

---

November 2021

## On the Squares and in the Comments Sections: The Feminist Movement in Russia between Contentious and Discursive Politics

Vanya Mark Solovey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Solovey, Vanya Mark (2021). On the Squares and in the Comments Sections: The Feminist Movement in Russia between Contentious and Discursive Politics. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(11), 16-30.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss11/3>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## On the Squares and in the Comments Sections: The Feminist Movement in Russia between Contentious and Discursive Politics

By Vanya Mark Solovey<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Academics have overlooked feminist movements in Russia, allowing struggling women's rights organizations to overshadow the many achievements of Russian feminists. Scholarship has reported on struggling women's rights organizations, citing Pussy Riot, the Russian feminist protest punk rock group, as an exceptional case and concluding that the overall situation with feminism in Russia is desperate. Even though recent publications acknowledge some feminist mobilizations, they are still judged insufficient. Why is contemporary Russian feminism continuously "not enough" for outside observers? And is it "enough" for its members?

In this paper, I argue that one of the major reasons why feminists outside Russia, as well as other observers have tended to downplay or disregard the feminist movement in Russia, even in the face of real and successful feminist organizing, is a discourse on movements that centers contentious politics. Defining movements in terms of public protest and claims-making to the state, this discourse is, I argue, at odds with the feminist movement's actual goals and preferred tactics. To explore feminists' attitudes towards and definitions of useful tactics and goals, I draw upon qualitative interviews with feminist activists. Although feminists consider contentious action as their duty, their relationship to this set of tactics is fraught with contradictory political legacies. At the same time, in reflections in which tactics are useful and within the movement's overarching goals, it is cultural and discursive action, framed as education and awareness-raising, that comes to the fore. I argue that considerations of feminism in Russia require a broader conceptual focus which is more in line with the contents and aims of feminist politics. Based on my empirical findings, I suggest that an approach centering on collective identity is better suited to understand the contemporary feminist movement in Russia and its increasing successes.

*Keywords:* Feminism in Russia, Feminist movements, Contentious politics, Discursive activism

### Introduction

Since at least the mid-2000s, a mass grassroots feminist movement has been rapidly growing in Russia. Dozens of feminist collectives across the country now regularly hold rallies and demonstrations, camps, public talks, festivals, performances, exhibitions, and more, while hundreds of feminist online resources across several platforms bring together tens of thousands of members who debate and advance feminist politics<sup>2</sup>. Despite an undeniably hostile political

---

<sup>1</sup> Vanya Mark Solovey studied linguistics in Moscow and was active in several feminist and lesbian activist projects. He is currently a doctoral student at the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies, Humboldt University of Berlin, and the author of articles on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. His interests are feminist movements, intersectional analysis, and post-/decolonial approaches to post socialism. Contact: vania.solovei@hu-berlin.de.

<sup>2</sup> Although no index of a grassroots movement can be complete, some idea of the scope and variety of feminist groups and projects may be gained from the "Feminist Map of Russia" by the ONA collective ("Феминистская

environment, the feminist movement in Russia has succeeded in initiating large-scale public debates on several feminist issues, most notably on sexual and domestic violence. In a society where feminism used to be notoriously considered a “dirty word”, feminist activists have now secured visibility in the media and won over support from large segments of the liberal and progressive public. More successes are undoubtedly to come.

I do not believe any of the above to be an overstatement. Still, this is not at all how feminism in Russia is usually described. Scholarship has instead focused on struggling women’s rights organizations, citing Pussy Riot, the Russian feminist protest punk rock group, as a single exceptional case, assessing the overall situation with feminism in Russia as desperate (Johnson, 2014, p. 587; Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 561; Turbine, 2015, p. 327; Yusupova, 2014, p. 606). Although recent publications have acknowledged some feminist mobilizations, they still tend to judge them insufficient, while strongly emphasizing the Russian state’s current neopatriarchal policies (Aripova & Johnson, 2018, p. 490; Sperling, 2015, p. 209; Sundstrom, 2018, p. 219).

Why does a vibrant and increasingly successful feminist movement remain largely unrecognized by academia? Indeed, to what extent does it recognize itself? While I believe there are several systemic reasons that make feminists doubt themselves and outside observers overlook the feminist movement, in this paper I focus on the feminist debate over definitions of action, activism, and movement. I argue that people within and outside of the feminist scenes are influenced by a discourse on movements that centers contentious politics and that this understanding is at odds with the feminist movement’s actual goals and chosen tactics. Below I examine feminists’ attitudes towards public protest and their definitions of useful activist tactics and goals. Instead of contentious politics, I suggest that a collective identity approach is more productive for understanding the movement.

This paper is part of my research on the contemporary feminist movement in Russia. I define the feminist movement as, firstly, a network of primarily grassroots groups and individuals who identify as feminist and maintain contact with each other, and, secondly, the various political and cultural actions they take to advance their collective goals. Seeking to identify some of its key defining processes and thus provide an analytical overview of the movement, I have conducted qualitative semi structured individual and group interviews with feminists in four Russian cities (Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Tomsk, and Voronezh) in 2015 and 2016 and analyzed them, drawing upon constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Consistent with feminist standpoint and intersectional theory (Harding, 1991, p. 121; Hill Collins, 1990, pp. 11–13), I have tried to primarily approach multiply marginalized feminists whose perspectives rarely gain public prominence to capture the movement’s complexity.

Aside from interviews, I draw on several years of observation of the feminist movement, first as an activist, then from a combined researcher/activist perspective. I am thus an “insider” to the field I study; however, I consider this position to be partial and unstable (Naples, 2003, p. 49), complicated in my case because aside from my current belonging to “Western” academia, I also came out as trans at the early stages of my research, which makes my involvement questionable in some feminist scenes. Despite these tensions, my activist background provides me with extensive knowledge of feminist scenes and sensitivity to activists’ meanings and concerns, which, I hope, helps me produce a nuanced and compelling analysis.

---

карта России’, n.d.; on Cyrillics, see footnote 2) and the catalogue of Russian-speaking feminist resources hosted by the same group (Ясенева, n.d.) (with the latter also including projects based in other post-Soviet countries).

### Contentious Politics versus Collective Identity

In social movements studies, a dominant position is held by the contentious politics approach. This approach defines social movements in terms of contention: that is, making claims to those in power, usually governments, by engaging in public collective protest (Tarrow, 2011, p. 9; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 7). Protest, also termed contentious or confrontational action, typically means disruptive tactics such as demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, etc. (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, p. 263). 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 the number of protests (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002). A major factor in measuring a movement’s success is “new advantages” secured from the government (Gamson, 2015, p. 383).

This narrow focus on protest has been criticized on various grounds (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 39; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, pp. 267–268). Notably, proponents of what was initially known as the new social movement approach have contended that several movements, including women’s, environmental, youth, and anti-war movements cannot be adequately conceptualized within the contentious politics framework. Seeking radical social and cultural transformation rather than specific reforms or more institutional representation, such movements act primarily in the ideological and symbolic sphere rather than on conventional protest arenas. Rather than claim and protest, these movements primarily redefine and convince: “they often do not even *ask* (for goods, advantages, reforms), they *bring* (make visible new meaning through their practice)” (Melucci, 1996, p. 183, emphasis in original). Although they do periodically recur to contentious tactics and mobilize to target the state, a crucial part of their contribution occurs in “submerged networks” (Melucci, 1985, p. 800) or movement communities (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 40) where new meanings and cultural practices are produced and tried out.

Accordingly, new social movement research considers much broader tactical repertoires which notably include, besides protest, a wide range of cultural and discursive actions (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 46; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, pp. 269–270). Researchers of feminist movements have analyzed the crucial role of feminist culture as a means of sustaining the feminist movement community and thus the movement itself, but also of bringing about social change (Staggenborg, 1998; Taylor & Rupp, 1993; Whittier, 1995, pp. 52–53). Acknowledging the centrality of discursive politics for feminist movements, another strand of research has focused on feminist discursive activism, including feminist writing and publishing (Young, 1997) as well as the more recent spectrum of online discursive activism (Arbatskaya, 2019; Clark, 2016; Shaw, 2012).

With no clear organizational structure or formal leadership, but rather a diffuse movement community blending into various institutional and everyday contexts, what is deemed to hold these movements together is collective identity: “a shared definition of a group based on common interests, experience, and solidarity” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 170). Collective identity encompasses shared language, practices, and cultural artifacts, but most crucially, definitions of goals and methods (Melucci, 1996, pp. 70–71). A movement’s collective identity need not be stable or consistent; quite to the contrary, it is conceptualized as a process of constant re-negotiations and ideological debates (Fominaya, 2010, p. 397). Because movements like feminism are primarily concerned with producing new meanings, ideological conflicts are not considered as signs of weakness, but rather as testifying to their vitality: “[a] movement remains alive as long as there is struggle over its collective identity” (Whittier, 1995, p. 18).

Whether “new social movements” are new or even a clearly determinable type of movement has been since questioned (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004, p. 273); nowadays researchers

tend to agree that collective identity processes play a more or less central role for all movements (Hunt & Benford, 2004, p. 433). I argue that a collective identity approach is considerably more productive for understanding and, in fact, recognizing the existence and scope of the feminist movement in Russia than the contentious politics approach. As I shall demonstrate below, cultural and discursive action is crucial to the Russian feminist movement, which is reflected both in the activist methods feminists choose and their definitions of the movement's overarching goals. Their relationship to protest, on the other hand, is complicated, fraught with contradictory discourses on contentious action. I argue that the debate over what constitutes feminist action is part of the current collective identity process of the Russian feminist movement.

### **Protests in Russia and in the Previous Feminist Generation**

In Russian post-Soviet history, contentious politics and mobilization have been largely delegitimized; however, attitudes towards them are gradually changing. Researchers argue that protest activity in Russia has been obstructed by the state monopoly on politics and resulting lack of a culture of social and political participation (Алюков et al., 2014, p. 11)<sup>3</sup>. Although Russia emerged as a state from a wave of mobilization in 1989–1991, several processes worked to suppress this wave: the hijacking of social mobilization by politicians, smearing campaigns against grassroots movements in the media, neoliberal reforms and economic crises, and the state's use of armed violence to crush protest (Клеман, Демидов, & Мирясова, 2010, pp. 88–104). All this led to mass disenchantment, deep distrust towards politics, and actual fear of openly contentious action. Reinforced by the media, discursive constructions of protests as useless and dangerous, and of activists as irresponsible idlers (Клеман et al., 2010, p. 98) came to dominate Russian discourse on protest.

The 1990s women's movement in Russia was also affected by this widespread aversion to protest. Having taken shape towards the end of the protest cycle when contentious politics were being increasingly associated with revolt and bloodshed, it avoided protest methods and mass mobilization (Sperling, 1999, pp. 47, 180). Operating under restricted political opportunities, it relied instead on institutional and professional channels to push for change (Sperling, 1999, p. 27; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014, p. 259) while sticking to a markedly conciliatory rather than confrontational approach towards activism (Sundstrom, 2018, p. 220). Women activists in the '90s 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 (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 553; Sperling, 1999, pp. 59–64).

The widespread delegitimation of protest in Russia was not, however, powerful enough to prevent two major waves of mobilization in 2005–2008 and 2011–2013 (Алюков et al., 2014, p. 7; Клеман et al., 2010, pp. 83, 102). Indeed, both waves have contributed to a gradual change in perceptions of protest. Researchers have spoken of a “cultural revolution” that made more people in Russia not only respect others' protest but also become activists themselves (Клеман et al., 2010, p. 674). Moreover, the politicization of the previously “apolitical” individuals due to the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2013 led them to continue their activism in local movements (Журавлев, Савельева, & Ерпылева, 2014). In the face of the powerful discourses that undermine protest, activist communities produce their own counter discourse that centers and valorizes protest

---

<sup>3</sup>I deliberately use Cyrillics rather than transliteration for Russian names and terms to disrupt the conventional exoticization of non-Latin scripts.

to the point of framing it as an activist's duty. As I shall attempt to demonstrate below, both mainstream discourses and the activist counter discourse impact feminists' attitudes towards contentious action.

### **Feminists' Attitudes towards Protest**

In contrast to the conciliatory image left behind by the 1990s women's movement, contemporary feminists in Russia protest on a regular basis. In fact, the first protests of the newer "wave" known to me date as far back as 2006 (Пирс, 2006)<sup>4</sup>. In the years of my own personal involvement in and observations of the feminist scene in Russia (from 2010 onwards), I can report hundreds of public feminist protest activities. The forms they have taken include authorized and unauthorized rallies and marches, picket lines, putting up banners, leaflets, graffiti, blocking streets, etc. The size of feminist protests varies from one person to several hundreds, and their geography encompasses most of Russia's major cities. The reasons for contentious action have been multiple as well: feminists have demanded legislative reforms (protection from violence, women's labor and reproductive rights, etc.), protested specific instances of discrimination and the state's overall oppressive anti-women\* policies, demanded justice for survivors of gender-based violence and prosecuted activists, and used protest to generally raise awareness of feminist issues.

Despite the wide occurrence of feminist contentious action, a lot of feminists are unhappy with it for several reasons. While some find the current scope of feminist public mobilization insufficient, others fear protest or doubt its effectiveness. Whether they believe and engage in protest or not, however, most feminists seem to share an implicit belief that they should do it. An example of this ambiguous attitude about contention is offered by Katerina Maas<sup>5</sup>, 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<sup>6</sup>, Katerina reflects on her own activist 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.*) Right. 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?<sup>7</sup>

Citing activist tactics that she does not use, Katerina begins with contentious methods: putting up leaflets and protesting in the streets. She constructs her reflection in a polemic manner,

<sup>4</sup>There may well have been earlier protests, but information on them is hard to come by. Until the last couple of years, media coverage of feminist action was abysmal, making media sources extremely unreliable and any attempt to apply the protest event count method to the feminist movement essentially futile.

<sup>5</sup>All names used for my participants are agreed upon with them. Whereas I initially suggested pseudonyms, some feminists I spoke to prefer to be featured under their full names.

<sup>6</sup>First cited in (Solovey, 2018, p. 116).

<sup>7</sup>All interviews were held in Russian, and all quotes are provided in my translation. The quotes were slightly edited to bring them closer to written style; however, I have tried to preserve the pauses in speech (marked by ellipses) to make reflection processes visible. Square brackets in the quotes indicate minor rewordings resulting from editing and translating; italics and round brackets indicate non-verbal sounds.

effectively justifying herself for the fact that she neither uses contentious methods nor provides direct help to abuse survivors. She thus constructs a hierarchy of activist methods where her own chosen kind of activism, namely feminist community organizing, occupies a third-rank position. Explaining why she chooses not to engage in public protest, she refers to her fear but also expresses doubt in the impact of contentious politics, even if she does not substantiate her doubts.

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

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 year<sup>8</sup> they simply aren't authorizing anything anymore. [...] 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, like, 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 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. At the same time, all the methods she names fall under the label of “activism in real life”, which, as Tatyana emphasizes several times in her interview, is not as popular with feminists as it should be, in contrast with online activism.

Despite the differences in their outlooks, both Katerina and Tatyana speak of contentious action as a default tactic. Just as many (although not all, see below) other feminists I spoke to seem to share an understanding of activism that centers contentious politics. In this perspective, contentious methods are paradigmatic and valued considerably more than others—in fact, it is common for activists not to take other methods into account and to contrast contentious politics with “doing nothing”, even if they spend much time and energy on online discursive activism or on organizing feminist communities.

It is this line of thinking that Tatyana evokes by using the term “activism in real life”: although it may appear to be a purely technical term to distinguish from “online activism”, Tatyana also uses “real activism” elsewhere in her interview, which points to a presence of 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 the only kind that counts, but it is also what activists must do—otherwise they are considered, indeed, “cowards” (as Katerina calls herself), “armchair feminists”, or “passivists”.

---

<sup>8</sup>The interview took place in October 2015. For an overview of the Russian state policy on restricting protests, see (Smirnova & Shedov, 2018, 2020a, 2020b).

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 as being in opposition to the state. Against the state-sponsored delegitimation of contentious action, these activist scenes produce their own counter discourse that both glorifies protest and demands it. This counter discourse is constructed in response to state policies considered outrageous and to state repression against activists and seems to acquire an increasingly moral character as repression builds up<sup>9</sup>. Among contemporary feminists, there is no ambiguity about the state's role as their opponent. In the face of consistently neopatriarchal policies, a unanimous consensus in feminist scenes is that organized resistance is necessary and that "real" change in the status of women\* can only be achieved through conflict—at least as far as the area of state policies is concerned.

However, as of today, there has been no major breakthrough in this area. Despite several spectacular mobilizations, twenty-first century feminist protests have yet to achieve a scale comparable, for instance, to the legendary women's demonstration in Saint Petersburg on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1917 that started a revolution and eventually led to the end of monarchy. Mass feminist protest is inhibited by obstacles of the kind mentioned by Tatyana, with a growing body of anti-movement laws making it increasingly hard to hold protests legally (and of course, far fewer activists are prepared to take the risks of illegal protest action). It is further obstructed by activists' fear (as pointed out by Katerina), raised by actual risks of persecution and violence (my participants cite Pussy Riot and a variety of other cases with feminist and non-feminist protesters alike) and fueled by pre-existing discourses on the dangers of protest (cf. Solovey, 2018, pp. 114–116).

However, it is not only shrinking political opportunities and fear of repression that prevent feminists from widely using contentious tactics. As Katerina mentions in the above statement, she also doubts the extent to which such tactics are effective. Indeed, these doubts are shared by several of my research participants. They seem understandable, since relatively small-scale protests cannot do much against consistent state policy. However, is there more to these doubts? To answer this question, I shall focus in the next section on how effectiveness or usefulness is defined in feminist scenes.

### Useful Tactics and Feminist Goals

The question of which methods and tactics are more useful and therefore more worthwhile<sup>10</sup> concerns many in the feminist movement. As usefulness is what leads, at least potentially (with due regard to the complex interaction with resources and political opportunities), to achieving the movement's goals, the question of which methods are understood as useful has to do with how the movement's goals are defined.

In a contentious politics approach to social movements, a movement's main goal is understood as impact on state policy (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 7). Therefore, tactics are useful to the extent that they help bring about policy change. There are clear claims concerning policy on Russian feminists' current agenda, such as laws against domestic violence or securing abortion rights. However, when I asked feminists directly about their goals, this was not what they cited, either regarding the movement as a whole or their particular groups or projects. A characteristic example is provided by Natasha, a member of a feminist group that first only held non-public

<sup>9</sup> This tentative analysis builds upon a discussion on activism and repression in Russia and Turkey with Pelin Dincer and Betül Yarar, whom I thank.

<sup>10</sup> Like some of my participants, I prefer not to use the term "effective" due to its neoliberal connotations.



meetings for members but then initiated public talks with invited speakers (mostly scholars who presented their research on gender-related topics), which Natasha organized.

*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 clearly non-contentious: maintaining a feminist community and educating the public; 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 the adversative “but” (“but we decided”) subtly hints that there must have been differences of opinion.

Creating and maintaining a community—what Natasha describes as discussing “interesting topics with like-minded people”—is far from a trivial goal for a feminist group. In fact, most of my participants have emphasized how essential feminist communities are for them, both personally and in terms of movement organizing. In a largely hostile political and cultural environment, feminists in Russia often find themselves in isolation; they are routinely ignored, misunderstood, and face aggression in various forms. As such, communities are crucial spaces of empowerment and mutual support, and platforms where feminist collective identity is produced and lived out (cf. Solovey, forthcoming).

As Natasha points out, both community work and public education are necessary to lay the basis for other, including contentious, forms of action. Her reference to “people who could do something” echoes the allusions to “real action” discussed above; 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. This is most probably the reasoning behind her “but”: although she and her group support various forms of action, they decide against them for the time being, focusing on community and educational activities as ways to strengthen feminist collective identity and recruit more sympathizers and, potentially, members—in other words, to mobilize cultural and human resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004, pp. 126–127).

Many of my participants consider education and awareness-raising<sup>11</sup> a central goal not only for their specific groups, but also for the feminist movement as a whole. As explained by Zara, a feminist from Voronezh in southern European Russia 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

---

<sup>11</sup>The Russian words participants use are *просвещение, распространение информации, популяризация*. The English translations I have chosen are close but not ideally precise; some further alternatives are “enlightenment”, “outreach”, “spreading information”, and “promotion”.

everywhere. And people should get information on feminism from feminists firsthand. [...]

*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 re-posting articles to writing [our] own. Just talking to friends, explaining theory to newcomers... Everything. Raising awareness in any way.

Zara argues for education 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 firsthand knowledge on the subject. This implies that society is currently largely ignorant about the feminist agenda and values—a well-established fact about Russia (Agaltsova, 2014, p. 197; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015, pp. 91–92). By emphasizing the need for awareness-raising in all forms and spheres, Zara conveys a sense of urgency like the one discussed above regarding state policies. Indeed, many feminists adopt a language of urgency when talking about awareness-raising, e.g., by criticizing the prevalence of misconceptions around feminism, just as Zara does above.

Suggesting a wide array of both online and face-to-face activist methods, Zara does not, however, cite any contentious tactics. Nor does anything in the spectrum she describes point towards 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.

Feminist movements have long been known to place particular emphasis on discursive politics (Young, 1997, pp. 12–13). In post-Soviet Russia, however, feminist discursive politics used to be mostly restricted to professional and academic settings, such as universities, gender studies institutions, and NGOs (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014, p. 266). Indeed, the women's movement as such did little to reach out to the larger public (Sperling, 1999, p. 272). Now, apparently, this is changing. Not only do contemporary feminists identify discursive activism as a central goal, but they practice it at a scale unprecedented in post-Soviet history. Online tools are instrumental in this, but discursive activism also extends to various face-to-face events and everyday communication (“talking to friends”, as Zara says).

The contemporary feminist movement's emphasis on discursive politics makes it seem unconventional and, at times, incomprehensible for observers. Among my participants, this incomprehension was perfectly 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. During the interview, this yielded a captivating discussion, as Natalia eagerly asked other participants to explain the feminist movement to her. However, 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 her reflection shows traces of a thinking 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.

The desire to change language and cultural practice, the way people think and speak about and, consequently, act regarding gender, power, and justice, is clearly articulated by many feminists. The0<sup>12</sup>, a long-time feminist who currently lives in Moscow and is mostly active online, provided a vivid metaphor to illustrate this.

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

*The0:* 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... this sort of 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, The0 turns to a vision of an ultimate feminist utopia, imagining an instantaneous realization of feminism's central goal. Whereas elsewhere in the interview, The0 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 The0 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 groups but turns then to how oppression manifests itself at the interpersonal level ("this woman", "how could I"). And 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.

---

<sup>12</sup>This is the participant's preferred spelling. The final 0 is pronounced as an "o".

Despite the unconventional framing, the core of The0's statement could likely be shared by many feminists. Indeed, the idea that at least one of feminism's central goals has to do with communication and dissemination of ideas and values is recurring among feminists, as demonstrated by the above quotes. This is in line with the analytical emphasis on symbolic and discursive challenge suggested by feminist and new social movement researchers (Melucci, 1985, p. 797; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p. 46; Young, 1997, p. 17). Whereas in The0's fantasy version, the goal is achieved instantly, and any application of specific tools is skipped; in the bleaker reality, it is clearly discursive methods that are useful to convey the feminist message.

When feminists speak about the movement's general goals, what comes to the fore is notably education and awareness-raising. Whereas some tend to consider it a tool for mobilizing human resources and thus, ultimately, for ensuring more fruitful action on conventional political arenas, others perceive discursive change as a goal in itself. Although contentious tactics such as demonstrations may be used as a means of symbolic challenge, other methods are at least equally, and arguably better, suited for impacting gender discourse and practice, while at the same time often entailing less risks. Methods of discursive activism such as giving public talks, writing and publishing texts in various genres, engaging in face-to-face and online discussions, as well as various artistic tools (visual arts, poetry, theater, music) are, in fact, what feminists use at a large scale to promote feminist ideas.

### **The Conflict over Definitions: A Collective Identity Process**

As I have attempted to show above, feminists tend to consider contentious politics as central and paradigmatic for the movement, often equating it to "real action". Whereas they feel pressed to engage in contentious tactics, associated risks and extant delegitimizing discourses inhibit feminist contention. At the same time, feminists question how useful contention is to advance the movement's goals. An important goal concerns discursive change, and it is probably best achieved through various methods of communication, education, and awareness-raising.

The feminist movement's general self-definition or, in other words, feminist collective identity as it relates to the movement's goals and priorities, is thus shaped by a conflict between two paradigms. One centers contentious politics, thus emphasizing the feminist movement's affinity to other social movements. The other one, embedded in feminist tradition, highlights discursive change and suggests a broader definition of politics, but also a reduced emphasis on contentious tactics. In several interview quotes cited above, the simultaneous presence of both paradigms is apparent. However, there is a hierarchy between the two: the contentious politics paradigm is clearly more established and thus referred to as relatively self-evident, while the discursive paradigm mostly emerges in response to direct questions on goals or achievements and is articulated in reflection. Exacerbated, as I have suggested above, by the moral discourse on public protest as a duty, the hierarchic relationship between the two paradigms results in harsh moral judgments of those who do non-contentious activism and invalidation of one's own and others' work, as manifested in labels like "cowards" or "armchair feminists".

Although invalidation does arguably little good to the movement, the conflict over the definitions of action, activism, and movement as such is, I suggest, nothing inherently harmful. Quite the contrary, as feminist researchers have argued, conflicts and debates over definitions are central to the collective identity process: it is through conflict that multiple experiences are made visible and new forms of social life produced. Neither side-effects nor encumbrance, conflicts are, in fact, signs of the movement's vitality and relevance (Maddison, 2007, pp. 395–396; Whittier,

1995, p. 18). This conflict pertains to broadening the definition of politics in feminist terms and thus potentially has implications reaching far beyond the feminist movement.

At the same time, the need for conventional protest and policy change remains and is recognized by feminists, whatever their stance on discursive action. Indeed, the conflict over definitions does not seem to negatively affect activist practice. Acknowledging the importance of both contentious and non-contentious tactics, feminists demonstrate and protest where there is need and opportunity for public protest, while also doing extensive discursive work in various settings. The results of these efforts are becoming increasingly clear as feminism secures ever more visibility, recognition, and support in the Russian media and larger public.

Interestingly, it is online discursive activism on the Russian-speaking Internet that has recently attracted researchers' attention, sparking several publications on online flash mobs against gender-based violence (Arbatskaya, 2019; Aripova & Johnson, 2018; Sedysheva, 2018). Despite the long-needed focus on and analysis of current feminist action, however, all these studies make the same omission: they construct the flash mobs as isolated events, disregarding the mass feminist movement that prepared the ground for them, and thus paradoxically perpetuate the silence around feminism in Russia.

The issue of whether to define activism in exclusively contentious terms or to include discursive action is relevant both within and outside of the feminist scenes: internally, as a collective identity process, it pertains to how the movement understands itself, and externally, to how the movement is perceived by outside observers and whether, in fact, it is recognized at all. As I have attempted to demonstrate above, a narrow focus on contentious politics distorts the content, scope, and reach of feminist activism. At a time when feminism in Russia is gaining popularity and influence, to abandon this focus in favor of a broader and more feminist definition of politics would, without a doubt, open the way to numerous exciting analytical insights.

## References

- Agaltsova, A. (2014). Collective Female Identities in Discussions about Pussy Riot 's Performance. *Religion and Gender*, 4(2), 184–201.
- Arbatskaya, E. (2019). Discursive activism in the Russian feminist hashtag campaign: the #ItIsNotAReasonToKill case. *Russian Journal of Communication*, 11(3), 253–273.
- Aripova, F., & Johnson, J. E. (2018). The Ukrainian-Russian Virtual Flashmob against Sexual Assault. *The Journal of Social Policy Studies*, 16(3), 487–500.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd ed.). London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Clark, R. (2016). “Hope in a hashtag”: the discursive activism of #WhyIStayed. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(5), 788–804.
- Edwards, B., & McCarthy, J. D. (2004). Resources and Social Movement Mobilization. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, (Schneider 1995), 116–152.
- Fominaya, C. F. (2010). Collective Identity in Social Movements: Central Concepts and Debates: Collective Identity in Social Movements. *Sociology Compass*, 4(6), 393–404.
- Gamson, W. A. (2015). Defining Movement “Success”. In J. Goodwin & J. M. Jasper (Eds.), *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (3rd ed., pp. 383–385). Blackwell Publishing.
- Harding, S. (1991). *Whose science? Whose knowledge?: Thinking from women's lives*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Hunt, S. A., & Benford, R. D. (2004). Collective identity, solidarity, and commitment. *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, 433–457.
- Johnson, J. E. (2014). Pussy Riot as a feminist project: Russia's gendered informal politics. *Nationalities Papers*, 42(4), 583–590.
- Johnson, J. E., & Saarinen, A. (2013). Twenty-First-Century Feminisms under Repression: Gender Regime Change and the Women's Crisis Center Movement in Russia. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(3), 543–567.
- Koopmans, R., & Rucht, D. (2002). Protest event analysis. In B. Klandermans & S. Staggenborg (Eds.), *Methods of social movement research* (pp. 231–259). Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Maddison, S. (2007). Feminist Perspectives on Social Movement Research. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Practice* (pp. 391–408). SAGE.
- Melucci, A. (1985). The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements. *Social Research*, 52(4), 789–816.
- Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Naples, N. (2003). *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research*. New York and Oxford: Routledge.
- Salmenniemi, S., & Adamson, M. (2015). New Heroines of Labour: Domesticating Post-Feminism and Neoliberal Capitalism in Russia. *Sociology*, 49(1), 88–105.
- Sedysheva, A. (2018). The #ЯНеБоюсьСказать (#IamNotScaredToSpeak) campaign of July 2016 in Facebook's Russian speaking community: A Discourse Analysis. *Praktyka Teoretyczna*, 30(4), 180–203.

- Shaw, F. (2012). *Discursive politics online: political creativity and affective networking in Australian feminist blogs*. University of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Smirnova, N., & Shedov, D. (2018). The Art of the Ban How Russian authorities refuse permission for rallies and other protests. Retrieved 24 December 2020, from <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/art-ban>
- Smirnova, N., & Shedov, D. (2020a). Suppression of peaceful assembly in Russia from 2015 to 2020: from a coalition of human rights organizations' report for the United Nations Human Rights Committee. Retrieved 24 December 2020, from <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/suppression-peaceful-assembly-russia-2015-2020#1>
- Smirnova, N., & Shedov, D. (2020b). Violations of the Right to Peaceful Assembly for Women and Girls in Russia from 2010 to 2020. Retrieved 24 December 2020, from <https://ovdinfo.org/reports/violations-right-peaceful-assembly-women-and-girls-russia-2010-2020>
- Solovey, V. (2018). Is an 'armchair feminist' a coward? Debates over activist methods within feminist movements in Russia. In M. Hawel, S. Heinemann, N. Kaiser, L. Killius, & M. Schröder (Eds.), *Work in Progress. Work on Progress. Beiträge kritischer Wissenschaft. Doktorand\_innenjahrbuch 2018 der Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* (pp. 106–119). Hamburg: VSA: Verlag.
- Solovey, V. M. (forthcoming). Créer des espaces de solidarité : la communauté et l'identité collective féministes en Russie. *Diogène*.
- Sperling, V. (1999). *Organizing women in contemporary Russia: engendering transition*. Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperling, V. (2015). *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Staggenborg, S. (1998). Social movement communities and cycles of protest: The emergence and maintenance of a local women's movement. *Social Problems*, 45(2), 180–204.
- Staggenborg, S., & Taylor, V. (2005). Whatever happened to the women's movement? *Mobilization*, 10(1), 37–52.
- Sundstrom, L. M. (2018). Russian Women's Activism. In A. Basu (Ed.), *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms* (pp. 213–239). New York, London: Routledge.
- Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, V., & Rupp, L. J. (1993). Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism. *Signs*, 19(1), 32–61.
- Taylor, V., & Van Dyke, N. (2004). "Get up, Stand up": Tactical Repertoires of Social Movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (pp. 262–293). Blackwell Publishing.
- Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. (1992). Collective identity in social movement communities: lesbian feminist mobilization. In A. D. Morris & C. M. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 104–129). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Temkina, A., & Zdravomyslova, E. (2014). Gender's crooked path: Feminism confronts Russian patriarchy. *Current Sociology*, 62(2), 253–270.
- Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. G. (2015). *Contentious Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Turbine, V. (2015). Women's human rights in Russia: outmoded battlegrounds, or new sites of contentious politics? *East European Politics*, 31(3), 326–341.

- Whittier, N. E. (1995). *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Feminist Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Young, S. (1997). *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Yusupova, M. (2014). Pussy Riot: a feminist band lost in history and translation. *Nationalities Papers*, 42(4), 604–610.
- Алюков, М. Л., Ерпылева, С. В., Желнина, А. А., Журавлев, О. М., Завадская, М. А., Клеман, К., ... Туровец, М. В. (2014). *Политика аполитичных: Гражданские движения в России 2011—2013 годов*. (С. В. Ерпылева & А. В. Магун, Eds.). Москва: Новое литературное обозрение.
- Журавлев, О., Савельева, Н., & Ерпылева, С. (2014). Разобщенность и солидарность в новых российских гражданских движениях. In *Политика аполитичных: Гражданские движения в России 2011—2013 годов* (pp. 445–471).
- Клеман, К., Демидов, А., & Мирясова, О. (2010). *От обывателей к активистам. Зарождающиеся социальные движения в современной России*. Москва: Три квадрата.
- Пирс. (2006). 8 марта в Москве. Retrieved 1 December 2020, from <https://feminist-ru.livejournal.com/100246.html>
- Феминистская карта России. (n.d.). Retrieved 10 September 2020, from [https://ona.org.ru/map#\\_=\\_](https://ona.org.ru/map#_=_)
- Ясенева, А. (n.d.). Каталог русскоязычных фемресурсов. Retrieved 10 September 2020, from <https://ona.org.ru/femosphere#>