudeness and expressions of disrespect. In the example she cites, people in the cinephile groups may behave in a condescending manner which she considers untypical of feminist spaces.

Rules and moderation play just as important a role at face-to-face events as in online spaces, although there may be technical differences. As Zhenya points out:

I think there's a need for moderation. [...] I mean, I, for one, feel more comfortable if there are... rules, they're actually absolutely... reasonable, like don't interrupt, don't take up half an hour all by yourself... these sorts of things. And actually, if these things are spelled out... just said out loud, the

¹⁰⁵ Russian: деточка.

chances that people will interrupt each other and be aggressive drop. This is what happens.

Although interrupting is an issue in offline and only some online spaces,¹⁰⁶ what seems common to both is the underlying idea of mutually respectful communication conveyed by the rules. In this excerpt, Zhenya argues for moderation as a tool for maintaining a space where everyone can feel comfortable. According to their observation, even simply mentioning the rules already has considerable effect on members' behavior and protects from aggression. Clearly defined rules may also be useful when major conflicts break out. As Zhenya explains, their group first came up with rules after facing a bitter conflict over transphobia:

When all these fights started around... the trans issue, I guess, and some other things... we came to realize we needed some sort of rules. We had one meeting that was quite emotional, we were trying to discuss stuff, and then S* [Zhenya's main opponent — V. S.] and I, we decided we'd tag the trans issue as a triggering topic and if anybody wanted to discuss it we were going to notify everyone particularly.

At another point, Zhenya clarifies the content and aim of the rules:

In fact... half of the rules are about the procedure of discussing the topics we've tagged as triggering. Just so we don't traumatize¹⁰⁷ each other, that's what it's about.

Facing a political conflict with emotions running high on both sides, Zhenya and their opponent responded by introducing rules.¹⁰⁸ Besides the "trans issue" that sparked the conflict, they identified other sensitive topics and agreed on how to proceed when discussing them. This decision was achieved through more debate, as not all members agreed immediately that rules were necessary (it is this discussion that Zhenya implicitly refers to in the first quote cited in this section). The final decision reveals respect for each other's feelings ("so we don't traumatize each other") and a shared desire to keep the group together. This way of dealing with conflicts stands in stark contrast to spaces described above by Katerina (cinophile groups) and Tatyana (neighborhood group) where no moderation is implemented and no protection from aggression is provided to members.

Yet not all feminist collectives offer equal protection or equally respectful communication. Whereas banning hate speech and discriminatory language are common practices in feminist spaces, they are not universally used. Moreover,

106 In 2016 when I spoke to Zhenya, online feminist communication was exclusively written. Since then, spoken real-time forms like Instagram live, Clubhouse voice chats, and Zoom events have emerged where interruptions can occur.

107 Russian: травмировать. In this particular context, the English "hurt" would probably be a better fit. I chose the more literal equivalent, however, because the term "traumatizing" often comes up when feminists talk about communication. I suggest that this is a characteristic element of the feminist activist discourse on communication, emotions, and vulnerability.

108 While Zhenya already identified as agender at the time of the interview, they had not come out to their feminist group at that time; consequently, their opponents did not perceive them as personally affected by the debate.

different collectives use different definitions of what constitutes hate speech. As to general rudeness, insults and other expressions of aggression, they are probably even more tolerated in certain feminist spaces. Indeed, rather than contrasting feminist to non-feminist spaces based on the extent to which they allow or disallow aggression and disrespect, some participants have contrasted certain feminist spaces to others or even various phases in the life of the same feminist space. In Chapter 8, I will discuss situations where collectives and rules fail to protect their members or aspiring members from aggression. I argue that while such aggression can be productive to protect group boundaries and thus contribute to maintaining the safe(r) space, it can also alienate newcomers and marginalized people who differ from the group's (implicit) self-image.

When a group discusses and establishes rules of communication, this may appear to be a merely technical issue or a matter of how specific individuals choose to interact with each other. I argue, however, that establishing and enforcing rules of communication is deeply political. By defining which language and behavior will not be tolerated and by choosing stricter or milder rules, feminist collectives define the groups of people they seek to protect. In so doing, they draw group boundaries and define their collective identity. This is apparent in the different approaches to rules as described by Katerina and Zhenya. In Katerina's account, the motherhood group uses a blanket ban on sexism, racism, and homophobia. In Zhenya's group, rather than prohibit transphobia altogether (or instead ban trans people and their supporters, like some TERF groups do), the rules specify the procedure of discussing the "trans issue." As issues of trans inclusion and transphobia continue to be hotly debated in feminist spaces, there is often no basic consensus over what should be considered transphobic or indeed, whether the concept of transphobia has any legitimacy at all (Kirey-Sitnikova 2016, 170). What sparked the initial conflict and led the group to introduce rules were comments some members considered transphobic, while others insisted they were "not that bad." By choosing to establish a procedure for discussing the "trans issue," the group makes an effort to grant some protection to trans people or their allies¹⁰⁹ while at the same time respecting the feelings of those feminists who struggle with accepting trans identities. This particular feminist collective thus attempts to define its collective identity as neutral with regard to the "trans debate," acknowledging both sides of the debate but joining neither.

The political conflict experienced by this group exposes the paradox inherent to safe(r) spaces: by doing the boundary work necessary to separate the safe(r) space from the hostile environment, they risk emphasizing certain privileged identities and excluding marginalized people (Clark-Parsons 2018, 2128; The Roestone Collective 2014, 1354). In feminist history, "safe spaces" were initially created as "women's spaces," whereas "women" was implicitly understood as "white middle-

109 There were no out trans members in the group at the time. Based on this I would suggest that the trans issue was even more explicitly political for the members: a matter of principle rather than of practical relevance.

class women” (Hill & Megson 2020, 61). Consequently, they have been criticized for being unsafe for other groups, notably women of color and trans people (Hill & Megson 2020, 62; Serano 2013, 23). Following these criticisms, some have advocated for conceiving of “safer” rather than “safe spaces,” emphasizing that “safety” is never universal or without ambiguities and that it involves ongoing work and struggle (Clark-Parsons 2018, 2141; Kokits & Thuswald 2015, 88; Hill & Megson 2020, 72).

The need to continuously question and reconfigure safe(r) spaces has to do with the inherently innovative character of negotiating rules in feminist spaces. It is this ongoing innovation, I suggest, that constitutes another aspect making this process political. When feminist groups introduce rules, they invent and try out practices that have not previously existed in their social context. Therefore they not only define their own collective identity but also produce social change. Even while this change is initially produced in a limited setting of a given feminist collective, the new practices have the potential, given that they prove viable with time, to spread to the general feminist scene and beyond it to larger society. These new practices thus represent, I argue, the innovation that is the direct contribution of a social movement to social transformation (Melucci 1996, 183).

Above I have examined how participants reflect on the benefits of belonging to a feminist collective. Based on the data, I have argued that whatever the initial purpose of a given feminist group, members tend to value it additionally for providing understanding, emotional support, and protection from outside hostility. This is possible, I have suggested, due to special rules of communication that distinguish feminist groups from other online and offline collectives. Although negotiating these rules is a complicated process that does not always lead to providing equal protection to everyone, it is also a political practice of initiating social change and articulating the group’s collective identity. This is why, I suggest, it is productive to think of feminist groups as social movement communities. I will argue this point in detail in the next section.

7.3. Social movement community and collective identity

The term “community”¹¹⁰ comes up in some but not all of my interviews; overall, I would not characterize it as a widely used piece of Russian feminist vocabulary. Some participants use it as a technical term to refer to collective spaces on the Internet: both on Livejournal and Vkontakte, such spaces—contrasted to personal pages and blogs—are officially called “communities.” Others, however, use it with no clear reference to the Internet. What seems particularly thought-provoking is Katerina Maas’ approach: in a fragment cited above, she argues that her group is a

110 Russian: сообщество. Although a very good equivalent to the English “community” in the context of politics and social movements, the Russian term has a narrower meaning (a group or association of people with common interests; or an association of nation-states) and does not belong to everyday vocabulary but rather to political and media discourses. This is probably another reason why some of my participants were uncomfortable to use it: this word sounds awkward in an informal conversation.

“women’s community” because communication there differs from other contexts where women are divided by misogyny and competitiveness. For Katerina, a “community” is thus clearly something more than simply a group or collective. This surplus that makes a group into a community consists, according to Katerina, of personal, emotional bonds enabled by feminist thinking. I suggest that this understanding of the term “community” captures what other participants have addressed as well: the emotional ties that enable empathy and provide a feeling of togetherness.

In social movement research, the term “social movement community” was initially suggested to account for movements’ continuity and cohesion beyond or in the absence of formal social movement organizations (Buechler 1990, 76). This concept is not as widely discussed as the closely related concept of collective identity (I will address their relationship below). Yet it is researchers of feminism, especially lesbian feminism, who have most contributed to theoretically developing this concept in social movement research. The concept is used both at the macro- and microlevel: in the first sense, it encompasses “all actors who share and advance the goals of a social movement,” including organizations, individuals, and institutional supporters (Staggenborg 1998, 182). In the second sense, it refers to the local level or individual groups: Suzanne Staggenborg, for instance, discusses theoretical aspects of the concept of social movement community using the case of the local women’s movement community in Bloomington, Indiana (Staggenborg 1998), and Leila Rupp studies the women’s community of a specific organization in the United States, the National Women’s Party, in the 1940s to 1960s (Rupp 1985). In their study of lesbian feminism, Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier describe it as “a social movement community that operates at the national level through connections among local communities in [a] decentralized, segmented, and reticulated structure” (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 107). In such decentralized structures, researchers argue, it is the social movement community that holds the movement together through networks of human relations and mutual support (Staggenborg 1998, 182). Moreover, they contend that the social movement community both ensures the movement’s survival in times of scarce political opportunities (Rupp 1985, 725) and enables large-scale participation during protest cycles, i.e. periods of heightened mobilization (Staggenborg 1998, 183).

A major contribution of feminist researchers concerns exploring the relationship between social movement community and collective identity. A central concept of contemporary social movement research, a movement’s collective identity is understood as a shared definition that helps members “to distinguish the (collective) self from the ‘other’ and to be recognized by those ‘others’” (Flesher Fominaya 2010, 395). Whereas collective identity is constructed based on shared experience and emotions (Melucci 1996, 70–71; Whittier 1995, 17) and constantly re-negotiated through boundary work (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 111), researchers have demonstrated that it is the social movement community that serves as the crucial space where these collective identity processes take place. As Taylor and Whittier

point out, “[m]aintaining an oppositional identity depends upon creating a world apart from the dominant society” (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 113). A social movement community is this “world apart” where collective identity is created through human relations, mutual support, movement culture, and ideology (Staggenborg 1998, 182).

I argue that the concept of social movement community as discussed in social movement studies is productive for understanding the feminist movement in Russia. The model of an encompassing decentralized feminist movement community consisting of numerous smaller, local communities fits well the data presented above. This is particularly apparent when Zhenya reflects on first meeting people who speak the same language: the feminists who come to this first meeting are already part of the general feminist (online) community, they recognize each other as belonging to it due to a shared language and politics, and they proceed to establish a new local community as part of that whole. On the local and group level, as I have argued above, mutual support and personal bonds play an important role for participants, and some even use the word “community” to describe this. Moreover, I have examined how collective identity processes, most notably boundary work, occur within feminist collectives. Taken together, I suggest that all this warrants the use of social movement community as an analytical concept with regard to the feminist movement in Russia.

In studies of social movement communities, feminist researchers have focused especially on so-called periods of abeyance with little to no visible movement activity. They have explicitly contended with the perception that the feminist movement subsided or died in these periods (Rupp 1985, 716; Staggenborg & Taylor 2005, 37); by studying movement communities during abeyance or “backlash years,” they have found several processes that sustained the movement, ensured continuity between political generations, and provided a basis for later mobilizations (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 122; Whittier 1995, 26). I suggest that this argument from feminist movement research is highly relevant for the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, since it currently operates in a hostile environment with few opportunities for large-scale visible action. I will focus in the next section on hostility against feminists in Russia and will then discuss the role of the feminist movement community in this context.

7.4. Made to feel like a freak: hostility against feminists

As mentioned above, reflections on feminist collectives tend to contain contrast. Whereas they describe participants’ experiences in and feelings about feminist spaces, they also shed light on the daily challenges feminists typically face in their everyday lives outside of these supportive spaces. If one re-reads the above reflections on the benefits of feminist collectives with a focus on explicit and implicit markers of comparison, what emerges is a general picture of miscommunication and hostility. When a feminist articulates a feminist issue in a general setting, be it a group of friends, colleagues, family, or even fellow political (non-feminist) activists, they usually get no sympathetic response, their emotions are not shared, and their

arguments are not recognized or found convincing. The chance of meeting people who share and support feminist ideas outside of dedicated feminist spaces is virtually non-existent. As such, being a feminist is often described as a lonely experience. This is how Natasha recalls her life before she found her feminist group:

I remember my situation a few years ago when [...] I really believed that in Tomsk or around, there was no one with the same views as myself. Because... well, there wasn't even a flicker, nothing at all. I would have been very happy if there had been such a... community on Vkontakte.

Natasha presents here a quite typical narrative of total isolation, contextualizing and explaining the longing for finding like-minded people. Very common among feminists, similar narratives of isolation seem to be especially characteristic for smaller cities and towns. The reason why there is often “not even a flicker” of feminist activities or critique in public spaces is, of course, that besides disinterest and misunderstanding, mentioning feminism is often met with hostility. A characteristic example is provided by Ellie who disclosed her feminist identity to her fellow students at the university and regretted this decision:

My department is very patriarchal. And... the thing is that now people have got this attitude like I'm a freak and... I mean, during lectures and stuff, when they start talking... in stereotypes... making jokes about blondes and logic... afterwards people come to me or look round at me, like: “Aha!” I don't like this reaction that much. Or they go like: “This is it, now Ellie'll flame up, now it will start!..” Like this. This is why I'm actually scared to somehow speak up, to be honest, because I expect this sort of reaction. Why attract attention?

While Ellie recounts her interactions with fellow students and professors in markedly mild terms, her tone during the interview as well as the frequent pauses she makes indicate the great emotional intensity this situation has for her. In Ellie's account, her whole university environment, professors and students alike, is hostile to feminism. Professors make blatantly sexist remarks that go unchallenged. Other students recognize this sexism, but rather than challenge the professor, they throw excited looks at Ellie, hoping that she will make a scene. These signals of malicious excitement reduce Ellie to a caricature feminist who is apparently supposed to entertain the public by overreacting at the smallest manifestation of what she thinks is sexism. Albeit relatively subtle, these non-verbal signals produce a devastating effect. They stigmatize Ellie by marking her, rather than the professor who makes sexist jokes in class, as abnormal. Thus, the students' reaction silences the feminist, making her feel like a “freak” and afraid to speak up. It normalizes misogyny and seals the sexist consensus at the university. Situations like this one demonstrate clearly why feminists' need for a safe(r) space is so great. They can also shed light, I suggest, on why feminists tend to have rather high expectations on feminist spaces and why conflicts within them are often experienced as particularly painful.

At her university, Ellie does not even need to articulate any specific feminist criticism: in a sexist consensus, calling oneself a feminist is already a challenge. This is why Simha, who is a student as well, uses a different approach:

At the university, I don't walk around with a sign saying "I'm a feminist," see? I don't wear it on a silly T-shirt [...] but if I hear some blatant sexist or misogynist bullshit near me, I simply make my position heard. I just state my position consistently, why I think what I think. I mean, in this case... people start thinking after all, presenting arguments. Why is there no benefit in saying you're a feminist? Because feminism is a label that has a specific content for people [...] and people start to argue with this label. And then you're supposed to dance in front of them and prove if it's true or not. But if you simply articulate your position: "This is just what I think..." See? It doesn't matter why I think this, does it? I mean, it's implied that I think this because I subscribe to... feminist views. But I don't say it, why would I? I state my position. And people are forced to somehow... actually listen.

Having made experiences very similar to Ellie's, Simha addresses the humiliation associated with claiming a connection to feminism. As Simha only came out as trans when he was already studying at the university, his counterparts in the situations he describes most probably do not perceive him as a cis man ally, therefore supposed male privilege likely does not shield him in the situations he describes. As he chooses, nevertheless, to engage in political arguments rather than tolerate "blatant sexist or misogynist bullshit," Simha's strategy is not to call himself a feminist so as not to draw fire upon himself too early. This allows him to articulate critique against specific expressions of sexism and to engage his opponents in a discussion. Simha's story highlights the urgent need for feminist resistance in the university context. His detailed reflection and choice of words (especially "there [is] no benefit") reveals a well thought-out, strategic approach of an activist who wages his struggle in the everyday.

A striking similarity between Ellie's and Simha's accounts is that they both speak of social sanctions for openly associating with feminism. Whereas Ellie experiences these sanctions, Simha tries to avoid them by leading feminist conversations without saying the word. Both Simha and Ellie, moreover, refer to feeling as if on display: Simha describes his counterparts' expectations as "you're supposed to dance in front of them," and Ellie evokes the idea of a show. I suggest that what both Ellie and Simha are up against can be interpreted as stigma around feminism. Indeed, Myra Marx Ferree has argued that stigma, along with ridicule and silencing, belongs to tactics that are used systematically to suppress feminist movements (Ferree 2005, 142). Ferree suggests that these hostile responses to feminism are forms of "soft repression" whereby it is society, rather than the state, that acts with collective power and often informally "to limit and exclude ideas and identities from the public forum" (Ferree 2005, 141). She defines stigma as "an impaired collective identity,

where connection with the group is a source of discredit and devaluation because that is how the group as a whole is viewed” (Ferree 2005, 144). This conception, I suggest, corresponds precisely to what both Ellie and Simha describe and, moreover, illuminates the limitations imposed on their agency in their respective situations. Both find themselves alone against a collectively mobilized power, and accordingly, each of their strategies has its gains and losses: Ellie has acted against the stigma around feminism by openly embracing the label but is then prevented from articulating feminist critique and suffers from stigmatization; Simha, on the other hand, is able to debate feminist issues, yet at the price of not challenging the stigma attached to feminism.

Ferree’s theory of stigma as a form of soft repression implies that stigmatization can subside or intensify in various historical contexts (Ferree 2005, 146). In contemporary Russia, I suggest that a range of historical and social factors have contributed to the current levels of stigmatization. Until very recently, as researchers have pointed out, feminism has been a “dirty word” in Russia (Johnson 2014, 586; Sundstrom, Sperling, & Sayoglu 2019, 43). Some authors have associated this with historical legacies such as the Soviet authorities’ targeted vilifying campaign against Western feminism (Sperling 2015, 49). Moreover, lack of feminist discursive action in the public space since the 1990s has arguably also played a role (Sperling 1999, 97). Because of the general absence of feminist arguments in the public space, virtually every reference to a feminist position in public easily turns into a political debate. Whether organizing feminist protests or cultural events, speaking up publicly against sexism, or stating their opinions in private conversations, feminists routinely encounter verbal attacks, harassment, threats, bullying, and sometimes physical violence. This is how Tatyana Bolotina describes the routine of antifeminist harassment:

Vanya: Do you experience pressure due to your feminist stance or to specific things you do? Or any aggressive reactions?

Tatyana: Well, I know there are aggressive reactions, I know there are sexist public pages on the Internet that are actively discussing me (*laughs*). And from time to time, aggressive people come over to my page or my groups. So there is this sort of pressure but I can’t say I really experience it, I mean... I’ve already built very good psychological defenses against this. I just ban them, this is all. And I simply don’t go to see these groups, I have neither time nor interest, actually. As to people I know personally, my social circle consists almost exclusively of feminists, so... no, I feel no pressure, but (*laughs*) I feel that I don’t want to leave this circle at all. Oh, and also... I can say I generally try to cut out negative information in order to have the strength to live and work. (*Laughs.*) I mean, I try to ignore it.

As a feminist organizer with some public prominence, Tatyana has been a target of several bullying campaigns, which she describes here mildly as “actively discussing” her. Tatyana emphasizes her indifference to the attacks, which she appears to

consider beneath her: she is markedly ironic and insists that she knows little about the harassment. At the same time, she is clear about the efforts she has invested into protecting herself: she bans aggressors, she has mounted psychological defenses, and she makes sure to organize her information space in a way that does not mentally destabilize her. All these are common techniques feminists use to protect themselves from hostility both in online and face-to-face interactions. Yet despite the image of strength and indifference to harassment, Tatyana still perceives the world outside of her feminist “social circle” as extremely hostile. Her account suggests that her emotional stability and the image of unconcerned, unwavering strength she projects hinge upon her relationships to other feminists. It thus highlights the crucial role these relationships—which, I have argued, can be understood as the feminist community—play in providing protection from hostility.

As mentioned above, studies of feminist movements and feminist movement communities have focused specifically on periods of retrenchment and backlash when hostility against feminism has been particularly high. Rupp has documented and analyzed the survival of the women’s movement in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, a time during which, according to popular accounts, there was supposedly no feminist activism (Rupp 1985, 716). In her book on the persistence of the radical women’s movement, Whittier dedicates considerable attention to the 1980s, similarly known as a “postfeminist” period of political apathy (Whittier 1995, 2). Both authors come to similar conclusions: the political context during both decades was highly unfavorable (characterized, respectively, by McCarthyism and the “feminine mystique” and Reaganist conservative policies), feminists were widely ridiculed (Rupp 1985, 722), and feminism was considered a “dirty word” (Whittier 1995, 194). However, they find that in response to these adverse political conditions, feminists focused on sustaining their community and collective identity—including personal relationships, infrastructure, and culture. This, they argue, has allowed the feminist movement to endure through the “backlash years” and laid the basis for later mobilizations (Rupp 1985, 721; Whittier 1995, 211, 225).

In my data, reflections on the gains of being around other feminists are virtually inseparable from accounts of the adverse experiences feminists have outside of feminist spaces. The continuous use of contrast in these accounts is, I suggest, another instance of the boundary work whereby feminists construct their collective identity in opposition to larger society. At the same time, their accounts and reflections provide convincing evidence of how critical personal relationships and mutual support are in an otherwise hostile environment where they so often find themselves under attack. By providing emotional support and protection to their members, I suggest that feminist communities lay down a basis for various kinds of activism, despite the fact that creating and maintaining communities is rarely understood as a form of action in its own right (cf. Chapter 6). This is how Katerina reflects on this function of collective feminist spaces:

It seems to me that anyway, one should begin with creating a supportive space. [...] Especially in smaller cities like Tomsk, one should start with this: simply letting people feel like they belong in a supportive environment where you definitely won't be judged and you can ask any question and get an answer.

In this quote, Katerina describes feminist spaces like the one she has created in Tomsk as spaces of validation and support. However, she argues that this is what “one should begin with,” suggesting that something more or something different can follow. I suggest that this statement addresses the role of social movement communities as providing a basis for later action, which is in line with how their functions are understood in social movement research. Indeed, for various forms of collective political action, one needs fellow activists, but also political knowledge and empowerment. All three elements can be provided by feminist communities.

7.5. The normalization of feminism and the future of community

Above I have examined feminists' reflections on the value of understanding, mutual support, and protection they find in collective feminist spaces. I have argued that in the light of these functions feminists come to value in their collective spaces, it is productive to conceptualize these spaces as social movement communities, which also highlights their role in creating and maintaining feminist collective identity. I have also examined feminists' contrasting accounts of the hostility they encounter outside of their collective spaces. Hostility against feminism and feminists, I have argued, is pervasive and routine in contemporary Russia for several reasons, and feminist critique has long been largely absent from the public sphere. As a result, there are no major discursive victories from the previous decades feminists could appeal to in current public or everyday debates. Instead, I have argued, every small communication is necessarily political action, and feminists have to engage in relentless discursive activism to stand their ground and make themselves heard.

As my data demonstrate, these incessant discursive battles feminists have to lead at every turn take a considerable emotional toll, which is arguably a major reason why they need their own collective spaces—feminist movement communities—to recover. By providing emotional support, understanding, and safe(r) spaces shielding them from outside hostility, feminist communities empower their members, but besides this, they produce and sustain the sense of belonging and togetherness rooted in shared language, experiences, and culture that is the feminist collective identity (Melucci 1996, 70–71; Taylor & Whittier 1992, 105). Collective identity, in turn, produces the movement community through boundary work. Co-constitutive of each other, collective identity and community sustain the movement during the period of hostility and backlash, and, I have suggested, encourage and enable further forms of collective action. Moreover, as I have argued based on my data, by introducing and negotiating their own rules of interaction, feminist communities produce new,

alternative definitions and norms to be disseminated in the wider society. Thus, I argue, feminist communities not only enable political action, but are also political in their own right.

This inconspicuous politics paired with relentless discursive efforts has clearly been yielding its results. Over the recent few years, hostility toward feminism has subsided ostensibly in Russia. This is probably most apparent in changes in media coverage. For instance, when the #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak online flashmob against sexual violence sparked in 2016, the media not only covered it on an unprecedented scale, but actually picked up the discussion of sexual violence. Even though the media debate was expectably heated and massive victim blaming took place, as Anna Sedysheva argues in her analysis of the media response, the online feminist campaign has nevertheless sensitized the media to the issue of sexual violence and has had overall lasting effects on society in Russia (Sedysheva 2021, 304). #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak was neither the first feminist online flashmob on the Russian-speaking Internet nor the first mass protest against gender-based violence, yet it was arguably the first one to spark so much serious discussion and actually shift public opinion on the matter. Previous similar feminist protests were largely ignored by the media or drowned in ridicule and victim blaming, yet this one was not. This clearly suggests a massive shift in attitudes toward feminism both in the media and the wider public. Whereas additional research would certainly help illuminate in detail how this shift occurred, I argue that it was previous feminist efforts in all their forms, from public protest to creating, sustaining, and expanding feminist communities, that made it possible.

Already noticed by some of my participants, this change of attitude became even more manifest since. Although it hardly extends to the state or state-supported institutions, considerable portions of the public are increasingly supportive of feminism. There are spaces all over Russia where feminism is not a “dirty word” anymore, and they are growing. As feminism becomes increasingly normalized, it is possible that the need for separate spaces shielded from larger society will lessen, feminists will increasingly focus on action directed outward and gradually attach less importance to their communities. This does not mean, however, that one should expect a decline of feminist communities: rather, just as the feminist movement increasingly gains visibility and strength, feminist communities will likely also expand and diversify.

As feminism is gradually normalized and feminist communities grow in numbers, collective identity processes continue. Time and again, boundaries are drawn and communities face the need to establish whom they choose to include and protect. Mentioned briefly above, conflicts over boundaries and questions of inclusion and exclusion will be the focus of the next chapter.

8. Issues of participation: questioning inequalities within the feminist movement

As the 90s women's movement in Russia was largely understood to be primarily a movement of the privileged few (Zdravomyslova 2014, 123; Hemment 2014, 140), some authors have extended this label to the contemporary feminist movement. In Sperling's book, contemporary feminists are labeled "highly intellectual, well-read women" (Sperling 2015, 218); based on this assessment, Julie Hemment brands the contemporary feminist movement "marginal and elite" (Hemment 2016, 151). Elena Gapova assigns feminists in Russia to a "new class" of privileged urban intellectuals, which she contrasts to the working class (Gapova 2014, 25). Whether the authors are sympathetic or critical of the feminist movement, these assessments echo the familiar discourse on feminism as a bourgeois movement that has little to do with regular people's concerns. Widely used by the Soviet authorities to delegitimize feminism, it remains a delegitimizing tool in Russia to this day. The idea that the contemporary feminist movement in Russia consists primarily of elite intellectuals is, I submit, mistaken. Quite to the contrary, as discussed in Chapter 5, the movement is made up of people with widely varying social positions, including class and educational status. It is thus neither elite nor homogeneous.

While the idea of the contemporary feminist movement as an elite one may be due to the previous feminist generation's historical shadow, it may also be shaped by the simple fact that public attention is granted disproportionately to more visible feminists, who also tend to be more privileged.¹¹¹ Those who are not organizers or leaders, those who do not readily take up the role of spokespersons for the movement remain outside of the spotlight. Yet leaders do not make the movement. Regular members do. In a decentralized grassroots movement, especially one that declares fighting hierarchies one of its central political goals, leadership is a highly questionable concept anyway. Are leaders those who take up more responsibilities? Don't they earn the right to more visibility by their greater contributions? Or is it rather their privilege that enables them to take up certain highly valued tasks and receive more recognition for it? In this chapter, I will explore those tensions and inequalities within the feminist movement that are sometimes too easily explained as differential motivation or commitment. If some members participate more fully and actively than others, does this mean they are more committed to the cause? What other factors influence participation? In the following, I examine the barriers for movement participation and their interplay with systemic marginalizations. I also address the strategies feminists may use individually and collectively to overcome these barriers.

111 In Sperling's research, the disproportionate presence of relatively privileged feminists in her sample is probably due to the fact that she met her participants through academic scholars (Sperling 2015, vii).

This chapter picks up several threads from the two previous ones. The issues of what counts as contribution and political action will be addressed here again, but while in Chapter 6, it was approached from the perspective of collective action, goals, and political opportunities, I now begin with the individual, focusing on personal experiences, resources, and feelings. I will also come back to the issues of heterogeneity and conflict in feminist communities: while they were mentioned briefly in Chapter 7, I will address them in more detail below and examine what happens when feminist collectives fail to be the safe(r) spaces they claim to be. After an analysis of exclusion and inclusion, I will close with considerations of how the issue of participation reflects the feminist movement's approach to difference.

8.1. Participation in the feminist movement

In the feminist movement in Russia, participation is a subject fraught with worries similar to those fueling the “real action” debate (cf. Chapter 5). Despite the fact that participation in feminist initiatives has been growing steadily and dramatically since the mid-2000s, some feminists express concern and, at times, frustration over insufficient participation. Most often, these worries are articulated by feminist organizers. One such person is Katerina Maas who describes the participation dynamics in the group she started as follows:

But here is an interesting thing: more people are joining but activity is not increasing. I don't say that there has to be more activity but I thought the more people's numbers grew, the more active leaders would emerge. But thus far [...] a sort of core has formed, around six or seven people, and then the four of us [present at the group interview — V.S.] are more or less constantly in touch. [...] And the others just... well, people join but everybody just sits silently and reads posts in the online group. So nothing special is going on.

Thwarted expectations are at the core of Katerina's statement. Even though she emphasizes that she does not demand more active participation, she nevertheless wishes for it and is at a loss as to why the dynamics are different. Katerina speaks neutrally, but others are often more overtly frustrated. Resonating partly with concerns over “real action,” this frustration has similar roots: from the organizers' perspective, lack of participation often appears to stand for lack of solidarity and support for their efforts. Often, it is also interpreted in terms of lack of interest or motivation.

However, the situation looks differently from the perspective of those who do not participate—or rather, do not participate in the forms expected by organizers. In my interviews, people told numerous stories about deciding against certain forms of participation in favor of others. In none of them was lack of motivation the central reason. Before examining the reasons, however, it is necessary to address an important aspect of participation.

The issue of participation is rarely dichotomous. This is apparent in Katerina's above quote: she distinguishes between active participation, which, for her, implies taking over leadership, and what might be called silent participation: being present in the online space without actively contributing to it. In other interviews, participants speak of choosing between attending or not attending a demonstration, or between bringing a sign or banner to the demonstration or coming without any; between taking the floor at public events, or asking questions, or coming only to listen; between attending public events as such or only participating online, etc. Thus the boundaries between what might be considered "active participation" and "silent participation," or even between "participating" and "not participating," are shifting, subjective, and situational. I therefore suggest that what feminists often do, sometimes to organizers' dismay, is not withhold from participation, but rather negotiate forms of participation based on their resources and constraints under the given circumstances. Below I will examine the major groups of reasons that can restrict participation and strategies individual people use to manage them, before addressing the question of what organizers can do to encourage participation.

8.2. Negotiating forms of participation: assessing and managing resources

I will begin with an example provided by Theo who chooses precisely to the kind of "silent participation" that seemed so confusing to Katerina and explains what motivates their choice:

Vanya: So now you participate in the P* group more or less regularly, don't you?

Theo: I don't participate, I come to the meetings and keep silent. (*Laughs.*) To be honest, I cannot... being aware of my resources, I cannot take responsibility for any activity. Although I only have one child and my job is not exactly full-time, still it turns out that... all the... day-to-day chores... take up so much time that I literally cannot promise people I'll do anything on time. So I withdraw from everywhere.

Theo's explanation for choosing silent participation is simple and straightforward: they lack resources to participate more actively. In Theo's case, the relevant resource is not material: it is time. Time is a resource that comes up in many interviews, particularly in the context of parenting and having a full-time job. Although Theo describes their job as "not exactly full-time," they have irregular working hours, which makes their employment very time-consuming. Being a parent¹¹² also imposes a lot of restrictions on activist participation: not only in terms of free time but also because some events and spaces do not allow children, either explicitly or implicitly, and because of heightened risks, e.g. at public protests. As to lack of time, it is also often connected to geographic distance and logistics: my participants in larger cities

¹¹² While I use the gender neutral term "parent," the reality I describe in this chapter and specifically with regard to constraints on activist participation is, of course, gendered, and generally concerns cis men less than all others.

mention not being able to attend events because they take place too far away from where they live, or being afraid of having to move from downtown and being cut off from the activist events and social life that takes place there. In smaller cities, on the other hand, public transport sometimes stops circulating rather early in the evening, which means that people who live in outer districts must leave events early to be able to get home.

As one would expect, money proves to be one more problematic resource. Although most feminist events are free, some take place in so-called anti-café, or time clubs, where attendants are charged for the time spent in the space. At some public events, admission fees are established, typically to raise funds for women's rights organizations. Addressing benefit theater productions, Tatyana Bolotina points out the exclusion inherent in them:

But I'm very unhappy with the fact that there is an entrance fee and basically, it costs an amount that is... (*laughs*) for me personally, very significant. I mean, around 500 roubles.¹¹³ And for those, well, poor activists... for whom it's not spare money, who can't just give away 500 roubles to go somewhere... It turns out that these plays can only be seen by people who can afford it. I don't like this. I mean, I consider this classism.

Tatyana also criticizes the activist practice of donations and "pay what you can" systems: although conceived as a way to dismount income barriers, they quickly produce, as she observes, a community norm of how much it is considered "decent" to donate, thus adding feelings of guilt to the humiliation of being poor.

Another example of resources that are often scarce, which, in turn, imposes restrictions on participation, are health and emotional resources.

Vanya: And could you tell me, do you go to demonstrations?

Simha: You know, I go very rarely because... as a person with epilepsy, it's hard for me. I mean, I am autistic, I am a person with epilepsy and... the slightest noise, a little more than normal, and you can make me into material for barricades, that's it. This is why if it's single-person picketing,¹¹⁴ I'll probably come. If it's a noisy demonstration—I mean, after I went to the pride parade in Finland, I had to stay in bed. (*Laughs.*) Seriously, it's true. And this is not to mention all was peaceful there. And we know what happens at protests here.

Although the risks of contentious action are generally high, they present an additional burden for neurodiverse people and those with chronic conditions. In this instance, Simha negotiates forms of participation by favoring single-person picketing which does not usually involve either crowds or noise, and more peaceful demonstrations with less risk of detainment and police violence, like the pride parade in Finland.

113 Ca. €7 or \$8 at the time of the interview (October 2015).

114 For details on single-person picketing, see Chapter 1.

Besides police violence, a risk commonly associated with contentious action is being recognized, which might entail, as many fear, consequences at their jobs or universities. Ellie, a student in her late teens, fears recognition for a different reason: she lives with controlling parents who generally oversee how she spends her free time and would, she is certain, punish her if they learnt that she went to a demonstration:

Vanya: Could you tell me about the 8th of March?

Ellie: What is there to tell?.. Well, I just listened to speeches, did nothing special, mostly I hid from the cameras.

Vanya: From the cameras—do you mean journalists?

Ellie: Well yes, so I wouldn't get in frame.

[...]

Vanya: And did you have a sign?

Ellie: No, I decided to go without any sign, I just knew TV channels were going to shoot.

Ellie comes to the demonstration on the International Women's Day as a silent participant; she suggests that she cannot afford giving a speech or even bringing a sign because doing so might attract attention. She reports dodging TV cameras to make sure her family does not accidentally see her on local TV. A noteworthy element of her account is the fact that she emphatically describes her participation as “nothing special.” This is a telling and characteristic element of many stories about negotiating forms of participation, and I will address it in detail below.

In all examples provided above, participants reflect on participation and resources in strikingly economic terms, even when the resources in question are not material. In their accounts, a given form of action, be it a mass demonstration, a meeting of a feminist group, or a benefit theater production, requires investing particular resources in specific amounts. When the potential participant has a limited amount of this resource, the direct or metaphoric price they are supposed to pay may be perceived as too high, which leads them either to not participate at all, as with cultural events with fixed entry fees, or to seek less “expensive” forms of participation, e.g. to participate in meetings without taking up additional responsibilities or choosing less noisy and less dangerous demonstrations.

The above quotes also highlight the multiple and diverse resources necessary to participate in feminist action. Some of them, such as time or the personal freedom to attend a protest, are routinely taken for granted by organizers. Others, such as money, are easily recognized as unevenly distributed, and organizers often try to keep the thresholds low (e.g. by setting low recommended prices). However, all forms of feminist action seem to have direct or metaphoric prices, and there are always those for whom the existing price is unaffordable. The above quotes also demonstrate how systemic oppression—being a parent, poor, disabled, etc.—produces resource scarcity and thus puts constraints on activist participation.

Participation costs and resources

The narratives presented above prove somewhat hard to connect to social movement theory. Whereas there is a body of scholarship discussing issues of participation, they are generally approached from a rather different perspective than the one emerging from my data. Nevertheless, there are also partial overlaps that may, I suggest, provide helpful insights into the processes of negotiating participation in the feminist movement.

Social movement theory initially relied on the idea of relative costs and benefits of social movement participation suggested by Mancur Olson, who happened to be an economist rather than sociologist. He suggested that individuals, whom he understood as rational subjects, do not participate in collective action unless the benefits of participation outweigh the costs (Olson 1965, 51).¹¹⁵ Researchers of social movements went on to contest and complement this initial suggestion: like all social behavior, they argued, participation in social movements is not strictly rational; rather, participation is shaped by an interplay of considerations of costs and benefits with matters of identity and ideology (Klandermans 2004, 363). Bert Klandermans who studied social movements from a social psychological perspective summarizes these three fundamental reasons for movement participation as follows: “people may want to change their circumstances, they may want to act as members of their group, or they may want to give meaning to their world and express their views and feelings” (Klandermans 2004, 361). With regard to the first aspect which he calls instrumentality, Klandermans suggests that “it is... the belief that the situation can be changed at affordable costs that makes [people] participate. They have the resources and perceive the opportunities to make an impact” (Klandermans 2004, 363).

In Klandermans’ model, costs are what the individual has to give away in order to participate in collective action. He cites two major categories of costs: time and effort, and suggests that forms of participation can be differentiated according to how time-consuming they are (e.g. a single protest vs. a campaign) and how much effort and risk they entail (e.g. signing a petition vs. a sit-in or strike) (Klandermans 2004, 360). Importantly, Klandermans emphasizes that costs and benefits are perceived, i.e. they emerge from the individual’s interpretation. Identity and ideology (which he treats, in contrast to most collective identity theorists, as separate categories) play a role in this, as they may provide additional benefits for participation (Klandermans 2004, 368).

Resources, on the other hand, are generally approached in social movement research—more specifically, in the influential resource mobilization theory—from a collective rather than individual perspective. The focus lies on how social movement organizations aggregate and produce various resources (moral, human, cultural, material, etc.) to enable collective action (B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 125). As

¹¹⁵ While this point may seem trivial and even simplistic today, thinking of collective action as rational was highly innovative at the time, since previous theories considered it as irrational and destructive “crowd behavior” (Buechler 2007, 47).

part of resource mobilization processes, organizations are understood to mobilize participants for the movement, primarily by using collective action frames and fostering collective identity (Klandermans 1997, 16). Resource mobilization is fundamentally understood as a process of resource redistribution that aims at overcoming resource inequality (B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 118). Although various resources are deemed necessary for successful collective action, some resources may compensate for lack of others, e.g. even movements with few material resources can organize successfully due to creative deployment of human and cultural resources (B. Edwards & McCarthy 2004, 143).

The implicit focus on contentious politics limits these theories' relevance for studying feminist movements and the contemporary feminist movement in Russia in particular. Firstly, it is not productive, I suggest, to differentiate between instrumentality (i.e. striving toward change) and identity in a feminist movement: as I have argued in the previous chapters, in a movement of this kind, collective identity *is* change. Secondly, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is neither structured around movement organizations nor engaged in readily recognizable resource mobilization processes, which results in different identity and mobilization dynamics. At the same time, I suggest that thinking of participation in terms of costs and benefits and examining the interplay between these considerations and collective identity can be helpful for understanding the dynamics in the data I have presented above.

I suggest that the concept of costs can be usefully engaged to think about participation in the feminist movement. Yet it should be complemented by an intersectional analysis that takes into account how systemic oppression, especially when it is multiple and intersecting, produces resource scarcity at the individual level. The concept of costs seems to capture well the nature of the situations described by participants where they are supposed to provide something in order to participate yet find that they cannot afford to do so. However, in a departure from Klandermans' theory of participation, my data suggest, firstly, that costs are related to the resources available to the individual and, secondly, that multiple resources and costs are relevant to participation. Indeed, effort, suggested by Klandermans as a classifier for forms of participation, is also, I argue, resource-dependent, as shown by Simha's example: going to a street protest certainly involves effort, yet this effort implies investing one's health and emotional resources. Those who do not possess these resources are not in a position to make the required effort. In a similar way, participating in risky action requires possessing personal freedom, which is less available to those who are controlled by their parents or bosses.

As to the benefits of participation, in the above quotes, participants do not address them explicitly. However, it seems illuminating that the issue of resources is the only reason they cite for choosing less visible or less active forms of participation. Thus they do not claim, for instance, that they are not interested in doing more, or do not see the point of it, or disagree with the concept suggested by organizers. Therefore,

their motivation to participate more actively is implied, and they focus solely on the discrepancy between what they are motivated to do and what they can afford. In other cases, however, participants address the interplay between costs, resources, and identity more directly. This will be the focus of the next section.

Motivation and identity

To explore the connection between participation, motivation, and identity, I return to Ellie who, despite her parents' control, has managed to attend all the major feminist protests that took place in her city in the year leading up to our interview:

If I go to protests and the like, I make up all kinds of excuses. On workdays it's easy, but on weekends—this is why I don't like weekends and holidays much... Well, I find ways to wriggle out.

Ellie does not expect her parents to let her participate in feminist demonstrations—on the contrary, she expects sanctions if they find out that she attends them. In order to participate, she reports finding excuses to go out. She thus deploys her creativity to enable her participation. Although this suggests a high motivation to participate, Ellie does not yet address this directly. She does this, however, in the following excerpt where she also goes in the detail of how she takes precautions against being recognized at protests. This dialogue occurs when I ask her about her impressions from her very first protest, a picket line in support of a rape survivor and against rape culture:

Vanya: And how was it?

Ellie: (*Laughs.*) Well, because of my family and all, I was wearing sunglasses, of course, as always, and was all covered-up... I didn't like it how people were trying to see my face all the time: who is it standing there with this provocative sign? [...]

Vanya: What about your sign, did you bring it from home?

Ellie: Yes, I camouflaged it somehow, so it was fine. [...]

Vanya: And how did you feel about picketing? And about all this in general?

Ellie: Oh, I'd participate more often, I'd like to take my glasses off and be more open but... it's impossible. But actually, it was great.

Among all types of protest, picket lines are the most common in Russia. They are also among the least spectacular, and many participants describe them as “boring.” For Ellie, however, her first picket line is an eventful quest: because she fears sanctions from her parents, she reports having to cover her face and smuggle her protest sign so that she is not seen with it before the protest begins. Thus what is a routine event for many activists and hardly a sensation for the media constitutes a significant challenge for Ellie. I suggest that Ellie's story and other stories of multiply marginalized people who negotiate forms of participation shed a new light on the idea of heroic activism: although not immediately apparent from the outside, they make considerable sacrifices and deploy outstanding creativity to participate in

political action. All the difficulties notwithstanding, Ellie speaks here directly of her high motivation: she reports feeling very enthusiastic about protests and describes her first experience as “great.” What makes her participate in spite of all the challenges she faces?

Vanya: So you weren’t scared, were you? Were these rather positive—

Ellie: I was. But I guess the positive feelings outweighed it. Because when you’re among... your people,¹¹⁶ those who share the same views as you, this is always nice.

Contrary to my assumption, Ellie asserts that she felt fear, just as many protesters do. However, the benefit of being with like-minded people turns out to be paramount for her. Thus her choice to take to the streets is guided, I suggest, by a strong feminist identity: not only does she support the general political idea behind this protest, but she also finds encouragement in meeting other feminists face to face, which does not otherwise occur in her life. In other words, I suggest, sharing a feminist collective identity encourages her to participate by providing both ideological reasons and the feeling of belonging, of a community, which outbalances the high costs of participation.

Motivation to participate appears crucial in various instances of high-cost participation. Here is how Alexandra describes deciding to take part in an “unauthorized” march on the International Women’s Day after talking to its organizer:

Alexandra: They decided to block the K* Avenue. So I met her and said: “M*, let’s talk...” She’s like (*whispers*): “Listen, you must take no part in this, you’ve got a child!” I’m like: “Huh?” She says (*whispers*): “This is very dangerous!” I say (*laughs*): “Come on, M*, tell me!” She goes: “As an organizer, I could face criminal charges for this.” I’m like: “Ooh, do you want to murder somebody or what?” Right. So we blocked the K* Avenue and—

Vanya: So you took part anyway?

Alexandra: Yes, I did. I did! I said that basically, I would determine for myself whether I should be afraid or not.

As is apparent from this story, Alexandra and her counterpart perceive the risks of blocking the avenue quite differently. Despite being a mother, Alexandra is very keen to participate. According to her account, her motivation is fueled by how secretive the organizer is about it, to the extent that she appears almost disappointed when she learns about the actual plan. High motivation to participate seems, again, to prevail over potential risks. However, Alexandra’s further account suggests that this is not the only reason that contributes to her participation. This is Alexandra’s fist “illegal” protest, and she admits feeling some fear. The group preparing the demonstration is heterogeneous, and Alexandra does not know the others. This is how she describes the preparatory meeting:

116 Russian: среди своих.

Of course, this was a little scary because I couldn't trust people I saw for the first time. And I was a little scared. Then I found out nobody knew any lawyer's phone number, nobody had the phone number of the N* Group [volunteer human rights group—V. S.]. [...] I ended up distributing these phone numbers on pieces of paper, on a napkin I tore up... I mean, the anarchists had L*'s number, he does legal stuff in the anarchist movement, but the others had nothing! [...] And I didn't like the fact that this wasn't discussed.

This quote sheds additional light on why Alexandra does not consider the risks of an “illegal” protest high enough to prevent her from participating. When the group comes together to discuss the future march, Alexandra turns out to have more knowledge on protests than other participants. She considers the possibility of being detained and knows exactly who to contact for legal help. She even indirectly criticizes the organizers who did not think about discussing safety and takes over some of their functions by distributing lawyers' phone numbers in the group. Of course, as a mother, potential costs of participating in an “illegal” demonstration are objectively high for Alexandra. Besides police detention, it is not uncommon for authorities to threaten activists with taking away their underage children (Литинский 2015). However, I suggest that she can compensate for these high costs of participation by leaning on other resources she has, namely relevant knowledge that helps mitigate potential risks.

The accounts discussed above clarify the relationship between the costs of participation, motivation to participate, and collective identity. High motivation may urge individuals to find creative solutions to enable their participation, and collective identity can reinforce this motivation. At the same time, motivation is not the only factor determining participation. As Alexandra's example demonstrates, especially in high-risk forms of participation, additional resources that help mitigate risks enable participation along with motivation.

Based on the data presented above, I argue that even apparently routine forms of political action require a variety of resources from potential participants, and their costs are not affordable for all. For multiply marginalized actors who find themselves lacking necessary resources, several strategies are possible. They may choose the forms of participation they can afford, e. g. going to single-person picketing but not to large protests, or coming to meetings to listen rather than taking the floor or assuming tasks. They can also try and find a way around the constraints by leaning on other resources—thus the risks of protest are mitigated by the joy of being around fellow feminists or by relevant knowledge on how to protect oneself in case of repression. Despite experiencing several intersecting oppressions, I argue that feminists who are poor, disabled, parents, etc. deploy their agency and creativity to participate in feminist action. This is also apparent in the tone of their reflections on the costs of participation. A common and striking feature of all stories cited above is participants' clarity. Whether they speak with embarrassment or, on the contrary, with confidence and political consciousness, their tone is always

business-like and their words straightforward. This suggests that both for material and immaterial resources discussed, this is a matter of strategy, and participants clearly understand it as such.

8.3. Feeling inadequate: systemic inequalities and disempowerment

Whereas feminists address lack of resources discussed above in a clear, strategic manner, their approach tends to differ for another type of constraints. Among the numerous stories of choosing less visible forms of participation I have heard in the interviews, many were not as straightforward. Rather, they evoked feeling shy, ashamed, or awkward—briefly, feeling inadequate. As a first example, I return to Ellie’s account of the International Women’s Day rally which she attended without carrying any sign or banner:

Vanya: It’s just occurred to me: and if you had had a sign, what would it have been?

Ellie: Oh, well, that was one of the reasons. (*Laughs.*) I didn’t actually know what to write on it because I felt like... I wouldn’t be able to think of a good one. It would have been banal, what I would’ve written because... basically everyone who takes part in the demonstration knows it all, as do... many in the wider public in general.

This answer seemed confusing to me, as demonstrations on the International Women’s Day are not known for innovative claims. Over the years, my impression of them has rather been that they gather the central issues on the feminist agenda: domestic and sexual violence, reproductive rights, labor and housework inequality, sexist beauty standards, homophobia, etc. Of course, slogans or images that address these issues in creative, innovative ways are always welcomed, but the most classical catchphrases have their undisputed place at the yearly March protests as well. The requirements Ellie articulates thus appear to be her own rather than imposed on her from the outside. This is, I suggest, feeling inadequate: feeling that what one has to contribute is not good enough, not valuable enough, insufficient. As in this instance, feeling inadequate often leads to self-censorship and prevents more visible forms of participation.¹¹⁷

One may also feel inadequate because one apparently does not quite belong. In the following excerpt, Theo describes how they went to a public discussion on conflicts between the feminist and leftist movements at an activist art festival:

The discussion was exhilarating, but I... because I don’t actually belong to any scenes, I mean, I... have never been part of the leftist activist scene, and I don’t

117 In fact, Ellie did not seem to experience a similar lack of confidence at her very first protest when she creatively “camouflaged” her sign to take it from home undetected (see previous section). In the quotes cited above, she has also specified that at this demonstration, she was expecting to see TV journalists. It seems possible to me that beyond her concerns over being filmed, her self-censorship may have been triggered by the feeling of being on display before a larger audience.

consider myself part of the feminist scene either because I haven't engaged in any feminist activism—I only ever stood on the sidelines, commented (*laughs*) on the social networks—so I... just came, took pictures, I hardly talked to anybody. And moreover, I didn't even go to argue in person with those leftists with whom we had argued in the summer of 2014, practically all the... spring and summer, from winter even. [...] I tried to remove myself from all discussions because I... I'm nobody, to anyone, anywhere, so I'd just come and observe and listen to what people say.

To say “I'm nobody” represents, I believe, the essence of feeling inadequate. Theo reports that they withhold from engaging in the discussion and restrict themselves to just observe and listen. They claim that they are not entitled to take the floor because they have not contributed enough either to the leftist or even to the feminist scene. They have, in fact, been very active in ideological debates with leftists, but because these debates took place online, they do not seem to count. Moreover, Theo happens to be an experienced photographer who has taken pictures at several feminist events, thus providing high-quality documentation, which is always valuable. Yet they mention taking pictures casually, in passing, implying that photographic documentation is not enough of a contribution. Theo's reflection evokes the “real action” debate discussed in Chapter 6: as is apparent from their quote, the invalidation of online discursive action is at least partly what underlies their feeling of inadequacy.

Are feelings of inadequacy a personal trait? The sheer number of stories about feeling inadequate in feminist and/or activist spaces I have heard in the interviews suggests that this is more than personal lack of self-confidence. Moreover, feminist theory cautions explicitly against privatizing feelings of inadequacy, shame, or low self-esteem, calling instead for examining their ties to systemic inequalities and experiences of violence (hooks 1994, 4; 2003, 21; Ahmed 2016). To put it in Sara Ahmed's words: “A wall can feel internal, like a voice inside your own head that says don't go there; you can't do that. Even when a wall feels internal it does not begin there” (Ahmed 2016). Although reasons for feelings of inadequacy may be complex and context-related, a major issue with thinking of them as individual is that it implies strictly individual solutions, i.e. working on one's confidence (Gill & Orgad 2017, 33), rather than questioning and transforming collective practices.

When an individual feels inadequate, this creates a barrier to participation that is arguably harder to surmount than when they lack resources such as time or money. This resonates with Klandermans' argument that people participate in collective action when they “perceive the opportunities to make an impact” (Klandermans 2004, 363). Feeling inadequate, I suggest, means perceiving oneself as unable to make an impact. From a feminist theoretical perspective, this can be understood in terms of empowerment, “the development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life” (I. M. Young 1994, 48). A concept that connects the individual and the collective, as Iris Marion Young suggests, empowerment implies

that through collective action and dialogue, “relatively powerless persons” can come to “see the possibility of acting collectively to change their social environment” (I. M. Young 1994, 50).¹¹⁸ From this perspective, feeling inadequate relates to a state of disempowerment.

Drawing on feminist theory begs the question on whether disempowerment has systemic reasons. Indeed, some participants address this in a rather straightforward manner. This is how Simha describes his experience in feminist spaces:

But I couldn't fit in. I mean, I have spent three long years trying to fit into the feminist movement, to find a way to do something with my own hands, to make, to contribute something, because people I met were usually... I mean, a typical feminist's portrait I saw in front of me was an older woman, say, 25 or around 30 years old.¹¹⁹ She has probably got higher education, probably a steady job, very often it's academic education in the humanities, and she's a creative woman, she makes art projects of one kind or another, writes articles or something—and here's myself: a have-not, a biology student who never has free time, nothing to eat—so? I mean, what can I do? I can't make an art project, can I? I can't write an article as a journalist. I mean really, I can't. So what can I do, what good is my biology? I can't come and say: “Let me test some specimens for feminists' sake,” can I? (*Laughs.*) This is nonsense. So I didn't see how I could reconcile that.

Simha is a trans person; however, he did not yet identify as trans at the time he describes in this excerpt. Even so, he differs in several ways from the “typical feminist's portrait” as he saw it: he refers to differences of age, education, economic and employment status. Simha addresses the issue of resources and high costs of participation: having to study and work to support his basic needs, he has neither the time nor the skills to do what he sees other feminists do. However, resources are not his focus here: rather, it is the feeling that he cannot deliver what they can. I argue that this sense of inability or insufficiency is best understood as experiencing disempowerment compared to the “typical feminist.”

Further in the interview, Simha disavows his statement and says that his idea of a “typical feminist” was inaccurate. Of course, feminist scenes being far from homogeneous, most feminists certainly do not embody Simha's “typical portrait.” Why, then, did he form such an impression? I suggest that the reason is not how numerous academics and artists in their twenties and thirties are among feminists, but rather how visible they are. Moreover, rather than being a depiction of a “typical feminist,” the portrait provided by Simha is, I suggest, more accurately understood as a typical portrait of a feminist leader.

118 Whereas there are also individualist interpretations of empowerment, they are criticized by feminist theorists as reductive (I. M. Young 1994, 48–49; Allen 2008, 164; Weldon 2019, 4).

119 Simha was 18 when he formed this impression and 21 at the time of the interview.

Indeed, the generalized “typical feminist” Simha describes is someone who possesses the kind of knowledge and skills that are particularly useful for public discursive and cultural activism. Even though feminist theory is hardly ever taught in Russian universities and feminists must rely on activist sources for feminist education, people with a background in the humanities or social sciences may be generally better equipped for public discursive activism, since they know the language and conventions of authoritative institutions. This, as social movement studies suggest, is a common characteristic of movement leaders (Morris & Staggenborg 2004, 175). While formal education is not the only way to acquire cultural resources of value for discursive activism, commanding these resources helps one get the feminist message through in the media or in the art scene. Thus cultural and educational capital helps a feminist become visible to a wider public and obtain a position of leadership in the feminist scene.

Leadership is a fraught concept both in social movement research and within the feminist movement. As far as scholarly discussion is concerned, researchers argue that one of the reasons why leadership in social movements remains undertheorized is that “an emphasis on leaders seems to unfairly relegate the critical masses of movements to the category of ‘followers’” (Morris & Staggenborg 2004, 171). My observations of the feminist scene and specifically among feminist leaders suggest that a similar discomfort about leadership is present in the feminist movement: since it claims to oppose hierarchies and strive toward being horizontal, leaders are rarely prepared to acknowledge their status or the cultural and educational capital at its foundation. Whereas they rather tend to think of it as a useful resource for activism, there is a lack of sensitivity among feminist leaders to the fact that not all have equal access to these kinds of capital. And although intersectional issues are increasingly debated in the feminist scene, they are more easily recognized in speech than in practice. Therefore, it seems most probable that the reason why Simha feels inadequate and alienated in feminist spaces is not simply because he encounters people who have the educational and cultural capital he does not possess (as this alone does not explain his disempowerment), but also because these people act, albeit unconsciously, in a way that makes Simha feel out of place.

In my interviews, feelings of inadequacy did not only manifest in stories participants told, but also in how they told them. A common feature of most interviews was a general tendency to downplay one’s own work and activism, which extended beyond the specific topic of choosing forms of participation. This tendency manifested in subtle ways: for instance, participants showed embarrassment about applying words like “community,” “activism,” or “politics” to what they did. They protested against these terms, explained that they were “big words” that did not feel quite right, or signaled their discomfort through laughter. This struck me for several reasons. Firstly, when I learned about what participants did, I felt respect and admiration and had no doubts that their feminist contributions deserved regard and praise. Secondly, this tendency was at odds with my own activist experiences, which I had largely made around feminist leaders who were keen to engage in public discursive

politics, had skills to do it, and enjoyed over the years increasing prominence both within the feminist scene and beyond it. These people tended to place great value on personal empowerment and made a point of taking what they did seriously. I had learned this from and with them. For reasons set forth in Chapter 4, however, I did not approach these leaders for interviews: among my participants, only a few feminists were leaders in their small communities, and none enjoyed wide public recognition. Therefore, I am inclined to interpret my participants' self-doubt with regard to their feminist work as a consequence of their position in feminist scenes, which, in turn, depends on (even though is not completely determined by) their general position in various systems of oppression. Whereas in general settings, all feminists tend to encounter hostility rather than recognition (cf. Chapter 7), recognition is also unevenly distributed within the feminist scene, where it is primarily feminist leaders who receive it.

Leaders do a great amount of valuable work in and for the feminist movement: they act as organizers, they inspire other feminists, they do discursive activism with great impact, and shape public debate on feminist issues. Prominent feminist leaders share several struggles with other feminists and are, moreover, especially exposed to specific forms of antifeminist hostility such as large-scale mobbing, which often has devastating effects on them. Several feminist leaders I have encountered over the years take pains to reflect on their practices and act in solidarity with others. At the same time, my observation is that all too often, prominent feminists tend to focus on their own empowerment and disregard those beside them who do not share their experiences and are not necessarily empowered by their actions. Moreover, as the data presented above suggest, feelings of inadequacy are prevalent among non-prominent feminists.

Is there a substantial difference between lack of resources and feelings of inadequacy as constraints for activist participation? Lack of resources is more often described as an external constraint, whereas feelings of inadequacy seem to be rather presented as an internal constraint, one that lies in one's person rather than the conditions of one's life. From an empirical perspective, discussing lack of resources and feelings of inadequacy separately seemed appropriate, as it is the latter that tend to be privatized and individualized, and are often associated with shame. Thinking of feeling inadequate in terms of disempowerment, however, suggests considering, just as with other resources, its uneven distribution and dependence on systemic inequalities.

8.4. Policing group boundaries: aggression in feminist spaces

As discussed in Chapter 7, feminist collective spaces are generally imagined and valued as safe(r) spaces that provide support and protection from outside hostility. This is why, I have argued, it makes sense to think of them as feminist movement communities, which also allows to examine their role as spaces where feminist collective identity is produced and negotiated. Both aspects of communities have to

do with constructing and enforcing boundaries. Boundary work is considered a necessary element of collective identity formation (Taylor & Whittier 1992, 111; Whittier 1995, 100). It also produces a paradox: whereas boundaries are indispensable to distinguish the collective self from the mainstream and thus essentially lay down the basis for political action, they can also restrict access for newcomers and marginalized people (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1354; Clark-Parsons 2018, 2141).

By discussing aggression in feminist spaces, I do not intend to activate the “aggressive feminist” trope, which is too often used by antifeminists to undermine and silence feminist critique. I fully recognize the validity of feminist anger and its emancipatory, transformative, and protective potential (cf. Lorde 1984, 127; Ahmed 2017, 172). To do justice to the feminist movement’s complexity, however, I believe it important to discuss the tensions that arise from feminist boundary work.

Although many experience feminist communities as extraordinarily welcoming and supportive spaces, they are, of course, not without conflict. This is how Ellie describes her participation on online feminist platforms:

Ellie: I rarely comment on anything (*laughs*), I somehow feel too shy to do it. Usually I just read.

Vanya: Why do you feel shy?

Ellie: I don’t know, I don’t like it much when all those holy wars start, I’d rather not get negative reactions, I get enough negative stuff in my life as it is. I prefer to keep silent... and keep my opinion to myself if it differs.

Vanya: If it differs from the one in the original post?

Ellie: Yes.

The expression “holy wars”¹²⁰ Ellie uses is Internet slang for long and heated debates, and even though its religious origin is not transparent in Russian, it is primarily used, at least in the feminist scene, to designate debates over ideological issues. Ellie’s answer thus suggests that her “shyness” has to do with ideological differences and with the way the feminist platforms she follows tend to deal with such differences. Apparently, they do not particularly welcome disagreement, since Ellie expects that sharing her ideas might make her into a target of a “holy war.” The fear of conflict is exacerbated for Ellie by the fact that she is confronted with “negative stuff” in other areas of her life. Protecting herself from aggression by not engaging in discussions is thus a strategy she uses to manage her emotional resources.

As an example, Ellie went on to cite feminist attitudes toward men: one of the platforms she follows promotes women’s separatism and insists that no man is “not like that,”¹²¹ i. e. not involved in supporting and benefiting from women’s

¹²⁰ The Russian word холивар was borrowed from English.

¹²¹ The Russian feminist slang for this is нетакой (also spelled as нитакой), similar to the English “not all men.”

oppression. Ellie, on the other hand, contends that she “would not label” people so easily. The feminist debate over dissociation from men plays a fundamental role for feminist collective identities (Whittier 1995, 103). In many feminists’ eyes, supporting a “women-oriented” approach that decenters men is a litmus test to establish whether one is a feminist. Those who, like Ellie, do not rule out political alliances with men are considered non-feminist from this perspective; accordingly, its adherents may react harshly to protect what is, for them, one of the crucial boundaries of feminist identity and community. Yet while attacking feminist separatist politics, e.g. under accusations of “man-hating,” can indeed be a feature of antifeminist backlash, there are also feminist critiques of women’s separatism, notably from intersectional perspectives (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16; hooks 1984, 68). Ellie does not go into the details of her reasoning behind opposing separatism. Whatever her reasons, she ends up on the margins of a feminist community protective of its boundaries. A young woman who is very enthusiastic about feminism, Ellie is reduced to silent participation on this particular feminist platform by its boundary-protecting aggression.

Whether a community recurs to aggression to protect its boundaries can change over time. Theo who joined their first feminist online community in 2008 left it for a while and came back to discover a striking change of atmosphere:

When I came there again, I found that everything had changed. Absolutely everything. I mean, discussions became very aggressive, there is no... how should I put it? No consideration for lack of knowledge. I think when people come with their questions, even if they phrase them in an inappropriate way, we should still understand that every one of us has made this journey of not knowing. I mean, we have gained this knowledge ourselves, maybe in a traumatizing way, maybe in a non-traumatizing way... Why can’t we respond to these people who’ve come to the community in a way that does not traumatize them? I don’t really get that. They were all somehow too fierce in their attacks (*laughs*)... on newcomers.

In this account, the boundary between the feminist community and outsiders is established along the lines of feminist knowledge, or more precisely, of the specific subset of feminist knowledge that is considered necessary in this particular feminist community. Reflecting on communication between long-term members and newcomers, Theo calls for empathy with those who “lack knowledge.” By referring to the process of learning, they suggest considering newcomers as soon-to-be members, but for Theo’s fellow community members, they are outsiders. In other words, other members have come to perceive the community’s boundaries as rigid, whereas Theo believes they are and should stay permeable. By describing “attacks on newcomers” as “traumatizing,” Theo highlights their alienating effect: a person who has been bashed for their “lack of knowledge” has probably much less motivation to continue participating. In fact, Theo goes on to say that they limited their participation in the community in response to the change in atmosphere, even

though they state only having witnessed the aggression rather than having been a target themselves. Thus aggressive boundary-policing can alienate long-term members as well as newcomers.

Of course, besides politics and knowledge, boundaries are also routinely drawn along social identities and similarities of experience. Aggression over this kind of boundaries is probably most visible in the trans debate. Simha describes his experiences in online feminist spaces as “being bombarded with rotten tomatoes.” After he started to identify as trans, he recounts, he simply stopped coming to feminist spaces:

Then I had a crisis, basically, realizing my identity, and now I don't butt in,¹²² so to say, into feminist circles directly. Because I know how... intense the emotions are toward transgender people. Even if nobody says it to you plainly, on the whole, among many feminists you can feel... malevolence, at the very least.

Simha describes how he navigates through transphobic online discussions:

On the Internet, if you come to a discussion thread, you can look at this thread and see from what has been written there that you should not write in it. I've had such cases, see? When I would just turn my back and leave—simply not to waste my resources.

Having encountered open aggression toward trans people, Simha withdraws from feminist spaces. Again and like Ellie, he refers to emotional resources which he chooses to spare by not engaging in debates. Indeed, Simha's use of the expression “butt in” suggests that he now feels like an outsider in feminist spaces. This is, I suggest, a direct result of exclusionary boundary work: having witnessed and, indeed, been a target of feminist aggression directed against trans people, Simha does not feel like he belongs in feminist spaces anymore.

Simha's story has a particular resonance for me as a trans person. Like Simha, I have made the painful realization that my position vis-à-vis the feminist community has become questionable since I came out as trans. Unlike Simha, my decision was to insist on my continued belonging to the community, yet the ongoing pain of having my belonging questioned certainly affects deeply my interpretation of what Simha describes. Moreover, it seems probable that my being trans has also affected the way Simha recounted this story in the interview: to focus on the experiences of injustice and describe them in a straightforward manner like he does is likely influenced by the context of a conversation between two trans people with similar experiences.

Whereas being in the transmasculine spectrum, both of us are not the primary targets of the trans debate which is primarily directed against transfeminine people, Simha has nevertheless reported having been accused of “betraying sisterhood” and “erasing lesbian identity,” both common hate phrases wielded against trans people in feminist spaces (Noble 2004, 20; Hines 2019, 150). Arguably, the trans debate is

122 Russian: не лезу.

currently one of the central feminist debates worldwide, due to increasing trans visibility, but above all due to the fact that it touches upon the definition of woman as feminism's political subject (Awkward-Rich 2017, 819; Koyama 2020, 741; Hines 2020, 702). In Russia as elsewhere, it has led to the emergence of new boundaries in feminist scenes, dividing spaces and collective identities into trans-inclusive and trans-exclusive. Yet in practice, as discussed in Chapter 7, these boundaries do not necessarily imply a dichotomy, since some feminist groups also attempt to articulate intermediary positions and remain in dialogue rather than in rigid confrontation.

Whereas boundary work is crucial for maintaining collective identity and feminist safe(r) spaces, it produces paradoxical effects when it pushes away those who identify as feminist or are curious about feminism, preventing feminist communities from acquiring or keeping active members. Boundary work is even more questionable when it reproduces the oppression in the wider society, pushing away those who are already marginalized. Those who are shunned away may leave the unaccepting community altogether or remain present as silent participants without getting actively involved. When boundary work is expressed through aggression, it exposes the interactive aspect of movement participation. Indeed, when an individual chooses a specific form of participation, their choice does not only depend on the resources available to them, but is also shaped, as the above examples demonstrate, by ongoing interaction between the individual and the collective. Of course, this interaction does not have to be shaped by aggression. In the following, I will address how feminist communities may enable and encourage participation.

8.5. Collective solutions: enabling participation through empowerment

Above I have argued that some of the major reasons for people to choose less active participation is lack of resources which translates into high costs of participation, disempowerment experienced as feelings of inadequacy, and aggressive policing of group boundaries. In a grassroots, decentralized movement, participation primarily takes place in self-organized feminist collectives rather than formal organizations. These collectives can hardly provide their members with material resources; yet what they can and do deliver is cultural resources, i. e. knowledge and skills. Moreover, feminist theories of empowerment suggest that empowerment is also provided through community membership and collective action (Allen 2008, 171). Indeed, empowerment can be thought of as the very process whereby the individual overcomes their feeling of inadequacy, acquiring confidence and a politically grounded sense of agency.

What can organizers do to support participants' empowerment and participation? To examine the options, let us turn to stories of positive experiences in feminist spaces. For Alexandra, the first space where she learned consistently about feminism was a series of small-scale public lectures held at a research institution. This is how she describes her interactions with the events' organizer and one of the participants, a respected feminist intellectual:

B* actively—well, not actively, but he somehow encouraged me to participate all the time. And because it really was all very interesting to me and I enjoyed coming there immensely, I started to say: “Oh, let’s do that,” and then I would find something else to discuss, and then something else... Or I would bring a book and show it to everybody, and T*, she was kind of—she did not organize the meetings but they took place under her auspices, so to say. I mean, she came to every meeting, she always asked questions, debated. [...] Once she saw a book I brought and said: “Alexandra, will you maybe... make a presentation about that book?” Well, somehow I finished the book and didn’t present. But on the whole, these were very easy—I mean, I thought back then these were very easy, cozy relationships at these meetings.

Initially, Alexandra is a “newcomer” at the lectures in the sense discussed in the previous sections: she knows little about feminism but is keen to learn. She describes going gradually from silent to more active participation, and the main reason for expanding her participation is an atmosphere she characterizes as “easy” and “cozy.”¹²³ As is apparent from her account, the events were meant to be interactive and dialogical: the organizer wanted participants to debate and make suggestions for further meetings. Alexandra points out explicit encouragement from people in charge of the space (B*, the organizer) or perceived as being in charge (T*, an intellectual from the previous feminist generation who evidently has authority over other participants). Although Alexandra’s participation does not go as far as holding her own presentation, the encouragement and the “cozy” atmosphere make her enjoy the meetings and get gradually more involved.

Thus the attitude and actions of organizers and established members may help newcomers overcome the barrier of feeling out of place and become, indeed, full members of the community in question. Theo describes a similar experience:

And back in 2008, the community was very, extremely considerate.¹²⁴ I mean in general, obviously I went to various places on the Internet and saw that people... argued with incredible frenzy, completely ferociously, foully, and no sensible discussion could come out of it. I mean, it all turned very quickly into torrents of mutual insults. And this is why the feminist community, the discussions that happened there, they stunned me with their consideration, with their respect for... for lack of knowledge in others. I was simply fascinated... I mean, it was such a... safety island, a refuge of safe, measured discussion. And... there were people who were willing—I mean, they had the time, the willingness and the readiness to explain it all. Because I too... butted in with comments about—well, not about the female destiny, naturally, I mean, I had questions, I asked them in a rather aggressive form, but... those who were there communicated with me in a very thoughtful way, they explained me things...

123 Russian: свободные, уютные.

124 Russian: корректное.

This account stands in direct opposition to the one cited in the previous section where Theo described how the same online collective space stopped welcoming newcomers a few years later. When Theo first discovers this online group, it corresponds fully to the definition of a safe(r) space, at least as far as Theo is concerned. This, as Theo goes on to explain in their interview, was the tipping point that made them start identifying as a feminist. They describe the mode of communication on this platform as “being considerate,” which goes, I suggest, to the heart of enabling participation. In this instance, Theo speaks of being considerate of others’ lack of knowledge: a way of communicating that precludes shaming newcomers for unfamiliarity with feminist concepts or otherwise expressing aggression toward them. In practice, being considerate may encompass responding to ignorant comments with offering education (“they explained me things”) and to aggressive ones with deescalation, thus creating a safe(r) environment. This communication functions as a kind of antidote against feeling inadequate or having to protect oneself from aggression, and it helps people feel welcome and at ease. Moreover, being considerate implies being willing to listen and validate others’ perspectives while not necessarily agreeing with them. This aspect comes to the fore in Alexandra’s account of joining another fledgling activist group:

And then we started to meet on a regular basis. And... those were really the happiest times in my life. Well, not in my life (*laughs*), but this was simply awesome. I would say everything I had to say and... well, it was really great. Nobody interrupted anybody... And all the while, until you take it all down to the smallest piece, until you tell everything to the last doubt, nobody leaves, everybody listens, and everything is so interesting, and with so much attention... But at the same time, all this from ab-so-lute-ly strange people! I was just exploding with happiness from it all.

The group meets to discuss ideological issues and offers everyone present the opportunity to say “everything [they have] to say”: they listen carefully and discuss issues in great detail, demonstrating in practice that they value every opinion. This clearly creates an environment of mutual respect that makes Alexandra feel extremely happy, thus ensuring her further participation. Alexandra expresses surprise at so much consideration from people she did not know before. In this case, Alexandra is no more of a newcomer than any other member: the group is new and horizontal, so there is neither a single organizer nor core or longstanding participants. Accordingly, the group’s boundaries are not yet defined, and it willingly embraces new members.

In the above quote, Theo speaks of sharing knowledge with newcomers as a way of inviting them into the community. Alexandra’s account emphasizes producing knowledge collectively in discussion. Both stories thus touch upon the immaterial resources feminist communities generate and redistribute. Yet how can

communities deal with individuals' lack of resources and systemic inequalities? In this case, redistribution and knowledge production matter as well, as shown again by Theo:

Actually, some of us feminists with children, when the P* Group's events were being discussed, we started to say: "You still fail to be truly inclusive because... feminists with children are still left overboard." I mean it turns out that feminism is something for those who are young, childfree, and not inscribed into capitalism. That is to say, they don't have a job with a strict schedule, they can come—I mean, even the P* Group's events, for example, start at 7 p.m. Well, not everyone can come on a Tuesday, can they? Not everyone can either call a babysitter or simply just make all the way from their jobs to the event. But because people show up, they somehow don't... And those who have kids can come least of all. If you want to attract everybody, you need to organize children's activities of some sort and... apart from events for adults, there has to be, I don't know, a trampoline room with entertainers (*laughs*). I mean, figuratively speaking. So people with kids can come and leave their kids in that room. But then another idea sprung out of this: when we discussed it, we realized we don't want... to send our kids away to do their stuff, we would much rather... involve the kids in what we do.

Theo is one of those who speak up and criticize the group they are part of for failing to be considerate of the working parents' living conditions that prevent them from participating in the group's activities. They point out that the organizers had not been aware of the problem before because still other people had shown up at meetings, so that the absence of those members who also happened to be parents could be overlooked. In other words, the group had been catering inadvertently only to the interests of those who are "young, childfree," and do not have to work full time to support their families. To enable parents' participation, Theo suggests, the group should meet their needs, e.g. by taking over some of their care work for the time of the group meetings. While a literal "trampoline room with entertainers" is hardly imaginable in self-organized activist spaces, the group proceeds to develop other ideas and comes up with the creative solution of including both parents and children into feminist activities. Thus in order to enable parents' participation, other group members have first to educate themselves on the parents' life realities and needs. The group as a whole then generates knowledge through discussion, coming up with innovative ideas on redistributing labor to free up parents' time.

In Theo's account, the parents phrase their criticism of the group at large using the words "still" and "truly inclusive," which suggests that the group had previously proclaimed their interest in being inclusive. The criticism thus pertains to the gap between declaration and practice. This situation is different from cases of boundary-protective aggression: in this case, boundaries are not supposed to exist in theory,

but dismantling them in practice requires additional political action. This is, of course, a common observation multiply marginalized people have to make in feminist as well as other spaces. This is how Simha reflects on transphobic behavior:

When you meet someone online, let alone in person at an event, imagine someone comes and says: “I’m a feminist.” And you don’t know what to expect from this person. I mean, [...] there is no indicator to show the percentage of transphobia the person has got. And anyway, even if they don’t uphold the position of those people who call themselves radical feminists, they can easily blurt out something like that. Without even attaching any importance to it.

Experiencing feminist spaces as unsafe by default, Simha makes it clear that simply calling oneself a feminist or even explicitly disassociating oneself from trans-exclusionary radical feminism is not enough, as this does not necessarily prevent people from reproducing transphobia or cissexism. Being considerate of a marginalized identity, then, must go beyond simply labeling oneself friendly or an ally: it must encompass educating oneself about the marginalization in question and translating the acquired knowledge into action.

For all the heterogeneity of the above examples, I argue that they all involve resource redistribution in a broad sense of the term. Whereas initially, it is the marginalized person or the newcomer who bears the burden of disempowerment or lack of resources, other community members can give their time, emotional resources, or labor to balance out this difference and enable participation. Enabling participation thus effectively increases the community’s equality. Besides this, enabling participation involves innovation, i.e. exchanging and producing knowledge. Whether communities debate ideological differences or practical ways to ensure participation, these discussions generate new political understandings and practices of inclusion.

When are feminist organizers and communities more likely to be considerate of others and thus encourage participation? Comparing stories of considerate communities to those of failing to be considerate provides a somewhat disheartening answer: people are more likely to be considerate of others and to work actively to encourage participation when the group boundaries are not yet established. In Alexandra’s story of thoughtful discussions where all listened to everyone, the group had not existed before, and it was precisely in and through these meetings that it formed as a stable collective. In Theo’s account of the developments in their online feminist community, they describe how considerate the platform was in its early years and how it stopped being so later. Apparently, organizers and communities tend to be considerate of other people when they need them. When they are looking for new members or trying to expand their audience, this is the phase where they are likely to put in the effort necessary to be considerate, by listening carefully, being patient and respectful in discussions, educating themselves on others’ marginalizations, etc. As to the situations where communities fail to be considerate, on the other hand, they tend to occur in established groups that already possess a

clear identity and boundaries due to previous collective experience and/or shared social positioning (cf. “those who are young, childfree, and not inscribed into capitalism” in Theo’s story or Simha’s description of a “typical feminist”). As long as these established groups provide their members with what they need (from partners for activist projects to people to socialize with), members tend to feel comfortable within them and value relationships to each other more than existing or potential relationships with outsiders. In other words, they can afford to forego the complex work of being considerate in favor of maintaining existing relationships within the group.

As discussed above, boundary work is productive and necessary for maintaining collective identity and thus, ultimately, securing a solid basis for collective action. Not all groups can or should be equally open to new members, and a plurality of boundary practices arguably belongs to the overall diversity of a decentralized movement. A problem may arise, however, when a group wishes for more active members and active participation yet is not aware of instances where potential members are shunned away by rigid boundaries or the group’s lack of consideration. Indeed, feminist groups may face a dilemma when their desire to increase membership and activity comes up against the necessity to invest emotional resources into listening, offering information, de-escalating, and other practices that make up what I have discussed above under the label of being considerate.

The tendency of recurring to practices of consideration only when the group has a need in new members is, I suggest, particularly troubling when it concerns the exclusion of multiply marginalized people. When feminist communities fail to be considerate of those who are different, they silence and force them out just as non-feminist communities do. Reproducing oppression and marginalization in this way, as feminist theorists have relentlessly cautioned, can only have very limited, if any, emancipatory effects (Lorde 1983b, 99; hooks 1984, 43). By contrast, when a movement community considers the experiences and needs of multiply marginalized participants, it produces change by including them in ways that larger society does not. This internal political work that occurs within the movement community is, I argue, no less important than any “outward” political action.

There is also evidence that feminist communities can start being considerate of difference when they previously were not: namely when those previously not taken into account speak up and demand recognition and change. In Theo’s story of feminist parents’ inclusion, the discussion in the P* Group took place in the aftermath of the so-called “children shitstorm:”¹²⁵ a series of fierce online debates on feminism and parenthood that shook several feminist online communities in the summer of 2014. The incentive was a Facebook post by a prominent feminist who complained about children on an airplane; the post used harsh expressions one of my participants qualified as hate speech. This sparked indignation among feminist parents, which led to a debate on personal freedom, reproductive pressure, and care

125 The term came up in several interviews with small variations: детский срач or детосрач.

work. Whereas initially, childfree feminists who participated in these debates saw mothers¹²⁶ as compliant with patriarchy's claims over women's bodies and understood themselves as oppressed rebels, many came, in the course of a collective feminist analysis of motherhood/parenthood, to acknowledge children's and their caregivers' oppression under patriarchy. As Theo explains, the "children shitstorm" impacted the subsequent discussion in the P* Group:

As a result, now... they don't touch upon this issue anymore. I mean, childfree feminists don't touch upon this issue. At all. And when, for instance, feminists with kids talk about how we need more inclusion and how we are affected by this or that, nobody jumps at us anymore. [...] I mean, for example, when G* [another feminist parent—V. S.] and me, we start nagging the others in the P* Group's mailing list: "We don't have enough inclusion," everybody says right away: "Yes, let's think of something for the kids," with so much willingness that I think... it's because people have reflected following all that conflict and realized... that... children and mothers... have to eat up their share, so to say... of oppression (*laughs*).

Observing their fellow group members, Theo registers a change in how they approach the political issue of children and parents. Theo describes their new willingness to discuss children's inclusion as almost surprising and links it to reflection in the aftermath of the "children shitstorm." Providing context to Theo's above quotes, this excerpt suggests that feminist parents' success in claiming inclusion in the P* Group builds upon the debate the group members followed (and possibly participated in) online. Driven to speak up by an initial discursive attack, the marginalized group has thus managed, in an encompassing online debate, to change the political understanding of parenthood in feminist terms, indeed to articulate parenthood as a political issue, and gain wide recognition for this political articulation in the feminist scenes. Moreover, this debate has also led to changes in practice, as the P* Group's example shows.

8.6. Participation and difference in the feminist movement

Despite its seeming simplicity, the issue of participation is far from trivial. Whereas classical social movement theory considers participation as depending on an interplay of collective identity and affordable costs, my data suggest that it is the latter that often constitutes a barrier for feminist participation. In the feminist movement, highly committed people who identify strongly with feminism are often unable to participate actively due to systemic lack of resources or disempowerment. Nevertheless, they use their agency and creativity to negotiate forms of participation, leaning on other resources or opting for less visible forms of participation they can afford. The latter strategy is even used in those feminist communities that recur to confrontational practices of boundary protection, preventing newcomers and marginalized people from participating more fully.

¹²⁶ I refer here to the language used in the debate in order to remain true to history, but also because it concerns women and mothers as constructed in patriarchal discourse.

Accordingly, encouraging participation is, I have argued, a matter of opening up community boundaries, redistributing resources, and supporting empowerment. By redistributing resources, communities may at least partly compensate for systemic lack of resources experienced by members. Furthermore, data show that processes of exchanging and generating knowledge also play a major role in enabling participation: while listening and sharing knowledge helps create a welcoming atmosphere, community members may also educate themselves on others' experiences and marginalizations, debate and generate ideas for new, fairer practices. Thus, I have argued, enabling participation is closely tied to collective discussion and innovation.

Should all communities open up to all differing perspectives and experiences? Would this not ultimately reduce rather than increase the feminist movement's diversity? As I hope to have shown with the above analysis, the apparent homogeneity of certain feminist communities is often an illusion rather than reality. As soon as one thinks of participation as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy of participation versus lack thereof, one can discern the various forms of participation and the dynamics that make people reduce or increase their participation. In fact, it is highly probable that seemingly homogeneous communities include members with a wide variety of marginalizations and perspectives, but only a small part of this spectrum is acknowledged (producing oppressive ideas of "typical feminists") while all others remain invisible, even as they do their share of work in maintaining the community and/or supporting collective action. As such, the question is often not about inviting new people in but rather about acknowledging the experiences, perspectives, and contributions that are already there.

To the extent that the issue of participation touches upon multiple marginalizations, it is thus a question of how the feminist movement deals with difference. Seemingly homogeneous communities where certain marginalizations have no place or voice may help some of their members empower themselves as an already relatively privileged group but do little to promote more fundamental change, as they reproduce the same exclusion that occurs in other social contexts. However, when a community chooses to question its own practices and enters into collective debates over inclusion, it becomes an experimental platform where new ways of being, working, and thinking together are produced and tested, potentially to be offered to the larger society.

9. A subaltern imperial feminism: situating Russian feminism in global coloniality

Whereas the previous chapters addressed internal dynamics within the feminist movement in Russia, this chapter, on the other hand, seeks to take a step back and consider it in a wider context that transcends national boundaries.¹²⁷ What place does it occupy in the global interplay of feminisms and power relations? I will attempt to answer this question by considering, firstly, how feminists in Russia relate to the West and secondly, by examining the tensions and conflicts between feminists in Russia who are variously positioned in terms of geographical location and race. I suggest that a postcolonial approach is helpful for understanding both sets of issues and interconnections between them.

The idea for this chapter emerged out of two sources I initially did not consider as connected: firstly, what I perceived in the feminist scene as a power dynamic between Moscow (and Saint Petersburg) and the rest of Russia, and secondly, the need to frame my research with regard to the Western context and audience. At the beginning, I saw the former as one of the many relationships to be considered in an intersectional analysis along with the axes of class, age, dis/ability, etc. As to the issue of the West, I intended to address it as part of my general theoretical perspective. It was not until later stages in my research process that I engaged seriously with post- and decolonial¹²⁸ perspectives on Russia and Eurasia,¹²⁹ which led me to examine how these two threads I believed separate intertwined, illuminating from different angles the place of Russian feminism in global modernity/coloniality (Mignolo 2011, 2). It was at that point that I fully realized that there was also a crucial third thread that I had not sufficiently addressed at the empirical stage of my research: the dynamics between Russia as a colonial empire and its colonized peripheries.

Moreover, the need to examine the relationship between Russian and Western feminisms arose for me from an incongruence I perceived between how my participants addressed this relationship and how it has been described in Western, most notably US American academic scholarship. Much of the literature on the women's movement and feminism in Russia tends to strongly emphasize Western

127 Some of the data and preliminary analysis presented below were first published in (Solovey 2019b; 2020).

128 Although there have been vehement debates between decolonial and postcolonial authors, I agree with María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan that the two strands of theorizing have common intellectual and emancipatory goals and that there is value in thinking them together rather than in opposition (Castro Varela & Dhawan 2015, 325). Madina Tlostanova, initially a decolonial feminist and a crucial figure in post- and decolonial studies on Russia and Eurasia, has also lately applied the term "postcolonial" to her work (Tlostanova 2017; Koobak, Tlostanova, & Thapar-Björkert 2021).

129 Following Tlostanova and Suchland (Tlostanova 2010, 16; Suchland 2011, 838), I use the term "Eurasia" to refer to the spaces where post-Soviet, postsocialist and postcolonial experiences intersect. My use of this term is meant to be critical of the colonial dynamics that are eschewed by more conventional concepts like "post-Soviet states" or "CIS countries."

support for women's and feminist organizing in Russia, portraying Russian activists as passive recipients of Western knowledge and funds. As researchers have suggested, such tendencies probably have historical reasons, primarily cold-war ideologies that have influenced the discipline of Soviet studies since its emergence (Suchland 2011, 841). In the 90s, interest in gender and women's activism in the postsocialist contexts surged among Western scholars in response to the Perestroika (Garstenauer 2018, 116, 119) and was strongly framed in terms of democratization and modernization (cf. Sperling 1999, 14; Johnson 2009, xii). Critics of this framing have argued that it is rooted in an assumption of Western modernity as a singular model of linear development (Koobak & Marling 2014, 333). Since this critique suggested engaging with postcolonial approaches, working with it has led me to ask what more a postcolonial perspective could reveal on Russia and feminism.

The following sections retrace the course of my reasoning. I begin with examining Russian feminists' relationship to Western feminism(s). I then address theoretical discussions at the intersection of postcolonial and postsocialist studies to suggest a conceptualization of how the dynamics between Russia and the West may relate to those within Russia and/or the region Russia claims to control or influence. Further, I discuss the relationship between feminists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and feminists in the so-called "regions" and question how it can be understood in postcolonial terms. Finally, I engage with postcolonial critiques of Russian politics and society in the past and present; I discuss the issues of coloniality and racism in the Russian feminist movement and outline questions that have emerged in this respect later in the course of my research.

9.1. The relationship to Western feminism

For the 90s women's movement in Russia, interactions with the West have played an important role since its very beginning. In fact, it was already in late Soviet times that those who were soon to identify as feminists read, translated, and disseminated Western feminist texts (Sperling 1999, 56; Zdravomyslova 2014, 116). Whereas their interest in feminism was partly guided by a desire of "reconnecting with progressive European thought" (Hemment 2014, 133), discovering global feminism also meant finding an adequate language to articulate what they had long experienced or understood implicitly (Lipovskaia in Sperling 1999, 56; Гапова 2009, 469). These Western intellectual influences were soon followed by direct communication (both at collective events like conferences and through personal contacts) and financial support from various Western and international organizations and foundations.¹³⁰ This financial support, as researchers concur, has been a major factor that shaped the women's movement in Russia (Sperling 1999, 256; Hemment 2014, 138). Women's organizations were largely dependent on Western funding, which partly impacted their agendas and, moreover, led to competition and splits (Hinterhuber 2012b, 159; Гапова 2009, 470). At the same time, other authors have argued that the donors' agenda did not overtake or determine women activists' priorities

¹³⁰ For a detailed overview of the donors, see for example (Hemment 2014, 139).

(Hemment 2007, 145). Still, when international donors withdrew their support for Russia's NGOs in the 2000s, many women's organizations closed (Johnson 2009, 60; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 262).

The relationship of the women's movement to the West in the 90s was thus apparently one of intellectual and financial dependence. Yet how far did this dependence reach? There is a tendency in some of the literature to portray the women's movement in Russia as lacking self-support. For instance, Sperling argues that Western feminist knowledge and money have played a "key role in shaping the contemporary Russian women's movement" (Sperling 1999, 52). Suvi Salmenniemi and Maria Adamson contend that "[f]eminism in post-Soviet Russia developed thanks to considerable western funding, and when this funding gradually dried up in the mid 2000s, feminist organisations largely disintegrated" (Salmenniemi & Adamson 2015, 92).¹³¹ Johnson directly attributes the emergence of women's crisis centers in Russia to "[t]ransnational activism and funding for women's organizations" (Johnson 2009, ix) and claims that "Russian activists unabashedly appropriated their ideas about the proper response to violence against women mostly from North American institutions" (Johnson 2009, 53). These authors thus construct Western activists and institutions as savior-like actors who provide resources and ideas to passive and sometimes ungrateful Russian women.

However, this perspective is likely influenced by cold-war ideological legacies in area studies and political science. As Jennifer Suchland has argued, the emergence of Soviet studies in the U. S. academia was largely shaped by the ideological goals of the Cold War (Suchland 2011, 841). As the U. S. women's studies experienced a "global" or "transnational turn," which has implied incorporating postcolonial critique and adopting considerations of the politics of location, these developments touched upon how the relationship between the "first world" and the "third world" was conceptualized in scholarship but left out the "second world" (Suchland 2011, 839). As a result, the persistence of stereotypes about Russian and Eastern European women has resulted in an erasure of postsocialist perspectives in U. S. scholarship, especially those critical of the Western hegemonic democratization project (Suchland 2011, 848).

Other authors have argued that rather than borrowing from Western knowledge indiscriminately, Russian women have approached it critically, considering historical and cultural differences, and adopted elements of Western theories in constructive, creative ways (Kay 2000, 180; Hinterhuber & Strasser-Camagni 2011, 149). Examining the particular case of crisis centers, Hemment suggests that whereas Western (U. S. and German) organizations offered a clear model for establishing such centers—"a do-it-yourself NGO kit," as she calls it—adapting it to

131 Salmenniemi and Adamson back this claim with a reference to an article by Russian gender sociologist Irina Tartakovskaya. In the original article, however, Tartakovskaya cites the withdrawal of Western funding just as one of several reasons for the fact that "the number of professional gender studies in the post-Soviet countries has reduced significantly over the recent years" (Тартаковская 2010, 7, my translation).

the Russian context was a complicated task (Hemment 2007, 95). Her participatory action research in which she assisted Russian women activists in opening a crisis center in Tver provides ample and nuanced insight into the complexity of this work and offers a well-founded critique of Western neoliberal aid (Hemment 2007, 139). Therese Garstenauer examines the forms and practices of collaboration and exchange between Russian and Western gender scholars; in particular, she discusses in detail mutual influences between Russian and Western scholars in international projects and Russian researchers' critical approach to Western knowledge (Garstenauer 2018, 187, 199).

These considerations are in line with the perspective on feminism and gender as traveling theories (Cerwonka 2008, 811; Binder 2011, 7). Drawing on Edward Said (Said 1983), this approach suggests that rather than being directly "transplanted" in other contexts, theories experience shifts, adjustments, and adaptations as they move across national borders and are subject to transcultural exchanges (Binder 2011, 8). It thus allows both to acknowledge Russian and Eastern European feminists' agency in interacting with Western theories and to consider how Western feminists have, in turn, benefited from Russian and Eastern European thought and critique (Cerwonka 2008, 825; Hinterhuber & Strasser-Camagni 2011, 163).

Drawing inspiration from this approach, it is Russian feminists' agency that I seek to center in the following as I examine how contemporary feminists in Russia interact with Western feminism. I will begin with discussing the general role the West plays for the contemporary grassroots feminist movement in Russia and then examine more closely how feminists reflect on the relationship between Russia and the West.

Local priorities: self-reliance rather than dependence

In the overwhelming majority of interviews I did for this research, the West and Western feminisms are conspicuously absent. My semi-structured interviews were designed to let participants set the direction for the conversation in order to discover what was relevant for them rather than impose my own agenda. In light of this, the fact that most of them did not speak about the West is in itself valuable information: namely, relationships to the West are not of high relevance to my participants.

This disinterest toward the West has evidently to do with the fact that my participants were multiply marginalized, non-prominent feminists. None of them did professionalized work as feminists in NGOs, academic or artistic settings, none enjoyed wide public visibility. Their activism was unpaid, relatively small-scale, mostly local, and addressed primarily their immediate communities. Western publics and organizations did not appear on their activist horizons either as donors, partners, or audiences. Whereas participants were generally interested in feminist developments in other countries and asked me eagerly about the feminist movement in Germany, this was mostly a matter of curiosity rather than a burning practical or political concern.

This observation is thus a direct result of my method, which excluded interviewing prominent feminists (cf. Chapter 4). Besides self-organized grassroots initiatives, feminist scenes in Russia include people who finance their feminist projects by applying for grants,¹³² feminist scholars and artists who regularly travel abroad and maintain direct contacts to Western colleagues. These people are more likely to reflect on their relationship to the West, yet they do not make up the majority of the feminist movement.

There are two exceptions in my sample: Katerina Maas from Tomsk and Tatyana Bolotina from Moscow. Both spoke at length about feminists' relationships to the West, and I will examine their reflections in detail in the next sections. Like the rest of my participants, Katerina and Tatyana are neither materially dependent on Western funds nor have they had close ongoing collaborations with Western feminists. Yet their interviews stand out among the others, as both produced a strong impression of self-confident leaders, at least within their immediate feminist communities. Not only did both act as organizers who establish collectives and bring other feminists together, they were also interested in discussing the feminist movement's strategies and future directions and, moreover, freely criticized other feminists (which several other participants markedly abstained from doing). In contrast to most other participants, Katerina and Tatyana also wished to be mentioned in my research under their full names, choosing authorship of their ideas and analyses over the protection of anonymity. Their status and self-perception as leaders of their local communities may explain why Katerina and Tatyana were interested in reflecting on Russian and Western feminisms.

On the whole, as far as relationships to the West are concerned, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia differs from the previous feminist generation in a major way. Being largely self-organized, it does not depend on Western material resources and is thus significantly more self-reliant. In this respect, it is a more typical social movement than the 90s women's movement.¹³³ This difference between the two generations is, I suggest, due to a difference in political opportunities. In contrast to the 90s, the mid-2000s when the contemporary feminist movement emerged were a time when Western funders were few in Russia and the state increasingly restricted independent NGO activity (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2014, 262; Davidenko 2020, 1329). This was, therefore, a context that did not favor either organizing formally or working transnationally. As a result, the contemporary feminist movement has developed as a grassroots movement relying primarily on collective identity, informal membership, and direct participation. As a mass grassroots movement, it also has been firmly grounded in

132 These two categories are not strictly mutually exclusive. At the time of the interviews, a few participants have mentioned that they were considering applying for grants. Funding and fundraising practices have since become increasingly common in the feminist scene, cf. Conclusion.

133 Sperling has described the 90s women's movement as "paradoxical" because it has relied on international support rather than other ways of resource mobilization, which were unavailable at the time (Sperling 1999, 46).

local issues and concerns,¹³⁴ unlike the 90s women's movement that has been described as "distant from the lives of the majority of Russian women" (Hemment 2014, 140).

Yet self-reliance does not amount to isolation. While maintaining its focus on local concerns, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is involved in global feminist debates. Numerous examples from the previous chapters illustrate this: when feminists in Russia reflect on internalized misogyny, stage campaigns against victim blaming and sexual violence, or discuss trans inclusion, they use a transnational feminist language and participate in the same debates feminists currently lead worldwide. How do feminists themselves reflect on their relationship to the West? This question will be the focus of the next section.

The West as inspiration and hope

As the reader might remember from Chapter 6, Katerina Maas does not consider her feminist group's activities to be political. Elaborating on this, she provides the following definition:

We're not a political group, we're simply... Simply learning how to live by global standards, so to say (*laughs*). Although in Tomsk, nobody really needs that.

In this succinct statement, Katerina disassociates herself and her group from her local community, her immediate environment, and associates herself instead with a certain "global" community. She also places the two communities in a hierarchical relationship and indicates that her own position within this hierarchy is that of a "learner." At the same time, there is a bitterness in Katerina's words about her city, an environment that does not understand her. Considered from this perspective, the statement suggests that the "global" community that sets the "standards" fulfills the role of a collective ally that helps Katerina not to feel alone, albeit on a purely symbolic level. Both aspects are expressed more clearly in the following excerpt:

Vanya: In your opinion, in what direction should feminism develop?

Katerina: Oh, dear me, in Russia we've got a long way to go, I mean really! I can't even think about Russia, to be honest. I get so depressed right away! I just... with all those laws, with all those fanatics who claim that you've got some kind of energy flowing into your uterus through your skirt,¹³⁵ I don't know... I think in Russia, we haven't even reached the second wave of feminism yet, that's... my personal sentiment. To be like the USA, we've got a very long way

134 For instance, participants in Voronezh have discussed how local activism must take into account the presence of the Cossacks, historical militarized communities that have re-emerged in Southern Russia as a major consolidated conservative actor and sometimes act as vigilantes, including against feminists.

135 The idea that women must always wear skirts or dresses so as not to obstruct the "natural" flow of the "female energy" supposedly emanating from the earth has been promoted by spiritual neotraditionalists in Russia. Feminists have ridiculed it as an expression of extreme gender essentialism.

to go, to be like Europe—I'm not even talking about countries like Norway or Sweden, that's out of question, goodness me!

When I ask her about future directions for feminism, Katerina speaks of feeling hopeless and cornered. She refers to far-right neopatriarchal ideologies and to restrictive laws recently introduced by the state (at the time of the interview in 2016, the most widely discussed pieces of legislation on gender and sexuality were the 2013 ban on homosexual propaganda and the increasingly restrictive and stigmatizing abortion legislation adopted between 2011 and 2014 (Stella & Nartova 2016, 17). By doing so, she outlines a hostile political and cultural context where the state joins forces with extreme conservatives to suppress all gender and sexual freedom. Katerina's answer thus implies that the hostile environment does not facilitate making big plans or imagining any daring agenda for the feminist movement.

Both here and above when she speaks of “global standards,” Katerina recurs to what has been described as the “lag discourse” (Koobak & Marling 2014), constructing Russia as backward and repressive as opposed to a modern and enlightened West. References to the “global” are typical for this discourse, yet it is the hegemonic West that is usually implied by them. Criticizing alliances between the state and radical conservatives in Russia fits well with this discourse, however, it hardly leaves room for similar criticisms of the West or for considering interconnections between Russian and Western antigenderism (cf. Korolczuk & Graff 2018, 813). Reproducing the “lag discourse” in this way is common for feminist scenes in Russia; it is often combined with the “three waves of feminism” narrative in debates on whether it is time for Russia to go over to the “third wave” or it has to “catch up” more thoroughly with the second. Although the West does not appear quite monolithic in Katerina's statement, her differentiation between the United States and the Nordic countries with their reputation as global champions of gender equality (Martinsson, Griffin, & Nygren 2016, 4) positions these countries within a hierarchy rather than suggesting a plurality of possible feminist ways of social organization. While the US “standard” is supposedly more attainable for Russia, it ultimately still belongs to the same linear scale of progress.

Although the above quotes by Katerina seem to suggest that she unambiguously believes in the idea that the West is a feminist model for Russia to follow, her stance is in fact more nuanced. This becomes clearer as she continues:

I don't know what I'd wish for. I'd like to have more popularization. Let it be pop feminism, like Taylor Swift or Beyoncé, but let it be there, let it be some... (*tuts*) parallel way... that you can jump over on... and follow it... so it all moves forward somehow. I don't know, maybe more... spreading of the network itself, I guess, of feminist associations of all sorts and... women's associations.

Katerina speaks here of a visible, culturally accessible alternative to counter the conservative hopelessness and stagnation she has described above. She brings up Western pop music icons as ready-made illustrations that stand for an acceptable,

yet not ideal version of feminism. What she actually wants for feminism in Russia is popularization. To reach this goal, Western mass-culture pop feminism is but one possible tool, which she envisions alongside expanding the network of feminist and women's rights organizations in Russia. She thus draws on Western examples for inspiration, a vision of possible options. Yet repeating Western development is not a goal in itself: rather, she remains true to the feminist movement's central goal of disseminating feminist ideas and values. Indeed, as a feminist blogger, journalist, and founder of a feminist collective, she contributes to this goal on various levels; drawing on Western sources for inspiration is one of the many tools she uses in her daily feminist work.

Since they do feminist activism in a hostile environment, facing antifeminist and increasingly repressive state policies as well as antifeminist hostility in society, it is an understandable step for feminists to look beyond Russia for hope and inspiration. Knowledge of lasting successes feminist movements have achieved elsewhere and, moreover, a construction of feminist history in the West as a success story help sustain the belief that change is possible in Russia as well. Thinking of history as linear provides powerful support in this, as it suggests that change is not only possible but imminent. When one feels alone and powerless, it is a relief to imagine oneself on the right side of history. Yet as practice has proven time and again, history is not linear, and one day's successes are easily reversed when conservatives like Donald Trump come to power. Moreover, for feminists in Russia, appealing to the West as their symbolic allies comes at a price, as accepting the West's role as a model of feminism implies also accepting Russia's inferiority. However, some feminists recognize and address this problematic consequence.

Challenging internalized inferiority

Of the two participants who have explicitly addressed the relationship between Russia and the West, Tatyana Bolotina takes a stance that differs starkly from Katerina's, at least at a first glance:

I would like to add something on, so to say, (*laughs*) internalized coloniality, as I call it. I mean, most Russian women have this feeling of inferiority compared to first-world countries, especially USA. And it shows in different ways: many get into hardcore nationalism, right? But among feminists, it's mostly not the case, mostly the feeling is that, you know, everything sucks here, that we've got a bad mentality, that nothing is ever going to be better... That out there somewhere, far, far away, that's where everything's cool, and here everything's bad because we're so bad... And in my opinion, this is very similar to how women in general feel about men: that men are so great, they've invented everything, written everything, and so on, and we are only good enough to make babies and... be sexual objects. And actually, this internalized coloniality, it gets in the way a lot... for the feminist movement, it prevents us from... treating... perceiving one another as important people, so to say... to care about each other, to take interest... in each other. [...] This is a systemic issue. This...

feeling of our own worthlessness. I'd like to work with this somehow, by promoting what goes on here: I've already talked about demonstrations¹³⁶ and texts written here, written by non-prominent feminists. This is partly why I like reading personal stories and comments, not the manual.¹³⁷

Tatyana criticizes sharply the tendency to compare oneself to “first-world countries” and associates it with feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. In her analysis, she distinguishes between nationalism and internalization as different ways to respond to this experience of inferiority to the West, pointing out that the latter is more common among feminists. To demonstrate both the fallacy and the negative effects of this internalization, she compares it to internalizing sexism and misogyny. She highlights the negative impact this internalization has for feminist movements and outlines ways of resistance.

As compelling as Tatyana's analysis is, I believe it necessary to question the term “coloniality” used in this context. Colonial terms are utilized by several scholars to reflect on Russia's cultural and symbolic subordination to the West. Tlostanova, for instance, describes Russia as “intellectually, epistemologically and culturally colonized” (Tlostanova 2015b, 46). Yet when concepts like “coloniality” and “colonization,” which are supposed to name a specific power dynamic, are used metaphorically, this heightens the risk of shifting the focus away from actual colonial oppression. As several authors have observed, such shifts occur all too often with regard to Russia (Koplatadze 2019, 476; Suchland 2021, 22). If there is a power dynamic between the West and Russia, then it is not colonial, since it does not rely on direct oppression and violence, but rather discursive and symbolic. This distinguishes it, I suggest, both from Russian coloniality and sexism, limiting the persuasive power of Tatyana's analogy.

Tatyana's observation on nationalism and internalization as two responses to the experience of inferiority can be understood as a critique of a long tradition in Russian culture that dates back to the 19th century “Slavophiles vs. Westernizers” debate (Tlostanova 2006, 640; Zdravomyslova 2010, 141). This discussion opposes the call to follow Western models in politics and culture to a nationalist position that claims a Russian *Sonderweg*. By naming the experience of inferiority as the root of the problem, however, Tatyana distances herself from both sides of the debate, suggesting that the choice is not limited to these two options.

Crucially, Tatyana parallels internalizing inferiority to the West and internalizing sexism and misogyny. Recurring to a rhetorical and analytical tool widely used in feminist scenes, she draws upon a more widely accepted and understood critique of inequality to explain a less common one. She argues that in both cases, those in power are constructed as deserving their status, whereas the disadvantaged are constructed as undeserving and their subordination is associated with their

136 Earlier in the interview, Tatyana argued for disseminating and preserving knowledge on demonstrations and other feminist action in Russia to ensure the movement's continuity.

137 The “manual” is slang for a body of feminist texts and arguments considered essential; cf. Chapter 5 and next section.

supposed inherent deficiencies. In both cases, internalizing leads to self-deprecation, which hurts the feminist movement, Tatyana argues, as it prevents solidarity and mutual support. Therefore her suggested solution is to uplift unrenowned Russian feminists by consciously promoting their work and focusing on their stories and ideas rather than on well-publicized feminist texts (“the manual”).

Tatyana articulates a clear and thought-out feminist critique of internalizing inferiority to the West. Whereas Katerina uses references to the West strategically as a source of hope and inspiration, accepting Russia’s inferiority implied in the “lag discourse,” Tatyana rejects this discourse altogether, emphasizing its harmful aspect. These differences notwithstanding, both feminists’ approaches are similar in that they center their own communities. Even though Katerina says that nobody in Tomsk needs feminism, she effectively disproves this exaggeration in practice by organizing feminists in Tomsk and writing for the local audience. In a similar vein, Tatyana emphasizes the importance of “perceiving one another as important people.” Having examined both feminists’ general take on the relationship between Russia and the West, I will focus in the next section on how they approach it in the specific area of traveling knowledge.

Questioning the Western manual

Since their emergence in the mid-2000s, grassroots feminist projects and collectives in Russia have been concerned with producing a language that would adequately describe the realities of gender inequality in Russia and help articulate political alternatives. In order to be able to do discursive politics, to argue and convince, the movement urgently needed a body of authoritative knowledge. Gender studies institutions and university programs could only be of partial help in this endeavor, since, as discussed in the previous chapters, the emerging movement’s contacts to them were punctual and the knowledge they produced was both difficult to access and considered too academic. Although new generation feminists knew, read, and disseminated post-Soviet gender scholars’ texts on issues like Soviet and post-Soviet gender relationships or pre-revolutionary Russian feminist history, this did not quite satisfy their need for politically relevant knowledge that would provide a firm ground for feminist activism (cf. Chapter 5). This is why they turned to the Western feminist movement tradition.

Translations of Western feminist texts became an important part of what is still known as “the manual”: a core body of feminist concepts, ideas, and arguments that every feminist is supposed to know and support. Compiling the “manual” has thus arguably been one more major process contributing to the articulation of the feminist collective identity. Yet just as with collective identity as a whole, the boundaries of “the manual” are not stable but rather subject to renegotiating and defined differently in different feminist communities (cf. Chapter 5). Since the moment the first translations of Western texts appeared on Russian-language online feminist resources, there has been a nagging anxiety in the feminist community that

the “manual” consisted to a large extent of borrowed, foreign knowledge, not directly compatible with Russian realities. Tatyana Bolotina is among those feminists who criticize the “manual” for this reason:

Those public pages that publish all that manual stuff, I’m not interested in that. [...] I’m interested in the problems people face here and now. That is, not in something that has once been described in America or somewhere else, see? And... I believe what’s happening in Russia today is actually a little different from... another country and another time.

Tatyana directly associates “the manual” with outdated American texts and discards them as irrelevant. When I ask her about specific examples, she says:

Well, the most elementary example, for instance... of the American manual that doesn’t suit us is the middle-class housewife, I mean there’s a lot on this topic. Here, we have, firstly, few housewives and... as to the middle class... I don’t know (*laughs*), basically, there’s a lot less middle class as well. Yes, and... Our history is different, I mean, at the time where in America, middle-class women mostly stayed at home and did housework, women here mostly worked, they had two or three shifts.

Emphasizing the differences in present-day Russia’s and mid-20th century US realities, Tatyana refers to the cornerstone of mainstream feminist theory: the white middle-class housewife, a central character in seminal texts like Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*. Betty Friedan has indeed been translated in excerpts into Russian and published on feminist online platforms, along with other Western “second-wave” authors. Yet the experience of white middle-class housewives is unrelatable for a wide majority in postsocialist countries, as has long been observed by Eastern European feminists (cf. Slavova 2006, 248).¹³⁸ It has certainly little resonance with Tatyana’s personal experience as a childfree lesbian with no higher education nor a steady source of income. While this experience may neither be the most common for women in Russia, research suggests that most of them have other concerns than Friedan’s middle-class housewife. According to gender researchers, it is the “working mother” gender contract that has retained a dominant position in the post-Soviet Russian gender order, which means that most women in Russia have to combine paid work with domestic and care work (Temkina & Rotkirch 1997, 6; Salmenniemi 2013, 13). It is this model that is described in the feminist scene either as two shifts (productive and reproductive work) or three shifts (productive work, domestic and care work).¹³⁹

138 Meanwhile, as Allaine Cerwonka has argued, Friedan’s argument was itself dependent on Marxism in Central and Eastern Europe and should thus be understood as an instance of transculturation rather than pure and independent Western theory (Cerwonka 2008, 826).

139 For a feminist discussion of the “two shifts” in Russia, see for instance (Серенко 2019). For a feminist scholarly discussion of the concepts of care and reproductive work, see (Binder & Hess 2019).

By highlighting differences in Western and Russian realities that limit the applicability of Western theory to Russia, Tatyana effectively rejects the “learner’s” position toward Western feminist knowledge and the idea of universal “standards” of feminism. As her previous quotes indicate, she prefers other sources of knowledge, namely personal stories told by “regular” Russian-speaking women. This is how she uses them:

Tatyana: So it’s very interesting, actually, what’s going on now and... based on this, I develop my own, well (*laughs*), theory, so to say...

Vanya: Theory—how do you mean this?

Tatyana: Well... a notion of what issues are top of the agenda¹⁴⁰ at the moment and how they should be solved.

In this short but illuminating exchange, Tatyana reclaims the word “theory” as a feminist activist, which is in line with her overall radical anti-hierarchical stance. In a bold move, unapologetic but for a short moment of hesitation, she challenges both Western and academic monopoly on producing theory. Her answer also suggests that theory should be understood as a basis for political action, a tool for activism rather than something superior to it. Her defiant interest in comments on online platforms rather than in the Western “manual” is elucidated elsewhere when she observes: “I see that many people are too shy to write their thoughts as a separate post and a lot of very interesting information ends up in the comments.” By focusing on the perspectives of those who may not feel empowered enough to use more authoritative genres (such as books, articles, or even posts on social media), Tatyana also ensures that her activism centers the issues that concern this disempowered majority rather than a handful of relatively more privileged leaders.

Although radical and uncompromising, Tatyana’s position seems to disregard just how omnipresent transcultural connections and dialogues are in feminist thought and practice. Feminists who discard Western feminist theory still experience its influence, I suggest, albeit in implicit ways. On the one hand, those who post and comment on Russian-language online platforms are likely to draw on the Western “manual.” On the other hand, the language used by feminists, with concepts like “gender,” “sexism,” “sisterhood,” “abuse,” “beauty standards,” “compulsory heterosexuality,” and myriad others, is in itself a form of dialogue with various feminists across the globe. Those are traveling concepts that mostly originated in the West, even if feminists in Russia have shifted or added to their meanings. Yet I argue that such critique of the Western “manual” should not be interpreted as an isolationist call for denying all contacts. Indeed, as Tatyana has remarked above, nationalism is not what feminists generally support. Rather, I suggest that such uncompromising stances reveal a desire to set the priorities differently from how it is often done by challenging the centrality of Western elements in the “manual” and complementing it by local perspectives.

140 Russian: что сейчас актуально.

Katerina Maas also expresses concern over the “manual” and translations of outdated texts:

By the way, one reason why I don't like all those online groups and public pages that much is that they'll take some bloody text from the 70s that uses language even I don't always understand [...] I mean... why? Who are you writing it for? Write about yourself, about your experience! [...] Popularization is explaining all these things in a simple language, I mean... Actually, I think, Betty Friedan's done a cool thing. I mean, you don't even have to bloody do anything, just do the same in Russian! [...] Svetlana Alexievich, by the way, has done a very cool thing in this respect. She popularizes this anti-war rhetoric, right? She gathers all those interviews, and it's huge work, it's actually... Lyudmila Petranovskaya popularizes psychology, she explains it all in a very competent way. I like this. [...] I mean, this is how we should just go and popularize it too.

Like Tatyana, Katerina begins with criticizing feminist online platforms for reposting “texts from the 70s,” i.e. texts by Western “second-wave” authors. However, her critique has different reasons: she argues that these texts use inaccessible language, which makes them hard to understand and obstructs popularization instead of helping it. Katerina's call for writing from one's own experience suggests that she, too, perceives a difference in social realities between the Western 70s and today's Russia. It may seem confusing in this context that she goes on to bring up a Western “second-wave” author, Betty Friedan (who seems indeed to be an inescapable reference point) as a model of smart popularization. Yet I believe that there is no contradiction here. What Katerina primarily values about Friedan is her method, “explaining all these things in a simple language,” rather than her analysis of “these things,” i.e. women's position in the post-war United States. Indeed, in the following Katerina cites other prominent and successful popularizers, this time Russian-speaking authors: Belarusian Nobel-winning non-fiction writer Svetlana Alexievich and Russian psychologist Lyudmila Petranovskaya. Svetlana Alexievich became famous for her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, a collection of women's interviews on World War II. Lyudmila Petranovskaya is a specialist in children's and family psychology. Both are respected public intellectuals; neither, to my knowledge, has publicly identified as a feminist. The fact that Katerina puts Alexievich and Petranovskaya on par with Friedan demonstrates that beyond not being interested in applying Western theories to Russia (which she states here explicitly), she is also free of implicitly imagining a Western theorist as being superior to non-Western public figures. In this instance as in her other statements, Katerina centers popularization as the feminist movement's main goal, and what she is interested in is finding effective methods for this. She also clearly makes a point of focusing on women's voices and achievements as a way of challenging androcentrism. By lining up Friedan, Alexievich, and Petranovskaya, Katerina shows her desire to learn from different people, whatever their country, language, or area of interest. Opposing

simplistic reproduction of Western theories and its uncritical application to the contemporary Russian context, Katerina calls for selective and active learning, for acknowledging diverse sources and taking from each what you need and can.

Both Tatyana and Katerina speak out against borrowing from Western knowledge indiscriminately. Both oppose universalizing Western theory and by doing so, both effectively resist the discourse on Russia's inferiority to the West. The difference in their perspectives concerns their suggested alternatives to the uncritical reproduction of Western knowledge. Katerina does not discard Western sources of knowledge, but complements them with post-Soviet and Russian ones. Throughout her interview, she presents a whole gallery of famous women who inspire her, and they are both Western and non-Western. Tatyana, true to her critique of internalizing inferiority to the West, rejects looking up to Western models altogether. Instead, she emphasizes validating and uplifting local knowledge produced by non-prominent women. In this instance, again, both feminists exhibit a focus on their local contexts and an active, critical attitude toward hegemonic discourses.

Based on my interviews and observations of the feminist scene, I argue that the relationship to the West is not of primary importance for the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. A mass grassroots movement, it relies largely on unpaid activism rather than on any professional or institutional settings. Symbolically, the West plays a role as a source of inspiration and hope for feminists in Russia in the face of scarce political opportunities and state antifeminist policies. At the same time, critique is articulated within the feminist movement against perceiving the West as a model to follow, since this suggests Russia's inferiority and jeopardizes solidarity among feminists in Russia. Western feminist knowledge remains a significant, yet not the only intellectual reference and resource for the feminist movement in Russia. Feminists' reflections suggest that they approach it critically and bring it into conversation with local issues and perspectives.

In contrast to the 90s women's movement, the contemporary feminist movement is thus considerably more self-reliant, even though it may have less material resources than the previous feminist generation. Whereas dependence on foreign funding put pressure on women activists in the 90s to adjust their agenda to the donors' priorities (Hemment 2014, 136), contemporary feminists are largely free from this constraint. What both generations have in common, however, is an active, critical approach to Western knowledge (Hinterhuber 2012b, 29–30; Garstenauer 2018, 269).

The issue of dependence on the West runs implicitly and sometimes explicitly through much of the scholarship on the Russian women's movement in the 90s (Sperling 1999; Kay 2000; Johnson 2009; Hemment 2007). Clearly, this has partly to do with the historical situation in the 90s when the collapse of the Soviet Union brought a drastic worsening of women's living conditions and rampant inequality,

while the opening of borders enabled Western support. Yet the “lag discourse” that constructs the West as a model of progress and enlightenment and Russia as backward both pre-dates and outlives this specific historical juncture. Why is it so enduring? What are its roots? And how specifically does feminism relate to it? I argue that a postcolonial approach can not only provide compelling answers to these questions, but also place them in a broader perspective. And it is this postcolonial approach that I will attempt to outline in the next section.

9.2. Russia as a subaltern empire

Debates on the relationship to the West have long accompanied research on feminism not only in Russia, but also in the broader postsocialist context of Central and Eastern Europe. Over several decades, as Eva-Maria Hinterhuber and Gesine Fuchs demonstrate in their review of this scholarly discussion, the “transferability” of Western feminist theories and the role of Western donors have been among its major concerns (Hinterhuber & Fuchs 2021, 29). Redi Koobak and Raili Marling suggest that this academic debate, too, has been implicitly shaped by the “lag discourse” that constructs Western feminism as the norm that Central and Eastern European feminisms are supposed to copy (Koobak & Marling 2014, 333). This lag discourse, they argue, is based on a modernist progress narrative and a broader Western/neoliberal hegemony (Koobak & Marling 2014, 334). To elucidate feminism’s role in this progress narrative, they refer to Clare Hemmings’ observation that hegemonic Western discourses associate gender equality with Western modernity, capitalism, and democracy (Hemmings 2011, 9), thus making it into a “Western trademark that can be exported globally” (Koobak & Marling 2014, 334). Koobak and Marling call for a new analytical framework in transnational feminist studies and suggest building on Tlostanova’s decolonial approach (Koobak & Marling 2014, 337).

Developed by Latin American scholars, the decolonial approach introduces the concept of coloniality as a persisting global condition that includes, beyond political colonization in the narrow sense, cultural, epistemic, and biopolitical dimensions (Quijano 2000, 216; Mignolo 2011, 2). Walter Mignolo argues that coloniality is the “darker side” of modernity, its inseparable and co-constitutive element. He identifies “salvation, progress, development, modernization, and democracy” as elements of the rhetoric of modernity which serves, he argues, to mask the underlying structures of coloniality (Mignolo 2011, 14). I suggest that the framework of global modernity/coloniality put forward by Mignolo is helpful for understanding narratives of progress as part of global coloniality. In itself, however, this framework does not explain how Russia relates to coloniality.

A theoretically grounded answer to this is provided by decolonial feminist Tlostanova. She conceptualizes Russia as a subaltern empire: “a second-rate imperial power among the European empires,” yet at the same time a colonial power with several colonies (Tlostanova 2006, 638). Tlostanova uses the term “imperial difference” to designate Russia’s subordinate position with regard to Western

empires and “double colonial difference” to describe the specific oppression experienced by Russia’s colonies. The model thus emphasizes Russia’s double status, a “Janus-faced Empire,” as Tlostanova calls it (Tlostanova 2015a, 271), yet it implies no symmetry. Russia “allows Western philosophy, knowledge, culture to colonize itself with no blood shed” (Tlostanova 2010, 64), thus Western “colonization” of Russia, in contrast to Russia’s colonization of regions like the Caucasus and Central Asia, is not direct but metaphoric, namely intellectual and epistemological.

Tlostanova’s conceptualization provides a necessary missing link between postcolonial theory and analyses by Central and Eastern European scholars, making it possible to think coloniality beyond the established dichotomy of “Global North/South” and explore its dynamics in the European and Eurasian borderlands. Tlostanova’s perspective suggests that epistemological colonization by the West is a point of similarity between Russia and Central and Eastern Europe: both are ambiguous Others to Europe, the former an external imperial difference, the latter an internal difference (Tlostanova 2015a, 271). Complementing and specifying the global modernity/coloniality framework, this perspective explains and contextualizes the many similarities with the discursive construction of postcolonial subjects in/from the “Global South” long observed by Central and Eastern European authors: Othering, homogenization, ascriptions of passivity, victimhood, and backwardness (Slavova 2006, 247; Mizielńska & Kulpa 2011, 16; Koobak & Marling 2014, 332).

Yet Russia is, Tlostanova argues, a colonial empire in itself. While secondary with regard to Western empires, it has, since the 19th century, reproduced colonial practices and discourses in its own colonies (Tlostanova 2010, 64). Drawing on a range of historical studies to analyze Russian and Soviet colonial practices in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Tlostanova argues that both Russian and Soviet modernities have relied on racializing the colonized subjects and constructing them as wild, uncivilized, and violent (Tlostanova 2010, 65). She also focuses on the intersection of gender and coloniality, retracing how colonial tropes like “violent patriarchal men” and “oppressed downtrodden women” were used to justify Russian colonial violence in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Tlostanova 2010, 78).

For a discussion of feminism in Russia as well as a range of other topics, I find the postcolonial perspective on Russia as suggested by Tlostanova compelling and holding great analytical power. Although several authors have previously provided illuminating postcolonial analyses of Russian and Eurasian history (e.g. Sahni 1997; Khalid 1998),¹⁴¹ Tlostanova’s perspective stands out due to its emphasis on a conceptual language that highlights the specificities of Russian coloniality. While several scholars from postsocialist countries have suggested postcolonial analyses of their respective contexts (e.g. Annus 2012; Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik 2015; Kalnač 2016; Mayblin, Piekut, & Valentine 2016), a postcolonial approach is still neither established nor widely known or debated in studies on Russia and Eurasia. I suggest

141 For an excellent overview of Russian postcolonial studies and its key controversies, see (Koplatadze 2019).

that a major reason for this ongoing omission is simultaneously what makes a postcolonial discussion of Russia of particular relevance: namely, the fact that in contrast to other colonial empires, Russia is an active colonial state that retains full political domination over a wide range of colonies, from North Caucasus through the Urals and Siberia to Chukotka, and has, throughout its post-Soviet history, waged colonial wars in Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Ukraine (Резникова 2014, 31; Koplataдзе 2019, 480; Mayerchyk & Plakhotnik 2019, 63).

As a Russian researcher who grew up in Moscow, the metropolitan center of the empire, I am implicated in the colonality of knowledge (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009, 137), which is why it has taken me long to fully engage with and apprehend postcolonial critique with regard to Russia. Consequently, the processes I have focused on during my empirical work, namely the dynamics between Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the rest of Russia, represent a secondary issue from a postcolonial perspective. However, I suggest that they are highly relevant for the feminist movement and, moreover, that it is a postcolonial perspective that can adequately explain and contextualize them. This, in short, will be the main argument of the next section.

9.3. Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and “the regions”

Since the early 2010s, I have increasingly encountered criticisms by feminists from various places in Russia directed against feminists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg, accusing them (us) of arrogance and self-absorption, and suggesting that their (our) activism and analyses were self-referential. Some suggested that there was a power relationship between Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the “regions.” These criticisms made me rethink my own position as a feminist from Moscow and changed how I perceived the feminist scene in Russia. The resulting reflections led me to seek out participants for my research beyond Moscow and Saint Petersburg and discuss the relationship to the “capital cities” with them during interviews. Even though I was unsure how to name the power relationship in question, I could feel it at work both in the feminist scene and beyond it, shaping the general relationship between Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the “rest.”

This relationship is most often represented in media and everyday discourses as a dichotomy between Moscow and “the regions,” which is clearly connected to Russia’s infamous centralization. Economically, Russia is considered one of the most centralized countries in the world, with Moscow accounting for more than 20% of the national GDP (Churkina & Zaverskiy 2017, 399). Accumulating political power alongside economic capital, Moscow has far higher wages and living standards than most other places in the country (РИА Новости 2020; Старостина 2020). Reaching as high as fourfold compared to some “regions” (Churkina & Zaverskiy 2017, 404), the income difference is widely considered drastic, which is expressed in popular phrases like “Moscow is not Russia.” Moreover, Moscow’s wealth is largely perceived to depend directly on the impoverishment of the “regions,” leading to resentment against the capital and its inhabitants, generally imagined as fabulously wealthy,

entitled, and arrogant (Новиков 2015; Поляков et al. 2020). The term “regions” that represents the other side of the common dichotomy is more than a technical designation of the (nominally) federal subjects that make up the Russian Federation. Discursively opposed to Moscow, it is closer in its meaning to “provinces” or “periphery,” with strong connotations of subordination, secondariness, and underdevelopment. It thus appears to capture accurately the material and political inequality described above. Finally, Saint Petersburg’s place in this dichotomy is paradoxically ambiguous: it is secondary to Moscow, but not easily subsumed under the homogenizing category of “the regions.” By various statistical parameters from population size to wealth, Saint Petersburg occupies the second place after Moscow (РИА Новости 2021). The former capital of the Russian Empire and center of Russia’s Europeanization, it maintains the informal title of “cultural capital.” In everyday discourse, Moscow and Saint Petersburg also form a category of their own: “the capital cities”¹⁴² in plural.

Both during and after my life in Moscow, I have observed (and participated in) close contacts between the feminist scenes in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. This relationship is exceptional for the Moscow feminist scene, which has not until now had contacts of comparable density with any other place in Russia. Feminists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg know and visit each other, organize joint protests and cultural events. This close relationship is certainly facilitated by a relatively small distance and excellent transport communication between the two cities. Moreover, I would argue based on my Moscow experience that Saint Petersburg has generally been imagined in the Moscow feminist scene as a place of equals. “The regions,” on the other hand, are associated with lack of opportunities, poverty, conservatism, and stagnation. The general feeling among feminists in Moscow is that feminism is not as lively in “the regions.”

The accuracy of this perception is debatable. On the one hand, in smaller and poorer cities, lack of resources and difficulties in finding like-minded people may indeed create additional barriers for feminist activism. On the other hand, the geographical range of feminist events and initiatives in Russia (cf. Chapter 6) rather disavows the idea that feminism has somehow less ground in the “regions.” Feminist organizing across Russia gained increasing visibility in the early 2010s when dozens of regional groups were created on the platform of Vkontakte. They were soon followed by several transregional platforms that aimed to facilitate connections among feminists from different places, bypassing Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Some of these platforms articulated criticisms of the “capital cities” for paying no attention to feminist developments in “the regions.” Whereas several Moscow feminists have tried to adjust to these criticisms, the results were sometimes still not devoid of paternalism.

142 Russian: столицы.

This paternalism was discussed by some of my participants from Tomsk and Voronezh, along with another trend coming from Moscow they found problematic: namely, attempts by some of the Moscow activists to centralize and lead the movement. Calls for creating an all-Russian organization or even a feminist political party have been articulated repeatedly, and they seem always to come from Moscow. Proponents of the movement's centralization have justified their idea with the need to build a "strong movement" capable to push for reform and influence state policies. These convocations have generally been met with skepticism rather than enthusiasm, and no such influential feminist organization has emerged to this day. Reasons for this are undoubtedly complex and have to do, I argue, with the currently available political opportunities and the overall goals and priorities of the feminist movement, as discussed in Chapter 6. However, my interviews suggest that the relationship between Moscow and "the regions" also impacts the prevailing skepticism toward the idea of a unified movement. It is this connection that I will explore in the next section.

Between leadership and domination

In my interviews in Voronezh, Moscow came up in the context of a Moscow-based feminist group that was calling for creating a unified movement.¹⁴³ Arguably one of the most widely known feminist collectives in Moscow at the time of the interviews, this group tried establishing contacts with feminists across Russia and invited them to join a broad association they were envisioning. In Voronezh, this is how Zhenya describes exchanging online messages with this group:

Zhenya: When we got in touch, they asked: "Do you want to join... the D* Association, do you want to be part of D* or to be called Voronezh D*?" I thought, well... I asked them: "What's the gain?" They told me... they get grants and they can do stuff due to these grants. They gave as an example the fact that they went to some city where there was no feminist movement before, and they sort of created it there. I felt somehow—

Vanya: For real?

Zhenya: (Laughs.) Yeah, I felt a bit... uneasy about that.

Natalia: That's what it's going to be: "We created... D* Voronezh."

Zhenya: I guess.

Natalia: We, the great ones.

In Zhenya's account, the online encounter with the Moscow feminists appears confusing. They invite Zhenya and their Voronezh group to join their association, yet fail to provide a clear explanation of their own activities. Indeed, none of the Voronezh group had a clear picture of what the Moscow group actually did. Although the Muscovites seem to be offering material resources, the example they provide does not clarify how specifically feminists in the other city used the grant

¹⁴³ I do not cite the group's name and abstain from using direct quotes from its materials below in order to protect the group's and its members' identities.

money but rather suggests that the Moscow feminists spent it to cover their travel costs. Moreover, their reference to collaboration with feminists elsewhere produces distrust, as it appears objectifying.

What seems most concerning if not shocking both to participants and to myself is the claim of having “created” a feminist “movement” in a place where there had supposedly been none. The story seems to suggest that in fact, the Muscovites took credit for the work local feminists had been doing on their own. Applying this interpretation to the Voronezh group, Natalia argues that rather than offering support to the local feminists, the Moscow association might represent a danger for them. Further in the discussion, Alisa joins in to endorse this criticism:

Alisa: I feel very uncomfortable with the fact that they said they came and made... feminists there. This is very odd. [...] One can't just say there were no feminists and you came and made it so that feminists appeared. You can say you came and introduced them to each other, that they couldn't organize by themselves, and you simply—

Natalia: Well, it's the same, it's a synonym.

Alisa: No, it's not a synonym. Because the feminists were already there!
(Laughs.)

According to Alisa, the main problem with the Muscovites' story is how much impact they claim to have made. While Natalia suggests that this might be a matter of interpretation, Alisa insists that the choice of words is indeed fundamental, as it grossly misrepresents the scope of the Muscovites' contribution and makes local feminists appear as passive objects who completely lack agency. For Alisa, the Moscow feminists' account does not represent the encounter with them as collaboration or dialogue. This lack of respect logically provokes discomfort and distrust.

An alternative explanation could be that the Moscow group operates with a different definition of “movement.” Indeed, as its online publications indicate, this group relies, just as other proponents of centralization and unification, on a contentious politics approach to movements: it envisions a “strong movement” as acting within the field of institutional politics and inducing policy transformations. To this end, the Moscow group wants to establish (or more specifically, to evolve into) a clearly structured organization with a head office in the capital and chapters across the country. Within this definition, to “create the feminist movement” in a given city could mean officially setting up a branch of the organization. If one accepts this interpretation, the Muscovites' account does not appear that offensive. However, the fact that no one of the Voronezh participants interprets it in this way suggests that this notion of a movement is very far removed from how they perceive it. Moreover, what this version leaves unanswered is on what grounds the Moscow group claims the authority to lead the unified movement it envisions. In the eyes of the Voronezh participants, these unknown Muscovites have no legitimacy as leaders, therefore they meet their claims to leadership with confusion.

This incident was not an isolated episode. In Tomsk, Natasha told me about her encounter with the same feminist group. She was visiting Moscow and was curious to meet feminists there, yet the experience turned out unpleasant, as one member of the Moscow group tried to pressure Natasha into joining their association and paying money to its fund. This is how Natasha describes the beginning of the encounter:

We got along alright at first, it was interesting to hear about the Moscow experience... Because I realized that it's just thicker, there are more people, and therefore more activities [...] But it's not like there is anything radically new, it's all the same action, the same problems... all the same as what we've got around here. But then! (*Laughs.*) Then she cornered me with the request: "Let's unite in a network and make a common fund!" [...] I laughed a lot and tried to explain what it sounds like for a Siberian. Like, first of all, do you have any idea of the difference in our wages? How much I'm paid and how much it will be for you? (*Laughs.*) What are you going to do, buy a coffee with my miserable money? Because anyway, to tell a Siberian: "You should all send money to Moscow and we'll distribute it" is a very dangerous thing to do. (*Laughs.*)

Later, I ask Natasha to clarify this last point and she explains:

I don't know for other regions, but I think the farther away they are from Moscow, the more they can feel it: we give more to the center than we get back. Unlike the Voronezh feminists, Natasha got first-hand information on what the Moscow group did. What she learns seems to come as a surprise: apparently, she had not only expected a difference in numbers compared to the Tomsk feminist scene¹⁴⁴ but also in the quality or contents of feminist events or debates. The assumption that Moscow is a pioneer or somehow sets the tone for all of Russia in terms of feminism is thus clearly also familiar to her, and to defy and disprove it appears to be an empowering moment. Interestingly, however, Natasha's Muscovite counterparts did not come out of this encounter with a symmetrical realization on feminism in Siberia: Natasha told me they never asked her a single question about her feminist group or her local feminist scene. She only realized this when I asked her directly about it. This lack of interest for "regional" feminists' concerns and achievements suggests that even though the Moscow group wishes to establish connections to the "regions," they do not really perceive feminists from elsewhere as partners or equals. It also seems remarkable that Natasha had not paid attention to this before she recounted the story to me. Although she takes an explicitly critical stance toward Moscow feminists, this suggests that the Muscovites' indifference to her as a "regional" feminist is, to an extent, normalized for her.

144 A difference in numbers as such is logical, since Tomsk, a city of five hundred thousand, is twenty four times smaller in population than Moscow with its twelve million people (Федеральная Служба Государственной Статистики 2016).

What did strike Natasha in this encounter, however, was the demand of money made by the Moscow feminist. For a Siberian, as Natasha explains, economic exploitation by the capital city is a constant and omnipresent reality and causes ongoing resentment. The difference in wages and living standards between Moscow and “the regions,” including Tomsk, was repeatedly emphasized by the Tomsk participants, which suggests that it is indeed a major factor shaping their attitude toward and idea of the capital city. As such, when the Muscovite accosts Natasha and insists that she join and finance the Moscow-centered organization, this is no different for Natasha from what the exploitative centralized state does on a daily basis. Rather than cross-regional solidarity, the contact of Moscow and Tomsk feminists is thus interpreted as an attempt to reproduce domination.

Domination is what Natasha addresses directly in the following comment on her conversation with the Moscow feminist:

She was very concerned that we would develop a consciousness of our own. That is to say, that we would start to think of ourselves as something apart, something Siberian, not generally Russian.

Whereas Natasha does not elaborate on which specific words or actions of the Moscow feminist have led her to this conclusion, she interprets her counterpart’s behavior as aiming at political domination. In the context of the Moscow group’s goal of centralization for the sake of building a “strong movement,” an alternative interpretation could be that they were seeking to keep the movement from splitting. If this member spoke out against Siberian feminists’ particularity, this was possibly to rather suggest a common agenda in order to increase the movement’s efficiency as a unified social and political actor. However, in the context where the Moscow feminists do not ask Natasha anything about her group but only demand money, their unification project seems indeed to rely on hierarchy and exploitation rather than heterogeneity or recognition of various interests.

Both the Voronezh and Tomsk participants describe their interactions with Moscow feminists as rather unpleasant. In both cases, they perceive the Muscovites’ attitude toward them as presumptuous, if not downright arrogant. In both accounts, Moscow feminists are described as showing no interest in “regional” feminists’ activism or concerns but rather attempting to use them as tools or suppliers of resources for their own goals. Although I did not interview any member of the Moscow group in question, their online publications and oral presentations suggest that this attitude is not an explicit part of their strategy, nor do they overtly seek domination over the feminist movement. Rather, they are genuinely concerned with furthering the feminist cause, which they try to do according to their understanding of what a movement is and how it should function. Yet plurality and heterogeneity hardly have a place in this vision, which rather draws on hierarchy and subordination. Based on my interviews, this strategy of creating a hierarchical organization appears to have

limited effect, since members of self-organized feminist collectives in several places do not see the gains of giving up their autonomy or resources to a group that has little legitimacy or authority in their eyes.

It may seem peculiar that according to Natasha's account, the Moscow activist insists on a "generally Russian" agenda and against Siberian particularity while simultaneously asking no questions on what life in Siberia is actually like. Although this may seem extreme, my experience in the Moscow feminist scene suggests that this is not unthinkable. In fact, this interpretation corresponds to Moscow feminists' tendency to universalist thinking, which feminists elsewhere also notice and criticize.

Universalist claims

In the above quote where Natasha clarifies how Siberians perceive Moscow, she makes a curious remark: "I don't know for other regions." I have often heard participants in Tomsk and Voronezh use similar disclaimers or specify the scope of their observations with expressions like "in our city" or "around here."¹⁴⁵ To my Muscovite ear, this sounded odd: in Moscow, in the feminist scene as well as beyond it, I was rather used to statements of an unclear scope and easy generalizations. Indeed, even though people in Moscow, including in the feminist scene, are well aware of the fact that life in Moscow is different from the rest of Russia, this does not usually hold them back from theorizing on Russia as a whole. Participants in Tomsk noticed and criticized these claims to universalism, which they saw, moreover, as characteristic both of Moscow and Saint Petersburg:

Katerina: I mean, we've got absolutely different social and economic conditions, we grow up under absolutely different circumstances. And when we start something, we take cue from the Tomsk circumstances, we draw on the Tomsk situation, on the experience of Tomsk women who have already done something. [...] This is a general problem Moscow and Saint Petersburg people have: they sit there and build up all this theory—they have no idea what's going on here. They don't get that you can't say to a Siberian woman— [...] I mean, we've got an average wage of fifteen thousand roubles!¹⁴⁶ [...] And you can't move out of your parents' place because of the rent. [...] I'm sorry, but Bella Rapoport, I mean, she's great, she writes stuff... But she lives in Saint Petersburg, she has no idea how I live here and what's happening here! [...] I respect her, but the things she writes, I cannot agree with her on every point because she lives in completely different circumstances, she has a completely different background, and every time a person from Moscow or Saint Petersburg starts telling me how we live here...

¹⁴⁵ Russian: в нашем городе, у нас.

¹⁴⁶ € 203 at the time of the interview (May 2016). Katerina's observation does not quite correspond to official statistics: for 2015, the official average wage amounted to 35 000 roubles (€ 439) in the Tomsk region, yet the Moscow wage still was almost its double with 69 000 roubles (€ 865) (Березина et al. 2016).

Natasha: This seems very naive.

In her emotional monologue, Katerina challenges the claims to universalism which, she argues, are common to feminists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and insists instead that it is local feminists who are best experts on their own context. Pointing out the fundamental character of economic differences between the two capital cities and places like Tomsk, she emphasizes that her group's activism is rooted in local experience and local activist traditions. Yet Moscow and Saint Petersburg feminists, she suggests, do not generally realize that their opinions are equally shaped by their local experiences. She cites Bella Rapoport, a feminist journalist and activist from Saint Petersburg and, indeed, one of the most prominent feminists in Russia at the time of the interview, as someone whose analyses, for all their value, only have limited relevance for her in Tomsk. In Katerina's eyes, universalist claims made by feminists like Rapoport are clearly patronizing and offensive.

Whereas I have observed the dynamics between the capital cities and the "regions" from the opposite viewpoint, my observations are consistent with Katerina's criticism. Moreover, differences in income and living standards are not the only differences between feminists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and in the "regions." As is apparent from Katerina's statement, she reads what Rapoport writes, yet the opposite is less likely. Even though Katerina is a blogger and journalist too, the fact that she lives in the periphery drastically reduces both her chances to being published in central media outlets and to achieving wide popularity in the Russian feminist scene. Feminists both in Saint Petersburg and Moscow have considerably more access to influential media platforms and more opportunities to accumulate social capital. Even though living in one of the capital cities is not the only condition for acquiring prominence as a feminist, all feminists who are publicly acknowledged as spokespersons for the feminist movement (for instance, approached for media interviews or expert commentary) live in Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

In my observations of the feminist movement over the years, I have encountered several attempts by feminists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg to contact or acknowledge feminists from the "regions," yet these attempts, however well-intentioned, have often produced an impression of awkwardness. In 2015, a feminist festival was held in Nizhny Novgorod under the characteristic name "Feminist Frontier."¹⁴⁷ The organizers were a group of leftist feminists from Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod. They described the festival as an attempt to overcome the focus on the "capital cities" and to introduce local activists to the feminist agenda (Васильева & Гинойн 2015). Most of the festival's program consisted of talks and workshops by prominent feminist artists and intellectuals from Moscow and Saint Petersburg. While arguably a well-intentioned intervention and an important event for the local feminist scene at the time, the festival's organization exhibited a clear division of roles: feminists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg spoke and presented,

¹⁴⁷ Whereas the English word "frontier" has multiple meanings, it was borrowed into Russian (фронтир) in the only specific meaning: the boundary of colonized territories during settler colonization in North America.

whereas local feminists and feminists from other places listened and followed. The use of explicitly colonial language in the festival's name additionally underlined this division.

Some of the Moscow feminists have tried to be more inclusive of the “regional” feminists in response to increasing criticisms from the latter. In 2019, Moscow feminist researcher Ella Rossman announced a new category in her blog where she would interview “regional” feminists, explaining the rationale as follows: “how little we [*sic*] know about feminism in the regions” (Россман 2019). The category bore the hashtag #всюдужизнь (“there is life everywhere”). Two posts were published under this hashtag: one contained an interview with Daria Pyatnitsa, a feminist video blogger from the Sakhalin island, the other announced a new one with a feminist from Kazakhstan¹⁴⁸ which was, however, never published. On the International Women's Day of the same year, Moscow-based feminist activist and poet Daria Serenko published an overview of Russian feminism at Lenta.Ru, a major online media outlet. In the text, she introduces “regional feminism” as a separate current of feminism beside categories defined by politics (radical, intersectional, etc.) and areas of action (academia and art) (Серенко 2019).

Intentions of solidarity are apparent in all these efforts: feminists from Moscow and Saint Petersburg clearly seek to correct the inequality between themselves and “regional” feminists, to establish contacts, and share their platforms. However, these gestures also convey the feeling that they still rather consider themselves as legitimate subjects of feminist knowledge and practice and find it hard to accord the same status to feminists elsewhere. They are surprised when they learn that feminism exists independently in places they deem unlikely, and they perceive living in the peripheries as a primary unifying characteristic that even outweighs one's political stance.

Both my observations and interviews suggest that in the feminist scene, a hegemonic relationship exists between Moscow and Saint Petersburg, on the one hand, and other places in Russia, on the other. Feminists from the “capital cities” generally imagine the “regions” as places where feminism is hardly possible. They tend to think of themselves as the only ones capable of being feminist and assume leading roles, taking it upon themselves to educate or organize “regional” feminists. Feminists who live in the “regions,” on the other hand, criticize their counterparts from the “capital cities” for ignorance of local realities and find their universalist claims both badly informed and arrogant. Whereas the difference in local realities across Russia is certainly largely shaped by economic inequality, economic relationships do not directly explain the assumption that the subjects of feminist knowledge and practice must be located in the “capital cities.” Which other factors might help understand it? I discuss possible explanations in the next section.

148 Interestingly, the boundary between the “regions” and post-Soviet countries seemed to erode in this instance.

An extension of coloniality?

In the “regional” feminists’ criticisms I have examined above, references to economic inequality are used to explain the specificities of the local context that remain unknown to feminists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. As I have outlined above, economic inequality is directly connected to Russia’s economic and political centralization. It seems also plausible that centralization could influence discourses and social and cultural practices, including the symbolic appropriation of feminism by the “center.” However, the fact that the relationship under consideration encompasses Saint Petersburg alongside Moscow weakens the centralization argument: why would centralization happen in favor of two centers rather than one?

I suggest that a postcolonial perspective can explain this and illuminate the hegemonic relationship between feminists in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and feminists in the rest of Russia. The two cities’ shared hegemonic status is easily explained in postcolonial terms: Saint Petersburg is the former capital of the colonial empire, whereas Moscow is its current capital. Even though Saint Petersburg has lost its formal status as a focus of political power, I suggest that its history as the imperial capital remains highly relevant for the present social relationships in Russia due to the continuity of Russian coloniality. Moreover, Saint Petersburg still retains its role as a hub and source of Russia’s modernization and Europeanization. I argue that Moscow and Saint Petersburg are thus best understood as metropolitan centers: not simply the current and former capital cities in terms of formal political power, but rather the current and former centers of the colonial empire, a status that has social, cultural, and symbolic implications.

An understanding of Moscow and Saint Petersburg as metropolitan centers explains the strong connections between the feminist scenes in the two cities as well as the fact that “regional” feminists’ criticisms are directed at both cities rather than only Moscow. Yet is a postcolonial perspective warranted for analyzing this relationship? The processes participants criticize in interviews as well as my accompanying observations from feminist events and publications are partly similar to (post)colonial dynamics. Throughout the stories cited above, a common thread is the assumption that feminist knowledge and practice belongs to the metropolises rather than the periphery. While metropolitan feminists may wish well and even make conscious attempts to support and uplift feminists from the peripheries, they continuously construct themselves as the only subjects of feminist practice and assign their counterparts from the peripheries to inferior and passive roles of their audience or suppliers of resources. They may also homogenize peripheral feminists under the label of “regional feminism,” disregarding political, cultural, and other differences. The objectification and homogenization of peripheral subjects by those from the metropolises are evocative of colonial dynamics.

Yet there is also an obvious fact in the data presented above that speaks against conceptualizing this dynamic as colonial. Whereas one side of this hegemonic relationship is constituted by metropolitan centers, Moscow and Saint Petersburg,

its other side encompasses both contexts that can be understood as colonies, like Tomsk in Siberia, and clearly non-colonial Russian peripheries, like Nizhny Novgorod and Voronezh. The relationship in question thus clearly has colonial characteristics, yet it also involves non-colonial contexts. Does this mean that this is some other form of coloniality or rather an extension of colonial dynamics to non-colonial peripheries? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine Russian coloniality as such. Are there clear instances of coloniality in Russia? How do they reflect on the feminist scene? I will attempt to address these questions in the next section.

9.4. Russian coloniality

Despite the fact that a postcolonial perspective on Russia is still not widely accepted, a strong body of research accumulates rich historical evidence and compelling analyses of Russian coloniality. In this section, I will first address some of these studies to provide additional context on Russian coloniality. Against this backdrop, I will then discuss the empirical data I have gathered as well as those that are missing for a substantiated analysis of how colonial dynamics impact the feminist movement in Russia.

A seminal resource for understanding Russian coloniality (and a major source Tlostanova draws upon in her decolonial theory of Eurasian borderlands (Tlostanova 2010, 65) is Kalpana Sahni's research entitled *Crucifying the Orient: Russian Orientalism and the Colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia* (Sahni 1997). Built along the lines of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978), this comprehensive study examines Russian military colonial violence alongside economic, cultural, and epistemic colonial practices. Focusing on the Caucasus and Central Asia, two regions she suggests are best understood as the "Russian Orient," Sahni details the violence of colonial wars and the dehumanization and Othering of the colonized peoples that Russian colonizers practiced along with it (Sahni 1997, 40). The study documents evidence of mass killings, destruction of settlements, economic exploitation, and other forms of colonial violence by the Russian Empire (Sahni 1997, 36, 91). Spanning across a period from the early 19th century until the 1980s, the book also presents a clear argument on the continuity of colonial politics under the Soviet regime, examining practices like drawing arbitrary geographical boundaries, coercive assimilation, deportation, and genocide (Sahni 1997, 114, 136, 146). Sahni's overarching argument is that besides similar methods, the tsarist and Soviet colonial politics shared a common foundation: a Eurocentric, modernist idea of linear progress and belief in their own mission, be it Christian or Marxist (Sahni 1997, xx, 110). Crucially, the study retraces how Orientalist and racist discourses on the colonized were produced through administration, literature, and language politics, constructing the Orientals as backward, primitive, and inferior to the Russians (Sahni 1997, 49, 74, 198, 237).

Drawing upon Sahni along with other authors, Tlostanova outlines the entanglements of gender and race in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Tlostanova 2010, 63). Russian colonial discourses, Tlostanova argues, emphatically associated men in the colonies with violence and women with passivity and victimhood, constructing the gender order in the colonies as ultra-patriarchal; the Russian Empire styled itself, by contrast, as enlightened and modern, and justified its colonial violence with protecting local women (Tlostanova 2010, 78). Tlostanova further demonstrates how these discourses were perpetuated in Soviet modernization campaigns (Tlostanova 2010, 106), just as the Soviet state crushed independent modernization efforts by local movements (Tlostanova 2010, 96).

Research on post-Soviet Russia suggests that processes of racialization intensified after the demise of the Soviet state. In a rare analysis that unites empirical methods with a postcolonial feminist perspective, Olga Reznikova argues that the two Chechen (neo)colonial wars in 1994–1996 and 1999–2009 were central events that have shaped Russian colonial racism (Резникова 2014, 30). Drawing on an analysis of Russian nationalist discourses and on her ethnographic work in Chechnya, Reznikova argues that constructing Caucasus men as patriarchal and violent serves to racialize and symbolically exclude them from citizenship (Резникова 2014, 26), while the supposed need to protect Russian women is used to justify military violence and extreme dehumanization of the Chechens (Резникова 2014, 33).

By focusing specifically on the contexts, developments, and perspectives that generally remain beyond the scope of social research on Russia, these studies provide a clear and compelling postcolonial argument. To the question of whether Russia was or is a colonial empire, this body of scholarship gives a substantiated and unambiguous answer. Moreover, it details how precisely colonial dynamics have functioned in Russia and in its colonies and illuminates the crucial juncture of racism and coloniality.

In my empirical data, the association of the Caucasus with patriarchy comes up in the context of interactions with non-feminists rather than within the feminist scene. At the Saint Petersburg university where Ellie is a student, she describes how her classmates react to her feminist critique:

Many are aware of the gender pay gap, for instance, but nevertheless, my classmates¹⁴⁹ say: “No, there is gender equality in Russia.” (*Laughs.*) “You’re mistaken, it’s probably back where you’re from, in Azerbaijan, there’s something like that...” I guess this is mainly why they don’t say anything [against Ellie’s feminist claims—V. S.], because they think: “Oh, she’s from that sort of country, that’s understandable. Caucasus, an oppressed woman, that’s fine, let her fool around.”

149 Russian: одноклассницы, fellow female students.

Prior to telling this, Ellie suggested that central feminist demands are familiar to the general public in Russia: if they did not support them, she argued, this was not because they were not aware of them. She illustrates this point with the example of her classmates who, according to her, do not translate their knowledge of the gender difference in wages into a more general notion of gender inequality. In Ellie's account, they argue with her by constructing their antifeminism as a kind of postfeminism, drawing upon the popular notion that gender equality has already been achieved in Russia (cf. Chapter 1). They also claim that Ellie's perception is distorted by the fact that she supposedly "comes from" a patriarchal context, Azerbaijan. This suggestion clearly leads Ellie to assume that her classmates perceive her as a stereotypical "oppressed woman from the Caucasus" and that it is for this reason that they do not take her feminism seriously.

I suggest that racist Othering is at the heart of this story. Ellie is Azerbaijani, yet she was born and raised in Saint Petersburg. In her account, her classmates racialize her and mark her as foreign to her home city, denying her knowledge of the Russian context. Although it remains unclear whether the classmates in question are white and/or Russian, in the situation as Ellie describes it, they claim the unmarked normalized position of privilege and relegate Ellie's perspective to a distant place which they contrast to their own supposedly progressive environment. Ellie's hypothesis about her classmates' thinking suggests that she had expected more debates over feminism from them. Yet because they have already activated the discursive opposition of a supposedly postfeminist Russian center to a patriarchal racialized periphery and thus claimed a position of superiority over her, the lack of debates is not, for her, a sign of acceptance or respect for her viewpoint¹⁵⁰ but rather a sign of objectification: a racialized "oppressed woman" is not an equal counterpart for political discussions.

In the context of how feminism is usually discussed in Russia, Ellie's classmates' argument as she recounts it seems both exotic and typical. The association of feminism with foreignness is common, yet it customarily implies Western foreignness: feminism is constructed as a "Western import" that has nothing to do with Russian realities; a Russian particularity is claimed where patriarchal relationships are legitimized through "tradition." This antimodern argument is used, for instance, in the Russian state's discourse on gender and feminism. The claim that there is already gender equality in Russia whereas the Caucasus remains patriarchal and in need of modernization dates back to the Soviet times; however, it is more commonly used, as mentioned above, to justify Russian interventions or aggression toward the colonies and colonial subjects.

Whereas Ellie's story deals, I argue, with racist Othering in a non-feminist context, my observations suggest that similar processes are also present in the feminist scene. Just as with other forms of marginalization and oppression, feminists

150 As the reader might remember from Chapter 7, Ellie has described her university environment as quite hostile to feminism and discussed how this hostility is expressed in indirect yet pernicious ways.

generally take an explicit stance against racism, yet often still reproduce racist and colonial practices and discourses. Associations of the Caucasus and of Muslim cultures with patriarchy and violence against women are commonplace in Russian feminist scenes. This is expressed, for instance, in recurring street protests where activists with no Muslim background put on veils to portray Muslim women as a symbol of patriarchal enchainment; some of these protests have elicited criticisms for objectifying Muslim women, homogenizing their experiences, and constructing them as backward.

Although there were several feminists of color among my research participants, none of them has discussed racism or coloniality in the feminist movement in interviews.¹⁵¹ I believe I have contributed to this not only by the fact of being white and Moscow-born, but also because during the interviews, I have not managed to create a space where participants would feel comfortable enough to discuss these issues with me. Besides this, a wide political debate over racism and colonialism had still not taken place either in feminist or in wider activist scenes in Russia at the time of the interviews, which has probably also impacted the conversations I had with my participants.¹⁵²

As I only came to seriously engage with postcolonial approaches to postsocialist contexts after I finished collecting my empirical data, the few findings I have in this area are not sufficient for a fully-fledged analysis. My research thus reproduces colonial thinking in its very design: from the choice of cities where to do interviews (of the four cities I chose, two are metropolitan centers and only Tomsk is a colony) to the interview questions and overall interaction with participants. Moreover, by confining itself to Russia's national borders, my research relies on a methodological nationalism which, however fundamental its role in social science (Beck 2007, 286), is not easily combined with a postcolonial perspective on Russia.

I believe it important to name some of the issues that should be addressed in a discussion of Russian coloniality, even if my research does not fulfill this task. Firstly, what remains to examine is the question of how specifically colonial discourses and practices impact the contemporary feminist movement in Russia and in the space affected by Russian colonialism. How do feminists in various (post)colonial regions perceive, interpret, and resist them? Drawing on her interviews with Chechen women activists, Reznikova suggests that in the context of anti-Chechen racism, even the term "feminism" functions as a racist construct, since it is used as a tool of cultural expansion and colonial control (Резникова 2014, 39). What definitions of feminism, which feminist politics are possible or imaginable in a context shaped by such deep colonial divides?

151 Some of my participants have mentioned colonial history or their experiences of racialization in our conversations outside of the interviews, yet these discussions did not touch upon the feminist scene.

152 The situation has changed since with the emergence of several media projects and texts on racism and coloniality in Russia (e.g. Wonderzine 2020; Узарашвили 2020; Фатыхова 2020).

Whereas I agree with Reznikova that the Chechen colonial wars retain their relevance in configuring Russian racism, a more recent colonial war is certainly no less relevant for the Russian colonial context: the war in Ukraine. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war has arguably reshaped social relations in Russia and across the region of Russian dominance, and it has had its effect on the feminist movement. On several Russian-language online feminist platforms, I have observed conflicts where Ukrainian feminists demanded from their Russian counterparts to acknowledge their complicity in the Russian state politics of violence and a fundamental rethinking of feminist solidarity in the face of war. In the Russian feminist scene, many took a clear anti-war stance and tried to support Ukraine, yet many also insisted on a self-image as victims of the Russian regime, denying complicity with colonial politics. These and other debates relating to the still ongoing war in Ukraine should be examined closely in a serious postcolonial analysis of feminism in Russia and in the area of its colonial dominance.

9.5. Feminism in Russia and global modernity/coloniality

In this chapter, I have examined issues that appear at a first glance to have little in common: Russian feminists' relationship to the West, feminist dynamics between Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and the rest of Russia, and finally, colonial and racist dynamics in Russia and in the Russian feminist scene. Despite these issues' apparent disparateness, I suggest that what connects them is the relationship between feminism and modernity/coloniality.

Based on my empirical data, I have argued that the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is largely self-reliant rather than dependent on Western feminism. These findings contradict the association of feminism with Western modernity set forth by hegemonic Western discourses and reproduced in some of the previous studies on feminism in Russia. Relying on a linear progress narrative, a hegemonic "lag discourse" constructs Russia as backward and unenlightened in contrast to the democratic and progressive West. For feminists in Russia, I have argued, to reproduce this discourse has the upside of symbolically aligning them with the supposedly winning side of history. Yet this discourse is also challenged within the feminist scene in Russia; what is suggested instead is centering local experiences and perspectives.

To connect these findings to processes in Russia and in the area of its colonial domination, I have referred to Tlostanova's concept of subaltern empire. Both subject and object of domination in global modernity/coloniality, as Tlostanova argues, Russia mimics the colonial practices of the Western empires in its own colonies (Tlostanova 2015b, 47). Drawing upon my empirical data and previous postcolonial studies on Russia and Eurasia, I have attempted to trace how colonial and racializing practices have engaged gender in Russian colonial history and present. I have argued that Russian metropolitan subjects claim feminism and gender equality as trademarks of modernity and construct themselves as progressive and colonial subjects as patriarchal and unenlightened.

Moreover, these colonial dynamics, as I have suggested, also impact the relationship between Russia's two metropolitan centers, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and non-colonial peripheries. In the feminist scene, I have found that similar objectifying and homogenizing practices emerge with regard both to colonial and non-colonial peripheries whereby metropolitan feminists construct themselves as the only subjects of feminist knowledge and seek to enlighten, lead, or exploit peripheral feminists. While these practices also have to do with centralization, I argue that this does not contradict the postcolonial perspective but rather refines it. In fact, it has been argued that a highly centralized structure is one of the characteristic features of Russian coloniality (Condee in Spivak et al. 2006, 831).

Throughout these various contexts, a linear progress narrative connects feminism to Eurocentric modernity. What changes, quite in line with the theory of the subaltern empire, is the supposed subject of this modernity. In the Russian colonial context, a metropolitan white Russian subject can claim to be modern (and European) enough to enlighten "regional" and/or colonial subjects on feminism and gender equality. In the context of Western hegemony, however, the same subject can find themselves cast as backward by someone claiming a belonging to the West.

While I recognize that my analysis is provisional and incomplete, I argue that a postcolonial perspective that acknowledges Russia's status as a subaltern empire is indispensable for a consideration of feminism in Russia. A primary reason for this is the powerful discourse on feminism as belonging to Western modernity, progress, and democracy. Traces of this discourse appear in virtually every discussion of feminism in Russia, and consequently, not to address it explicitly leads to reproducing the "lag discourse." However, if one only addresses Russia's subordinate status with regard to Western hegemony without due consideration of Russian coloniality and racism, this produces an abridged picture that distorts crucial political, social, and cultural processes in and around Russia. To use a postcolonial approach consistently, on the other hand, would lead to more sensitivity for and recognition of feminist agency across various contexts, which would certainly help producing rich and nuanced analyses.

Conclusion

In this research, I have sought to provide an analytical overview of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia by examining some of its key characteristic processes. The fundamental questions I have attempted to answer were: what does the movement do and what mechanisms enable it to sustain itself and grow stronger? In order to make sense of the movement in its complexity and heterogeneity, I have specifically focused on its internal tensions and conflicts, examining how it approaches difference.

I have argued that the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is a decentralized, mass grassroots movement that is less oriented toward making claims to the state but rather seeks to produce change in society. Its central goal is neither to overthrow the government nor even to ensure specific reforms. Rather, it initiates social transformation by offering new ways of thinking, new practices and forms of social organization. Common especially but not exclusively to feminist movements, this fundamental characteristic of the contemporary feminist movement in Russia affects its tactics and structure.

Because the feminist movement strives to change how society thinks about gender, power, and justice, its primary field of action is discursive politics. As I have argued above, feminists generally define the movement's central goals as discursive: educating, disseminating information, promoting feminist ideas. Accordingly, they are engaged in discursive action at a variety of levels: from everyday conversations to public cultural events and, of course, the Internet. Using a wide spectrum of online and offline media and genres, they work to get the feminist message across to various audiences. While contentious politics, i.e. claim-making and protest, play a secondary role for the feminist movement, it nevertheless actively uses contentious tactics, often combining contentious and discursive goals. For instance, demonstrations in support of survivors of domestic violence are held to defend specific people who have suffered from violence, to demand a law against domestic violence, and to change the public's perception of the issue.

Since doing discursive politics means offering new definitions and ways of thinking, it relies upon collective identity processes within the movement: collective knowledge production and internal debates over goals, tactics, and ideology. The debate over "real action" is, I have argued, one such collective identity process in the contemporary feminist movement. Contrasting legitimate forms of action, like public protest, to those lacking legitimacy but pertaining to the movement's central goals, like online discursive action, this debate exposes the fundamental challenge posed by the feminist movement to conventional definitions of politics. Besides the question of the movement's central goals, this debate also touches upon such feminist issues as invisible work and acknowledging differences in needs, perspectives, and experiences.

Throughout the above chapters, I have touched upon several more collective identity processes and debates, such as the “real feminist” debate and other conflicts over boundaries and inclusion in feminist collectives. These debates may vary in how explicit they are or whether they are framed in overtly ideological terms (as is the case, for instance, in debates over trans people or sex work). However, they all deal with the same fundamental questions: who are we as a movement? What should our priorities be? Since they are ongoing and often quite heated, these debates tend to produce considerable frustration. Often, feminists are concerned that these conflicts might divide the movement or damage its reputation in the public eye. However, drawing upon feminist theory and feminist movement research, I have argued that these conflicts are, quite on the contrary, both productive and fundamental for the movement. It is in these debates that new knowledge and new definitions are articulated. Emancipatory knowledge necessarily challenges established ideas and practices, therefore conflict is unavoidable if this knowledge is to spread beyond the small communities in which it was originally articulated. In the feminist movement in Russia as elsewhere, even those individuals and collectives who claim to be inclusive and considerate of different experiences rarely translate these claims fully and unfailingly into practice. Consequently, conflict remains a crucial avenue for introducing and establishing emancipatory knowledge and practices.

Feminist communities are key spaces where collective identity processes take place. Just as other decentralized movements focusing on discursive politics, I have argued that the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is structured around movement communities: informal, loose networks relying on personal relationships and communication. Besides serving as hubs and experimental platforms for producing social innovation, I have argued that feminist communities provide support and empowerment to their members, functioning as safe(r) spaces that shield feminists from outside hostility. Moreover, some feminists understand their communities as vehicles of discursive politics: the mere existence of feminist collectives, they argue, is in itself a statement against the patriarchal status quo, for mutual support and empowerment of the marginalized.

The hostility feminists in Russia encounter has to do, I have argued, with the stigmatization of feminism that, while having long been characteristic of Russian society, is also generally typical of societies targeted by decentralized emancipatory movements. Against the discursive challenge posed by these movements, societies wield silencing and stigmatization as tools of soft repression (Ferree 2005, 141). While the stigmatization of feminism may seem deeply entrenched in Russian society, this is due, I have suggested, to the fact that it could not have been effectively challenged by the previous feminist generation which lacked political opportunities for discursive action. Both the specific forms of stigmatization and the tools feminists use to resist to it, however, are largely the same in contemporary Russia as in other societies and other historical periods.

Although feminist communities are meant to function as safe(r) spaces providing shelter from outside hostility, they do not fulfill this function equally well for everyone. If several feminists have to abstain from active participation in the feminist movement, this is not, I have argued, due to lack of motivation or commitment to the movement, but rather because they lack the necessary resources to do so or feel disempowered and out of place. As I have argued, these experiences are often associated with multiple marginalization. Poor people, disabled people, parents, and others find themselves marginalized not only in larger society, but also in feminist communities. Moreover, whereas feminist communities are created, sustained, and protected through boundary work—i.e. defining who belongs to the given community and closing it to others—enforcing boundaries can also lead to reproducing marginalization or alienating newcomers. Multiply marginalized feminists may deal with these barriers to participation individually by choosing less visible, silent forms of participation. Feminist communities interested in expanding and encouraging participation, on the other hand, may dismantle barriers to participation by redistributing resources, empowering their members, and showing consideration of marginalized perspectives. Reorganizing feminist communities so that they can accommodate various needs requires sharing and generating knowledge, developing new practices and rules of interaction. Thus, I have argued, encouraging participation is another way in which the feminist movement produces social innovation.

Throughout most of the above chapters, I have emphasized the various aspects in which the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is similar to other movements in other political and historical contexts. However, it has also been necessary to address the particularity of the contemporary Russian context. To this end, I have drawn upon the analytical resources of postcolonial theory. The contemporary feminist movement in Russia is, I have argued, affected in multiple ways by the Eurocentric discourse of modernity with its linear progress narrative, the construction of an East/West dichotomy, and the association of feminism with Western modernity, progress, and democracy. Even though Russia's relationship to the West is not colonial, feminists in Russia may refer to Western feminism as their symbolic ally and a source of hope in the face of scarce political opportunities, state neopatriarchal policies and repression. However, critical voices point out that perceiving Western feminism as a model entails reproducing Russian inferiority and obstructs solidarity among feminists in Russia. In practice, as a mass grassroots movement, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia does not depend on Western or any other external support. Drawing partly on Western feminist knowledge, it approaches it critically, combining it with local sources and with its own knowledge production.

However, as a subaltern empire (Tlostanova 2006, 639), Russia is not only an object but also a subject of domination in global modernity/coloniality. As I have argued, the linear progress narrative on feminism is also at work when Russian metropolitan subjects claim feminism as a hallmark of modernity and construct themselves as

more progressive and enlightened than (post)colonial subjects. Shaped by Russian colonial history and present, these dynamics draw upon racialization to reinforce white Russian hegemony. Moreover, I have argued, colonial dynamics also affect the relationship between Russian metropolitan centers, Moscow and Saint Petersburg, and non-colonial “regions,” which manifests itself both in a disregard of local experiences and concerns and in attempts at exploitation. However, by drawing upon local identities and establishing networks of solidarity, feminists from colonial and non-colonial peripheries resist objectifying discourses and practices and reassert their feminist agency.

Whereas my explicit focus in the above chapters has been primarily on how the feminist movement operates rather than on the immediate agenda of feminist politics, I have touched upon several issues on the feminist agenda, such as domestic and sexual violence, victim blaming, abortion rights, house and care work, sexism in the media and language, as well as more encompassing issues addressed by feminist practice, such as challenging misogyny and displacing androcentrism. I have also discussed intersectional issues related to the exclusion and objectification of experiences and perspectives marginalized along the axes of race/ethnicity, class/educational status, dis/ability, sexual and gender identity, and motherhood/parenthood. Furthermore, by considering the forms of feminist action and dynamics within the feminist movement, I have addressed some of the underlying currents of feminist politics, such as questioning self-sacrifice, acknowledging invisible work, making space for various needs and interests, and respecting difference. In this way, I have sought to represent and analyze the politics of the feminist movement in its complexity. Transcending the narrow path of claim-making, I have argued, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia is a collective actor that brings about change by producing new ways of understanding social reality and developing new practices, which it disseminates beyond its communities to wider society.

Seeing and hearing the feminist movement: concluding reflection on the researcher’s position and method

My fundamental approach in this research has been to consider the feminist movement as a social movement that spans across several years, a variety of locations, and is active both online and offline. This broad focus distinguishes my research from previous studies on feminism in contemporary Russia. I suggest that it is my position as a (partial) insider in the feminist movement that has made it possible for me to see the feminist movement from this angle and helped me ground my perspective in empirical observation.

I have suggested that several systemic reasons have made it difficult for academic observers to acknowledge or even imagine the possibility of a mass grassroots feminist movement in Russia. Throughout the above chapters, I have addressed these reasons: the silencing of the feminist movement in public discourse in Russia,

most notably in the media, the already mentioned discourse associating feminism with Western modernity, and finally, the hegemonic discourse on politics, in particular on contentious politics as the main sphere of social movements.

For several years, ignorance by the media has been a consistent reality for the feminist movement in Russia. Drawing upon Ferree's theory of soft repression, I have argued that this ignorance is not coincidental but rather political, a reaction to the challenge feminism poses to the patriarchal status quo. The media have long abstained from reporting on feminist protests or approaching feminists for commentary, and when they have, they have stigmatized feminists by presenting them in caricature, stereotypical ways. At the same time, they have consistently emphasized how patriarchal Russian society was. In this way, the media and other authoritative discourses have systematically constructed Russian society as fundamentally hostile and unresponsive to feminism. By silencing the feminist movement, they have prevented it from making itself known and disseminating its message to the wider public. Thus for several years, the only way to learn about the feminist movement in Russia, its agenda, scope, and achievements has been through direct contact to feminists and their platforms.

The discourse associating feminism with Western modernity is, I have argued, another powerful mechanism that has long prevented knowledge on the feminist movement in Russia from reaching academia. In Russia, this discourse has additionally contributed to the stigmatization and silencing of feminism by constructing it as a Western import foreign to Russian culture. Outside Russia, on the other hand, it has combined with the construction of Russia as backward and authoritarian to produce an idea of Russian feminists as David confronting Goliath (Wiedlack 2018, 131): brave advocates of Western values who must always be few and exceptional, unlikely heroes fighting against a powerful evil state and a conservative, Orientalized society. In explicit or implicit forms, this imagery appears in much, albeit not all scholarship on Russia, gender, and politics. I have suggested that the association of feminism with Western modernity has made it difficult to consider the possibility of a sizable and successful feminist movement in Russia or of Russian feminist agency that does not draw in a direct and fundamental way upon Western knowledge and support.

Finally, I have argued that centering the state in the definition of politics and, more specifically, of the politics done by social movements obscures the action and goals of the feminist movement. In social movement research, politics are usually defined as interaction with the state or government (Tilly & Tarrow 2015, 8). However, a feminist perspective suggests a much broader definition: understanding power relations as all-pervasive rather than limited to the state, it considers a wide spectrum of fields for political analysis and action (Lloyd 2013, 117). As I have argued above, the feminist movement's central goals and much of its action lie beyond the realm of contentious politics. All this is missed if research only focuses on the claims and action targeting the state.

In light of these impediments for analysis, I suggest that my involvement in the feminist movement has given me important advantages. As an (albeit partial) insider, I have not had to rely on the media for information on the feminist movement but have rather been able to draw upon first-hand knowledge, a wide network of contacts, and a relatively easy access to various feminist scenes. Constructing my analysis, I have proceeded primarily from empirical observation and lived experience rather than from definitions, theories, or discourses external to the feminist movement. The movement was growing and achieving increasing successes before my eyes, and I saw my task in articulating a conceptual language that would adequately explain these developments. The issue of contentious politics has arguably presented more of a challenge in this respect since, as described above, the perspective on politics that centers the state is widely popular within the feminist movement as well. Again, however, keeping my focus on practice, on what is being done along with—sometimes even rather than—on what is being said has helped me make sense of the competing definitions of action in the feminist movement.

While I have grounded my analysis in empirical observation and experience, I have also drawn extensively on feminist theory. As obvious as this decision may seem, I consider it a fundamental element of studying a movement that acts discursively, i.e. through speech and persuasion. To make sense of this kind of movement, to address the meaning of its action, the researcher must, I suggest, hear the movement, which implies adopting elements of its political language in one's analysis. Relying on feminist theory has thus also meant that I have built my research practice upon the fundamental principle of solidarity with the feminist movement. This, in turn, has also shaped my method, my interactions with participants, and my overarching argument. It is the underlying idea of solidarity that has led me to continuously emphasize in my research feminists' agency and achievements. By constructing my argument in this way, I have sought both to uncover processes that have previously not been addressed in academic scholarship and to produce a narrative on the feminist movement in Russia that fundamentally inspires hope rather than hopelessness. Highlighting lack of resources and political opportunities could easily result in reproducing the discourse on the impossibility of feminism in a patriarchal Russia. Whereas acknowledging the constraints on feminist action has been an indispensable part of my analysis, I have nevertheless striven to emphasize the feminist movement's agency and creativity in producing opportunities and resources for further action.

The research process, I have maintained, has been just as important in this study as the resulting analysis. Like all feminist research seeking to reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, this has necessarily been an experiment in developing and implementing a fairer research practice. Some elements of my approach have worked better than others. For instance, using group interviews and discussing names and pronouns with participants have proven effective ways to grant my participants more control over our interactions and their

stories. As a way of ensuring participants' control over their stories, authorizing quotes has also been a helpful tool; at the same time, it has not resulted in an ongoing collaborative discussion, as I had hoped it would. Rather, I have been able to initiate this kind of discussion outside of the academic realm as I reworked my analysis and accompanying reflections in a blog. Ultimately, as much as I have tried to design a fair and equal research process, the power imbalance between myself as a researcher and my research participants has apparently been irreducible. Academic research can probably never be horizontal in the same sense as a grassroots activist initiative. Looking back at my research process, I believe the best way to deal with this dilemma is to strive for a fairer research practice while accepting that the ideal is unattainable in an academic setting.

Doing this research has challenged me at several junctures to go beyond my limits and question my assumptions and motives. In particular, encountering and listening to people who differed from myself in multiple ways has led me to face my white, Russian, and Moscow privilege and ask myself several uneasy questions, including on how I co-constructed interactions with my participants and what effects my research produced. My personal/political and scholarly reflection is still ongoing, and it is a provisional result of it that this study represents. At the same time, doing this research has been an ongoing intellectual quest through several academic fields, both well-established, like social movement studies, and emerging, like the intersection of postcolonial and postsocialist studies. However imperfect, I hope that my analysis set forth in this study can be a contribution to these fields.

Epilogue: the feminist movement's outcomes and social change

The period since 2016 has not been the focus of the above analysis, as it is not covered by my interviews. However, I have referred throughout this study to recent changes in the feminist movement and in society's perceptions of it. In this last concluding section, I will focus on this recent period and on the change produced by the feminist movement. As I have briefly mentioned above, the change I will describe here has already been burgeoning during my fieldwork and has been registered by some of participants. I thus suggest the mid-2010s as a watershed marking the beginning of a new phase for the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. Since that moment, the feminist movement has grown considerably. It has managed to introduce feminist arguments into public debate and to alleviate the stigma around feminism. While it has thus achieved widespread recognition and even acceptance, these developments have also affected the movement itself: its structure, its relationships to various scenes and institutions, and its repertoire of action.

The first, most obvious change has been growth in numbers. Already during my fieldwork, some of my participants have noted an increase in attendants at feminist events. For instance, whereas during the abortion rights campaign in 2011, 100 participants at a rally in Moscow was an extraordinary success, feminist demonstrations of several hundreds have since become common in Moscow and

Saint Petersburg (cf. Safonova 2019; Амелонская & Пушкарев 2021). All over Russia, feminist activity has become increasingly lively and visible. The recent years have seen not only cross-regional networking but also feminist campaigns launched and held in several regions aside from the metropolitan centers, such as the Memorial Walls, a campaign against femicide initiated in 2020 by feminists in Chelyabinsk and continued in Kazan, Ufa, and Smolensk (КвирФем-Радио 2021).

With increasing numbers and visible action, the structure of the feminist movement has changed as well. First of all, this has affected feminist communities: while they used to be highly marginal, clearly demarcated and enclosed spaces, they have now effectively blended into other social settings and their boundaries have become much fuzzier. The isolation described by several of my participants is no longer a ubiquitous experience: a feminist can now easily come across other feminists at school, at work, or in other everyday situations, and find support for their feminist ideas and critique. Of course, this is also a sign of the growing normalization of feminism: while previously, identifying as a feminist was perceived as a provocation and a challenge, it is now increasingly considered a casual matter.

Beside informal networks and grassroots collectives, the feminist movement in Russia now encompasses several formal organizations. Some of them are new, like Nasiliu.Net (“No To Violence”) established in 2015. Others, like the Consortium of Women’s Non-Governmental Organizations, have existed since the 90s and have now joined the network of the new feminist movement, collaborating with grassroots activists, participating at joint events, and working together on campaigns, most notably on the law against domestic violence. Unlike the grassroots feminist groups of the 2000s and early 2010s, these organizations are engaged in systematic resource mobilization, such as holding fundraising campaigns or enlisting celebrity ambassadors.

While professionalized activities have entered the feminist movement’s repertoire of action due to formal organizations, contentious action has recently reduced in the face of increased state repression and the Covid-19 pandemic, which has additionally been used by authorities to ban demonstrations (Smirnova & Shedov 2020a). Despite heightened restrictions and risks, some feminist protests have been held nevertheless, such as the 2021 demonstration on the International Women’s Day in Saint Petersburg (Амелонская & Пушкарев 2021).

Whereas until the early 2010s, the grassroots feminist movement and academic feminism existed in “different worlds,” as one of my participants put it, these worlds have increasingly come into contact since. Feminists who combine academic belonging with activist engagement have bridged the two worlds by blogging, holding public lectures, and organizing projects at the nexus of feminist theory, art, and grassroots politics. Some examples are Fem Talks, a Moscow-based educational project on feminist theory, and Feminist Translocalities, a networking platform and traveling exhibition for and by feminists from across the post-Soviet space.

Feminist discursive politics are no longer confined to social media but are also promoted at a large scale on platforms like Wonderzine, a popular feminist online magazine, or No Kidding Press, a feminist publishing house that prints innovative fiction and theory by women and trans authors. Numerous businesses have emerged that support and promote feminist values, while corporations like Reebok collaborate with feminist bloggers on advertising campaigns (Oppenheim 2019).

All these new developments point to an underlying, more fundamental transformation: the stigma around feminism has reduced dramatically. Rather than silencing feminists, the media now amplify their voices by reporting on feminist protests, taking up feminist arguments, and indeed, hiring feminists to write and speak for them. Meanwhile, celebrities like singer Manizha or TV host Yana Churikova publicly embrace feminism (Аглиуллина 2021; Командная 2021), and the law draft against domestic violence has been endorsed by star public intellectual Ekaterina Shulman and federal parliament member Oksana Pushkina (Эхо Москвы 2019). While public statements on feminism still provoke much controversy and heated debates, the current acceptance of feminism as a stance and a concept is unprecedented in post-Soviet Russian history. To put it simply, feminism is not a dirty word in Russia anymore.

A major area that has remained largely unresponsive to feminist politics in Russia has been the state. White heterosexist patriarchy is still an integral part of the Russian state's imperial nationalist ideology. Accordingly, state-affiliated actors and institutions, including public officials and state-sponsored media, have a stake in upholding an antifeminist stance. In public debates over feminist issues, it is most notably state-affiliated speakers who have acted as opponents to the change advanced by the feminist movement. Of course, legal reforms proposed by feminists are also at odds with the state's ideology. Since it is highly improbable that the current regime in Russia will renounce its neopatriarchal nationalist ideology of its own accord, the feminist movement's further advances in areas where state policies are relevant will likely depend on acting in coalition with those social movements in Russia that focus on challenging the state.

Whatever happens next, the contemporary feminist movement in Russia has already gone a long and impressive way. Having emerged in a largely unfavorable context, it has grown dramatically over the last 15 years and managed, through persistent efforts, to overcome the all-pervasive stigmatization of feminism in Russian society. By producing and disseminating knowledge, by arguing and educating in everyday conversations, offline and online public spaces, feminists have managed to turn numerous opponents and skeptics into supporters. Having set out to change the way society thinks about gender, power, and justice, they have indeed accomplished this to a significant extent by introducing innovative practices and emancipatory ideas. Through continuous discursive action, they have established a feminist perspective as an integral and legitimate element of the public sphere in Russia.

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