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In my doctoral project based at the University of Eastern Finland, I applied the ethnographic research method to examining how LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer-identifying) activists in St Petersburg form their practices, identify as activists, and create their own places. The data collection took place in 2017–2019 in a socio-political atmosphere that is further tense and oppressive towards minorities. As the ‘capital’ of Russian LGBTIQ+ activism, St Petersburg has wide local, national and transnational networks, and various initiatives and groups dealing with LGBTIQ+ related topics. Not surprisingly, the city has become a popular destination for LGBTIQ+ people from provincial cities and towns across Russia and even beyond state borders.

I also approached the St Petersburg activist scene through annual LGBTIQ+ festivals. In 2013, I did my university internship at an LGBTIQ+ initiative which was then registered as a civil society organization. My job description included aiding in both communication and the practicalities of the festival’s international guests. In these couple of months, I met wonderful people, made friends, and was welcomed as a team member – despite being a foreigner who asked silly questions and whose Russian skills left a lot to be desired. Because I had a good time and felt that I was doing something important, and also felt accepted, I decided to continue volunteering for other events and activities of some LGBT organizations in St Petersburg. After all, the city is less than 400 kilometres away from Helsinki and had frequent bus and train connections.

I also did my student exchange at the European University in St Petersburg, familiarizing myself with Gender Studies, among other topics. My master’s dissertation in social anthropology at the University of Tampere, Finland, investigated LGBTIQ+ activists’ work since the implementation of the ‘gay propaganda law’ in 2013. The law prohibits neutral discussion on LGBTIQ+ people among minors, but in practice it has also made impossible the public recognition of LGBTIQ+ people and several types of activities where LGBTIQ+ topics could be mentioned. In 2016–2018, I worked as a project coordinator at a development NGO (non-governmental organization) in Finland on two international projects, both cooperating with civil society organizations in Russia. This made me realize the challenges of cross-border cooperation between Finland and Russia. Firstly, our Russian colleagues operate in a remarkably more restricted environment and need to include a carefully planned risk analysis in whatever they do. Not only do they need to be prepared for sudden surprises, but they often work with highly limited and unsteady budgets, too. Secondly, the cross-border cooperation was fragile, because only relatively short-term project-based funding was available.

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Furthermore, I argue that the cooperation between Finnish and Russian civil society organizations and initiatives has remained limited and temporary in Finland, because we are separated from Russian NGOs' substance-related knowledge and daily field of work. The operating environments unarguably differ, but Finland seems to lack knowledge of and even interest in the civil society actors in Russia. This hinders recognizing the similarities, such as the civil society actors' common challenges and targets. Regrettably, during the ongoing war in Ukraine, these fragile connections now rely only on a few, temporally limited personal connections.

While working on one of the projects in 2016, I approached professors at the University of Eastern Finland with plans to continue research of the LGBTIQ+ activist movement in St Petersburg. In the course of 2013–2016, several of my activist acquaintances in St Petersburg emigrated from Russia for various reasons, mostly to Western Europe and to the United States. I sensed that LGBTIQ+ activism in St Petersburg was becoming further transnational and networked. It received unseen local and international attention, often from vantage points that were contrary to each other. This tense operating environment puzzled me and I was eager to head back to St Petersburg to conduct long-term fieldwork. Financial support from the Saastamoinen Foundation enabled me to do ethnographic fieldwork in St Petersburg for four months in 2017.

Finally, in January 2018, I had a chance to focus on research and start analysing the interviews I had collected during the field trips and make a couple of more trips to St Petersburg. Unlike many PhD candidates within the EU today, I was offered an early-stage researcher position at the University of Eastern Finland for 2018–2021. I was very lucky to be able to solely focus on my research without agonizing over short funding periods and frequent application processes. The work contract also gave me the liberty to run my project in the direction that I wanted. Yet, I must admit that it was a challenge at times to be one's own boss. Luckily, the study intersects with cultural, Russian, Gender and Queer Studies as well as ethnography and anthropology – a relatively unusual combination. This has given me a chance to meet various networks of researchers that together form a polyphonic group of experts. These meetings have made me wish that the Russian researchers would meet with each other far more often. These circles have also challenged me with complex theoretical and methodological questions, guiding and directing me to sharpen my analysis.

I defended my PhD dissertation on September 23, 2022. Now new research ideas are maturing in me. The tragic war in Ukraine and the related transnational aspects have turned into a daily topic also in my life. This time with further intensity, LGBTIQ+ activists are again emigrating or trying to emigrate from Russia. The EU and the US are imposing further sanctions on Russia, which cast long shadows also on the Russian opposition. The political atmosphere in Russia has grown to be more tense, and the regime has expanded the restrictions on the freedom of assembly and speech. As with the 'gay propaganda' law, for example, these legislative amendments aim at silencing multivocal public discussion. As a result, they enabled the regime to frame the war as a 'special operation' in the eyes of many citizens. Even though LGBTIQ+ activists in Russia have experience of working under repression, the situation is now more difficult because of the financial hardships caused by the war, increased patriarchal public discourse, and sweeping censure. Police surveillance covers effectively social media platforms that act as an important alternative public space. There are rumours that general mobilization would soon take place in Russia. This would close the state borders for men between 18–60 years. LGBTIQ+ activists with sufficient resources and contacts to lawyers as well as aid from other activists who have left Russia, have crossed the state borders to work, study, or seek asylum. Several LGBT initiatives in Russia have moved their staff and offices abroad. These processes have led me ask how transnationally dispersed LGBTIQ+ activists from St Petersburg construct their activism during times of intensified control and geopolitical tensions. I'm charting the available options to see if I could investigate this question in postdoctoral research.