CONTESTING FEMINISM AND MEDIA CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

FROM CELEBRITIES TO ANTI-WAR ACTIVISTS

Saara Ratilainen, Galina Miazhevich,
Daniil Zhaivoronok, and Eeva Kuikka

ROUTLEDGE

Contesting Feminism and Media Culture in Contemporary Russia

Contesting Feminism and Media Culture in Contemporary Russia: From Celebrities to Anti-war Activists examines how Russian discourses on feminism have been informed by fast-evolving, cross-border, transcultural, and trans-local media flows, which have both diversified and fragmented the spectrum of feminism in the region.

The book takes a multidisciplinary approach to Russian feminisms, including an examination of Russian politics and culture, the ideology of glamour, celebrity culture, and mass media, with a particular focus on online social networks – using a set of case studies involving high-profile feminist media personalities, social media influencers, and micro-celebrities appropriating feminist agenda, and online grassroot responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Contesting Feminism and Media Culture in Contemporary Russia: From Celebrities to Anti-war Activists will be of interest to both undergraduate and graduate students of media and communication, area, international relations, gender, and cultural studies.

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"An extremely timely and brilliant investigation into the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities of mediated feminism in an increasingly authoritarian (and now war-time) contemporary Russia. A must read for feminist and media scholars, everywhere."

Catherine Rottenberg, *Marie Sklodowska-Curie Visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK*

"This timely volume grapples with the baffling paradoxes of Russia's neoliberal-authoritarian cultural terrain, affording insights into the conditions that produced the war, as well as resistance to it. It brings a novel angle to the topic of Russian feminisms, contributing fresh insights and analytic tools. The mediated feminisms approach widens the lens and affords a very different picture of feminism's pre-war status – and great food for thought for theorising what came next. The feminist media ecology conception contributes to our thinking about the hybrid media sphere and political agency within it. The book offers a fascinating window into the dynamics of political agency in Russia's pre-war hybrid media environment, showing persuasively that neoliberal feminism paradoxically incubated/contributed to the development of anti-war activism. Engagingly written and analytically sophisticated, the volume is a must read for scholars of social movements, morphing activist forms and the intersection of digitisation and authoritarianism globally."

Julie Hemment, *Professor of Anthropology at University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA*

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This book was written with the aim of offering new perspectives and critical insights into existing debates on celebrities, activism, feminism, and hybrid media, without shying away from contradictions or uncomfortable questions and we take full responsibility for its content. We would like to see this book as an opening for a discussion, and we genuinely welcome constructive criticism. We hope that the book will resonate with readers, spark reflection within both academic and activist milieus, and perhaps even inspire new conversations about feminism, media, visibility, and resistance in contemporary Russia.

June 2025

Saara Ratilainen, Galina Miazhevich, Daniil Zhaivoronok, and Eeva Kuikka

Note on translation and transliteration

All texts originally in Russian (interview quotes, video transcripts, media publications, academic and journalistic pieces, etc.) were translated from Russian to English by the authors.

For Russian personal names we used their conventionally accepted transliteration into Latin script (e.g., Navalny, not Navalnyi). Elsewhere when transliterating Russian text, we used Library of Congress system of transliteration. When discussing Ukrainian and Russian-language feminist hashtags, we kept the original Cyrillic script to preserve the linguistic context and ensure they remain easily searchable for readers.

1 Celebrity feminism in Russia: media, power and resistance (an introduction)

Saara Ratilainen, Galina Miazhevich, Daniil Zhaivoronok, and Eeva Kuikka

Question: could you please tell us how you actually […] became a feminist?
Answer: there was this funny moment when I was about 13 years old. My godfather gave me a hoodie – bright pink, with the words 'Feminist Fight Club' and the Venus mirror symbol on it. And my mum asked him, 'What does this phrase mean?' And he said, 'I don't know what it means. I just picked it because it looked cool.' So, we translated it using Google Translate, and I was kind of confused. I was only 13, and I still held on to all those stereotypes […] Feminism seemed strange and unclear to me. But I still wore the hoodie because it looked stylish. I liked how it looked. I remember once I wore it to a vocal class – we had group lessons – and a girl asked, 'Wow, are you a feminist?' And she said it with such excitement, like she thought she had found a kindred spirit. And I was like, 'Well, not really, it was just a gift.' Then she started explaining that feminists are actually a bit different from what I thought, because I had shared my ideas with her. And that planted a seed of doubt in me, like, 'Oh, so maybe it's not quite what I thought.' That didn't exactly push me onto the path of feminism, but looking back now […] I realise it meant something.

(Quote from an interview with a member of Feminist Anti-War Resistance, FAR)

Mediation of feminism in an authoritarian context

Contesting Feminism and Media Culture in Contemporary Russia: From Celebrities to Anti-war Activists is a timely inquiry into the complex entanglements between media and feminism in the context of present-day Russia. Focusing on the complicated relationship between feminism, media, and authoritarianism, this book highlights that, paradoxically, celebrity culture can enable proactive spaces for contesting conservative gender politics. The book explores the popularisation of feminism in Russia during the 2010s which was facilitated by a rapid expansion of media platforms and a growing exposure of Russian media to transnational media flows, and was informed by an idiosyncratic post-Soviet celebrity culture.[1]

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Subsequently, we shed light on the intersections between celebrity culture, media, and activism since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. By doing this, our research highlights the dynamic and multidirectional relationship between popular expressions of feminism(s), including celebrities' appropriation of feminist ideas and dispositions, and grassroots civic resistance against the patriarchal regime and conservative gender politics of an authoritarian state.

This book starts from the premise that the 'intersections of feminism and contemporary celebrity culture are [...] myriad, complicated, and contradictory' (Hamad and Taylor 2015, 125), and can be seen as a predominantly commercial enterprise (Zeisler 2016; Gay 2019). As noted by Michelle Flood (2019, 422), however, 'the wide platforms afforded to individuals by their celebrity status give them a persuasive potentiality that cannot be ignored.' Hamad and Taylor (2015, 126) acknowledge that, 'although markedly different', various types of feminist celebrities 'shape the kinds of feminism that come to publicly circulate and that, to varying degrees, come to receive cultural legitimation.' Janell Hobson (2017, 1000), in turn, argues that 'celebrity feminist discourses occur in sustained dialogue with other feminist discourses, which complicates the meanings and possibilities for a celebrity feminism that might co-exist alongside grassroots feminism, academic feminism, and other spheres of influence.' By examining the Russian celebrity scene, as well as other publicly visible feminist actors from a viewpoint of networked mediation – an intersection that has largely escaped scholarly attention – this book analyses the multifaceted and often ambivalent dynamics of this nexus, introducing new conceptual frameworks and critical insights that contribute to the fields of feminist media studies, celebrity culture, and post-Soviet cultural studies.

We assert that, prior to 2022, feminism gained prominence in Russia by drawing heavily on *celebrity* – understood here as 'media generated fame' (Driessens 2013a, 544) – and engaging with a variety of media, cultural, and civil society actors. This was in line with global trends in the popularisation of feminism via networked media and popular culture at the time (Banet-Weiser 2018). Despite the indisputable growth in the visibility of feminism throughout a wide range of media spaces accessible to numerous audiences and social groups, there is a limit to feminism's recognition and public status in the Russian context that has to do with the ways in which the political and cultural elites can publicly position themselves in relation to feminism.[2] Take for example the established female politician Valentina Matvienko, who has been involved in the broader post-Soviet feminist agenda by taking part in an anti-domestic violence campaign (Johnson 2024). Still, she would never publicly and openly call herself a feminist. On the contrary, in a reactive move against feminist activists' efforts to destigmatise women without children, Matvienko supported an initiative to ban 'propaganda' about a so-called 'child-free' ideology (Novaya Gazeta Europe 2024).

This example tells us a lot about the tension within the Russian information sphere, which exists in between globally circulating ideas about women's liberation and Russian official conservative rhetoric. Furthermore, it exposes (self-)censorship within the political elites and formal institutions of power which align themselves with the state agenda. Finally, Matvienko's stance illustrates the principle

of loyalty within one-party political elites – it is impossible for someone from the establishment to step outside the boundaries of official discourse. These boundaries can be flexible to the extent that a female politician can advocate for preventing domestic violence, implicitly challenging patriarchal relationships (which still prevail, as seen in the decriminalisation of the 2017 Domestic Violence Act) (Johnson 2024), but she cannot openly identify with feminism, because feminism challenges the entire framework of Russia's neoconservative state ideology.

Thus, by attending to the local norms governing public expressions of feminist identities and sensibilities, we use the concept of *mediation*[3] of feminism here to account for a public diffusion of feminist discourses and ideas across Russian media with the help of celebrities who have strategically or unintentionally popularised it. The figures discussed in this book are self-proclaimed celebrities – either professional or media-enabled – who have voiced feminist concerns or displayed such a standpoint indirectly through, for example, visual messages like related slogans on T-shirts, which is a common global practice of 'commodity feminism' (Repo 2020). As this mediated celebrity engagement with feminism produces a multifaceted set of discourses, we cannot ascertain individual celebrities' feminist positionalities or the authenticity of a feminist stance expressed under repressive circumstances. Hence, Hamad and Taylor's definition (2015, 126) of popular cultural figures as 'celebrities who come to identify as feminist at some stage during their career and use their public persona to articulate political positions broadly consistent with feminism' still largely holds in the Russian context – with the caveat of self-identification – as our analysis shows.

'Neoliberal feminism' (Rottenberg 2018) serves as another important conceptual lens in this book. As a broader macro-social trend, neoliberalism instils diverse feminist formations with the values of individualism, self-optimisation, and market rationality (Mohanty 2013; McRobbie 2015). Neoliberal feminism reframes empowerment as a personal achievement rather than a collective struggle, often emphasising self-care, confidence, and entrepreneurial success as markers of women's liberation (Gill and Orgad 2017). This form of feminism is deeply embedded in celebrity culture, where feminist messages are commodified and circulated through highly visible, media-savvy figures (Hopkins 2018). It is also shaped by platform logics, where algorithmic visibility and affective engagement determine which feminist narratives gain traction (Saraswati 2021). As researchers argue (Mohanty 2013; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017; Rottenberg 2018), neoliberal feminism depoliticises structural critique by promoting a vision of gender equality that is compatible with – and even reinforces – existing capitalist and patriarchal systems.

In the Russian context, neoliberal feminism is not simply imported from the West, but is rearticulated through local cultural codes, colonial dynamics, media infrastructures, and political constraints (see Chapters two to six). It coexists with state-promoted traditionalism, post-Soviet gender norms, and pressures from authoritarian governance (Morris 2021). This often creates hybrid forms of mediated feminisms that are simultaneously aspirational and constrained, progressive and complicit (see Chapter three). By identifying and analysing these tensions, this book contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how 'neoliberalising'

feminism (Prügl 2015) is being mediated, contested, and transformed in contemporary Russia.

Thus, while this book adopts the broad definition of feminism as an emancipatory politics, practice, and symbolic production aiming for gender equality, we also acknowledge the neoliberal, conservative, colonial, and platform-driven appropriations of feminist ideas, as well as the intersectional feminism which highlight the role of multiple inequalities – gender, class, sexuality, race, and ableness (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Carbin and Edenheim 2013). Throughout this book, we also refer to key notions such as 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser 2018) and 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill 2017). Rosalind Gill's (2007; 2017) work on postfeminism – understood as a cultural sensibility characteristic of post-industrial and neoliberal media cultures in the West and globally, drawing simultaneously on both feminist and anti-feminist ideas – is instrumental to unpacking ambiguities in the symbolic language of Russian media representations of feminism at the crossroads of local and global histories of feminism.

Against this backdrop, this book seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What kind of discourses on feminism are circulating within the Russian mediascape, enabled by digital media? (2) In what ways are celebrities who address feminist issues associating themselves with feminism? (3) What modifications are being made within the feminist agenda, and how can it be mediated following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? and lastly, (4) What does all this tell us about the mediated formations of feminism in an authoritarian context?

The academic significance of this project is threefold. Firstly, the book contributes to de-Westernising knowledge on mediated feminism(s) by focusing on the Russian context, where increasing state control over the media is being combined with neoliberal economic structures and accelerated digital connectivity. Our insights into wartime media activism in particular advance our understanding of the role of mediated feminist networks in supporting transnational civil societies. Although several case studies have emerged from other non-Western, and especially post-colonial contexts, where expressions of neoliberal and postfeminist positionalities acquire localised meanings and form new practices of femininity and women's rights advocacy (Dosekun 2020; Roy 2022), a profound understanding of mediated feminism – particularly the re-appropriation of feminist discourses by the diversifying public and celebrity culture outside the Western liberal paradigms – is still lacking.

Secondly, this book fills the gap in theoretical and methodological approaches employed to contemporary Russian feminism. Recently, Russian feminism has been reviewed from the perspective of grassroots activism and feminist politics (Johnson 2014; Perheentupa 2022; Solovey 2022), and political opposition (Sperling 2014). Instead of focusing solely on feminist activism or academic feminism, this book deals with the complex intersection of celebriticised discourses and figures, digital technologies and cultures, and feminist grassroots' organisation, thus providing a more inclusive and novel take on feminism in Russia.

Thirdly, our insights are particularly timely considering the trend for democratic backsliding coupled with an ongoing global rise in conservatism and an anti-gender movement (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). The Russian case – marked by the increasing role of religious elites, militarisation of state ideology, and pronatalist family politics – is especially instructive. It combines the contradictory legacy of Soviet gender politics with contemporary infiltrations of neoliberal celebrity culture and anti-war feminist activism, producing complex feminist positions. That said, we should be mindful of limits to extrapolating from our findings, and be careful not to overemphasise the uniqueness of the Russian case. This is especially so considering the upsurge in anti-feminist gender politics worldwide.

From feminist celebrities to anti-war activists

The case studies discussed in this book cover the period 2012–2024, which saw an expansive growth of feminism's visibility in Russian digital media. In many respects, the trajectory of feminism's mediation followed similar patterns witnessed elsewhere, including the proliferation of feminist online blogs and digitally-enabled feminist street protests, the emergence of feminist social media influencers, and lifestyle media's adoption of feminist discourses, merging ideas of gender equality with the neoliberal logic of personal success (Clark-Parsons 2022; Hannell 2023; on Russia: Sperling 2014; Rossman 2021). In Russia, these developments constituted fertile grounds for new types of entanglements between celebrity cultures and feminism, as this book demonstrates. However, these processes occurred alongside simultaneous growth in authoritarianism, political repression, and state control of media, and finally, in 2022, a transition to wartime media consisting of 'a far more homogenised media sphere that the state strove to control through systematic censorship while increasing the level and scope of reprisals for those who challenge the official line' (Hutchings et al. 2024, 27).

In the Russian context, where grassroots and academic feminism's sphere of influence has dramatically diminished since the 2000s, celebrities' engagement with feminist ideas has become crucial, because they function as mediators reaching out to other society actors beyond their immediate celebrity domain (Amico 2014; Miazhevich 2025a). For instance, they bring together professionals in creative and cultural industries, grassroots feminist activists, and the general public. This makes celebrities an important nexus between multiple spheres of society, which is particularly important within the Russian re-centralising state oppressive to any independent, sustainable, and effective civil society institutional structures. Against this backdrop, celebrity is increasingly seen as a prospective resource by feminist civic actors and media-savvy activists veering towards media visibility and public recognition as a way of raising public awareness around women's rights and 'everyday activism' (McIntosh Sundstrom, Henry, and Sperling 2022) such as anti-domestic violence projects. These processes illuminate the need for a re-assessment of the relationship between celebrity and feminism and its role in raising awareness of, and even advancing, certain policies on gender equality.

Within the Western-dominated media paradigm, celebrity culture has arguably become one of the most visible arenas in which public statements advocating for women's rights, gender equality, and feminism are fashioned (Hamad and Taylor 2015). High-profile celebrities' engagements with feminism range from using 'feminist' as a 'commodified buzzword' to more authentic and informed articulations of feminist positionalities, as well as collaborations with grassroots movements (Flood 2019, 244; Chidgey 2021). Importantly, celebrity has become a viable form of capital that can be converted into other resources, such as economic and political capital, and a 'power resource' in and of itself, which is also accessible to grassroots media users (Driessens 2013a; Tufekci 2013), thus generating new spheres of professionalism, such as social media influencers profiting from audience monetisation of their personal profiles (Hearn and Schoenhoff 2015).

Here, alongside studying how various Russian celebrity figures from the entertainment and media industries publicly engage with feminism, we use 'celebrity' as a dynamic concept referring to the active and multifaceted process of accumulating popularity and recognition via media networks, as well as generating profit through a personal brand (Brooks et al. 2021). This dynamic aspect of how celebrity works in the contemporary neoliberal media system is particularly important and informative in our study, especially considering the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which significantly diminished the profitability of feminist celebrity engagement on commercial platforms and, at the same time, exposed the intertwining of celebrity feminism and activism to new avenues of exploration. Specifically, as we talk about the 'celebrification' of feminism as a dynamic process built on a logic of visibility, we register the dramatic shifts in celebrity standing post-2022, such as a drop in celebrity status and popularity (e.g., Chapter four) and activist-influencers' role within the anti-war resistance movement (see Chapters seven to eight).

In considering the relationship between Russian celebrity and civic activism domains, we draw on contributions to celebrity feminism (Chidgey 2021; Flood 2019; Hobson 2017) that move away from the postfeminist dichotomous counterposing of feminism as a collective political movement and profit-driven expressions of neoliberal feminisms (Gill 2017; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020) to more individualised celebrity branding practices, which are seen as being entangled with 'curated interactions with community organisations, everyday activists, and grassroots campaigners' (Chidgey 2021, 1066). However, this plays out slightly differently in the Russian context, where civil society actors are significantly constrained in their ability to influence formal policy-making processes. Although feminist celebrity actors provide a partial replacement of the missing infrastructure and institutional support, our insights into the pre-2022 decade show that the 'celebrity activist nexus' (Chidgey 2021, 1056) does not involve the prospect of mass movement mobilisation. Here celebrities can rarely act as endorsers of certain feminist grassroots campaigns due to a socio-political context involving a distinctly conservative repressive political regime. In these cases, the voicing of concerns, for instance, about gendered violence, does not translate into politically acknowledged grievances, but largely remains at the level of communicating and

recirculating concerns. After 2022, though, we register more pronounced advocacy positionalities and shifts towards activism within the 'celebrity-activism' continuum.

Our post-2022 case study focuses on the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) movement, founded on the second day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, February 25, 2022. It immediately recruited significant numbers of new members and mobilised mostly female-led onsite and online anti-war protests, relying on feminist grassroots activists' creative repertoire of action devised during the preceding decade (FAR 2023; Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024). FAR rapidly grew into a large transnational social movement recognised by jointly winning the Aachen Peace Award in 2023.[4] A group of exiled activists from FAR participated in the award ceremony in the city of Aachen, Germany in September 2023, wearing masks in solidarity with activists participating in the movement in Russia who had to stay unidentifiable for their own safety, while a video screen in the background showed a compilation of images of Russia-based activists, also masked, and some participating from behind black screens.

The image of the masked Russian anti-war feminists at the award ceremony (Figure 1.1), widely shared online, captures a key dynamic between Russian feminism and media visibility, which we investigate in this book. FAR has grown into an influential activist network and anti-war movement largely due to feminist

Figure 1.1 Masked FAR activists receiving the Aachen Peace Award.

activists' competence in media use that was accumulated over a significant time before February 2022. Feminist activists were utilising a wide range of communication tools as part of their repertoire of action, and they emphasised different creative forms of media activism, as well as collaborated with professional media as a response to increasing restrictions on other forms of public protest, such as street rallies. At the same time, these activists had devised effective tactics of *invisibility* and *anonymity* as being at the centre of wartime subversive action (see Chapter seven). The Aachen Peace Award ceremony was a spectacular demonstration of both the feminists' use of visibility and media as one of the remaining tools of activism, and their use of tactical invisibility vital for those acting and speaking out in a conservative autocracy (Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024; Zhaivoronok 2025a).

While activists' creative use of online media and tactics of invisibility are well documented in previous scholarship (Perheentupa 2022; Solovey 2023; Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024), we propose that in its recruitment and mobilisation, FAR also substantially relied on 'celebriticised' (Driessens 2013b) forms of feminism widely present in the Russian mediascape in the years prior to Russia's full-scale invasion. Significantly, FAR was able to attract people interested in types of feminisms routinely understood to be apolitical, individualist, and consumption-oriented. Most importantly, the neoliberal logic of visibility, which underpins both celebrity and influencer cultures, albeit in distinct ways, emerged as a crucial resource for FAR to gain public attention, but it also introduced problematic dynamics within the project, becoming a source of internal tension and frustration for activists (see Chapters seven to eight).

Our longitudinal monitoring of Russia's mediascape (2012–2024) has garnered an abundance of relevant data. To account for its diversity, and at the same time to highlight key issues and trends unearthed, we present the data via a set of case studies. To start with, the cases explored in this book demonstrate that media and celebrity culture have contributed to dissemination of feminism in Russia in more versatile and noteworthy ways than previously acknowledged. Next, our case studies highlight the cross-fertilisation of popular Western and domestic media formats and feminist discourses. Finally, we argue that a multitude of compounded variations of feminism's entanglements with popular media and celebrity cultures contributed to the formation of a *feminist media ecology* (FME) (see below), which proved to be fertile ground for fostering a collective feminist identity among FAR supporters.

Mapping the feminist media ecology

To unpack our take on mediated and popularised feminism in Russia, we must explain its key components. Broadly defined, we are dealing with a spectrum of heterogeneous discursive manifestations of feminism(s) in Russia: those officially sanctioned, the post-Soviet ones (e.g., Miazhevich 2025b), mainstream, grassroots, entrepreneurial, and those driven by social justice. Importantly, it is not feminism as a singular, but *feminisms in plural*, considered as a multifaceted set

of discourses produced by celebrities with feminist positionalities and other feminist actors interacting predominantly via digital networks. Following this, we propose to understand 'feminism' as a broad constellation of diverse actors, practices, and discourses whose identities and meanings are not set in stone but fluctuate, depending on the political conjuncture and the observer's perspective.

Because taking a publicly pro-feminist stance in Russia's socio-political and media context is almost an act of rebellion or subversion, our research remained open to elusive, shifting, and often contradictory manifestations of feminism. Rather than observing consistency or alignment between identities, practices, and discourses, we frequently encountered disjunctions and mismatches among them. For instance, such actors as Ksenia Sobchak (Chapter three) or Manizha (Chapter five), could simultaneously claim and reject a feminist identity, with some of their statements and actions clearly aligning with feminist values, while others appeared almost anti-feminist. In other words, in this book we use 'feminism' not so much as a descriptive category, but as a *performative* one – that is, as a category through which we assemble heterogeneous actors, practices, and discourses that collectively, and regardless of actors' intentions, beliefs, or self-proclaimed identities, constitute what we refer to as a *feminist media ecology*.

We conceptualise FME as an interconnected and dynamic network of various platforms and structures, feminist media actors, and discourses or expressions that collectively shape and sustain public feminist identities. It is a multi-component notion covering both an *infrastructure-related aspect* of media networks, such as social media platforms and other media channels, and *the practices of inhabiting and using* these media infrastructures by feminist celebrities, activist-influencers, self-organised collectives and other actors to build networks, communicate with their audiences, accumulate visibility, and other forms of capital. Thus, FME covers a diversity of activities and discourses building up on the content and genres produced, including grassroots activist initiatives, multi-authored non-hierarchical interviews, language play, and the use of popular and commodity feminism to mainstream feminist ideas. This, we attest, has resulted in the creation of counter-publics and diverse feminist discourses (see Chapter seven).

This book demonstrates that the studied celebrities' engagement is 'neither a clearly feminist one nor one advancing or rigidly functioning within a patriarchal agenda' (Miazhevich 2020). To grasp this peculiar 'post-Soviet postfeminist' stance (Miazhevich 2025b), we need to briefly look into the recent history of gender politics in the USSR and Russia. The Soviet gender order is widely characterised by scholars as being contradictory, combining both progressive and conservative elements of gender policy. The former include formal gender equality, elements of affirmative action, simplified divorce procedures, and access to education and other avenues of social mobility for women (Ghodsee 2018; Ashwin 2012; Rotkirch and Temkina 2007; Martin 2001). The latter involves the imposition of traditional responsibilities on women for social reproduction, childcare, and domestic labour (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2005; Miroiu 2007). Moreover, as noted by Rotkirch and Temkina (2007), the Soviet gender order was marked by a 'constantly reproduced gap between official ideology and everyday practices.' In

other words, the proclaimed gender equality often diverged from the lived reality of discrimination against women, both in the domestic realm and in the workplace. So, for instance, the Soviet state system enabled a certain degree of female freedom and equality (maternity leave, nurseries, etc.), but it frequently implied a double or a triple workload for women – a full responsibility for domestic labour, while working full-time outside of the home as well as taking political roles in party organisations. A prevalence of everyday sexism and discrimination against women led to the articulation of a dissident feminists' agenda in the early 1980s (Sidorevich 2023).

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, new 'gender contracts' began to emerge (Temkina and Rotkirch 2002), each with distinct rules, practices, and ideologies. Some scholars describe the new gender order in post-Soviet society as a 'patriarchal renaissance', while others highlight opportunities to develop more egalitarian gender relations and to protect women's rights (Kochkina 2007). However, the 2000s witnessed another transformation: the state, both ideologically and economically, sought to reassert women's maternal function, even as society experienced a significant shift toward more egalitarian gender norms (Borozdina et al. 2016; Chernova 2019). The development of the former trend led to the entrenchment of neoconservatism as official state ideology; meanwhile, a promulgation of anti-Western sentiment resulted in frequent misconstructions of feminism as a homogenous radical Western movement (Miazhevich 2025b). At the same time, traces of the latter trend can be seen, for example, in the emergence of entrepreneurial postfeminist femininity (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015; Chernova and Shpakovskaia 2020), as well as in increased political participation of women, and a high level of support for gender equality among the Russian opposition in exile after 2022 (Kostenko et al. 2025).

Our approach recognises the diversity and shifting nature of both the feminist movement and celebrity feminism(s) in Russia. It advocates not only for one type – either neoliberal (Rottenberg 2018), popular (Banet-Weiser 2018), or postfeminist (Gill 2017) – but it allows for different discursive patterns to co-exist. These may simultaneously combine a set of features from different branches of feminisms and borrow from the inter-temporal (the post/Soviet) axis as well. However, one of our principal observations is that, up to 2022 celebrity feminism was depoliticised and framed within the context of consumer culture, broadly in line with neoliberal feminism patterns (Rottenberg 2018). This appropriation of feminism, which favours self-empowerment via personal choice and consumption over collective struggle for systemic societal change, was extremely convenient for the regime, as it turned women into 'the ultimate neoliberal subjects in Russia and paradigmatic citizens' (Cassiday 2023, 130).

By adopting this standpoint, our approach makes a vital contribution to Russian feminist studies. Until recently, Russian feminism has been predominantly associated with grassroots activism, academic gender studies projects, the (political) art scene, or NGOs (Sperling 1999; Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009; Solovey 2022) built around an opposition to Russia's increasingly conservative political regime. Scholarship focusing on these aspects of Russian feminism has comprehensively detailed the ways in which the Russian feminist movement has adapted

to its changing political context, contributing to knowledge on grassroots feminist practices and agendas within authoritarianism. The performative and spectacular nature of feminist activism aimed at gaining media visibility and public attention (Perheentupa 2022; Zhaivoronok 2025b) is particularly informative for our study.

But whilst previous works analyse the media's role in shaping contemporary feminist protest action in Russia (Rossman 2021; Perheentupa, 2022; Solovey, 2022; Yangeldina 2023), they tend to leave out the influence of globally circulating popular forms of feminism on collective feminist identity building and feminist mobilisation. This book fills this lacuna by focusing on how Russian feminism has become noticeably popularised, and which feminist discourses have been mainstreamed via a range of online media and cultural formats accessible to broader users and audiences.

Russia's media and legislative context

Finally, we briefly turn to the Russian mediascape. A wide range of previous scholarship has produced a nuanced understanding of Russia's mass media (Zassoursky 2004; Koltsova 2006; Mickiewicz 2008; Roudakova 2017) and their reception (e.g., Beumers et al. 2009). Despite pronounced technological changes affecting media industries and high levels of internet penetration, Russian media have largely remained a two-tier, dichotomous media system 'where some outlets, notably national TV, [are] very tightly controlled, while others, including the Internet, [are] allowed a substantial degree of freedom' (Dunn 2014, 1425). Importantly, growing access to various digital media platforms (Gorham, Lunde, and Paulsen 2014) and new media formats (vlogs, hashtag campaigns, etc.), which, as we assert, have increased the public visibility of feminism, has first and foremost engaged a specific demographic group of younger-generation professionals in urban areas (Levada Centre 2019).

However, as we show in this book, Russia's mediascape does not constitute a straightforward case in which a range of different expressions of feminist ideas can simply trickle through to Russian audiences exposed to (global) popular culture and commodity capitalism (Ratilainen 2021).

Specifically, a pronounced politicisation of Russia's digital sphere during the first decade of the new millennium was curtailed after mass protests in 2011–2013 following the disputed Duma elections and Putin's third re-election as president, in 2011 and 2012 respectively. The establishment's increased control over digital communication (Denisova 2017) went hand in hand with an expansion of regional online media. The 'permitted' hybrid media formats oftentimes creatively brought together art projects, entertainment/lifestyle content informed by celebrity culture, and some political content within the neoliberal logic of the digital economy (Ratilainen 2018; 2019). In this book we show how this constrained, networked hybrid sphere created a specific context for mediating feminism(s).

To account for the legal context within which popular feminist narratives have developed, we trace a sequence of legal changes pertaining to body politics, freedom of expression, and media regulation. In part, these legal changes informed the timeframe of our analysis. They include the so-called 'foreign agent'

law introduced in 2012[5] and 'gay propaganda' laws (2013 and 2022) which became part of a wider framework of curtailing freedom of expression in Russia. The first of these 'gay propaganda' laws – 'For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values'[6] passed at the Federal level in 2013 – marked a shift in state ideology towards neoconservatism (Miazhevich 2022b), leading, among other things, to an increase in human rights violations in Russia (Muravieva 2014; Kondakov 2019; Edenborg 2020). The subsequent amendment of the law in 2022 bans all public information about LGBTQI+ issues or any activities carried out in support of LGBTQI+. The ban on gender re/affirming surgery in 2022 constitutes an additional indicator of the state's strategy to employ biopolitics as part of its ideological control.

Other notable areas of growing conservatism include the modification of domestic violence legislation. In 2017, the decriminalisation of some forms of domestic violence led to a weakening in legal protection against domestic abuse (Reuters 2021). Further infringements of civil freedoms and rights includes the proposal to recognise radical feminist and 'child-free' advocacy groups as 'extremist' ones (Novaya Gazeta Europe 2024). These legislative changes are significant for society at large, and for women's rights in particular.

The final aspect of biopolitics regulation that has arisen in the post-2022 context touches on the right to legally seek abortion. Rather than banning abortion, the state 'actively discourages' women (Shevchenko, 2023) via measures such as restricting abortion drugs, limiting private clinics' provision of abortion, and forcing state clinics to talk women into keeping their pregnancy or to purposely delay the procedure. Since 2023, it is illegal in two Russian administrative regions (Mordovia and Tver') to 'coerce' women into abortions. Russian Orthodox priests condemn abortions and call for women to require mandatory consent from their husband before ending a pregnancy. For now, anti-abortion measures are not uniform at the federal level, but their diverse nature, scale, and speed of introduction – as well as lavish state funding for grassroots anti-abortion groups – are remarkable and indicative of increasingly centralised control over women's reproductive rights.

The second set of laws important for our analysis deals with media regulation. As in the above-mentioned case of pregnancy termination, where the state employs a hybrid form of regulation, its media controls also encompass both direct and indirect measures. It has been established that one of the defining features of Russia's authoritarian regime is the state's adaptive and strategic approach to media control (Treisman and Guriev 2021; Miazhevich 2022a; Hutchings et al. 2024).[7] Despite a gradual tightening of media regulation in the 2010s (Bodrunova and Litvinenko 2013; Lehtisaari and Miazhevich 2019), manifestations of alternative voices used to be present in both state-controlled traditional media (Hutchings and Tolz 2015) and the online sphere (Miazhevich 2022a). Over time, Russian authorities have introduced various measures to bring the most important high-circulation outlets under its political control, while strategically allowing some isolated pockets of relative media freedom to exist, which are mainly online and include information sharing on global social media platforms (Hutchings et al. 2024; Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2020). As Hutchings et al. (2024, 42–43) argue, tolerance by Russian authorities 'of some oppositional media that […] questioned

the very nature of Putin's regime served the Kremlin's greater need to maintain a façade of staged pluralism.'

Predictably, state information management has intensified since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when a set of new measures was introduced. Within the first weeks of the invasion, Russian authorities forced major oppositional media outlets to close down (such as the Nobel Prize-winning newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* and partly state-funded radio station *Ekho Moskvy*), imposed war censorship laws (e.g., mentioning of the word 'war' in the media would inflict a lengthy 15-year prison sentence), and banned popular Western social media sites (Facebook and Instagram). Overall, stricter rules on acceptable imagery and terminology meant more cautious reporting, resulting in mass migration of independent journalists from Russia to other countries (Rodina and Dovbysh 2025) and of non-political content producers from Meta-owned social media to other platforms as well. Numbers of Telegram users rose dramatically and it has become the main site for alternative media and communication about the war in Russian language (Epifanova 2025). YouTube streaming was less affected and the platform's presence in Russia continued without many major alterations until 2024, although Russian users were banned from monetising their YouTube activities as part of Western sanctions.[8] This increased political oppression and media control forced celebrity figures to tone down or re-direct their participation in political advocacy on various matters. In other words, the post-2022 environment led to a rapid 'reformatting' of traditional and social media structures and everyday agendas, including around feminist issues.

Notes on methodology and data collection

This book adopts a critical feminist, interdisciplinary, and collaborative methodological approach to exploring entanglements of feminism, celebrity culture, and media in contemporary Russia. Our methodology is grounded in dialogue between multiple academic fields, including feminist theory, media studies, Russian and post-Soviet studies, gender studies, sociology, and cultural studies. We do not treat these disciplines as discrete, but rather as overlapping and 'intra-acting' (Barad 2003) terrains that inform and sometimes challenge each other. This interdisciplinary foundation allows us to approach our subject matter from diverse angles, enabling us to remain attentive to the original complexities of various expressions of mediated feminisms in Russia.

Our research project collected a diverse set of empirical materials, including media archives of relevant data, semi-structured interviews with activists from FAR and media professionals working with *Wonderzine*, as well as netnographic observations. Using multimodal discourse analysis (Ledin and Machin 2018), we moved from close readings of media content and YouTube videos to reflexive thematic interview analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013), netnography (Kozinets 2019), and analysis of digital archives (Carbajal and Caswell 2021). The project thus employed a multimethod approach designed to capture the heterogeneity of feminist media actors and their practices in the Russophone media sphere.

Interviews with FAR members provided us with rich data and in-depth insights into activists' lived experiences and personal feminist trajectories, their patterns of

media consumption, and the effect of a 'hybrid media system' (Chadwick 2017) on feminist organising, tactical repertoire, and strategic thinking. In turn, interviews with *Wonderzine*'s media professionals allowed us to gain a more nuanced understanding of how professional media outlets appropriate feminism as part of their brand identities. Crucially, conducting interviews with individuals from diverse backgrounds, professional identities, and different positionalities revealed the plurality of ways in which feminisms are understood and, perhaps more importantly, practiced at both micro- (individual) and meso- (outlets, organisations) levels of contemporary Russian society, while being overdetermined by broader macro-contexts of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, ubiquitous ICTs, and the profound crisis caused by the war with Ukraine. Conversations with our research participants foregrounded our understanding of the dynamics, effects and affects, evolving practices, tensions, and contradictions that shape activities of celebrities, feminist activists, and media professionals within the hybrid media system of contemporary Russia.

Using netnography (Kozinets 2019) enabled us to observe everyday interactions in online feminist communities, celebrities' performances on social media platforms, and digital campaigns (see Chapters two to six). Our insights into key celebrities' cultural production are supplemented by an overview of their long-term professional career trajectories, public pronouncements, including those made in interviews, and other mediated traces (experts' opinions/audience reception). Our long-term observation traced how feminist discourses are articulated, contested, and reconfigured in digital spaces, paying particular attention to their affective, visual, and rhetorical dimensions. Multimodal discourse analysis further allowed us to examine the interplay of text, image, sound, and design in feminist media artefacts (see Chapters three and five). This method was particularly useful for analysing YouTube videos and Instagram posts, where meaning is produced through a constellation of 'technosemiotic' tools (Rojas 2008). Digital archiving and media monitoring helped us trace temporal dynamics of feminist media practices, including how certain narratives gain or lose visibility over time, and how feminist actors respond to shifting political and media landscapes.

A key feature of our methodological approach is the dialogical relationship between empirical data and theoretical frameworks, drawing from 'grounded theory' (e.g., Galeaet et al. 2025). In other words, we aimed to avoid imposing prefigured concepts onto our material, instead intending to recalibrate and renegotiate (predominantly Western-centric) theories in dialogue with perspectives provided by our research participants and insights generated through our other methodologies. We are convinced that this generated a more nuanced and context-specific understanding of concepts such as neoliberal feminism (Chapter six), postfeminism and celebrity capital (Chapters three to four), and intersectionality (Chapter five). Moreover, building on our empirical insights, we coin here the new concept of *FME* (Chapter seven).

The research team behind this book consists of four scholars with diverse academic and personal trajectories. We represent different national contexts and brought varying degrees of proximity to Russian-speaking feminist movements into the research. Some of us have been directly involved in feminist activism, while others approached the field as critical observers or allies. This diversity

has been a source of both richness and productive tension in our collaborative work. Our analysis and writing often included multiple rounds of collective in-person discussions, as well as constant exchanges of comments, and other forms of feedback. We discussed and reviewed each data set and chapter together. These discussions were not merely procedural but epistemologically significant: they enabled us to surface and negotiate our assumptions, biases, and interpretive frameworks. In this sense, our methodology is not only interdisciplinary but also collaborative and co-constructed. Following Donna Haraway (1988, 1994), we can say that our individual partial knowledges are interwoven in this book, as in a cat's cradle game, into a form of feminist objectivity that is not transcendent but rooted in intersections of multiple situated perspectives. This form of knowledge production allowed us to be attentive to the complexity of empirical realities, foreground emerging differences and contradictions, and to remain open to the unexpected insights we garnered at all stages of data collection, analysis, and writing.

On interviews and ethics

We conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews (McIntosh and Morse 2015) with FAR activists. During the first round (September 2022 to March 2023), we spoke with 16 activists, and in the second round (February to March 2024) we re-engaged with six of those activists. We also conducted four interviews with journalists and editors from *Wonderzine* (May to June 2024). All interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom. To recruit research participants from FAR, we initially utilised our personal networks to reach out to activists. Then, we employed snowball sampling, asking those activists who had got in touch with us to spread the message to others. Media professionals from *Wonderzine* were also recruited through a combination of personal contacts and snowball sampling. Each interview lasted between 30 and 160 minutes, averaging about 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically in Atlas.ti.

Given the political sensitivity of feminism in Russia, we approached our research with a strong ethical commitment to anonymity, consent, and care. The identities of all research participants are pseudonymised throughout all our publications. Quotes from interviews appear as English translations rather than as in the original language, so as to make them less identifiable. Certain quotes from FAR activists which actually belong to one person in the text are attributed to different identities to increase anonymity.[9] Due to safety concerns, we did not ask our research participants to sign consent forms. Instead, oral consent for participation was obtained and recorded from everyone. At the beginning of the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of our study, along with the ways data would be stored and used. Participants also had the opportunity to withdraw consent for up to two weeks after their interviews were completed though no one opted for this. Participants were informed that they were free to stop interviews at any moment, to answer only questions they wanted to answer, and only to the extent that they felt comfortable and safe. Thus, our methodological choices were guided by a desire to minimise harm and respect the agency of our participants.

Chapter outline

The timeline of our analysis spans over a decade, marking the rapid growth of feminism's visibility in Russian media spaces (2012–2022), leading to the discussion on FAR (2022–2024). Cases were selected based on the authors' in-depth knowledge of the region and extensive systematic digital Russian media monitoring. They reflect feminism's mediation between 2012 and 2022, including the appropriation of feminist ideas and concerns 'outside' of feminist activist and academic circles via hashtag campaigns (Chapter two), celebrity engagements (Chapters three to five), influencer culture and its attempts to popularise feminist discourses (Chapter four), and lifestyle media's approaches to mediated feminism (Chapter six). An in-depth analysis of key features of the feminist media ecology (FME) prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 then informs our insights into the FAR movement (Chapters seven and eight) grounded in our unique media and interview data obtained from activists.

The book begins with an *Introduction* (current chapter), which provides a theoretical consideration of celebrity feminism in Russia, clarifies the rationale behind this study and the adopted methodology, and posits the research questions.

Chapter two starts the sequence of thematic case studies. It focuses on feminist hashtag activism in Russia between 2016 and 2020 and its overlap with celebrity cultures. Through an analysis of hashtags, the chapter demonstrates a steady presence of feminism in Russian media, highlighting the intersection between global (Delap 2020) and Russian feminisms. The chapter exposes some points of rupture and/or resonance with global information campaigns, and further shows that feminist hashtags were utilised by a range of actors – from human rights activists to social media influencers to celebrities – for multiple goals. These hashtags expanded feminist grammar and vocabulary relating to sexual harassment, femicide, gendered violence, and body positivity. Using Banet-Weiser's 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020) and her insights into the reactive dynamic between 'networked misogyny' and expressions of popular feminism, the chapter clarifies the nature of misogynist backlashes in Russia, which tend to be amplified by conservative state media and high-profile public figures. Drawing on our longitudinal approach, the analysis uses feminist hashtags as a lens through which to argue for the gradual formation of a feminist media ecology, and provides the background for the subsequent chapters dealing with specific cases of Russian female celebrities' engagement with feminism.

Drawing on elements of our multisited digital ethnography and multimodal discourse analysis, *Chapter three* explores Russian journalist and socialite Ksenia Sobchak's communication strategies regarding her celebrity feminist stance. This chapter foregrounds the role of a high-profile female celebrity as a mediator of public views on feminism. Sobchak represents a distinctive combination of a neoliberal celebrity female *entrepreneur* with an occasional re-branding as a *female politician*, who strives to balance incompatible views and adopt numerous personas, including a feminist, a patriot, a mother, a journalist, and a female politician, cherry-picking from Western liberal ideas. By engaging in either direct or subversive tactics and using various digital platform affordances, this high-profile Russian

female celebrity figure mediates collective public views on various topics, ranging from female agency to patriotic citizenship, within a highly commercialised contemporary Russian celebrity culture.

Chapter four, in turn, explores the mediation of feminist discourses through a self-professed feminist celebrity figure who has worked her way into media visibility predominantly through the domain of micro-celebrity, i.e., by sharing content and engaging with audiences on her personal social media accounts (e.g., Marwick 2016). The media data in this chapter originates from a popular YouTube channel, 'Tender Editor', (*Nezhnyi redaktor*) hosted by young-generation lifestyle journalist Tatiana Mingalimova. We consider her YouTube output as one of the most prominent cases of pre-2022 feminist influencer culture, through which an interconnected discursive network between celebrity and feminist actors and topics was formed, thus contributing to the feminist media ecology.

Chapter five focuses on mediated discourses of intersectional feminism in Russia through the case of Manizha – a singer and human rights advocate of Tajik origin. While Manizha's participation in the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest with the song 'Russian Woman' amplified her international popularity, in Russia, it triggered a racist and misogynist backlash. Manizha's multi-platform media presence sheds light on both feminist meso-celebrities' positionalities and dilemmas of intersectional sensibility in contemporary Russia, which in this example draws on the conflicted appropriation of the Soviet framework of a 'Friendship of Peoples'. Manizha's case also illuminates the reactive media logic of Russian mediated feminism, because some of the feminist discourses emerged as a response to the misogynistic backlash from the public.

Chapter six utilises the notion of the 'neoliberalisation of feminism' to explore the production practices of, and audience responses to, *Wonderzine* – an online lifestyle magazine. Relying on three data sets – interviews with journalists, its website archive, and netnographic observations – the chapter claims that *Wonderzine* constitutes an example of a contingent alliance between feminist forces and market incentives, which allowed it to engage with feminist topics without being perceived as politically dangerous or subversive by the general public. Simultaneously, the discussion exposes a set of contradictions that are inherent in the production processes of this feminist -identifying media outlet and meaning -making related to the complex nature of feminism(s) in the contemporary Russian context.

Chapter seven, informed by an exploratory study of FAR's mediated activism, outlines the concept of a feminist media ecology. Based on 22 semi-structured interviews with activists from FAR, this chapter traces the connection between the pre-2022 development of mediated feminisms in Russia and the post-2022 feminist anti-war mobilisation. It argues that this mobilisation was made possible by the previous development and public visibility of new feminist discourses and media genres, which rendered feminism more relatable and accessible across diverse audiences. The chapter highlights how the feminist identities of our respondents were shaped not only by grassroots DIY feminist media, but also by celebrities, influencers, and neoliberal media platforms explored in earlier chapters. Building on this observation, we argue that a sustainable and effective feminist media ecology does not rely on any single media form, genre, figure, or discourse. Rather,

it depends on the coexistence and cross-fertilisation of diverse media practices and actors.

Following this analysis, *Chapter eight* scrutinises the complex relations between digital media culture and feminist mobilisation. It probes further into tensions and challenges such as the impact of influencer culture and the attention economy on grassroots feminist projects, and broader contradictions between the logic of media and the logic of grassroots politics. It also reveals how this relationship has been made even more complex by authoritarianism, the military crisis in Ukraine, and the subsequent politically-driven relocation of activists to outside of Russia.

The *Conclusion* brings together our key findings together – informed by the polyphony of data ranging from multimodal digital data to interviews with various actors – to highlight the complexity of Russian feminism(s). These findings draw on the changing role of media(ted) celebrity in Russia amid the ongoing military conflict and the country's growing authoritarianism. This discussion is placed within a feminist media ecology framework. Finally, the conclusion outlines future opportunities for research and draws parallels with comparable feminist movements across the globe.

Notes

1 The idiosyncrasy of Russian celebrity culture emerges from a complex conjuncture in which neoliberal logics are hybridised with an authoritarian centralisation of power, the proliferation of digital cultures intersects with borrowings from Soviet heritage, and a queer renaissance in pop culture unfolds amid an officially sanctioned turn toward neoconservative politics (Miazhevich 2025a; 2022a; Engström 2021; Kalinina and Menke 2016; Goscilo and Strukov 2010; Heller 2007).

2 This is in direct contrast to other (Western) contexts where political leaders publicly endorse feminism, as US Presidential candidate Hilary Clinton did during her campaign in 2016, or celebrities making an appeal for gender equality at a public diplomacy forum, like Emma Watson's speech at the launch of the UN #HeForShe campaign (cf., Rottenberg 2018).

3 Mediation here is utilised in its conventional understanding in media studies (Jenkins et al. 2016; Papacharissi 2011) rather than understanding mediation as 'negotiation.'

4 The Aachen Peace Prize was first awarded in 1988 and it is awarded each year on September 1 to national and international activists. The other joint winner in 2023 was the Human Rights Defenders Fund (Israel).

5 The Russian 'foreign agent' law, first enacted in 2012 (Daucé 2015), requires any individual or organisation receiving any form of support from outside Russia or deemed to be under foreign influence to register as a 'foreign agent.' The law was expanded to include the media in 2017 (Laine and Silvan 2021) and 'foreign influence' in 2022.

6 This 2013 legislative change was done under the auspices of protecting 'traditional values.' Despite its continuous use by the media and legal system, 'traditional values' remains an obscure category. As Muravieva states (2014), 'traditionalism' is defined and understood as being in opposition to the 'non-traditional' (Muravieva 2014). Constitutional Court judgment N 24-П, 2014 understands 'non-traditional' as anything that deviates from a nuclear family and procreation.

7 For instance, in *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (2021) Daniel Treisman and Sergei Guriev claim that the classic 20th-century form of

dictatorship based on fear and repression have been replaced by new types of regimes that are closely linked to their media management approaches. Guriev's subsequent revision of spin dictatorship can be found here, https://democracyparadox.com/2023/07/25/sergei-guriev-revisits-spin-dictators/

8 YouTube usage was first slowed in July, and then in December 2024, leading to a decrease in internet traffic by almost 43 per cent before the throttling began (Epifanova 2025). Blocking YouTube completely is not currently viable as it forms a vital part of the 'digital ecosystem', including maps, cloud storage, and Android – 'the dominant mobile operating system in Russia' (Epifanova 2025).

9 On 'ethical fabrication', see Markham (2012); on the use of composite characters in ethnographic research, see Morris (2025, 8).

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2 Popularisation of feminism through hashtag campaigns 2016–2020

Saara Ratilainen, Galina Miazhevich, Daniil Zhaivoronok, and Eeva Kuikka

Introduction

Feminist hashtag campaigns play a significant role in popularising feminism around the world. While viral hashtag campaigns demonstrate feminist collective action across digital media spaces, they also have the potential to reach out to and engage non-activist media users, and make feminist claims and vocabulary known to wider publics. Rosemary Clark places hashtag feminism in a continuum with the discursive work of earlier generations of feminists, discussing them as 'feminist conversation-expansion tactics that politicise personal experiences with all forms of patriarchy' (2014, 1109). She analyses feminist hashtags within the broader framework of feminist discursive activism that is 'directed at promoting new grammars, new social paradigms, through which individuals, collectives, and institutions interpret social circumstances and devise responses to them' (Young 1997, 3 cited in Clark 2016, 791). In short, feminist hashtag activism is collective online action formed out of expressions of personal experiences of gender injustice. Bennet and Segerberg (2013) call this type of activism *connective action*, when 'personal action frames', i.e., 'easily personalised ideas' 'not requiring an adoption of a collective identity' are connected together via digital communication and online networks.

A number of scholars of feminist online activism have established that sharing personal experiences of gendered injustice takes place in intimate publics, which 'provide the feeling of immediacy and solidarity by establishing in the public sphere an affective register of belonging to inhabit when there are few adequate normative institutions to fall back on, rest in, or return to' (Berlant 2011, 226). For instance, Carol Harrington (2018) has examined online conversations between survivors of sexual violence, and argues that feminist intimate publics provide spaces where women can validate their experiences outside the heteropatriarchal (discursive) norm, and can do this in the public space of the internet which is elsewhere known to be hostile to women and feminism (see Jane 2016).

In contemporary media-saturated societies feminist discursive activism through hashtags has proved to have the capacity to trigger socio-political change. To date, perhaps the most influential feminist hashtag, #MeToo, has reverberated widely across the globe since October 2017, breaking persisting cultural silences around

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sexual abuse as a widespread practice embedded in structures of power (Pereira et al. forthcoming). The hashtag was originally created in 2006 by social worker and human rights advocate Tarana Burke, to support sexual abuse survivors from African American communities (e.g., Dey and Mendes 2021, 204). #MeToo went viral only after actress Alyssa Milano tweeted it as a response to the copious allegations of sexual abuse and rape against film mogul Harvey Weinstein that were exposed by a group of investigative journalists. Within a day half a million internet users around the world joined in sharing the hashtag and personal stories of sexual violence (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir 2021, 1). This chain of events unleashed a wave of more localised #MeToo movements demanding an end to gendered violence and sexual abuse via policy reforms (Lindquist and Lindgren 2023; Dey and Mendes 2021). Numerous case studies have established that, while the Hollywood engagement with #MeToo sparked a global movement and impacted public discourse on gendered violence in a number of countries, it also put an emphasis on the voices of elite and celebrity women and marginalised the voices of less privileged groups, such as ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities (Nanditha 2021).

In addition to deepening marginalisation, scholars have recognised misogynist hijacking and trolling, commodification, and decontextualisation to be among the most urgent risks and limitations of hashtag feminism (Dadas 2017; Banet-Weiser 2018; Chidgey 2021). Whereas these issues can be seen as deriving from the universally acknowledged handicaps of global online economies and thus concern most countries with high access rates to online communication, researchers studying hashtag feminism in the context of illiberal and authoritarian regimes have to tackle the additional limitations imposed on online feminist activism by their high degree of state control and patriarchal domination of media communication (Tafakori 2021, 50). However, and similarly to many other authoritarian countries with conservative political regimes (Liu 2023), feminist hashtag campaigning on Russian-language digital platforms still managed to gain traction and spark debates about various issues of gender injustice until recently. In fact, in the decade prior to Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, hashtag activism was one of the few remaining ways that enabled human rights activists, advocates, and other feminist-friendly media users to voice feminist claims in public and disseminate expressions of feminist solidarity.

War censorship and intensified attacks against feminism by the political elites during Russia's war on Ukraine have suppressed the most visible and popular forms of online feminist engagement from broader media circulation. Various hashtag campaigns, however, played an important role in making feminism popular in Russia during the preceding decade, contributing significantly to the growing presence of feminism in Russia's public sphere and cementing some significant feminist ideas and conceptions as part of media discourse. Moreover, they provided Russian media users with the language and concepts necessary to unpack patterns of domination, violence, and injustice. In this chapter, we therefore suggest that hashtag feminism made a vital contribution to mobilising later forms of feminist activism which followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see Chapters seven and eight).

A timeline approach to feminist hashtags

Every year between 2016 and 2020 significant numbers of Russian internet users and other actors, such as professional media and advocacy groups, engaged in one or several feminist hashtag campaigns against gendered violence, the objectification of women, femicide, and victim blaming. These campaigns included the transnationally and globally disseminated hashtags #яНеБоюсьСказати (#IAmNotAfraidToTell) in 2016 and #MeToo in 2017, as well as more locally circulating campaigns around shocking femicide cases: #этонеповодубить (#notareasontokill) in 2018 and #ЯНеХотелаУмирать (#IDidntWantToDie) in 2019; a commercial campaign with a hashtag #невкакиерамки (#outsideofthenorm) in 2019; and a feminist solidarity campaign #МыЗаЮлию (#WeAreYulia) in 2020, initiated in support of activist and artist Yulia Tsvetkova who was facing criminal charges at the time for sharing body positive art on social media.

Our discussion in this chapter brings together these campaigns and investigates them along a timeline, detecting and analysing their sequenced dynamic, connections, and the key feminist issues and concepts they introduced to Russian-speaking publics. This type of analysis of Russian hashtag feminism, we argue, will broaden our understanding of the role of media and discursive activism in feminist collective action in Russia. Our discussion is based on a literature review of previous research on the above-mentioned feminist hashtag campaigns, and monitoring of Russian-language media content across different platforms, including both news outlets and feature journalism-oriented online media. News items were collected via search engines Google and Yandex using as key words the Russian-language hashtags listed above.[1]

Previous studies have analysed these campaigns mostly as one-off cases, focusing on user and media engagement (Sedysheva 2021; Aripova and Johnson 2018), discursive strategies (Arbatskaya 2019), and cultural meanings (Rajagopalan 2019) of feminist online activism in Russia, as well as discussing them in the framework of anti-feminist backlash against public expressions of feminism in the post-Soviet media context (Arbatskaya 2019). These works also confirm that, in the Russian context, feminist hashtags have brought together intimate publics to discuss and share personal experiences of gendered violence, thereby expanding the scope of public expressions and discourses on the issue. Furthermore, in Russia, the feminist hashtag campaigns have provided a necessary network of moral support and solidarity, which is highlighted in the absence of political support for feminist initiatives and with the diminished state infrastructures of violence prevention and support for gendered violence survivors (cf., Hemment 2004; Johnsson and Saarinen 2013).

At the same time, anti-feminist and misogynist trolling against these campaigns has been severe. The reactive dynamic of online misogyny in relation to feminist hashtag campaigns within Russian-speaking online spaces corresponds with Sarah Banet-Weiser's definition of 'networked misogynism', as 'competing for visibility within the same mediated networks' as online expressions of feminism (2018, 4), as she goes on to argue, '[t]he technological affordances of social media have

authorised popular misogynistic expressions in a similar manner as popular feminism – the audience is wider, the circulation happens on many interconnected networks with relative ease, and the broader cultural political context […] endorses an aggressive, defensive popular misogyny' (2018, 32). Moreover, online misogyny in the Russian media context is networked with culturally normalised misogynist discourses and representations in professional and mainstream media (Rajagopalan 2019).

In the context of Russian media, the feminist counter-frames coming from the domain of hashtag activism can, thus, be seen as transgressing the normative boundaries of dominant gender discourse as well as challenging the state gender politics based on 'traditional values.' At the same time, as we will highlight in the following sections, hashtag campaigns have contributed to popularising feminism in Russia. They brought broad visibility to several feminist issues, ideas, and 'grammars', and made Russian mainstream media platforms as well as grassroots users engage with women's rights issues.

Transnational and global campaigns #ЯНеБоюсьСказати and #МеТоо

The hallmark feminist hashtag campaign of the post-Soviet internet is #ЯНеБоюсьСказати. It is a Ukrainian campaign, but it had a subsequent effect in Russia, which we are looking at here.[2] #ЯНеБоюсьСказати coincided with the Russo-Ukrainian military crisis and intensifying polarisation of politics in the online sphere, including gender politics.[3] On July 5, 2016, Ukrainian human rights activist Anastasiia Mel'nichenko launched the hashtag #ЯНеБоюсьСказати on her personal Facebook profile, accompanied with a text encouraging women to speak up about sexual violence:

> I want us women to talk today. To talk about violence that the majority us have experienced. I don't want us to make excuses such as 'I was walking in the middle of the day in my sportswear, and I was still attacked.' Because we don't have to make excuses. The aggressor is always the one to blame.

Further, Mel'nichenko described several incidents of sexual harassment and violence she had experienced throughout her life, beginning in early childhood. Mel'nichenko later recounted in a 'monologue' published by the Russian-language oppositional news outlet *Meduza* (Skibitskaia 2016) that, 'I communicate with women every day and I know how extensive the widespread phenomena of sexual harassment and violence are.' She explained that her campaign was against the objectification of women in general, the 'treatment of women as sexual objects' and emphasised that objectifying women is a deeply troubling shared cultural practice in both Russia and Ukraine:

> Russia and Ukraine share a specific cultural practice. People who encounter violence can seldom talk about it with specialists. Our cultural tradition doesn't allow it, or gender stereotypes, or something else. We have almost no limits to

> the objectification of women. It happens all the time through TV programmes and advertisements. (Skibitskaia 2016)

As an inherent part of this cultural logic, Mel'nichenko addresses the discourse of victim blaming, which deters those encountering sexual violence from seeking help.

Spreading quickly across the post-Soviet space,[4] this hashtag prompted thousands of social media users, women and men, to share their personal stories of sexual violence – many of them for the first time. Similarly to those of Mel'nichenko's, a lot of the posts described sexual harassment and abuse experienced in childhood or early adolescence, and addressed the social taboo around sexuality and lack of sexual education in post-Soviet societies.

According to a quantitative analysis by Tetiana Lokot (2018, 810), as many as 159 Ukrainian and Russian language media outlets covered the campaign between July and December 2016, and various societal actors ranging from researchers (e.g., Temkina 2016) to NGOs, and public figures commented on the hashtag and the discussion around it (Sedysheva 2021). Russian media across the board covered the campaign; conservative, state-aligned media framing it mostly negatively or in a confused, demeaning fashion, and oppositional and liberal-leaning channels more in line with the campaign's original agenda, but sometimes with an anti-feminist bias, for instance, by emphasising male victims of sexual violence (Sedysheva 2021, 309). Some commentators saw the campaign's explosive media visibility as an indication of a profound change taking place in Russian society and culture. For example, sociologist and gender studies scholar Anna Temkina wrote in an article for the *Russian BBC*, 'as shown by this campaign, both the language and legitimacy [of a discourse on gendered violence] have been created over a few days', continuing to say:

> A different society is being created, one with a rapid growth in awareness, which quite clearly does not want to live and is not obliged to live according to the laws of patriarchal power, violence, and silence. Young people no longer believe that traditional society provides them with privileges and security from gender discrimination, that only those who behave incorrectly become victims. (Temkina 2016)

Meduza, in turn, wrote that the 'main benefit' of the social media posts amassed under the hashtag was that they offered 'ready-to-use material for large-scale scholarly and societal work devoted to the theme of violence' (Meduza 2016).

In Russia, the impact of #ЯНеБоюсьСказати was mainly discursive, and it paved the way for many anti-violence hashtag campaigns that followed. At the same time, the political polarisation of the Russian info-sphere affected public perceptions of #ЯНеБоюсьСказати, as some commentators hijacked the hashtag to spread anti-Ukraine propaganda, claiming that the whole campaign was part of a larger conspiracy against Russia orchestrated by the West (Sedysheva 2021, 309–10).

Furthermore, there were stark local differences in the reception and societal impact of #ЯНеБоюсьСказати between Russia and Ukraine, where it reverberated outside media and discursive domains and generated street protests by feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations (Martsenyuk and Phillips 2020, 424). For example, Tamara Martsenyuk and Sarah D. Phillips (2020, 423) remark that Ukrainian universities became major sites where 'the stimulus [provided by #ЯНеБоюсьСказати] for pulling back the curtain of sexual violence' was felt most strongly and, as a result, one of the top universities, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, renewed its policy concerning sexual harassment, sexism, and gender discrimination prevention. The campaign also initiated an extensive discussion on women's status in the Ukrainian Army, which was at that time fighting against separatist groups and Russian troops in the Eastern parts of the country (Martsenyuk and Phillips 2020).

Roughly a year later, the global #MeToo hashtag did not resonate with the Russian online sphere to the same extent. Some outlets referred to it as the 'American' or 'Western' #яНеБоюсьСказати, and the media coverage was focused on the role of celebrities in the campaign.[5] Diverse figures from the Russian TV and film industry, such as propagandist Dmitry Kiselev, liberal-leaning talk show host Ivan Urgant, and Kremlin-minded film director Nikita Mihalkov, ridiculed #MeToo in public, and *Meduza* published interviews with Russian film industry professionals, who provided conflicting views of the campaign, and the case of Harvey Weinstein (Silaeva 2017).

According to Sedysheva (2021), Russian social media users' participation in the #MeToo movement was small in comparison with many other countries, due to the temporal proximity of the more relatable #яНеБоюсьСказати campaign, which was still ongoing when #MeToo went viral. The Ukrainian-language original hashtag as well as the parallel use of Ukrainian and Russian-language versions of it by both Ukrainian and Russian publics, made the campaign accessible to both Russian grassroots users and media.

However, in February to March 2018, probably the first high-profile case around sexual harassment emerged in Russia, with apparent connections to #MeToo and its impact in many other countries.[6] Three female journalists accused Deputy Leonid Slutskii from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) of sexual harassment while working at the State Duma. One of them provided an audio recording from an interview with Slutskii as evidence. As there is no law to protect individuals against sexual harassment in Russia, the journalists took Slutskii's misconduct to the State Duma's Ethical Commission, but the Commission's representatives declared in their closing statement that they could not see any violation of the norm in Slutskii's behaviour. Instead, they labelled the media channels the female journalists worked for (*RTV1*, *Russian BBC*, and *TV Rain*) as 'Western media' and 'hostile media', thereby discrediting the case as being orchestrated by the West.

During the relatively short-lived media interest and social media hype around the case, however, a solidarity campaign emerged. A number of both state-supported and liberal media companies began a boycott, withdrawing their reporters from the parliamentary pool (see Ratilainen 2020). Despite the State Duma official body's decision not to acknowledge Slutskii's misconduct, and its refusal to take

any measures against him, some other reactions by Russian Deputies signalled that there were single voices among the Russian political elite challenging this official line. For example, the spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mariia Zakharova, who was also well-known to Western audiences as the Kremlin's publicist, spoke up in support of the journalists, and Deputy Oksana Pushkina made another attempt to push the Russian gender equality law, which has been in the making since 2003.

In sum, the hallmark transnational post-Soviet feminist hashtag campaign #яНеБоюсьСказати and the Western-originated global #MeToo were confined mostly to the grassroots and liberal domains of the Russian media sphere, sporadically entering official state media circulation, where they were perceived negatively and instrumentalised for anti-Ukraine and anti-Western propaganda discourse. As political decision-making in Russia does not currently welcome gender equality initiatives to be made on the legal and institutional levels, as the Slutskii case shows, these hashtag campaigns should be seen as affecting the discursive practices of gender equality campaigning. As Sedysheva (2021, 304) put it, '[b]oth #MeToo and #яНеБоюсьСказать normalised women's protests against gendered violence in Russia, prompted widespread debates about this previously taboo topic, and brought the scale of violence against women into the broader forum of public speech.'

Popular misogyny and domestic hashtag campaigns

On those rare occasions when violence against women emerges into mainstream state media as a topic of discussion, it is framed as a scandal and scaled down to concern the private sphere. In other words, in the most visible Russian media outlets, violence against women is not addressed as a structural problem or a human rights issue requiring a legal reform. In general, Russian mainstream media sometimes even tends to carnivalise women's rights topics in a way that further reinforces the misogynist discourses and sexism prevailing in Russian society.

One such case was the media coverage of the rape of 17-year-old Diana Shurygina at a house party in 2017. Twenty-one-year-old Sergey Semenev was convicted by the Russian court to eight years in prison for Shurygina's rape, but was released after one year, in January 2018. Media scholar Sudha Rajagopalan (2019, 740), for example, remarks that the media hype around the case brought Shurygina 'hypervisibility' in the Russian media and a celebrity status. This case was also exceptional in that it was broadcast in a federal entertainment TV, as talk show host Andrei Malakhov took it as the topic in two episodes of his popular show 'Let them talk' (*Pust' govoriat*), in January and February 2017.

In the first episode, a confrontation was engineered between Shurygina and the mother and sister of convict Semenev, who was residing at the time in a penal colony. Host Malakhov aggressively interrogated Shurygina about the details of the rape, emphasising the amount of alcohol consumed by her and other young people at the party. The episode also included segments with celebrity guests and the studio audience shouting judgmental and mocking comments at Shurygina and

in support of Semenev, and asking additional questions in the style of a public tribunal. This publicity generated vigorous hate campaigns against Shurygina and her family on social media platforms and a meme (based on a clip from this episode) making fun of the rape was used in an international fast-food chain's advertising campaign (Rajagopalan 2019). In the second episode, in which Malakhov continued to investigate the case, Diana was confronted by Semenev through a video interview taken in the penal colony. At the end, Malakhov's representation of a young woman's rape reinforced an interpretation, heavily relying on the popular misogynist frame, of putting the behaviour of a woman (who in this case was only 17 years old) under close moral scrutiny and portraying the man as the victim of a 'manipulative' woman,[7] as Malakhov's opening lines to the first episode were, 'Today in our programme, [we'll discuss] why Sergei's intimacy with Diana destroyed his future and why his parents think that their son became a victim of a manipulative and opportunistic young woman.'

In the wake of Malakhov's, as well as other media outlets' sensationalist treatment of this case, grassroots solidarity campaigns arose to challenge such misogynist media narratives, and several social media accounts in support of Shurygina were founded. Shurygina herself published YouTube vlogs and community pages for rape survivors on VK, which is a Russian social media platform equivalent to Facebook. Thus, in the midst of flows of misogynist commentary and media representation in both mainstream media and social media platforms, grassroots online communication also started to work for Shurygina's benefit.

Rajagopalan discusses how online platforms enabled Shurygina to turn her individual tragedy into celebrity (Rajagopalan 2019). Rajagopalan further addresses Shurygina's social media personality as an example of postfeminist self-branding that meets the broader online audience's expectations of what female empowerment looks like. A postfeminist self-brand therefore helps to garner reactions and support from popular internet audiences. Interestingly, Rajagopalan also remarks that 'Shurygina [was] *not represented by activists*, but remains visible, vocal and agentic in the creation and perpetuation of a networked solidarity that claims to challenge rape culture' (2019, italics added), suggesting that online campaigning against misogynism and rape culture here happened entirely outside feminist activist networks. Overall, Shurygina's case is a vivid example of the ways in which Russian mainstream media exploited the topic of gendered violence that was being widely discussed in the grassroots online sphere at the time, turning it into a sensationalist spectacle, and engendering an outpouring of misogynistic trolling and hate on social media.

Malakhov's public treatment of rape was particularly chilling in light of the fact that, at the time of media coverage of Shurygina's case, there were also other news stories about extreme gendered violence and femicide circulating in the Russian media. Some of these were discussed in a similarly misogynistic way by professional media and in online comments, but they activated openly feminist hashtag campaigns, protesting against misogyny and victim blaming, and demanding legal changes.

One such case started to unfold in February 2018, when 19-year-old Artem Ishakov violently attacked, raped, and murdered 19-year-old Tatiana Strakhova in their shared apartment in Moscow. Ishakov then posted a detailed description of the crime on his personal VK page and took his own life. This tragic incident of femicide immediately became breaking news in which the news discourse, once again, relied on the popular logic of misogynistic victim blaming. The media focused on the personal relationships between the two, Ishakov's struggle with mental illness, Strakhova's indifference towards him, as well as Strakhova's social media accounts where she had shared semi-naked selfies, concluding that Strakhova had led a troubled lifestyle and provoked the 'disappointed in love' Ishakov to murder her. This victim-blaming logic was taken to extremes by the online public who commented on the case on various digital platforms, where some even went as far as to express delight over Strakhova's murder and posted their own fantasies of femicide (Arbatskaya 2019; Strakhovskaia 2018a).

A hashtag campaign, #этонеповодубить (#notareasontokill) emerged to combat this violently misogynistic victim-blaming discourse circulating across media platforms. It was started on Instagram by a Belarusian feminist influencer using the name '2day.4night.' The hashtag went viral within days, and this time a number of public feminists including artist Daria Serenko, and Anna Rivina, co-founder of the NGO 'No to violence' (*Nasiliiu net*) which provides legal aid to victims of domestic violence, as well as human rights organisations and feminist networks, such as women's NGO 'Sisters' (*Sestry*), and feminist online collective 'ONA' (SHE), participated in the campaign (Vol'ianova 2018; Blagova 2018). Many individual users joining the campaign shared self-portraits similar to Strakhova's photos, in which the media had found a reason for her murder. These eroticised self-depictions, combined with the feminist hashtag and texts commenting on Strakhova's murder from the point of view of women who related with the rape victim, formed an openly anti-patriarchal counter-frame to the mainstream media's victim-blaming narrative, emphasising 'women's right to control their body and image by themselves' (Arbatskaya 2019).

Elena Arbatskaya (2019) analysed #этонеповодубить as an example of discursive activism, combining different political uses of hashtags. According to Arbatskaya, the participants in this campaign used a diversity of discursive strategies to legitimise anti-patriarchal values and to delegitimise the dominant victim-blaming discourse. These strategies mirrored the content and style of the hostile online speech, emphasising affects such as fear and powerlessness in the face of the victim-blaming culture (Serenko 2018). Another strategy was to reclaim the obscene misogynistic vocabulary of those online commenters who addressed Strakhova as a 'slut' and praised Ishakov for killing her. The participants in the feminist hashtag campaign, in the style of the transnational SlutWalk movement (Carr 2018), declared themselves to be 'sluts' in solidarity with Strakhova and other women subjected to misogynistic attacks. Arbatskaya concludes that, in this campaign, the feminist attempts to change the victim-blaming culture also mixed with the postfeminist and neoliberal frame of individualist self-care, arguing that 'the political goal to change the social attitude to women was in some cases

displaced by the goal to have emotional support and reduce their stress' (2019, 17), which resonates with the global trend of postfeminism's entanglement with popular psychology industries (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015; Kolehmainen 2022). Arbatskaya also asserts that, in the end, the number of people participating in the hashtag campaign's level of engagement with feminist vocabulary or identification with the feminist movement was generally low. However, the term 'victim blaming' was widely introduced into public discourse, and some media outlets published critical assessments of victim-blaming discourses, explaining the term to their Russian-speaking audiences. Arbatskaya thus goes on to suggest that some members of the Russian online public 'became feminists' in the discursive process of the #этонеповодубить campaign, and that it advanced the process of normalising some feminist terms, such as 'victim blaming' as part of Russophone mainstream media discourse (Arbatskaya 2019).

Finally, another feminist hashtag campaign, #ЯНеХотелаУмирать (#IDidn'tWantToDie), was launched in July 2019 in support of victims of domestic violence and to lobby for a revision of the domestic violence law in Russia. This one differed from the previous hashtag movements in that it was a coordinated advocacy campaign initiated by two well-known Russian feminist figures – human rights activist Alena Popova and blogger Alexandra Mitroshina. By strategically combining feminist hashtag activism with influencer culture, #ЯНеХотелаУмирать introduced a series of portraits of twelve popular female social media influencers who had a following of two million or more. In their photos, these women with a high social media presence were wearing makeup that resembled injuries from being beaten, and had painted the hashtag #ЯНеХотелаУмирать onto their bodies or faces (Figure 2.1) (Oskolkova 2019). Thousands of social media users joined the campaign in the following weeks (McIntosh Sundstrom et al. 2022).

This campaign targeted a certain segment of the Russian online audience – young females interested in content produced by social media influencers. In comparison with the feminist hashtag campaigns of previous years, #ЯНеХотелаУмирать was thus a more strategic attempt to mobilise hashtag activism to push for change in the legislative sphere, as the hashtag was released together with an online petition demanding a new law on domestic violence. The petition was signed by 900,000 people in the following months (McIntosh Sundstrom et al. 2022, 1390).

#ЯНеХотелаУмирать was launched at a moment when domestic violence was widely being discussed in the Russian public sphere in relation to several highly visible news stories of severe domestic violence. In 2018 and 2019 the Russian media discussed the shocking cases of Margarita Gracheva, whose husband had chopped off both of her hands (Strakhovskaia 2018b; Volkova 2018), and Oksana Sadykova, who was killed in the hallway of her house by her husband in the presence of their eight-year-old child (Natsional'naia sluzhba novostei 2019). The news coverage also revealed that both Gracheva and Sadykova had turned to the police to report previous acts of domestic violence, without any response from the authorities. During this time, the high-profile trial of the Khachaturyan sisters was also ongoing. These three teenager sisters were charged with premeditated murder for stabbing their father to death, although they had reported him to the police

Figure 2.1 Alexandra Mitroshina's photo from the campaign #ЯНеХотелаУмирать advocating for a revised domestic violence law in Russia in 2019. Courtesy of Alena Popova.

themselves and confessed that they acted in self-defence against their father's abuse. Many Russians viewed the murder charge as an injustice, and protested on the streets in support of the Khachaturyan sisters (Liutykh 2019).

These and other shocking cases[8] had widely publicised the issue of domestic abuse, revealing the gaps in the Russian legal system when it came to protecting victims and defending their rights in court, as well as the indifferent attitudes of Russian local officials who failed to provide protection to victims of domestic violence. Moreover, several complaints regarding the Russian authorities' treatment of victims of domestic violence were brought to the attention of the European Court of Human Rights (Nelaeva et al. 2022). One of these (Volodina v. Russia) was resolved and the verdict was being widely discussed at the time when #ЯНеХотелаУмирать was launched (Nelaeva et al. 2022).

These incidents coincided with the preparation of the draft law on domestic violence. Initiator of the #ЯНеХотелаУмирать campaign Alena Popova, together

with a number of NGO representatives (e.g., advocate Mari Davtyan, co-founder of No to violence) as well as high-profile feminist and human rights activists, were in the legislative working group, and Popova used her media celebrity and that of the twelve other female social influencers participating in the campaign to raise public support for the draft law (see Nelaeva et al. 2022, 257; McIntosh Sundstrom et al. 2022, 1390). However, loud resistance from conservative actors and the Russian Orthodox Church 'derailed the bill', and 'significant provisions of the law introduced by the liberal forces' were gradually rejected (McIntosh Sundstrom et al. 2022, 1393; Nelaeva et al. 2022, 261).[9] However, as McIntosh Sundstrom et al. (2022, 1387) conclude, the anti-violence campaigns were successful in that they 'led to frequent public protest events attended by far more people than ever witnessed before on issues on gender equality in Russia.'

Mediation of feminist social media influencers and activists

The feminist anti-violence campaigns discussed above partly overlapped with a notorious media scandal in Russia around a feminism-inspired advertising campaign by the global sportswear company Reebok, which was a local adaptation of the global campaign #BeMoreHuman based on the idea of female empowerment through fitness.[10] Actress Gal Godot, known for her film role as Wonder Woman, was one of the celebrity faces in the original campaign that was copied and adapted to a number of local contexts and to more targeted audiences. The Russian campaign was launched in 2019 for online circulation only, and it introduced a series of 'online posters' with female athletes Izabel Magkoeva, Justyna Grachiki, and Anzhelika Piliaeva, all international champions in combat sports, and a Russified hashtag #невкакиерамки (#outsideofthenorm).[11] The scandal-causing component of the campaign, though, was a poster depicting journalist, blogger, and author of feminist Telegram channel 'Female Power' Zalina Marshenkulova, with an accompanying slogan proposing that women should rise up from under patriarchal oppression and 'sit on a man's face.'[12]

This Russian adaptation of 'femvertising', i.e., advertising drawing from the popular ideas of female empowerment and body positivity – which had become a key site of feminism's popularisation around the world (Varghese and Kumar 2022) – was met with such a huge outpouring of negative feedback from both Russian media and the grassroots internet that Rebook's Russian office decided to withdraw Marshenkulova's image from circulation, and the creative director in charge of the campaign resigned. Professionals in media and marketing commented, for example, that the advert was a 'failed attempt to engage with the feminist agenda' (Ponomareva 2019) and that 'something went wrong with localising a global advertising campaign into Russia' (Brandley 2019). However, most responses from both expert commentators and regular internet users, once again, took an openly anti-feminist and misogynist stance, and a lot of hateful comments were targeted directly towards Marshenkulova. At the same time, feminism was widely discussed, re/defined, and argued for and against across media platforms in the Russian information sphere (Ponomareva 2019). Therefore, this

advertising campaign and the ensuing scandal can be appraised as contributing to an increased media visibility of feminism across the mediascape, as it brought certain aspects of feminist discursive work, feminist advocacy, and terminology to the attention of the wider public.

What aspects of feminism did the Russian campaign cover, then? In fact, the localised Russian campaign can even be seen as taking a step further in engaging with feminism than its American counterpart. The original material of the #BeMoreHuman campaign is a typical representation of feminism's mainstreaming in the US context, portraying Godot as an example of female success achieved through hard work and 'not being afraid to fail.' It is a highly individualistic representation of female empowerment and, in a postfeminist fashion, it does not acknowledge a collective feminist struggle as the source of her empowerment. The Russian campaign video, in turn, directly and blatantly addresses harmful gender stereotypes and women's discrimination in sports. In her part, Marshenkulova goes on to question the overall sexism dominating Russian advertising, arguing that half of all advertising in Russia is 'absolutely sexist', and continues, 'woman is a decoration of a collective, of a war, decoration of tomatoes, or whatever.' She also argues that the 'second half' of advertising 'uses positive discrimination: ooh, girls are so cool, so weak, let's help them', and concludes, 'I don't like either of these approaches.' These observations point directly to the cultural and structural reasons behind gender stereotypes.[13]

This diversion from the original American expression of popular feminism was not accidental. Marshenkulova was invited by the local head of Reebok not only to act as the celebrity face of the campaign, but also to participate in designing the content. As Marshenkulova explained in her Telegram post responding to the backlash, it was her idea to change the original hashtag #BeMoreHuman into the more assertive #нивкакиерамки (#outsideofthenorm). Furthermore, the slogans on the online posters with her image ('Sit on a man's face' and 'When they say [that a man should] "carry [a woman] in their hands" I imagine they are carrying me to my grave') were taken from her previous social media posts (Marshenkulova 2019). In this way, it can be argued that the Russian campaign engaged more directly with feminist media activism, whereas the American campaign utilised a postfeminist sensibility as its primary frame of reference. At the same time, however, the Russian video is less progressive in its representation of gender, as it emphasises biological differences by referring to the notion that a 'feminine appearance' and 'sex appeal' are not lost when acquiring physical fitness, which the American campaign does not do.

The localisation was hence a conscious attempt to engage with a local feminist agenda on the global platform of 'femvertising.' It strived to challenge the overall sexist advertising culture in Russia and turn it into female sexual empowerment and dominance, by inviting women to 'sit on a man's face.' This multi-layered feminist play on cultural meanings did not properly communicate to the general public, as a lot of the online comments were wondering (perhaps false naïvely) how sex and sports are in any way mixed up with one another. A representation privileging

women in sex and allegedly objectifying men was furiously opposed by a segment of anti-feminist commentators (Ponomareva 2019).

Furthermore, the Russian campaign's focus on the sexual empowerment and bodily autonomy of women[14] aligns with another group of recent popular cultural representations of feminism and female empowerment that emphasises sexual empowerment in parallel with women's professional and economic empowerment (see Chapter three). In this way, with a feminist influencer as the co-author and lead celebrity face, the Reebok campaign adds another interesting layer to the overall discussion of the 'mediation of feminism' in Russian-speaking hybrid media space that intersects grassroots actors on the internet, influencer culture, and commercial platforms. This episode in particular might have attracted the segment of mass consumer public interested in global consumer brands to engage with feminism.

In 2019, another chain of events, which eventually brought nation-wide media visibility to feminist activism, started to evolve in the Russian Far East, the Khabarovsk region. Several charges for spreading 'propaganda on non-traditional sexual relations to minors' and distributing pornography on social media were pressed against the local artist and LGBTQI+ feminist and anti-militarist activist Yulia Tsvetkova. Charges on distributing pornography were instigated under criminal law, and the prosecutor demanded that Tsvetkova should be convicted to three and a half years in prison. During a police investigation in late 2019 and early 2020 Tsvetkova spent several months under house arrest. In 2022, she was listed as a foreign agent by the Russian Ministry of Justice. She was cleared of the charges by the local court in November 2022 and emigrated immediately after. In the following year, 2023, the court decision was dismissed, and Tsvetkova was ordered to be detained in absentia (OVD-Info n.y.).

In her hometown Komsomolsk-na-Amure Tsvetkova was a well-known activist and director of a local youth theatre. She had posted on social media in support of LGBTQI+ issues and shared body positive images challenging feminine beauty ideals and the social taboo around female bodies. Two such social media projects ended up under criminal investigation for pornography, namely, a VK page, 'Vagina Monologues', containing art works depicting female bodies by different artists, administrated by Tsvetkova, and a series of Tsvetkova's own body positive drawings of female bodies, entitled 'A woman is not a doll' (*Zhenshchina ne kukla*) (Vinnik 2022). The drawings were meant to empower young women against unrealistic beauty ideals dominant in the media and beauty industries, and included depictions of realistic nude female bodies, with captions such as 'Real women have fat', 'Real women menstruate', and 'Real women don't have ideal breasts.'

The Tsvetkova case is a good example of the shared interests of Russian conservative right-wing grassroots actors, the local administration, and state security structures used to suppress feminist and LGBTQI+ activism and intimidate individual activists. The police investigation of Tsvetkova's alleged violations was paralleled with harassment by homophobic and anti-feminist individuals towards Tsvetkova and her family, and during the investigation there was a lot of police pressure on Tsvetkova and people close to her (Vinnik 2022, 78–79; OVD-Info

n.y.). Katharina Wiedlack and Iain Zabolotny (2023, 82), for instance, discuss Tsvetkova's persecution as a case of a coordinated attempt by different-scale anti-feminist actors to suppress openly feminist-identified women's agency from the public (online) sphere, and to prevent them from using their voice to promote equality and social change.

At the same time, the Tsvetkova case brought a lot of media visibility to feminist activism, as it was covered widely in Russian – mainly liberal-leaning – media, which also publicised the international body positivity movement. Activists in Russia and internationally organised rallies and hashtag campaigns in support of Tsvetkova (e.g., #WeAreYulia). Within the Russian media sphere, one of the most extensive support campaigns, called 'Media strike in support of Yulia' (*media straik #zaIuliu*), took place on July 27, 2020. It is estimated that, in addition to activist networks, more than 50 professional media spread a purple banner across their online platforms as a visual sign of participation (Startseva and Sibirtseva 2020). The banner was specially designed for the campaign, and included a stylised picture of a female vagina as embedded in the Russian slogan as a statement of the absurdity of the criminal charges against Tsvetkova. During the most intensive phase of media campaigning, public figures and celebrities such as Ksenia Sobchak (see Chapter three), actress Renata Litvinova, and journalist Vladimir Pozner also performed to support her (Vinnik 2022).

In terms of the 'mediation of feminism', here again endorsed by the visibility of Russian high-profile celebrities, the Tsvetkova case brought discourses of female sexuality and body politics, as well as representations challenging the sexist double-standard inherent in cultural images of female bodies, to the attention of the wider public. Through the news coverage of Tsvetkova's case, the English language term 'body positivity' especially circulated widely across online news media including official outlets, although most of the coverage happened through liberal online media (e.g., Lenta.ru 2019). Moreover, both Tsvetkova herself and various human rights organisations and activist networks actively reached out to the media in the hope that media visibility would provide Tsvetkova and her family protection from state injustice (e.g., freetsvet.net). This particular short-term peak in feminism's media visibility, however, did not work out to her benefit. The overturning of the court decision to free Tsvetkova from criminal charges, and the prolonged trial speak for the fact that this media presence did not create enough pressure on the authorities, so she was eventually forced to leave the country for her safety and join the growing ranks of Russian activists-in-exile (cf., Henry and Plantan 2021).

The media's tendency to frame Tsvetkova's trial with feminist activism prompted even Tsvetkova herself to reflect on the role of 'mediated feminism' in her case. She concluded that, in retrospect, she saw little or no real value in the highly visible media narrative of feminist activists rallying in her support both on the streets and online, which, she argued, was disproportionally emphasised by the Russian liberal outlets in relation to some other support groups such as artists (Tsvetkova 2023). Similarly, she deemed celebrity endorsements as just a side-track of the short-term media hype during the early stages of her trial which should be regarded as part of the information loop between liberally-thinking Russians and media outlets (at

times joined by state-minded outlets and public figures), rather than a real act of voicing political grievances to the state to press for change.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated hashtag activism as one of the viable forms of feminist online activism in Russia, which contributed to the popularisation of feminist ideas and conceptions in the period before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It introduced a timeline approach to feminist hashtag activism by conducting a literature review and media survey of a sequence of the most visible feminist hashtags that gained prominence in the years 2016 and 2020. This approach enabled us to account for a continuation and accumulation of visibility between a variety of campaigns in which feminist hashtags were utilised by different actors for multiple goals, and to ascertain how online publics and the media responded to a variety of different feminist ideas and concepts, as well as instances of misogyny and gender injustice taking place in Russian society (cf., Hill 2016). Our review has also demonstrated that each feminist hashtag campaign was followed by a misogynistic backlash, which confirms the reactive dynamic between online feminism and misogyny (Banet-Weiser 2018) and that a side effect of feminist online activism is that it also ends up amplifying misogynist and sexist discourses across online media spaces, and creates tensions around feminism.

This chapter has highlighted that, although Russian feminist online culture is globally connected, the period of intensive use of feminist hashtags started from the locally-bound, transnational post-Soviet campaign #ЯНеБоюсьСказати (#IAmNotAfraidToTell), which was followed by a series of home-grown Russian campaigns responding to several domestic high-profile cases of femicide, gendered violence, and abuse. Russia, moreover, stands out as one of the few national contexts with highly developed and globally connected internet cultures and popular feminisms where #MeToo did not become influential. The reasons for this can be found in both local online feminism and the dominance of state propaganda discourses: the culturally and linguistically more relatable #ЯНеБоюсьСказати (#IAmNotAfraidToTell) overlapped with #MeToo, while anti-Western discourses quickly hijacked this American-born campaign in mainstream media and online spaces. This, however, did not prevent #MeToo from generating societal action and discussion around sexual harassment in the workplace.

Our timeline approach to feminist hashtags has also compellingly shown that sequentially organised hashtag campaigns generated a steady presence of feminism in Russian media and thereby paved the way for what we call *feminist media ecology* (see more, Chapter seven). They brought feminist grammars and vocabulary relating to sexual harassment, femicide, gendered violence, and body positivity into the Russian online public sphere. Feminist hashtags can therefore be regarded as having significantly contributed to the mediation of feminism in Russia in 2016–2020, which also coincided with increasing celebrity engagement with feminism. As discussed in detail in this chapter, some hashtag campaigns strategically drew from celebrity capital, combining it with the increased media capital in popular

feminism, which ultimately contributed to diffusing feminism across online spaces and to new audiences. On the other hand, converging celebrity culture with feminist hashtags also contributed to the commodification of feminism, as discussed through the case of Reebok's advertising campaign, which not only drew from the global commercial practice of femvertising, but was created as relying on Russian feminist online activism and journalism. Overall, this chapter has spotlighted the various ways celebrity culture overlapped with feminist hashtag campaigns. The next three chapters will continue this exploration by discussing other types of celebrity engagement with popular feminism.

In sum, the visible and influential presence of feminism in Russian media during the decade before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not limited to hashtag campaigns, although they were a significant component of the evolving feminist media ecology. Hashtag campaigns tapped into the lineage of gradually growing feminist media culture, having already started at the turn of the millennium with the first feminist online blogs, the first online mobilised feminist street protest, and the foundation of the first YouTube channels of feminist influencers-to-be, evolving through to the early 2010s when the growing field of liberal online lifestyle media were adopting popular feminist discourses (see Chapter six). All these together created a fertile soil for new types of entanglements between celebrity and feminism in Russia, alongside a simultaneously growing authoritarianism.

Notes

1 The search was made in Finland.
2 For a multi-faceted discussion of changing gender norms in Ukraine 2014–2023 and new feminist perspectives on Russia's war in Ukraine, see Shevtsova 2024.
3 Anti-gender advocacy culminated in the foundation of 'Male Reign' (*Muzhskoe Gosudarstvo*), an extremist far-right movement advocating for xenophobia, especially hate against women.
4 The campaign was also popular among the linguistic diaspora of post-Soviet countries, especially in the USA, Germany, and Israel (Martsenyuk and Phillips 2020, 410–411).
5 E.g., Kozachenko 2017.
6 For example, Sedysheva points out that '200 prominent men lost their jobs due to public allegations of sexual harassment in the wake of a *New York Times* exposé on the subject' (2021, 304).
7 See a discussion of the episode in Rajagopalan 2019.
8 Such as the murder of Anastasiia Eshchenko, a graduate student at St Petersburg University, who was killed and dismembered by her professor partner in 2019.
9 For a more detailed discussion of the draft law see Nelaeva et al. 2022.
10 https://campaignsoftheworld.com/digital/reebok-be-more-human-campaign/
11 A literal translation of the hashtag would be 'not inside any kind of frame.' For a detailed discussion of the Marshenkulova case as a Russian 'fashion scandal', see Vänskä and Gurova 2024, 83–89.
12 The Russian phrase *Peresiad s igly muzhskogo odobreniia na muzhskoe litso* is a play on words, referring to female sexual liberation and the history of patriarchal domination in Russia. It is nearly impossible to translate into other languages. Another way to explain

the meaning is that women should change their position in relation to men: instead of depending on their approval, it is better to sit on their faces.

13 Also, in her previous media appearances and social media posts, Marshenkulova has criticised the blatant sexism of Russian commercials, especially the popular practice of representing women as purchasable consumer items (which has clear connotations with prostitution) used in advertising slogans (Marshenkulova 2019).

14 Among other slogans in the campaign were, 'I approve of myself on a daily basis', 'My body, my business!', and 'Let me finish!'

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3 High-profile celebrity Ksenia Sobchak's 'illusive' appropriation of feminism

Saara Ratilainen, Galina Miazhevich, Daniil Zhaivoronok, and Eeva Kuikka

Introduction

The case in point is Ksenia Sobchak (b. 1981), a 43-year-old journalist who is the daughter of Anatolii Sobchak – the first democratically elected mayor of St. Petersburg[1], who died suddenly in 2000. Ksenia Sobchak (also known as the 'Russian Paris Hilton') is one of the key female celebrity figures in Russia. Ksenia – as a macro-celebrity[2] – was selected for our research due to her immense popularity, social status, transregional reach, and feminist positionality. Sobchak is active within several creative realms, including journalism and vlogging. She also performs cultural intermediation as a socialite. Due to her background and age, she can tap into slightly differing audiences, reaching out to both younger and more mature audiences. Moreover, Sobchak's case can be seen as being anchored in (post-)Soviet memory, as she still has a strong association with her late father's legacy.

An additional rationale for focusing here only on Ksenia Sobchak stems from our longitudinal monitoring of the online data, which confirms her significant social standing and currency (online media monitoring, Google analytics, rankings, etc.). This chapter excludes other (potentially relevant) figures such as the political analyst Ekaterina Schulmann, the journalist Ekaterina Gordeeva (see Chapter five), or the prominent singers Zemfira or Svetlana Loboda, as they lack comparable intergenerational appeal and also now reside outside of the country. These celebrities' substantial socio-cultural capital was not sufficient to prevent the state from silencing their anti-war positionality. Sobchak still lives in Russia and continues reporting from there, despite having briefly left the country at the start of the full-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine in February 2022.[3]

This chapter explores Sobchak's communication strategies and the public's perception of her feminist stance. As the Introduction provided an insight into Russia's socio-political context regarding feminism(s) since the 2010s, this chapter goes straight to the case in question. It claims how Sobchak, who skilfully employs multi-platform, multi-genre affordances, targets this mixed audience, articulates divergent standpoints, and exemplifies subversive mediation on various topics including feminist positionality. Her chameleon-like branding is evidenced by

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her career progression, as the chapter shows, by scrutinising Sobchak's media productions, her presidential campaign in 2018, and her post-2022 stance.

Is Sochak a feminist? To determine this, we explore her stance on feminism via several direct and indirect indicators. To start with, Sobchak has demonstrated her feminist positionality via her independence in her own personal and professional life, her adherence to gender equality[4], and a certain freedom from patriarchal structures. She is an independent woman who achieved success without the support of men (e.g., husbands), although she significantly capitalised on her father's socio-cultural capital. At the same time, she has also married twice and has a child from her first marriage to actor Maxim Vitorgan.

During her presidential campaign in 2018, Sobchak, who previously avoided making any clear-cut statements about feminism, held a one-person protest on March 8, International Women's Day, and appeared on the cover of *Vogue* in a T-shirt with the slogan, 'Girl power.' However, as the chapter reveals, Sobchak's engagement with feminism(s) is quite elusive, which is due in part to the Russian socio-cultural context of societal ambivalence towards feminism. As this chapter develops this argument, it also addresses the following questions: in what way is Sobchak different from other Russian female macro-celebrities? What communication strategies and transmedia branding does Sobchak employ? How can her self-(re)branding be conceptualised?

After providing an overview of Sobchak's career progression and her 'branding', the analysis below stems from our multisite digital ethnography (Caliandro 2018) and multimodal discourse analysis (Ledin and Machin 2018). Multimodality accounts for images, graphics, videos, posts, and public comments which contribute to semiotic meaning making and expose gaps and silences. Our systematic digital media tracing over a 12-year period (2012–2024) is supplemented with an overview of the long-term professional career trajectories of this celebrity. The key platforms are Sobchak's Instagram and YouTube channels.[5] This chapter surveys Sobchak's communication on YouTube (including a response to her critics, Careful, Sobchak! 2023a), her interviews (an interview with Vladimir Pozner, for the *NY Times* (Troianovski 2023), and with the rapper Morgenshtern)[6], and other mediated traces (such as experts' opinions referencing Sobchak, Google analytics of searches using her name, and mediated scandals). This dataset provides insights into intertextuality and interdiscursivity (and Sobchak's meta-mediation).

The case of Sobchak

Sobchak stands out from a vast array of Russian female celebrity figures for several reasons, which we will examine in turn. As a daughter of the mayor of St Petersburg, Ksenia Sobchak was able to tap into her late father's (Soviet) socio-cultural capital, such as gaining unique access to various elites, assets, and sources of information (e.g., high profile interviewees). Moreover, Sobchak has managed to convert her father's political standing into substantial financial capital.[7] The 'Sobchak' brand includes advertising, a restaurant, fashion, entertainment, and other businesses. Her professional career now spans 20 years, meaning that she can

claim an intergenerational appeal among various groups (for some, her consumption of high-end brands might be more relevant than her journalism).

In her multifaceted career, Sobchak has transitioned from a reality TV host in 2004 into a celebrity lifestyle influencer, a successful (media) entrepreneur, and an oppositional journalist (the TV *Rain* channel). In the 2000s, Sobchak's branding involved an objectification and commodification of (sexual) desire via her own reality show 'Blonde in Chocolate', and revealing self-imagery featured on the front pages of prominent glossy magazines.[8] Subsequently, she refashioned herself as an oppositional politician (during the *Bolotnaya* protest in 2011; and yet later was blamed for triggering divisions within the movement itself). Sobchak has become a prominent public figure who experiments with several (political) subjectivities, such as being a presidential candidate in 2018. She is also seen as a Kremlin stooge[9], and rumoured to be a goddaughter of Putin.

Her appearance has been transformed to suit new roles: from a glamorous blonde – in lavish and alluring attire featured in glossy male-readership magazines – to a modestly dressed journalist in glasses with shoulder-length (less blonde) plaited hair. Sobchak's numerous scandalous personal affairs gave way to a secret marriage to a Russian actor Vitorgan in 2013 and motherhood in 2016. However, what has remained constant is the fact that her entrepreneurial identity is built around conspicuous consumption and celebrity culture (e.g., curating 'product placements' on Instagram or carefully managing her pregnancy announcement in 2016 via a 'celebrity pregnancy photoshoot'). After divorcing Vitorgan in 2019, Sobchak married theatre director Konstantin Bogomolov in a lavish (she wore three different wedding dresses) and provocatively-staged wedding, as the couple travelled to the wedding hall in a catafalque, and Sobchak performed a 'striptease' on stage during the evening reception.

As a macro-celebrity Sobchak actively engages with 'the industrial underpinning and the cultural logic of social media celebrity', with its staged authenticity, managed connectedness with the audience (Hou 2018), and meticulous entrepreneurial calculation. Sobchak actively builds and maintains communities of followers (e.g., on Instagram), being adept at utilising the social media logic of quantified popularity (Van Dijck and Poell 2013). She clearly embodies a visibility-media-neoliberalism nexus, exerting 'a certain amount of cultural authority', mainly as 'the inculcator of new consumerist dispositions' (Nixon and du Gay 2002, 497). Her branding as a socialite appeals to (mainly) urban communities promoting high-end Western products. Even during the military conflict, she still acts as a cultural broker in social and economic life by making a set of shows about beauty ('Beauty Needs Cash') such as a programme about her home refurbishment (Careful, Sobchak! 2022). By combining her *social capital,* ability to succeed as a *socialite* and her *entrepreneurship* as a TV celebrity, Sobchak has managed to bridge both professional and media-made celebrity types. In this case, she is unique, as celebrities generally belong to one type only.

Finally, Sobchak's activities are positioned in a liminal zone. This is between the state and grassroots spheres, between various cultural industries, and between different cultures (mass/elite, urban/rural, past/present, etc.). Simultaneously, she

is relatively autonomous, and her positionality does not need to align firmly with the establishment and/or opposition. Several experts, either indirectly or directly, have acknowledged that she is 'allowed more than others' and can get away with living in her distinct way. Despite remaining in Russia, Sobchak also mediates internationally (such as her near-diplomatic activities during her presidential 2018 campaign involving interviews to English-language media (Russia's Post-Authoritarian Future 2018)). It seems that her role as a mediator still extends beyond the domestic audience, even though she remains in Russia. Sobchak reaches out to the Russian-speaking diaspora abroad, thus potentially mediating wider communities. As Sobchak approximates other international professional 'feminist celebrities' (comparable to individuals such as Beyoncé, for instance), her activity might be potentially relevant for wider transnational communities.

Sobchak's brand

Sobchak's brand is based on: (a) controversies (provocation); (b) constant reinvention and a versatility of representation, adopted roles, and genres; and (c) fluid (chameleon-like) positionality which makes it impossible to pin Sobchak down on anything. As her branding is based on controversies, she thrives on negative publicity that is comparable with, for instance, another 'contentious PR' British commentator, Katie Hopkins. Sobchak appears to mediate from the position of elites to the masses, contesting almost anything and playing on existing lines of polarisation. Being a divisive figure is productive for publicity purposes, as Sobchak is widely recognisable although not highly regarded (various political analysts and media practitioners, for instance, use labels such as '*pustyshka*' (literally 'pacifier' – with an implied derogatory meaning 'hollow' or 'dumb' that is applied to young women), and '*neser'eznaia*' (not serious).

In addition to her assertive style of interviewing, which challenges the patriarchal cultural custom whereby women should adopt a subordinate position, Sobchak questions Russian conventions of femininity via her choice of outfits. Her chameleon-like personality manifests itself through a diverse and versatile range of garments selected for each interview. Depending on the calibre, profession and social standing of her interviewee, Sobchak varies her looks. These tend to echo or mirror the habitus of the person interviewed (e.g., more hipster-like when meeting someone from the cultural industries, more formal with an official or someone of higher standing, or smart casual for a celebrity). Her images provocatively challenge the overt sexualisation of women, as Sobchak frequently wears high-end fashion which chips away at the norms of femininity, promoting instead a rebellious image (power dressing that is purposively asexual, combining contradictory or exaggerated, occasionally hideously extravagant outfits).

Furthermore, Sobchak is adept at using media (such as cross-mediation, alleged manipulation of algorithms) to boost her programme ratings, and understands cultural industry conditions involving monetisation (via ads, co-productions with other celebrities, etc.). Finally, Sobchak is known for altering her viewpoint within a short time span, and populistically covering this up. Significantly, Sobchak's

chameleon-like positionality and evasiveness are vital for her role as a mediator. According to Keblusek (2011, 3, 6), the negative connotation of a chameleon should be seen as a neutral term when applied to cultural brokering or diplomatic activities, as it is precisely the shifting nature of 'sympathies, responsibilities, and activities' that enables flexibility in role-switching and successful functioning as a mediator. For instance, Sobchak managed to justify being photographed wearing Ukrainian national costume whilst reporting from the Maidan Uprising in 2013[10], by saying it was a requirement of the filming format.

Thus, although Sobchak is a contemporary celebrity who personifies the manifestation of market economic practices, her undertakings need to be contextualised within a broader framework, as outlined in this subsection. In a way, she embodies the (neoliberal) feminist project of a celebrity female utilising structural inequalities for her personal gain. Certain direct parallels can be drawn with Ivanka Trump, who Rottenberg (2019) sees as 'the newest permutation of the neoliberal feminist subject', having a focus on one specific woman's success and self-investment whilst ignoring structural inequalities and diverse female experiences. The subsequent discussion demonstrates that Sobchak is a 'cultural broker' in tune with post-glamour and 'hype' consumer culture, who acts as a subversive (dissenting) agent skilfully utilising multi-platformativity, and promoting various and, at times, conflicting viewpoints on feminism and female agency.

Sobchak's illusive appropriation of feminism

Sobchak's media projects and feminism

In order to evaluate Sobchak's appropriation of the feminist agenda, this subsection considers her forthright mediation of feminism, using the case of one 2019 YouTube programme. The following two subsections investigate two cases – Sobchak's 2018 presidential campaign and her post-2022 media presence – to trace the dynamic of Ksenia's ambiguous utilisation of her feminist positionality.

There are several relevant Sobchak programmes on feminism and LGBTQ+[11] issues with influencers and celebrities where she probes them on feminism (such as the interview with Manizha, Chapter five). This chapter focuses on one illustrative programme (Sobchak 2019) called 'Seks, feminizm i igla muzhskogo odobreniia. Fem-aktivistki na devinchnike u Sobchak' (*Sex, Feminisms and the Needle of Male Approval. Fem Activists at the Girls' Gathering*) aired on March 4, 2019. It is set in a glamorous restaurant with six invited activists and socialites. The activists are Bella Rappoport (an LGBT and fem-journalist, sociologist, and 'polyamour'), Zalina Marshenkulova (introduced here merely as a model in Reebok's feminist ad campaign), and Anastasiya Krasil'nikova (a fem-activist, author of several Telegram channels). The selected 'old elites' comprise Yana Rudkovskaya (presented as a TV host; a producer of her husband, the Olympic figure skater E. Plushenko), Svetlana Bondarchuk (presented as a TV host; the editor of *Hello* magazine, a former wife of the famous film director Fedor Bondarchuk), and Laura

Dzugeliya (editor of the media portal *People Talk,* formerly a society columnist (*svetskii obozrevatel'*) for the journals *Tatler* and *Vogue*).

The show probes several topics, ranging from feminism and successful independent female careers to sex and marriage, differing physical abilities of wo/men, to quotas, societal attitudes to feminists, body positivity and beauty standards, and sexual harassment and violence (mainly in relation to Western cases). At the same time, it omits the issues of female political participation, gender inequality, Soviet legacy, and domestic violence. Due to space limitations here, we focus on the guests' understandings regarding linguistics/terminology and the notion of class, as other aspects such as body positivity, gendered violence, and intersectionality are addressed in other chapters.

The show advances glamour (Goscilo and Strukov 2010) and an entrepreneurial feminist sensibility in its set-up (top restaurant *Beluga*) and the calibre of participants (early on in the show Sobchak invites the activists to consider the 'old elites' as the 'role models'). As the programme progresses, it introduces subtitled formulaic definitions of feminism (on screen) which are blatantly incongruous with the informal mode of the conversation and settings. This purposefully awkward 'popularisation' of feminism might be a deliberate move by Sobchak to highlight its artificial or 'alien' nature which does not organically 'marry' with the domestic context. Here, the utilisation of these terms via direct translation comes across almost as self-colonising, as terms such as 'empowerment' are simply transliterated, with no consideration of their domestic connotations and applicability.

Although this discussion includes some reflections regarding sexist words, idioms, and expressions, often these conversations focus on gender-neutral language (such as the search for corresponding female nouns, etc.). However, the conversation does not go beyond words and linguistic structures to question the 'inequality regimes' (Acker 2006) or sexism that permeates everyday discourse. This is partially addressed via the separate topic of misogyny and sexualised ads. It is informed by Zalina's provocative advertising campaign (which is also in the show's title) and challenges female over-sexualisation in ads using a reverse strategy, as her Reebok advertising slogan states that women should 'change seats' (*peresiad'*) to stop seeking 'the Needle of Men's Approval' and relocate to 'men's faces' instead, alluding to cunnilingus (Chapter two).

Next, Sobchak purposefully and provocatively juxtaposes old (previously) privileged elites with the younger generation of celebrity media influencers. This is what she does best – provokes her guests and sets them off against each other with a smile. However, the discussion does not mention the notion of 'class' as such, and is framed within glamour, elite, and celebrity culture, clearly gesturing towards neoliberal feminism and conspicuous consumption (rivalry over advertising contracts, etc.). Decisively, there is a glaring absence[12] of any feminist conceptualisations along the dimension of class, such as noting a lack of a healthy 'layer' of a well-established middle class in Russia. As a result, the programme (a) omits this aspect without questioning 'a blind spot' in the narratives or perceptions of feminism in Russia; or (b) substitutes the idea of class with the notion of elites (artistic or 'old type' elites similar to the Soviet intelligentsia or a 'new type' of wealthy elites); and

(c) endorses a 'glamour' or popular feminism simultaneously unlinking it from the idea of structural inequalities, social capital, or class.

On the one hand, the programme picks up relevant aspects but remains very formulaic. On the other hand, the show trivialises some of the feminist issues. This is similar to Sobchak undermining and trivialising the emancipatory politics of 'Pussy Riot', who she interviewed in 2014, asking them questions about their beauty regimes rather than activism (Miazhevich 2018). Eliot Borenstein in *Pussy Riot* (2021, 72–74) calls her a 'Party Girl', confirming that her interview with 'Pussy Riot' demonstrates the difference between her frivolous concerns and those of the genuinely oppositional group.

Sobchak's 2018 presidency campaign

In October 2017 Sobchak undertook yet another 're-branding', declaring that she would be standing for election to the Russian presidency in March 2018. She was the first woman to run since 2004. Sobchak's nomination was met with various reactions, ranging from confusion to a glimmer of hope. The Russian mediascape was flooded with unflattering epithets calling her a caricature candidate, a joke, a Kremlin stooge, and a socialite trying to boost her publicity. A prominent oppositional candidate – Alexey Navalny, who was denied the right to register – accused Sobchak of dividing and tainting oppositional circles. One more key narrative was that Sobchak was 'allowed' to run because, as a controversial female 'entertainer', she was less of a threat than serious contenders like Navalny, and could increase voters' turnout in a managed 'election exercise.'

We argue that, in her current incarnation as a *female politician*, Sobchak continues to balance incompatible views and adopt numerous personas (an undisclosed feminist, a patriot, a mother, a female politician cherry-picking from Western liberal ideas, etc.). By looking at the issues of framing, voice, dialogue structure, and her role in her interview with Vladimir Pozner (and drawing on Sobchak's other interviews and online comments related to them, where appropriate), we analyse the re-branding strategies adopted by Sobchak and shed light on the peculiarities of women's political engagement in Russia.

Sobchak's presidential motto was a controversial statement based on negation – 'I represent the vote against everyone.' Sobchak claimed to represent those who are dissatisfied with the established regime which lacks a system of credible democratic institutions, freedom of speech, etc. 'Everyone' presumably includes those representing or associated with the 'establishment.' The motto was well suited for attracting attention in Sobchak's characteristically provocative (almost tabloid) manner and standing out from other 'alternative' candidates. According to Sobchak, she did not hope to 'unseat' Vladimir Putin in 2018, but was striving to instil 'a hope for a change' in the nation.

From the very beginning of her campaign, Sobchak skilfully used social media, adding immediacy to her campaign and targeting specific demographic groups with new (different) media consumption patterns. Her candidacy announcement on YouTube featured Sobchak in her kitchen. This alluded to the well-established

Figure 3.1 A screenshot of Sobchak's promotional YouTube video as part of her presidential campaign (Radio Svoboda 2017)

stereotype of a woman's place in Russian society (i.e., in the kitchen cooking borsch), and to Mayakovsky's poem, in which he claims that 'every female cook can be taught how to manage a state.' It immediately evoked a range of mocking responses (including Ivan Urgant's parody video in 2018[13]). However, the focus here is on Sobchak's televised engagements.[14]

Surprisingly for the public, and in contrast with other candidates, Sobchak was allowed to use a broad spectrum of outlets to articulate her platform. So, she appeared on numerous TV shows, including Malakhov and Solov'ev's talk shows on *Rossiia*, Pozner's show on *Channel One* at that time, and gave an interview to *Russia Today* (RT). While dispelling various allegations, such as being a tool of the Kremlin (namely that she had done a deal with Putin to allow him to say that the Russian elections embrace free speech and genuine competition), or being part of a liberal wealthy elite detached from the masses, she had to deal with Russian patriarchal culture that is characterised by misogynistic views. Our analysis of these televised engagements is below.[15]

The first programme, which aired the day after Sobchak's press conference announcing her presidential bid, was Malakhov's talk show on Channel *Rossiia* (October 25, 2017). It provided a recap of Sobchak's past career and her multiple roles (an entrepreneur, a journalist, an oppositional figure ostracised from the mainstream media, a mother, etc.). Amongst several invited panel members was Sobchak's mother – Liudmila Narusova – an established politician. While Sobchak was delayed in traffic on her way to the studio, Narusova talked at length about her daughter's childhood and early stages of career development, either positively spinning or partially silencing her more controversial *It Girl* period. Due to Ksenia's late arrival (she appeared 36 minutes into a one-hour format) and the

nature of the programme (a talk show rather than an interview or a debate), her input was partial and largely directed by the (sympathetic[16]) host.

The broadcast was used to assist Sobchak's re-branding as a politician. The volley of praise (from her mother, from another female guest – the editor of *Glamour* magazine – and the host) was 'balanced' by verbal attacks from two male participants – Vitali Milonov, a politician who opposes LGBTQ+ rights, and an eco-party leader Oleg Mitvol' (who criticised her stance on various topics, including Crimea). Sobchak's performance highlighted her multidimensional personality and versatile communication skills, as she skilfully switched from an assertive, persuasive, composed,[17] and competent mode to a more flirtatious, childlike, and narcissistic one. The show was also used to address grassroots mockery of her campaign (memes involving her appearance, for instance, comparing her to a horse[18], and morphing Sobchak's image into Hillary Clinton's). It concluded by foregrounding Sobchak's father (his legacy, input, etc.) via an invited guest who had worked with him, showing a video clip of his passionate public speaking.

This tapping into Sobchak's social capital was, perhaps, an attempt to bring her (albeit young and inexperienced[19]) into the realm of politics on a par with significantly more mature male competitors. Simultaneously, the same social capital and (enabled by it) entrepreneurial success led to her alienation from a significant part of the electorate. Sobchak tackled her association with wealthy elites detached from the masses in an assertive manner. In several interviews Sobchak was open about her wealth. She accentuated that she had earned it by herself (an independent woman) in a transparent fashion, without any tax avoidance. Indeed, throughout her career, Sobchak has carefully curated the image of an autonomous successful female entrepreneur. However, during her campaign she tended to mostly foreground her financial transparency[20] rather than a *female*-entrepreneur aspect.

Despite Sobchak's attempts to downplay her gender – in her entrepreneurial activities, above, and other undertakings, as discussed below – this was seen as undermining her electoral credibility. A survey by Levada (2017) showed that more than half of the population in Russia did not envisage having a female president in the next 10–15 years. In a society with deeply-rooted patriarchal gender norms, the appetite for women's issues and gender equality is minimal. Subsequently, Sobchak became an easy target of sexist ridicule. Our in-depth examination of Sobchak's televised performances finds that the fluent and articulate Sobchak tended to adopt several (sometimes contradictory) personas. We conclude that this manipulation of roles and exploitation of the rules and limits of patriarchal culture allowed her (albeit partially) to address gender-related issues during her campaign.

To start with, there was Sobchak's interaction with one of the most notorious and divisive politicians, Vladimir Zhirinovsky (who also took part in the presidential campaign). During one presidential debate, he attempted to discredit Sobchak by denigrating her, using the terms 'whore', 'black dirt', and a 'madwoman/idiot' (*dura*), alluding to Sobchak's earlier scandalous past with (near) nude images and what he claimed was her limited intellectual ability (sufficient only for the entertainment industry). This led Sobchak to throw a glass of water over her opponent (*Debates*, 28 Feb 2018, Channel *Rossiia*). Later on, during another presidential

debate, she started crying on camera after becoming frustrated by continuous interruptions from Zhirinovsky and other candidates (*Solov'ev*, March 14, 2018, Channel *Rossiia*).

This range of responses is impressive. Her reactions represent almost opposite poles of the spectrum: a more proactive (more masculine boisterous confrontation[21]), and a 'typically female' passive emotional reaction (tears). One can only speculate whether this loss of composure was staged or genuine. It is reasonable to doubt her authenticity, considering Sobchak's comprehensive grasp of the media logic (the combination of sensationalist content in an era of convergent media). What is clear is that her performance either challenged or utilised societal norms to her advantage, such as a woman's prerogative to cry in public.

Moreover, throughout the campaign, Sobchak intentionally strived to avoid accentuating her gender, articulating her political position as a 'person', not a woman. For instance, on Solovi'ev's talk show (November 23, 2017, Channel *Rossiia*) she challenged his attempts to skew the discussion in that direction (by stating that it was 'a historical moment', but not because she is a woman). At the same time, she appeared on the front cover of *Glamour* magazine (Nov 2017) in a T-shirt with the logo 'Women, power.'

During Pozner's interview (30 Jan 2018, *Channel One*) she portrayed a naïve idealistic female, a mother, and an undisclosed feminist stance. At the end of the programme, in response to a silly question about whether she liked her own appearance, Sobchak simply answered 'no.' If the same question was put to a British female politician, she would doubtless respond: 'have you ever posed this question to a male politician?' Similarly, when asked if she'd ever been a victim of sexual harassment, Sobchak avoided 'a trap' by saying that she found the question embarrassing and 'too private' to discuss, whereas many younger Western women would now see this as a 'public' issue and answer readily. Next, she cleverly responded to the question of what would be her perfect day by replying a day spent with her child and husband (thus rebuffing an implied neglect of her maternal duties during the campaign[22]).

Overall, in her TV appearances, Sobchak adopted various communication styles, ranging from being very vocal and assertive to more thoughtful and open (e.g., in the interview with Vladimir Pozner). On the whole, however, Sobchak seemed oblivious to the fact that – by being a proactive and assertive woman – she was playing into the hands of deep-rooted misogynistic views inherent in the prevalent patriarchal culture. In other words, she behaved contrary to what a woman in Russia is expected to be and to behave. This, therefore, negated other aspects of her carefully staged image-making exercise.

Interestingly, Sobchak's feminist stance was not particularly evident before her 2018 presidential campaign. Throughout her career, Sobchak had avoided taking any clear stance on feminism, which might be linked to Russian societal views (see Chapter one). On the one hand, Sobchak is known for her tense relationship with a token Russian feminist Maria Arbatova, and her controversial interview with 'Pussy Riot' in 2014. On the other hand, Sobchak herself is a self-made woman and has been vocal about women's rights in the past and during this election campaign

(e.g., at an event concerning violence towards women). However, she has never moved beyond formulating a stereotypical image of a feminist in Russia (a male-like creature dressed in a suit, smoking, and spitting to the side). The first clear-cut message Sobchak gave was staging her one-person protest[23] commemorating the 8 March Women's Day celebration (beloved since Soviet times). This act simultaneously clarified Sobchak's stance on feminism, which she now seems to openly support, and added an extra dimension to her (self)-branding as a declared-feminist.

The final dilemma – as the grassroots reaction to Sobchak's campaign showed – is the polarisation of the audience questioning her trustworthiness (e.g., speculating about the 'actors' behind the campaign) or her authenticity (like the incident where she cried). However, using an 'authentic' version of the self as a strategy for attracting followers might not be entirely relevant in today's post-truth environment and the rise of celebrity politicians. This point prompts a timely debate about the transformation of the notion of authenticity and problematises the issues of coherence and integrity. The following subsection explores these ideas further by examining Sobchak's post-February 2022 mediated positionality.

Sobchak's balancing act: the 'special military operation'

Shifting positionality

Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion into Ukraine, Sobchak has spoken about the war on several occasions, with her positionality being either factual or conflicted. In this respect Sobchak uses the same strategy as she did when 'flirting' with feminism, i.e., by employing her chameleon-like positionality. Thus, Sobchak made several contradictory statements and briefly left the country. The initial reaction she posted on Instagram was what some Western media outlets called an anti-war stance: 'today they woke me up at six in the morning with the words "Ksiusha, the war has begun"' and then: 'we, the Russians, will be dealing with the consequences of today for many years to come' (@xenia_sobchak, February 24). Despite voicing her grave concern, Sobchak avoided directly placing any responsibility on the establishment. In September 2022, she criticised Ukrainian condemnation of Zara's advertising campaign involving a model from the Russian Federation – Natalia Vodianova – by using the term 'Nazism.' These two dramatically different statements – only six months apart – illustrate her contradictory and controversial branding yet again. Furthermore, her decision to choose to vent her odd criticism against the fashion industry confirms her strategy of foregrounding consumerism (in this case fashion) and subverting the political angle.

Sobchak is one of the few independent journalists who have continued their broadcasting in the post-2022 Russian mediascape. Ksenia's YouTube channel complies with national restrictive legislation on terminology, referring to the war by the officially-required term 'special military operation' (*spetsialnaia voennaia operatsiia*). At the same time, her interventions cover significantly more than is 'permitted' in other media. Her Telegram channel includes stories that the Russian state media ignore, such as arrests of anti-war activists and violence committed by

soldiers returning home (though an in-depth analysis of her post-2022 journalism is beyond the scope of this chapter). By providing a platform for anti-war voices, Sobchak performs what can be called 'masked acts of resistance' and/or presents herself as an independent journalist providing 'alternative' coverage.

Apart from her journalistic reporting, Sobchak uses the interview genre, where she frequently draws on her high-profile connections and utilises the politics of memory. For instance, in her interview on April 25, 2022 with the famous Soviet-era rock singer Andrei Makarevich, whom she has known since her childhood, Sobchak established an excellent rapport. As the singer had left Russia in disagreement with the country's course, Sobchak probed his anti-war stance. To do this, she posed provocative questions that demanded a clear positionality from the interviewee, without offering any definite reciprocal stance of her own. Eventually, she 'clarified' her ambiguous stance in a separate, highly engaging (self-centred) programme (on October 3, 2023) filled with self-irony, subversion, and assertion.

There Sobchak confronted 'alleged' inconsistencies in her positionality and rebuffed criticism, ranging from being Putin's goddaughter to not taking a stance on the war. She argued for the need to be 'neutral' to maintain journalistic ethics and professionalism. Nevertheless, she used various dubious techniques to make this point, such as mirroring, trivialising, partial accuracy, claims of victimhood ('if something is not right then Sobchak is here to blame'), and even swearing. The high quality of this interview prompted comments from viewers such as 'this interview is the turning point.' They revaluated Sobchak and saw her 'in a positive light.' Like other actors who were 'engaging' with feminism prior to the 2022 invasion, Sobchak has had to drop the feminist agenda as, firstly, it became less relevant and, secondly, dangerous (after the proposal to equate feminism with extremism). This is also clear from the examples below.

Neoliberal (elite) consumption and the compliant public

Another milestone was a 2023 interview published in the *NY Times* conducted during her holiday in Spain and aimed at an international audience. Being a glamorous celebrity, Sobchak aligned with the Western-oriented elites supporting neoliberal consumption, as her attire comprised high-end designer outfits. However, now she was promoting 'patriotism' – a modulated stance of being mildly anti-war but supporting those who had stayed in Russia. Rather than speaking from the standpoint of a woman, a mother, or a wife, Sobchak imparted the conformist position of a citizen: 'there is no resistance, nor can there be any […] This has to be understood.' As the interviewer noted, Sobchak's social media account presents the invasion as something to be endured, something like a natural disaster rather than a political decision that could be challenged.

Paradoxically, Sobchak's strategy to promote the message of unity and passivity was in direct contrast to her long-term brand built on an agentic, assertive, and divisive personality. It is unclear why the public – whom she typically tends to provoke and shock – should listen to her (now) pacifying claims. Further, rather than demanding accountability from the government, Sobchak mainstreamed the

concepts of law (but not rights), and talked about how citizens need to understand that they are legal subjects and must abide by the national legal framework. This caused another conundrum, as the legal system in Russia is nominal, and vague legislative language is used to exert unprecedented repressions. So, the creation of a citizenship position in this case seems far-fetched and artificial.

Sobchak presented herself as part of the public, using 'we' to construct a seeming unity and people's agency, simultaneously creating an illusion of Russia as a functioning state ('We decided to stay here, but also to follow the laws'). She tried to speak on behalf of the general public, who 'are born to live calm, happy lives […] not all are born heroes', while she herself continued enjoying a lavish lifestyle and a degree of protection that ordinary Russians do not have. Nevertheless, her message of complicity was partly successful.[24] Finally, she soothed the population by omitting the idea of collective responsibility and advocating passivity: 'At some point, you've got to accept that you can't influence it.'

A similar message is promoted by several Telegram groups not directly linked to her but led by members of her production team. This message of an ambivalent positionality on the war is dramatically different from the messages by the FAR movement (Chapters seven and eight). Constructed in this way, Sobchak's cultural brokering diverts the public's attention away from the establishment. This is deliberate in the situation where the focused nature of social grievances channels this dissent towards the state rather than other groups and structures (see Salehyan and Stewart 2017 on this point in Latin American and African contexts). Thus, Sobchak intervenes in the political realm but promotes apolitical subjectivity (without any specific intersectional angle such as gender, class, or ethnicity).

A 'Date' in Dubai

In November 2023, her message of conformism was supplemented by a new strategy, involving an 'upgraded' authenticity and new ways to maintain her (transnational) reach and influence. On September 11, 2023 Sobchak interviewed the rap performer Morgenshtern in Dubai,[25] as the singer had been forced out of Russia in 2021. Then he interviewed Sobchak labelling it *A Date with Sobchak* (Morgenshtern 2023). In this interview, Sobchak might have revealed the most, as she talked about the 'presidential towers' (certain groups within the establishment competing for power and using cultural elites for their own ends), her personal experience of (temporarily) fleeing Russia in 2022 after being accused of financial misconduct, and so on.

However, she stayed silent about her own protection as one of the 'Kremlin groups.' On several occasions, Morgenshtern probed Sobchak's special status – for instance, she was allowed to say more than others without becoming deemed a 'foreign agent' – but, possibly due to his inexperience, the script, or a prior agreement with Sobchak[26], he failed to press her on these matters. Still, Morgenshtern successfully raised the issue of Sobchak 'sitting on two chairs' several times during the interview. Amusingly, from the start, Sobchak was given an extra chair by her side, highlighting this aspect of her branding.

Several times, Morgenshtern clearly alluded to Sobchak's surname and social capital, even joking that he should marry her to be able to be protected and return to Russia. Sobchak humorously responded that it might be easier to adopt Morgenshtern to give him the surname, due to their age difference. Significantly, Sobchak did not deny her embeddedness in the powerful networks and significant social capital, but tried to downplay the weight carried by her surname. She stressed that she is not invincible, but acts within the legal *field* (Sobchak was evasive here, as she used the generic notion of a 'field' or 'pole' in Russian instead of 'the legal framework' or the 'rule of law'). Paradoxically, the public figures bending the rules and boundaries of conduct – chameleon actors such as Sobchak and Morgenshtern (who is open about his music piracy) – can exist and capitalise only in an environment where the majority play by the rules.

Finally, Sobchak played along with taken-for-granted traditional gender roles in this 'date' interview, but simultaneously contested gendered power dimensions by having the *upper hand* in the conversation. Although Sobchak performed the identity of a conventional white, elite-class, heteronormative, able-bodied woman, her femaleness played a non-conventional role in her mediation, which manoeuvred among existing patriarchal structures and was largely based on functionality and profit. Decisively, Sobchak's positionality might be less believable due to her financially-driven attitude (a significant amount of advertising was built into the interview with Morgenshtern, such as a dating platform logo), and the use of various 'hooks' to add authenticity (discourse alluding to psychological issues, implying the need to work on yourself, thus potentially indicating sincerity and openness, use of an informal register, etc.).

Sobchak as the post-Soviet cultural intermediary

Sobchak's public engagement is continuous and multi-platform. She also uses indirect amplification – via some indirectly linked channels, thus continuing her incongruous branding in the digital realm to circumvent standard strategies – and subsequent monetisation. Sobchak tends to combine relatability with versatile storytelling, frequently using mirroring and sarcasm to convey her point. She rebuffs criticism and fluctuates between horizontal and vertical communication in her messaging. In her case, there might be an expectation that the audience has extra competence to be able to decipher her (subversive) messages or to be 'in the know.'

However, Sobchak's case is more convoluted than it might seem at first. On the one hand, she uses her chameleon branding, celebrity endorsement and social capital to pragmatically interweave a compliant citizen statement with her multi-platform monetisation. On the other hand, by engaging in her subversive mediation, Sobchak inadvertently performs 'everyday resistance' (Scott 1992), disguising her mediated dissent under an allowed complicity framework (like the soldiers' wives who complain about their mobilisation but not the war). In this way, she feeds into the 'feminist media ecology' (see the Introduction and Chapters seven and eight). Sobchak has thus become an enabler of an anti-war standpoint disguised under the

plurality of opinions (obviously, an opposite point of view holds as well – her pro-war guests serve the regime's interests.)

Sobchak strives to bridge the official and non-official spheres. However, she cannot completely disengage or separate herself from the system. How much dissenting freedom does she have? As Sobchak voiced her anti-regime sentiment during a quasi-kitchen or semi-public intimate interview with Morgenshtern, she was confronted by the interviewee asserting that she is insulated by her background and that anyone else speaking out as she does would be in trouble.

Sobchak's embeddedness in elite circles from birth associates her with a rather corrupt (*nomenklatura*) elite, which is not a favourable factor due to the (Soviet) legacy of distrust and resentment towards wealthy and powerful elites. Attitudes towards Sobchak vary. Generally, she is treated less seriously and taken with a pinch of salt, prompting questions about her legitimacy as a figure of moral authority. At first glance, audience reception of Sobchak is mainly positive (although moderation of the comments might provide a skewed picture): 'you are a rare example of subtle humour and bold self-irony, a clear, logical mind and ambitious, talented, bright personality.' They praise her self-irony, professionalism, her ability to make a point (even justifying swearing), and 'amazing eloquence.' The audience also display empathy: 'it is a shame that you have to explain and justify yourself", due to the 'burden' of her high-profile background. Still, big data mining of her online commentaries is required to ascertain accurately how the public perceives Ksenia Sobchak.

Further, by opportunistically playing around with various commodities, subcultures, and authenticities, Sobchak has moved further from something akin to the intelligentsia and turned herself into a quasi-elite. Interestingly, Sobchak was described as a lighthouse – but for 'those who are in the bog' – by Yakovenko (2023), which symbolically downgrades her authority and deprives her of the moral leadership associated with the intelligentsia during Soviet times. Overall, political analysts, journalists, and other cultural industry figures are sceptical about her personality and role (calling her a Kremlin stooge, etc.). Commentators are more lenient (deeming Sobchak an inevitable evil) and treat her in an infantilised and gendered manner, alluding to her younger years or association with her father (using the diminutive *Ksiusha* rather than her given name Ksenia), or disparagingly ascribing her to the liberal elites. Importantly, Sobchak's mediation by the establishment is virtually non-existent: they 'leave' Ksenia be. Hence, she even emerged unscathed from her involvement in the 'almost naked party' scandal in December 2023, unlike the other high-profile guests (Meduza 2024; Sauer 2023).

Conclusion

Sobchak's socio-cultural capital makes her stand out from the homogeneous pool of Russian celebrities. This analysis has demonstrated that Sobchak's consistently inconsistent off/online persona addresses varying audiences and structural constraints (media ownership, platform affordances, patriarchal structures, etc.). Her brand 'stability' is in this lack of consistency and persistent manipulation with

diverse identities. Counterintuitively, her integrity lies in her dedication to this chameleon-like creature. On the one hand, her manipulation with diverse identities and lack of cohesion exposes a lack of integrity. On the other hand, it addresses the complexity of the Russian socio-cultural environment and its affordances, where public figures have to adapt to function in a highly centralised and conservative environment.

Sobchak skilfully utilises the social media logic of quantified popularity (Van Dijck and Poell 2013). She constructs and juggles various personas, frequently morphing into contradictory ones, such as capitalist entrepreneur or political activist. Importantly, Sobchak's substantial cultural capital (fame, resources, connections, etc.) allows her a certain autonomy and effective resistance devoid of the totalising appropriation and trivialisation of her rhetoric by both the state and mainstream state-funded media. This was evident in Sobchak's previous attempts to represent an embodiment of the feminisation of resistance: first, during her participation in the 2010 anti-presidential campaign (when she 'had everything to lose'), and then during the 2018 presidential campaign.

Still, like other (global) media celebrities, Sobchak is not shy about her 'luxury' lifestyle, and uses it as a product which can be branded and marketed in direct competition with other similar 'products' to gain attention, wealth, and status. However, Sobchak's endorsement of the modern mythology of consumerism in her apolitical life contrasts with the almost absent or indirect promotion of it during her 2018 presidential campaign (evident only via her high-end garments). This contradiction might constitute a line of further inquiry, as it exemplifies a particular nexus between neoliberal popular feminism, feminism as ideological project, and politics in the Russian context.

Sobchak's post-2022 activities explicate another dimension that would be productive for future exploration of the potentiality of the contentious public sphere (Lei 2017) in seemingly monolith authoritarian regimes (Chen and Moss 2018). This can be manifest in various ways, such as covert resistance by grassroots groups (Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024) or overt resistance by prominent celebrities (Miazhevich, 2025). Despite her dubious communication strategies, Sobchak still brings out more diverse information about the 'special military operation' and depicts people as being trapped between a rock and a hard place, with no room for manoeuvre. Sobchak skilfully employs multi-platform, multi-genre affordances and articulates digressing standpoints.

However, her independence and feminist positionality are becoming less persuasive, as Sobchak now seemingly echoes her husband's public stance. Bogomolov has adopted a position of pro-establishment conformism (Riazankii 2023), which undermines Sobchak's 'balancing act.' In 2022, she might have been described as mildly anti-war, but today Sobchak performs as a non-agentic, apolitical *everyday* person who needs to get on with life and comply with their own situation. Seemingly, her stance is for the good of society, but in her vision, this is achieved via passivity and conformism. She is an interpreter of the state line and the proselytiser of a consumeristic (even hedonistic) apolitical lifestyle. This foregrounds the role of Russian celebrity pop/neoliberal feminism and the way it interrelates

with other spheres of life, as next chapter discusses it further around influencer Tatiana Mingalimova.

Finally, as this discussion has demonstrated, Sobchak's journalism can represent a form of covert resistance, as it enables different opinions to be broadcast. Her interview with the prominent political analyst Ekaterina Shulman (a 'foreign agent') in December 2024 (Careful, Sobchak! 2024) is one of the most recent examples of that. Further research is needed to establish: (a) in what way her post-February 2022 mediation shapes the mainstream discourse, and (b) how its horizontal, cross-border, and transnational entanglements play into developing (new) cultural forms of diasporic resistance. Although this chapter has briefly touched upon the public's 'love-hate' reaction towards Sobchak's mediated positionality, further research is needed to unpick the perception of 'Sobchak's brand' in terms of its persuasiveness and its transmedia attainment. Her popularity and influence can be evaluated using big data mining and verification checks to exclude bots and artificial popularity enhancement.

Notes

1 Anatolii Sobchak was instrumental in elevating Vladimir Putin to his deputy in the St Petersburg mayoral office at that time.
2 Micro-influencers typically have up to 10,000 of followers, meso-influencers have up to a million followers with national visibility, and macro-influencers are celebrities with over one million followers.
3 Ksenia spent more than a month abroad with her son claiming to be on holiday, and received Israeli citizenship shortly after. On 25 October 2022, Sobchak briefly fled to Lithuania on her Israeli passport, allegedly to avoid possible arrest due to an extortion case; several members of her team were subsequently imprisoned (Radio Liberty 2022). Sobchak claimed that this was a way to 'pressure' journalists (Dettmer 2022).
4 E.g., by criticising the Russian Orthodox Church's stance towards women on Twitter.
5 Sobchak hosted several YouTube/Telegram channels, including 'Be careful – News' (*Ostorozhno, Novosti*); 'Bloody Madam' (*Krovavaia Barynia*), 'The Beauty Demands Cash' *(Krasota trebuet KESH)*; 'Channel Sobchak', Dubai; and 'Careful, Sobchak!' (*Ostorozhno Sobchak)*. The latter can be also translated as 'Be aware of Sobchak!'
6 Careful, Sobchak! (2023b) as Sobchak interviews Morgenshtern and, subsequently, Morgenshtern (2023) interviews Sobchak.
7 She has also benefited from the state structures throughout her career and until now, which also benefits her husband (Riazankii 2023).
8 Sobchak also tapped into the early 2000s' discourse on Rubliovka's wives when she co-authored a self-help book *How To Marry A Millionaire* (Robski and Sobchak 2007).
9 Sobchak admits to visiting Putin before officially announcing her presidential campaign (Vedomosti 2017).
10 A peaceful protest across Ukraine after then-president Viktor Yanukovych chose not to sign an agreement leading to a closer integration with the European Union.
11 There is another thematic stream here, such *Round table: Six Gay Men and Sobchak* (IMDb 2019), as one of her attempts was to broaden the LGBTQ+ narrative during her 2018 campaign. LGBTQ+ topics are intertwined with Sobchak's attack on patriarchal values and support for the feminist agenda (anti-domestic violence legislation, etc.), as evident in Sobchak's Telegram post (2022).

12 Kaneva (2015, 8) states that the mythology of 'the socialist super-woman endures in cultural discourse and practices of post-socialist femininity, but it is often re-interpreted through the ideological prism of global consumerism.' This focus on popular feminism and neoliberalism obscures the issue of class, or rather the lack of a substantial middle class, that is crucial for this discussion.
13 The video is no longer available via the original link. A video merging Sobchak's and Urgant's video is available (Radio Svoboda 2017).
14 The sustained importance of traditional media in contemporary Russia is well established (Beumers et.al. 2009, Miazhevich 2022).
15 Sobchak's interview with Yuri Dud' (*vDud'* 2017) and to RT (English language version) are excluded due to space constraints.
16 The only time when Malakhov was critical was when he asked Sobchak to comment on her interview on YouTube's channel (*vDud'* 2017), where she came across as not very diplomatic.
17 E.g., she asked the opponents to be more respectful.
18 When prompted to reflect on the act of provocation following her press conference (a person in a horse mask disrupted Sobchak's Q&A), Sobchak replied that it said more about the other person, as well as (childishly?) stating that if she is a horse then it is a unicorn.
19 Sobchak is much younger than the other candidates and not a very experienced politician (as she admitted during the campaign). However, she tried to 'weaponise' these factors, claiming that her youth and courage (*smelost'*) were ingredients for success (e.g., in her RT interview).
20 One of the reoccurring conspiratorial theories is that Sobchak's prime reason for running the campaign was the PR and financial monetisation that it would bring.
21 Rather than conceptualising Sobchak's stunt in terms of a hysterical woman's reaction, a context-related interpretation is more helpful. Here there are clear allusions to, and association with, a similar incident involving Zhirinovsky throwing water over Nemtsov during their debates in 1995.
22 Also addressed in Malakhov's show.
23 An unauthored public protest involves at least two people protesting, so a one-person protest act is less problematic.
24 An exiled representative of Navalny said: 'It really resonates with her audience because people take some solace in this: "there's nothing to be done".'
25 Post-February 2022, Dubai has become a cultural industry production hub, where both prominent oppositional and pro-state Russian artist elites currently reside.
26 Sobchak was one of the key entertainers at his wedding in 2021. She has interviewed him on several previous occasions and was seen as indirectly linked to him being exiled from Russia in 2021. Other factors might be relevant as well, but they go beyond the scope of this chapter.

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4 YouTuber Tatiana Mingalimova and feminist influencer culture

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Introduction

This chapter delves into the discursive complexities of Russian celebrity feminism developing at the intersection of Russia's conservative authoritarianism and platform-driven popular media culture. It argues that celebrity feminism in Russia has taken form as a multifaceted site of discourse with a set of feminist voices and positionalities interacting predominantly via social networks and the platform economy. Digital content sharing platforms can offer a site of agency outside formal state media structures, so they have become an important venue of professionalisation for the younger generation of Russian women with feminist worldviews. However, as shown by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and its consequences for the Russian media at large, during crises these sites become highly precarious, which means that professional and other support systems that rely on media platforms can easily be dismantled.

As established by a range of scholars, global platforms favour commodified, entrepreneurial, and individualistic expressions of feminism (Savolainen et al. 2020; Saraswati 2021) that cannot properly challenge the global hierarchies of neoliberal capitalism, including those based on gender, which underlie these very technologies (Rottenberg 2018). In this media framework accumulating media visibility, understood as 'celebrity capital' (Driessens 2013a) has become a major asset that is particularly attractive to those actors who have lesser access to other resources within media industries, such as economic and social capital. However, as discussed in the previous chapter on Russian high-profile macro-celebrities' engagement with feminism, through the case of Ksenia Sobchak, closer ties with state media structures and their various capitals also means a higher degree of elusiveness when it comes to celebrity figures promoting and identifying with feminism.

This chapter seeks to shed light on the realm of self-professed feminist celebrity figures who have worked their way into media visibility predominantly through the domain of micro-celebrity, i.e., by sharing content and engaging with audiences on their personal social media accounts (e.g., Marwick 2016). This chapter argues that micro-celebrity practices play an especially significant role in amplifying feminist voices across media systems that are closely tied with authoritarian and

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conservative regimes. In Russia, the domain of feminist micro-celebrity was witnessing a powerful expansion until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent media crisis in Russia, which caused a rapid disintegration and reorganisation of online media. Against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to answer the following questions: What kind of discourses of feminism are available to the celebrity framework in the rapidly changing and precarious online environment? What are the key feminist issues and messages, and suggested areas of change addressed by feminist micro-celebrities? What happened to these agendas at the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Our case study is the journalist and YouTuber Tatiana, Tania, Mingalimova, and her YouTube channel Tender editor (*Nezhnyi redaktor*). Mingalimova belongs to the young generation of Russians who grew up with social media as an integral part of their everyday life, lifestyle, and professional development. She produces self-branded (Khamis et al. 2017; Senft 2013) online media content, on some occasions using the English language name 'Tender.' A central component of her self-created media brand is her focus on women's roles and lives in different spheres of culture and society. She presents herself as a feminist, and her videos emphasise sisterhood and women's emancipation from oppressive cultural norms and stereotypes. Currently, Mingalimova produces content from a diaspora position. She had already left Russia and was travelling in Central Europe in February 2022, her trip abroad turning into a life in exile. She continues to regularly publish videos on her YouTube channel, her newest videos covering topics such as travel, fashion, and culture. Another prominent component is interviews with other Russians who live abroad. She also continues to occasionally discuss feminism, female empowerment, and gender roles.

We maintain that Mingalimova's YouTube channel, especially in its pre-2022 phase, provides an illustrative case study for examining a slightly different domain of mediation of feminism than was discussed in the previous chapter, namely, the domain of *micro-celebrity*. This is because, first, using micro-celebrity as the main logic of visibility, Mingalimova's YouTube channel created a very specific media space for a popular cultural adaptation of feminism in the Russian online sphere just before Russia invaded Ukraine. Second, it familiarised the viewers with a network of Russophone feminist activists, who are now visibly taking part in anti-war activism. And finally, as we will show in more detail in Chapter seven, Mingalimova's channel was one of those media resources that contributed to a feminist media ecology, building and maintaining a collective identity, which was then mobilised for anti-war feminist activism from February 2022 on.

Although Mingalimova is a trained professional and a rather well-known figure in Russian-language lifestyle and celebrity media, we locate her media agency primarily as belonging to and deriving from the domain of micro-celebrity. In the social media platform-driven domain, celebrity becomes a highly flexible category, referring to a continuous process of *celebritisation* of people and topics of discussion via a set of practices aiming to heighten media visibility (Driessens 2013b). Therefore, through the case of Mingalimova, in this chapter we also analyse the celebritisation processes of feminism and how micro-celebrity logic has become

particularly important to the social and cultural construction of feminism in Russia today. In addition to a high degree of media content individualisation, actors in this domain communicate in multiple directions and across different feminist networks, and then communicate messages from these networks to their online audiences. Feminist micro-celebrities interact with both entertainment industry celebrities and grassroots feminist activists, which makes micro-celebrity itself an important venue of mediation between multiple spheres of society. The degree of their professionalisation within this domain, furthermore, has to do with the amount of commercial cooperation with domestic and global consumer brands, which makes these actors highly dependent on digital economic structures (Khamis et al. 2017, 201).

With this approach, this chapter engages with recent scholarship conducted in the field of feminist media studies that challenge established views of postfeminist media cultures (Gill 2017; Banet-Weiser et al. 2020), which mainly understand commodified, branded, and neoliberal versions of feminism, including feminist celebrities, as existing as the polar opposite of the feminist political movement, and thus contributing negatively to society's gender equality work. Instead of building on such a dichotomous relation between political and different commercially-oriented expressions of feminisms, recent scholarship has discussed new feminist configurations, in which individualised celebrity branding practices become entangled with 'curated interactions with community organisations, everyday activists, and grassroots campaigners' (Chidgey 2021, 1066) in ways which can efficiently amplify the language of social justice and legislative solutions within the online communication sphere, and can also be utilised in the work of social movements. For instance, Red Chidgey has identified a 'celebrity activist nexus', 'that is mediated by practices of individualised consumer capitalism *and* oriented by explicit social justice frameworks troubling dominant narratives of postfeminist sensibilities' (Chidgey 2021, 1056; emphasis in original). This approach suggests a more multifaceted and interactive relationship between celebrity culture and grassroots political feminism, which together constitute a 'complex, internally variated assemblage of representations and political claims' and a 'historically situated, permeable site of social production – informed by civic society and in turn informing civic society, including its technologies and infrastructures' (Chidgey 2021, 1057; see also Hobson 2017). We maintain that this approach is also productive for the Russian media framework, which is complicated by pervasive state propaganda promoting conservative values and traditional gender roles, and its influence on feminist activism (Perheentupa 2022; Zhaivoronok 2025).

Drawing from this methodological background and focusing on feminist discursive and activist networks being constructed within the Russian micro-celebrity domain, our analysis will first identify key discursive strategies that younger generation journalists – with Mingalimova at the forefront – have honed to promote feminism as a useful contemporary Russian value system, while managing to avoid appearing hostile to the state's conservative rhetoric. Our discussion also pinpoints the drawbacks of these strategies, which have to do with the hyper-emphasised use of postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks to conspicuously underline disengagement from political feminist activism. Finally, our analysis will assess the potential

benefits of micro-celebrity media logic to feminist grassroots politics and activist networks.

Micro-celebrity and the changing face of Russian online media

The first videos on Mingalimova's YouTube channel were a series of celebrity interviews, with a focus on female professionals from the entertainment industry. This group included actresses Iulia Topol'nitskaia, Aleksandra Portich, and Liubov Aksionov, and singers Olimpia, Maruv, Luna, and Manizha, who the international audience knows best from the 2021 Eurovision song contest where she competed with the song 'Russian Woman' (discussed more in depth in Chapter five).

Mingalimova's celebrity interviews quickly became popular and gained her recognition within the mainstream Russian media industry. For instance, in 2019, Mingalimova was invited onto Regina Todorenko's weekly TV show *Friday with Regina*. She was also granted the title of 'best interviewer of 2019' by *Glamour* magazine, competing in this category with celebrity figures such as Regina Todorenko herself and another internet-generated celebrity, popular TV host, and Instagrammer Anastasiia Ivleeva (Todorenko 2019).

In May 2019, Mingalimova launched a new YouTube show, 'Girlfriends' (*Podrugi*). Unlike the one-on-one celebrity interviews, Girlfriends was produced in the format of a discussion group or talk show, where invited guests represented a certain topic or area of interest rather than a personal and professional success story, as was the case with the celebrity interviews. As a result, Girlfriends introduced lively debates with multiple intersecting lines of argumentation and opinions around certain topics and themes, ranging from female sexual and reproductive health to self-care to relationships and psychological issues. The guests often came from the social media domain and many of them can be defined as social media influencers. Thereby, Girlfriends clearly drew from a different celebrity culture sphere than the series of interviews with more traditional celebrities working in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2018). Girlfriends' format gave a lot of flexibility and room for experimentation, and it was even adaptable to lockdown circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021.

On several occasions, Mingalimova highlighted that one of Girlfriends' main tasks was to make feminism understandable for young women like herself, who are interested in celebrity, lifestyle, and popular culture. Another distinctive feature of the show was that Mingalimova ran the debates with first two, and then three co-hosts – Ksenia Dukalis, Karina Istomina, and Tatiana Starikova.[1] Girlfriends thereby relied on the idea that multiple hosts brought differing, and often contradicting points of view to the discussion. It ran for two years, comprised 41 episodes, and was well perceived by the Russophone new media sphere as well as its viewers. For instance, Russian journalist and YouTube host Nadezhda Strelets, who is slightly older than Mingalimova and her target audience, interviewed Mingalimova for her YouTube channel 'Well done, Strelets!' (*Molodets Strelets*). She praised Girlfriends as being something completely unique to Russian-speaking media: 'I haven't seen anything like that on YouTube, on TV, or anywhere. […] You girls don't have any

taboos. You've found a very cool angle on how to address all these issues [of sexuality]' (Strelets 2021). Regina Todorenko too stressed the same qualities of fearlessness, openness, and authenticity that Mingalimova showed as an interviewer (Todorenko 2020). These and other reactions from her media industries peers confirm that Mingalimova was perceived as one of the most innovative journalists of her generation. Her popularity among the YouTube audience is proven by a solid following of her videos, the celebrity interviews being the most popular in terms of number of views (ca. one million views per episode), and just slightly less for Girlfriends (from one half to one million). The overall success of Mingalimova's channel points to an existing niche for a feminist or feminism-friendly lifestyle and celebrity show within Russian-speaking YouTube. Girlfriends ended in 2021 and was followed by a small series of documentary films and podcasts, after which Mingalimova withdrew on a creative break. She resumed posting in August 2022, a few months after the escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine.

We will analyse in detail how Mingalimova's individualistic media project, i.e., her YouTube channel 'Tender editor', developed a very specific discursive strategy, leaning heavily on the celebrities' media visibility and appeal to introduce, explain, and frame feminism for the Russian-speaking, potentially non-feminist YouTube audience. The materials chosen for our close reading consists of the series of celebrity interviews (30 videos posted between 2018 and 2020), which launched Mingalimova's channel, and the talk show Girlfriends (41 videos posted between 2020 and 2021), which then further developed the channel's feminist profile and made it one of the landmark shows of popularised feminism within the Russian-speaking media sphere before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the background of our analysis in this chapter is the overall task of better understanding the role of mediated feminism under Russia's conservative authoritarianism, to lay the ground for a further analysis of the emergence of the Feminist Anti-war Resistance movement in February 2022, which again changed the face of Russian feminism.

Not 100 per cent feminist

Even though Mingalimova's celebrity guests were not all public feminists, that is, they did not endorse feminist ideas or collaborate with feminist activism – in fact, some of them were doing quite the opposite – the apparently feminism-friendly agenda of Mingalimova's YouTube project was featured in the topics of discussion reflecting the globally-trending issues emerging from feminist activist circles. Mingalimova brought into the discussion issues such as sexual harassment, unhealthy beauty ideals, and gender discrimination within the entertainment industries. To a few guests, who came across as particularly strong and independent, or who had been labelled feminists in other contexts, she even posed the direct question: 'are you feminist?' – a common question to put to any female celebrity in the #MeToo era.

It is telling that not a single Russian female celebrity interviewed by Mingalimova answered affirmatively to this question. On the contrary, the interviewees clearly wanted to avoid being labelled as feminists because they intuitively understood

'feminist' as being a pejorative term. In this negative meaning, feminism was first of all understood by celebrities as a denial of femininity, or more specifically, a denial of certain gendered behaviour patterns or social codes relating to relationships between men and women. The most repeated of such patterns was that men should pay for women's food and drink at restaurants, with feminists being seen as opposing this 'female privilege.' This pattern was often combined with another negative stereotype of feminists as extremists,[2] which the celebrities went on to define as something foreign to Russian culture and Russian women. In this stereotyped meaning, feminism is viewed as a negation of traditional Russian womanhood, as unnatural behaviour which, however, is widely accepted in 'other countries' or 'in the West', as some of the celebrities put it. For example, TV host and long-term reality show star Elena Vodonaeva's answer efficiently captured this stereotype, as she stated: 'I don't like this movement [feminism], I absolutely don't support it. I think it's wild that in some countries people split the restaurant bill in half', adding, 'I don't think I'm a feminist.' By calling the habit of splitting the restaurant bill 'wild' (*diko*), Vodonaeva implied that practicing gender parity in everyday situations is uncivilised, which efficiently amplified the negative tone of the term 'feminist' and was thus an efficient discursive tool for othering feminism for Russian audiences.

At the same time, most female celebrities interviewed for Mingalimova's project welcomed, or even openly advocated for, some other core ideas that have been at the centre of many contemporary Russian feminist groups' political and media activism. This resulted in a highly contradictory discourse on feminism. In essence, each celebrity response to Mingalimova's question 'are you a feminist?' introduced a similar discursive tactic of appropriating some specific idea clearly relating to contemporary feminist activism as their individualised personal or professional brand, while simultaneously disengaging from feminism as a political movement or ideology. At the same time, they all seemed to be choosing a slightly different issue or idea to cling to when discussing and defining what feminism is or isn't to them. On the surface, this points to a multitude of feminisms available to the celebrities through which they can speak to audiences and build their public image. However, a more detailed examination of the individual answers to the symptomatic 'are you a feminist?' question is due in order to understand the underlying logic behind this uneasy but prominent celebrity discourse on feminism.

For instance, in her interview, Ukrainian pop singer Maruv evoked the image of a self-sufficient, successful female artist emancipated from patriarchal structures of the entertainment industry. At the same time, she addressed the double standard behind this image. As a follow-up to her answer to the question 'are you a feminist?', Maruv contemplated the 'dual role' of women who strive to succeed professionally, saying that women are expected to be 'tough' (*sil'naia*) and 'strong-willed' (*volevaia*) on the one hand, and 'soft' (*miagkaia*) on the other. She continued by arguing that being a woman is 'hard work' (*slozhnaia rabota*), but that, with self-respect (*samootsenka*), it is possible to find a 'golden middle ground' (*zolotaia seredina*) between the contradicting expectations and roles. These thoughts align with a postfeminist understanding of gender roles, which relies on the idea of

equal opportunities as given, while suggesting that women should continuously work on *themselves* in order to qualify professionally as well as societally (Gill 2017). More precisely, Maruv here was drawing from the Russian 'domesticated' (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015) version of postfeminism which relied on the Soviet cult of labour to legitimise the postfeminist proposition for the tactical use of femininity and traditional gender roles to gain success in a market economy (see also Ratilainen 2012).

Make-up artist, beauty blogger, and influencer Elena Krygina's rejection of the feminist label, in turn, relied on the same explanation as Vodonaeva's. She claimed that she cannot be '100 per cent feminist' because she likes it 'when men do something' for her, like opening a door or carrying shopping bags for her. At the same time, her disengagement from feminism was not complete by any means, as she went on to say that, however, she has a 'feminist take on many things' (*vo mnogom opredeliaiu feministichno*). From here, she started an interesting chain of argumentation, revealing how the term 'feminism' constitutes the centre of a larger ideological battle, in which celebrities are trying to manoeuvre for their own benefit, and which, as shown here by Krygina's example, seems to be having a multitude of expressions and variations.

Thematically sticking to her own area of expertise, namely the beauty industry, Krygina went on to explain in more detail what a 'feminist take' meant for her: 'I don't like extremes. The West has already gone a bit too far to the extreme and now men there use more make-up than women […] Well […] I don't know […]' The self-contradiction of Krygina's answers was further revealed when she began talking about Russian male beauty bloggers.[3] She asserted that she's 'crazy about them' (*obozhaiu*) and continued by stating that here, 'gender identification' (*gendernaia prinadlezhnost*) does not play any role when it comes to these men's professional and aesthetic virtuosity. She made the point that Russian male beauty bloggers even show a certain amount of bravery in relation to 'contemporary Russian reality.' This was a subtle allusion to conservative gender discourses and homophobia prevailing in the Russian public sphere. Krygina's answer was thus located in Russian neoconservative public discourse, which groups together anti-Western sentiment and liberal human rights movements such as those advocating feminism and LGBTQI+ rights (Hutchings and Tolz 2015; Edenborg 2018).

At the same time, her answer referred to non-normative gender identities as being on an axis of inequality, which is especially relevant to contemporary Russia (*Russkii realii*). She did not mention the structural reasons behind this inequality, such as the discriminatory anti-gay law from 2013 prohibiting 'propaganda of non-traditional sexuality among minors', which legitimised physical and symbolic violence towards sexual minorities in Russia (Kondakov 2022). Instead, she brought up the example of cultural visibility and agency of non-heteronormative masculinity of famed male make-up artists and, again in a very subtle way, referred to their nonconforming relationship with the surrounding 'reality' (cf., Miazhevich 2022). However, this explanation also aligns firmly with the emphasis of Russian feminist grassroots activism on intersectional feminism and sexual equality (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2017; Kondakov 2022; Perheentupa 2022).

In sum, Krygina's replies were a chaotic mix of different arguments representing divergent ideological and cultural viewpoints, ranging from conservative and anti-Western to liberal pluralist views. As a result, Krygina ended up *both* criticising 'Western extremism', i.e., public manifestations of queer masculinity, *and* applauding the skills and bravery of Russian male make-up artists who transgress the country's restrictive gender norms and challenge its oppressive gender politics. From this it follows that Krygina's feminist attitude could be defined as emancipation from the cultural norm of gender binary and a celebration of transgressive gender identities, which evokes the activist and academic intersectional frame of reference, as it points to how 'gender dichotomy […] works as a mechanism of oppression, silencing, and marginalisation of other experiences of femininity and masculinity' (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2017, 31).

Krygina's intersectional feminist attitude becomes subsumed with the postfeminist ethos because gender roles, whether they conform to or transgress Russia's conservative gender norms, are understood ultimately as a personal project which can be instrumentalised for professional success within the platform economy. This mediated representation of feminism found in Mingalimova's celebrity interviews resonates with Marjo Kolehmainen's (2022, 79) discussion of the postfeminist logic of gender as 'a matter of personal performance', how individual choices and preferences become a terrain of 'doing gender' and performing it to others in professional arenas.[4] For the Russian media discourse, however, such a logic of performing gender as an individual choice is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can open up some room for diversifying the popular understanding of gender and sexual identities to include a diversity of different gender performances, as in the case here with male make-up artists, accompanied with the message that the Russian beauty industry should not be limited by traditional normative gender norms. On the other hand, it has the effect that queer identities become depoliticised and re-appropriated for the market-oriented discourse of the 'work on the self' in a society where sexual and gender minorities are heavily oppressed by the regime and are continuously losing political rights.

This identified gap between an individualised appropriation of feminist ideas and the political feminist movement in Russia was further reinforced in Mingalimova's interview with popular singer Manizha, which was one of the few celebrity interviews to even acknowledge the existence of a feminist political movement and feminist activism in Russia. Overall, in her answer to the question 'are you a feminist?' Manizha followed a very similar discursive tactic of dis/engagement as in the previous examples. More precisely, Manizha's disengagement was evasive, as her answer was, 'I am in support of humanity. I have my own philosophy', continuing, 'I don't call it feminism.'

It turns out that Manizha's rejection of feminism related to a specific background story about a special project 'Mother', i.e., a publicity campaign against domestic abuse, which Manizha authored in 2019. The campaign consisted of a music video to Manizha's song 'Mother' (*Mama*), illustrating the physical and emotional horror of domestic violence from the point of view of a teenage girl.[5] The video was

filmed to promote a mobile app called 'Silsila', which was designed by Manizha and her team as a technological aid for those experiencing or witnessing domestic violence.[6] At the end of Manizha's music video, an informational fragment appears listing figures to illustrate the extent of the problem in today's Russian society and stating: 'in Russia 36,000 women are beaten by their husbands. Every year, from 12,000 to 16,000 women die from domestic violence. One woman dies every forty minutes.'[7]

As a whole, the project combined media branding and celebrity with the long-term anti-violence advocacy work that feminist activists and women's NGOs have been conducting in Russia since the 1990s (Hemment 2004; Johnson 2009). The 'Mother' campaign was an attempt to mobilise Manizha's celebrity capital to raise public awareness around the issue of domestic violence, but also to provide support – both moral and technological – for those encountering domestic violence in their everyday lives. The campaign was successful in this respect as it circulated widely on social media and was covered in some Russian-language online media.[8] Therefore, Mingalimova's interview can be seen as just one channel Manizha was using to publicise the project, the core message of which was the lack of any support system for the survivors of domestic violence. The discussion of Manizha's campaign, as well as the topic of domestic violence more generally, took up almost half of the entire interview, and Manizha grew particularly galvanised and emotional when explaining various dimensions of it. She vividly described the significant amount of effort and personal resources she had invested in the project and her moments of doubt and despair over its possible failure. This showed that the project meant a lot to her personally and that she closely related with the Russian feminist movement's agenda of raising social awareness about different forms of gendered violence.

Although other sources show that Manizha relied on the women's NGO 'No to violence' (*Nasiliiu net*) when working on this project, in her interview with Mingalimova, Manizha focused on the negative feedback she received to her project from feminist activists. Therefore, the experience of being rejected by the feminist activist community seemed to be at least one of the reasons behind Manizha's refusal to be called a feminist at that time. She expressed disappointment and emotional discomfort, talking about herself in the third person when describing the conflict, as if from the point of view of the dismissive feminists: 'when you don't do anything, Manizha is bad, and when you're doing something, Manizha is bad', adding, shifting back to first-person speech, 'I don't like that,' then concluding by explaining that, after all, domestic violence is just 'one small piece of one big puzzle.'

With the metaphor of a puzzle, Manizha somewhat surprisingly did not refer to the larger context of Russian society where social security networks are gradually dismantling, but to her personal creative work and career as a whole, and the range of social and other issues she is advocating for and against, from beauty ideals and self-acceptance to cyber bullying and xenophobia (see Chapter five). In other words, she addressed her career as a pop singer and her 'own position in life' as the wider context of this feminism-inspired anti-violence campaign, which, when

articulated this way, can appear to be an opportunistic instrumentalisation of the feminist agenda to advance her own celebrity status.

Overall, the series of one-on-one interviews with Russian female celebrities on Mingalimova's channel comes across as an attempt to *celebritise* feminism for the niche of Russian YouTube audiences engaged with global popular culture and online networks. By persuading celebrity women to take a stance on feminism, her channel was thereby re-articulating and re-interpreting feminism from the point of view of Russian celebrity culture. However, a highly ambiguous discourse was formed as a result. The tension in the discourse culminates around the term 'feminist', because in Russian society feminist is a highly stigmatised oppositional political identity, which celebrities are keen to distance themselves from by any means possible. They wish to remain apolitical figures to avoid any public controversy that could cause them a loss of celebrity capital. However, Mingalimova's attempt to bring together the concepts of Russian celebrity and feminism in a new, positive framework and, in this way, challenge the persisting negative stereotype seems to be sincere, making this series of celebrity interviews subversive to the hegemonic Russian discourse on feminism.

Feminism for the masses

Mingalimova's second project, 'Girlfriends', was launched on May 27, 2019 as a sex-positive talk show for young women. Mingalimova introduced the first episode by asserting: 'there's a catastrophic lack of opportunities for women to talk about sex' and that, with this new YouTube talk show format, she wanted to create a space for women to talk openly. Mingalimova explained that the title refers to her and her co-hosts as trusted girlfriends in whom the viewer can confide. At the end of the first episode, Mingalimova revealed the second goal of the show: to find out what feminism is and 'to explain in an adequate manner […] because especially in Russia people in general don't understand what feminism is', to which co-host Ksenia Dukalis added, 'for the masses it is a negative word.'

With these words, Mingalimova and Dukalis foregrounded one of the key features of the previous series of interviews, i.e., the confused and conflicted celebrity discourse on feminism. In a way, the celebrity interviews too can be seen as reflecting this 'lack of understanding' which Mingalimova and Dukalis found among Russian people and the 'masses.' As the analysis above further pinpoints, it was precisely feminist as a political identity from which the celebrities were systematically disengaging, while appropriating a set of feminism-related ideas to be part of their public image as empowered and independent women in the contemporary Russian entertainment industry. Against this backdrop it was remarkable that Girlfriends, as if learning from this experience with the celebrity figures, then moved on to talk with feminist civil society actors and activists, thereby risking politicising the new talk show format in a way that is quite contradictory to the celebrity framework that gravitates towards neoliberal de-politicisation, as discussed above.

Starting by examining this 're-branding' towards a more overt engagement with political feminism, this section looks at the evolution of mediated feminist discourses

by considering the emerging horizontal networks across Russian (micro-)celebrity and civil society domains and how they are represented on Mingalimova's channel. Our discussion here covers the four episodes of Girlfriends that contained guests from civil society and feminist activist realms, examines in more detail how knowledge coming from these domains was framed, and what discursive tactics the hosts deployed when continuing to explain 'what feminism is' to their Russian YouTube audience at that particular intersection.

An episode focusing on domestic violence, entitled 'Why not just get up and leave?' (2021) is an illustrative example of the co-existence of celebrity and activist frameworks in this new format. The episode was made in COVID quarantine mode, every participant talking remotely from their home, which also links to one of the key motivations behind making the episode, as Mingalimova explained in her opening lines:

> This time we wanted to film an episode on the topic of domestic violence and abuse […]. Because of the incident with Regina Todorenko, it has become timelier than ever, and, unfortunately, this topic became timely in relation to the quarantine, as the numbers of domestic violence cases drastically rose during the quarantine.

With 'the incident with Regina Todorenko' Mingalimova referred to a scandal that exploded after the Ukrainian-born singer and TV star Regina Todorenko beloved by Russian audiences shamed female survivors of domestic violence in an interview with a Russian TV channel in a particularly crude manner (see Meduza 2020). The interview led to public outrage, and eventually a decision by major global consumer brands, such as Pepsi and Pampers, to cut their sponsorship deals with the star. Later, Todorenko posted a public apology and went on to quickly produce a documentary film in support of domestic violence survivors, in which she discussed the issue with professionals from women's NGOs (Todorenko 2020). The documentary can be seen as a spectacular act of remorse by Todorenko, but also as an attempt to regain her commercial sponsorship. In Girlfriends, Todorenko's example represented a feminist learning process, as a public scandal and the ensuing corrective acts seemed to have helped Todorenko understand, through acquiring new information, that domestic violence is a real issue in Russia and that victim-blaming is wrong.

The main guest of the episode was another Russian celebrity, singer Julia Parshuta, who, as a response to the Todorenko scandal, decided to share publicly her experience of domestic abuse. As part of her narrative of a past relationship, she educated Mingalimova and her co-hosts on the different forms of domestic abuse, and the common pattern of progression of violence from emotional, psychological, and economic to social and physical violence. In sum, while speaking as a lay expert, Julia Parshuta's role in this episode was also to give a celebrity face to domestic abuse and destigmatise the position of victims.

Approximately halfway through the episode Anna Rivina joined the discussion. She is a co-founder of 'No to violence', a Moscow-based NGO providing juridical,

psychological, and material help for victims of domestic violence. In this position she has become a well-known specialist on gendered violence and a public feminist figure widely interviewed by liberal media outlets.[9] 'No to violence' was labelled a foreign agent in 2020 by the Russian Ministry of Justice, as part of a wave of Russian state repression of civil society prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this episode, Rivina's role was to bring expertise from the civil society domain into the celebrity framework, which was an important deviation from the hyper-individualised postfeminist discourse dominating the celebrity interviews analysed in the previous section. It was therefore a remarkable step towards a radically different framing of feminism developing through Girlfriends.

More precisely, Rivina operates in a discursive domain where systemic societal changes and political solutions can, and should, be discussed. Rivina went on to express direct criticism of Russian political elites, including the ultra-conservative MP Yelena Mizulina, who had initiated the legal change towards decriminalising domestic violence in 2017, and President Vladimir Putin who then signed the law amendment. Moreover, her specialist terminology, such as 'family politics', 'gender discrimination', and 'patriarchal [cultural] model' clearly derived from academic feminist analyses of society. For an informed viewer this vocabulary was a reminder of the historical fact that gendered violence is a societal issue that was identified and brought to political consciousness by the transnational women's rights movement, collaborating closely with academic and NGO feminism in 1990s Russia. As, for instance, Julie Hemment (2004, 822) remarked at the time: '[a] small but prominent minority identified as feminists. […] Familiar with Western academic literature they brought insights from Western feminism to bear on Soviet gender relations and on the effects of political and economic reform.' Rivina and her participant position as a women's rights and anti-violence advocate stemmed from this legacy of early post-Soviet academic and NGO feminism.

From the point of view of the discursive formation of celebrity feminism within Mingalimova's YouTube channel, Rivina's role here was to insert an academic feminist vocabulary into the Girlfriends video series, to address the point that Russia's current state family politics and legal framework violate women's rights. As Rivina remarked, domestic abuse is considered a gender discrimination issue by the UN. So here, unlike in the interview with Manizha analysed above, domestic violence was discussed as a societal and structural issue, and the celebrity framework highlighted that domestic abuse is pervasive in all class and societal layers, including the economically and culturally privileged celebrities.

From this episode, it thus became clear that the format of Girlfriends provided an educational set-up for conversations on feminism-related topics, with the guests assuming different expert roles. However, it also soon became evident that this feminist education continued to have an uneasy relationship with feminism as political identity. In Rivina's case, for example, the word 'feminism' was absent from the conversation, and instead Mingalimova used the more generalised Russian term 'female agenda' to address the gendered nature of domestic violence. It was only in retrospect, in another episode with the Pussy Riot member and one of the world's most famous feminists Nadia Tolokonnikova, that Rivina was labelled a

feminist, and not just any feminist but the 'face of Russian feminism.' Interestingly, this labelling was to do with Mingalimova's quest to distinguish a Russian version of celebrity feminism, as she first asked Tolokonnikova to name one high-profile Russian celebrity who would represent the feminist agenda for the broader public. Perhaps recognising her own status as an international feminist celebrity, Tolokonnikova replied that in this regard she was not interested in 'superstars', but in activists such as Rivina and her colleagues working in the civil society sector.

Three separate episodes of Girlfriends were devoted to feminism, and they featured self-identified feminist activist guests. These episodes can be seen as forming the core of feminist education of Mingalimova's project. At the same time, these episodes introduced a changed dynamic between the four hosts and the invited guests, as the tactic of persuasion, that is, persuading the guests to talk about feminism or engage with feminism without having to identify as a feminist, changed to conflict and confrontation. In the episode with Tolokonnikova, the co-hosts only challenged their feminist guest after she had left the video call. For example, Tania Starikova accused Tolokonnikova of not using her high-level media visibility, i.e., celebrity capital, to actualise her ideals of gender equality and human rights on 'real people', while co-hosts Istomina and Dukalis concluded that, for them, Tolokonnikova was an important 'symbol' of feminist philosophy, which might also mean that, for the Girlfriends, Tolokonnikova remained distant, a feminist celebrity icon, whose status was unattainable and 'untranslatable' to the Russian 'masses' that the talk show wished to educate.

Another confrontation with feminist guests unravelled when Mingalimova started a conversation with influencers Aleksandra Mitroshina and Alisa Sapozhkova by saying, 'Let's discuss fem porn.' Mitroshina bluntly replied, 'honestly, porn as an industry cannot be fem', and Sapozhkova added, 'of course this fem porn must be humane but unfortunately that's not an answer as the porn industry is a disaster.' An explosive 15-minute debate followed, taking up one third of the entire episode, in which the co-hosts aggressively challenged these views, while Mingalimova and Dukalis tried to stay focused on what forms of porn could be regarded as feminist, and Istomina argued that porn actresses she knew enjoyed their work and had chosen this profession out of their own free will. In response, Mitroshina framed her arguments with a mix of sociological and legislative jargon, constantly extending the discussion to also cover other forms of sex work. This re-scaling of the topic from porn to sex work at large enabled her to respond to Istomina: 'there are women who like it, but huge numbers of women suffer. For example, in Russia it is illegal to be a prostitute, while it is OK to be a client.'

It soon became evident that a high degree of incompatibility of perspectives prevailed in this conversation. Istomina and the other Girlfriends were speaking from the individualistic viewpoint of sexually-empowered women, whereas the feminist guests spoke from the point of view of societal and structural gender inequalities. These differently scaled points of view furthermore led to an unresolved conflict between feminist activists and the hosts. In the end, the talk show here merely provided a dialogue between different 'feminisms', which can be seen as 'liberal choice feminism emphasising individual rights' versus 'political

feminism critical of patriarchal economic structures' (cf., Rottenberg 2018). Instead of acknowledging that the guests were approaching fem porn from a radically different vantage point from themselves, the hosts concluded that the conflict was caused by the guests' 'radicalised' views. Dukalis and Istomina, for example, summarised Mitroshina's and Sapozhkova's takes on porn as 'radicalisation', which put the feminist activist guests in a highly unfavourable light and alienated them from the allegedly non-feminist viewers. A similar dynamic pervaded all fragments of the interviews, in which the feminist guests' views clearly contradicted the hosts' empowered, sex-positive, and individualistic post-feminist ethos, relating to discussion topics such as 'Victoria's Secret' models or non-binary gender identities.

Overall, the hosts repetitively referred to radical feminism (in Russian, *radfem*) as a sort of abject feminism that needs to be fenced off, figuratively speaking, from other feminisms. In another instance, Dukalis asked Mitroshina and Sapozhkova to explain the meaning of what she called 'radical elements', i.e., feminists who 'don't wash but scream and judge others for not being proper feminists.' In another episode, Mingalimova used a similar stereotype when she referred to 'women who expose their breasts in the Metro and walk around with unshaved armpits.' These caricature images of unhygienic and misbehaving, and in this respect opposed to normative femininity, 'radical' feminist activists are widespread and can be found in almost identical forms anywhere where someone speaking from outside the movement, often from an articulated anti-feminist position, is making fun of or discrediting feminist activism (see also Chapters two and five). Therefore, the hosts' use of these negative stereotypes, as following the ethos of media sensationalism, can be seen as acts of confrontation and provocation, trying to imbue the discussions with an atmosphere of scandal and controversy. On the other hand, these pejorative caricatures can here be interpreted as an invitation to the activists to respond to the stereotypes in a way that would be productive to the emerging discourse of co-existing celebrity and political activism frameworks within the Russian micro-celebrity domain.

The third interview, with feminist activist and popular influencer Nika Vodvud, invites us to elaborate this further. Even though the hosts at first deliberately avoided the topic of 'radfem', the discussion eventually arrived exactly there. First Istomina, confused by the complexity of Vodvud's academic and didactic manner of speech in which she explains feminist activism, asked politely: 'can you please explain, what is your understanding of active feminism? Well, not radfem […] of which I'm very afraid.' After this co-host Starikova jumped in, questioning Vodvud's views of structural sexism: 'I haven't encountered this once in my life. I encountered it [the idea of structural sexism] for the first time when I was told that if I want to support women's rights, I must agree with the fact that I am second rate', which prompted Istomina to rephrase her question as: 'please explain […] why are you so radical?' Here Vodvud finally had an opportunity to explain radical feminism from her own, again mainly academically-informed point of view, challenging anti-feminist stereotypes:

> Radical feminism is not opposed to some kind of proper, adequate feminism. […] Radical feminism is opposed to liberal feminism, because liberal feminism thinks that there's a system and it doesn't need to be changed, you just need to do something within this system. Radical feminism, in turn, is about the necessity to change the system.

This was a discursive breaking point for the format of 'Girlfriends', as it offered an entirely new opening where it was possible to start creating a celebrity-activist nexus. Here the discussion reached a point where, instead of negative stereotypes, 'radical feminism' connected to a human rights vocabulary, because here Vodvud also listed the goals of her 'radical feminist activism.' She articulated demands for legal improvements and changes to be made to the political regime, 'to criminalise domestic violence, to criminalise all other forms of violence, and to prioritise human rights [in decision making] and not do the opposite.'

As discussed at the beginning of this section, Girlfriends included other single episodes and pieces of conversation where the invited guests addressed flaws in the Russian political system, especially the lack of protective legislation for victims of domestic violence. However, this exchange with Vodvud was radically different because it was precisely here that a definition of 'radical feminism' was proposed, which further led to a synthesis of opposing views from the hosts and the guest. At the end of the episode, Istomina summarised: 'I am for liberal feminism in the sense that I think that it is only in my personality', and continued:

> I think that my take on life is that if you don't like something then you shouldn't do it. […] If you're dissatisfied with something in your surroundings, you should change it. I'm not interested, for example, in activism. But activism is cool. And it's cool that there are women who fight for me, even if I don't do it myself. Feminism is absolutely needed, because we definitely have issues with these corporations, with this harassment, and violence is for real, really frightening.

Conclusion

In addition to being one of the most important digital platforms for influencers, YouTube is also one of the few Western platforms that have not been blocked or banned by law in Russia since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. YouTube's relevance for Russian influencers has, however, diminished since Google blocked Russian YouTubers from using its monetisation services, as part of Western sanctions against Russia. In the period prior to February 2022, YouTube was one of the fastest-growing media channels in Russia, where influencer culture gained ground and became a recognised sphere of public activity and information exchange. In this trend, YouTube became a key media outlet for Russian feminist social media influencers and educators.

Through scrutinising the YouTuber Tatiana Mingalimova – and focusing on two different sets of her videos, interviews with Russian female celebrities, and

the talk show 'Girlfriends' – this chapter has examined what discourses of feminism are available for online Russian audiences in the domain of micro-celebrity. Mingalimova's YouTube channel 'Tender editor' functioned both as a venue for herself to accumulate media visibility and popularity for her lifestyle journalism, and as a channel through which an interconnected discursive network between celebrity and feminist actors and topics was forming. Due to her considerable popularity and visibility, Mingalimova became a unique intermediate figure in the Russian media sphere, between both global and local feminist media cultures, as well as between the individualised expressions of celebrity feminism and the feminist civic sphere, and political activism. Mingalimova's professional background in online media helped her to quickly popularise feminism for Russian young online audiences and to identify, and fill, a special niche of celebrity engagement with feminism.

This close discourse analysis of Mingalimova's channel further shows that celebrity in this emerging online domain is discursively linked with a set of issues, concerns and positionalities, such as women's professional and sexual empowerment, LGBTQI+ rights, and advocacy against domestic violence, which, on her YouTube channel, can on occasion be interpreted as feminist, and other times as not. On the contrary, feminist as a political identity committed to advancing a regime change towards gender equity in Russia, appears risky and contested when linked to celebrities' agency. In this regard, the feminist micro-celebrity discourse favours a neoliberal and individualistic take on feminism where the emphasis is on personal empowerment and promoting a certain self-brand with liberal and progressive dispositions. As combined with aspirations to accumulate media visibility and popularity in online spaces, feminism is at risk of becoming a spectacle, a performance of visibility, and a form of cultural currency. The talk show Girlfriends proved a more flexible format for experimenting with a variety of new types of celebrity constellations and interpretations of feminism. Continuing to draw from the celebritified image of the channel Tender editor, Girlfriends attempted to establish a popular understanding of feminism that was more linked to feminist society actors outside the celebrity domain. Although the multi-host, and often multi-guest, talk show format allowed for discussions of Russian gender politics and feminist activism more openly and freely, the discourse was dominated by anti-feminist stereotypes, favouring again, the neoliberal interpretation of choice feminism as the only 'adequate' feminist identity for an aspirational celebrity figure.

We can conclude that Mingalimova's YouTube projects succeeded in developing new celebrity-informed frames for discussing some issues of gender inequality, such as gender-based violence and harassment, that prove accessible to a non-feminist online public. In addition, Mingalimova's channel might have familiarised her followers with a network of feminist activist-influencers (see Chapter eight) who have become visible actors of post-2022 Russian anti-war activism. The blind spots of the feminist micro-celebrity discourse analysed in this chapter relate to the counterproductive nature of the hyper-emphasised use of postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks to conspicuously underline the celebrities' disengagement from politics, which results in a discursive hybridisation of state-conservative, liberal,

and grassroots feminist discourses. Ultimately, the feminist micro-celebrity's mediator task within this discursive field comes down to promoting feminism as a useful value system, while avoiding appearing hostile or opposed to the state's conservative gender regime. Finally, the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the ensuing censorship seemed to have a strong depoliticising effect on Mingalimova's production values. Her contribution to celebrifying and popularising feminism in Russia pre-2022, however, is indisputable.

Notes

1 Prior to joining Mingalimova's channel, they were known from Russia's popular culture's online sphere: Dukalis is the co-owner of a new media agency, 'Belong Agency', and a fashion blogger, Istomina is a model and DJ, and Starikova is a video host and YouTuber on popular cultural topics.
2 See Yangeldina (2023) for a detailed analysis of the meaning of radical feminism, or *radfem* in Russian social media discourse.
3 Prompted by Mingalimova's question: 'we've started to have a lot of male bloggers, in particular beauty bloggers […] what's your take on them?'
4 Kolehmainen sees such logic at work in the relationship-counselling industry in Finland (Kolehmainen 2022).
5 The video was directed by a famous director Lado Kvataniia, who had previously filmed videos for Russian rappers Husky and Oxxxymiron. In the video for 'Mother', the father is depicted as a laser-eyed monster who eventually beats the mother to death. In one of its most striking scenes, the mother associates her situation with a piece of meat that the father batters with a steak mallet in the kitchen in preparation for dinner.
6 Can be retrieved via GooglePlay and Apple's app store.
7 Other sources show that the figures presented in the music video were provided by the NGO 'No to Violence' (*Nasiliiu net*) and other human rights organisations, and that Manizha herself was also collecting data on the number of domestic abuse cases. However, the origin of the figure is unclear. According to the Russian Federal Bureau of Statistics, in 2012, the total number of people of all ages and genders who died due to various forms of violent actions was 14,945, and this number has been decreasing since then. More realistic data is provided by the Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Associations, which indicates that over eight years, from 2011 to 2019, 12,209 women were killed by a partner or relative (Algoritm sveta, n.y.).
8 See Pravila Zhizni (2019).
9 Rivina's feminist stance is more prominent on other platforms, such as the YouTube series 'FEM IS'.

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5 Who can be a 'Russian woman'? Manizha as an intersectional feminist celebrity

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Introduction

Born in Dushanbe in 1991, Manizha Dalerovna Sangin and her family fled the Tajik civil war and moved to Moscow in 1994. Manizha became a Russian citizen at the age of 14 and started performing in early adolescence with the stage name Rukola under a commercial label. In 2016, she decided to pursue a career as the independent artist Manizha, promoting her work via social media. In 2021, she represented Russia at the Eurovision Song Contest, where her performance was placed ninth. Manizha is known for being outspoken about societal issues, publicly supporting the LGBTQI+ community and migrant workers, criticising gender stereotypes and body shaming. Likewise, her creative work and artist image reflect societal themes. Manizha raises awareness of domestic violence, engages with charitable foundations, and serves as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020–onwards). With these public activities she challenges Russian state policies and, as a female celebrity with a Tajik background, she challenges the country's dominant media discourses of gender and ethnicity. In February 2022, Manizha declared her opposition to the war in Ukraine, which led to her being blacklisted from official venues, with performance cancellations under the pressure of Russia's political establishment.

This chapter engages the theory of intersectional feminism and applies it to the post-Soviet context. Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s 'as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics' (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 787). It became a key term when addressing the social, economic, and political inequalities caused by the multiple intersecting axes of discrimination of gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, and/or ableness (Yuval-Davis 2015). Mainstream use of the term has been criticised by feminist scholars for adopting intersectionality as a synonym for diversity and multi-culturalism, simultaneously distancing it from the collective political goals of the feminist movement (Carastathis 2014).

It has been argued that the theory of intersectionality, strongly rooted in American feminist criticism of racial politics (Davis 1983; hooks 1990; Crenshaw 1992; Lorde 2007), is not easily 'translatable' to other, non-Western contexts

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(Yangeldina 2023; Miazhevich 2025b). In Russia, for instance, intersectionality plays out differently due to the Soviet legacy of artificially imposed ideologies of multi-culturalism and the 'Friendship of Peoples' (*Druzhba narodov*) (Tolz 2001). Recent decolonial feminist scholarship uses the intersectionality framework to conceptualise ethnic inequalities in the post-Soviet region and to discuss structural racism towards Central Asian migrants in Russia, while arguing that 'there exists no universally accepted vocabulary to discuss Russian/Soviet racism and colonialism' (Kravtsova 2022, 77; see also Biktimirova and Kravtsova 2022, 96).[1]

This chapter proposes that Manizha's public image and 'brand' are informed by the postfeminist neoliberal adoption of intersectionality (Flood 2019) on the one hand, and her ethnic Tajik background on the other. Tajikistan is a Central Asian country that was colonised by the Soviet Union and is currently under Russia's neo-colonial political and economic domination (Pasilov 2023; Laruelle 2007). Migrant labourers moving from Central Asia to Russia often face structural and everyday racism in addition to harsh working conditions and deplorable housing, legal precarity, and administrative discrimination by Russian employees and officials (Reeves 2015; Avrutin 2022). Manizha is one of the few celebrities who has addressed discrimination against Central Asian migrant labourers and advocated for their rights. In so doing, she is also 'one of the few public figures who has reconstructed Russian whiteness publicly' (Wiedlack and Zabolotnyi 2023, 252) thereby introducing the concept of race as part of contemporary Russian celebrity discourse.

Interestingly, Manizha cultivates intersectionality as part of her multi-media brand. As this chapter will show, it informs both her media and cultural capital. By borrowing from transnational feminism and global popular culture, as well as from post-Soviet discourses, Manizha articulates a particular *hybrid neoliberal and decolonial take on intersectionality*. Specifically, she addresses inter-ethnic tension and human rights issues without overtly politicising them. At the same time, her personal brand, on which she capitalises when she promotes her work on online platforms, openly draws from the representation of ethnicity and human rights issues. Manizha thereby contributes to mainstreaming progressive ideas on gender and sexuality via commercial routes, which, as we demonstrate below, is a viable way to promote certain liberal ideas in neoconservative Russia and, in a way, similar to what feminist celebrities and influencers were doing when popularising feminist ideas online (see Chapters three to four). Unlike other micro- and meso-celebrities with national-level visibility (see Chapter four), Manizha bridges both domestic and international music industries, thus addressing a slightly different and broader set of audiences.

Against this backdrop, this chapter analyses the popular cultural manifestation of the intersectional sensibility of Manizha's multi-platform media presence. We use the term 'intersectional sensibility' as our analytical tool to better grasp the unstable, fluid, and mediated nature of Manizha's discourse of gender and ethnicity (cf., Gill 2007). As with other female celebrities analysed in previous chapters (Chapters three to four), Manizha does not openly claim to be an intersectional feminist, but this potential positionality is formed via multiple, sometimes contradictory

articulations of ideas related to gender, feminism, ethnicity, and racism in Manizha's creative production and media work. In other words, 'sensibility' here incorporates numerous direct and indirect ways of discursively constructing intersectional feminism as a public position (cf., Banet-Weiser et al. 2020, 5).

Our close multi-modal analysis is based on a set of materials that are representative of Manizha's versatile use of, and visibility in, different media environments and genres: music videos for the songs 'Not Slavic enough' (*Nedoslavianka*) and 'Between two walls' (2023); Manizha's stage performance at the Eurovision Song Contest in Rotterdam in May 2021; a behind-the-scenes mini-documentary of Manizha's music video for her song 'Gun' (Horsman 2024); her Instagram account (@manizha); and interviews with Manizha published on YouTube by a range of journalists, in which she discusses her work and responds to the Russian public's backlash following her selection as the candidate for the Eurovision 2021.[2] After contextualising inter-ethnic relations within a Soviet state in relation to the theory of intersectionality, the chapter discusses Manizha's music performances of cultural hybridity, her counter-discourses to the racist backlash, and her shifting strategy of dealing with her multiple identities post-February 2022. In the concluding section, we consider our findings' implications for the mediation of feminism in Russia.

Soviet multi-culturalism and post-Soviet constructions of belonging

As noted above, the post-imperial nature of Russia and the former USSR creates a very specific understanding of intersectionality compared to the intersectionality understood within Western feminism as a sensitivity to race, class, gender, and other differences. In the USSR, there was an expectation that people of various national and ethnic identities (*natsionalnost'*) would come together as one 'supra-national "meta-ethnic" entity of *Sovetskii narod*', the Soviet people, unified by a certain type of internationalism via class solidarity (Bassin and Kelly 2012, 4). However, in practice, various nations had a different standing within the USSR, based on the hierarchy between colonies and the semi/peripheries, with their members experiencing differing attitudes outside and within their national regions (Suny 1993). Namely, a more overt ethnicity-based discrimination was present outside of the regional areas.

As Madina Tlostanova (2010, 113–123), building on Eric Weitz (2002), argues, despite this rhetoric of ethnic and national equality and a lack of explicit discourses on race, national and ethnic identities in the USSR were in fact racialised. Russian or Slavic ethnicities were ranked as being culturally and socially privileged, compared to non-European ethnicities that were not only discriminated against, but also subjected to displacements and annihilation. These differing policies, enacted under the ostensible umbrella of Soviet multi-culturalism, also intersected with gender. For instance, the Soviet colonial attitudes were more pronounced in Central Asian republics, meaning that gender politics also played out differently there, as Gradskova (2013) noted on the discriminatory treatment of non-White women in the USSR.

By the late Soviet period, the idea of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-peopled nature of the USSR community (Hutchings and Tolz 2015) had lost its appeal. Nevertheless, the hollow narrative of the peaceful coexistence of a 'family of nations' and the ideas of tolerance persisted in the official discourse. This inconsistent nationalities' policy conditioned different post-Soviet sensitivities towards intersectionality – in this case ethnicity – which is characterised by recycling the mythology of a multi-cultural community at the official level and the proliferation of everyday xenophobia at the grassroots level (Miazhevich 2023). In other words, an overt declaration of tolerance and inclusivity at the state level coexists alongside a highly racialised widespread perception of non-White Russians (Avrutin 2022). Importantly, perceptions of ethnicities originating from the former colonies (Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) differ from the attitude towards representatives of other Soviet republics which belong to a more industrialised and urbanised semi-periphery, such as Belarus (Miazhevich 2023). The current influx of Central Asian migrants, who are predominantly engaged in service industries in Russia irrespective of their education, reflects this division. This is combined with pervasive xenophobia which feeds off such 'colonial imaginations' (Yusupova 2024).

Within this localised framework, the notion of intersectionality in the contemporary Russian context has a different connotation from Western feminist scholarship due to dissimilar regional, historical, and socio-cultural factors. Tlostanova (2010, 40, 66–68; quote on 67), for instance, asserts that intersectionality can be used to address the experiences of discrimination against women in different colonial contexts, and simultaneously acknowledges a 'more complex and multi-layered' situation due to the differing local manifestations of Russian and Soviet coloniality and the resulting complexities in their racial and gender categories. Notably, Yangeldina's (2023) exploration of the 'dissemination' of US-based intersectional theory and terminology into Russian feminist discourse reveals that, for some feminists, racial identity categories developed within Western feminism appear foreign and unsuitable for the Russian domestic context. Even though the US-based identity categories may not necessarily be the best to describe ethnic relations in present-day Russia, Yangeldina shows how Russophone feminists nevertheless recognise the existence of racialised hierarchies between different 'Russian' and 'non-Russian' ethnicities (Yangeldina 2023, 200–224).[3] Discourses of intersectionality have until now remained mostly in the domain of Russian academic feminism and online activism, without gaining much resonance in broader society. Manizha is a rare case of a successful female artistic figure with a considerable media visibility and audience reach, whose performances centre around questions of multiple intersecting inequalities that are prevalent in contemporary Russia.

Manizha's performance of a hybrid other

Manizha's awareness of social exclusion and othering of Central Asian migrants was clearly displayed in her video for a song with the provocative title 'Not Slavic enough', in which Manizha plays with gender and ethnic identity to create a

subversive detective story. It starts with the title, which accentuates both female gender (in Russian, the female noun *Nedoslavianka*) and a lower ethnic status (as denoted by the titular nation which is here collectively referred to as *Slavs*) in the implicit racialised hierarchy (Miazhevich 2023). The video, filmed in Tajikistan and in Russia, begins in a post-Soviet bazar and takes the viewer through a variety of other familiar liminal spaces characteristic of migrant imagery – a mountainside driveway, poor living quarters, and an industrial warehouse – into a night-time party in a warehouse where Manizha hands out Russian passports to a large group of Central Asian immigrants.

The visual aesthetics of the video re-fashion some key 2010s Russian cultural phenomena, such as the 'New East Style' and 'aesthetic populism' discussed by Maria Engström in her article 'Transgressing the mainstream: camp, queer, and populism in Russian visual culture' (2021). According to Engström, these styles aestheticise Soviet socio-economic deterioration as well as the everyday life of the subaltern, foregrounding the groups of people that have been marginalised by both the West and Russia's political and economic system (2021). In addition to the emblematic figure of the *gopnik*, a streetwise working-class man from post-Soviet suburbs, this aesthetic has been used in cultural production to bring out racialised subjectivities as well. For instance, Yangeldina (2024) discusses the 2010s' music video trilogy by Russian-Tatar hip hop artist Timati, featuring Timati's fictive impersonation of a hyper-sexualised and hyper-masculine subaltern character Teymuraz, as an example of the New East Style in Russian hip hop. Yangeldina argues that, while drawing from the New East-styled 'aesthetic populism', the figure of Teymuraz reflects low-brow aesthetics that are culturally familiar to the Russian public, to embody the racialisation of Caucasian and Central Asian men in Russian society.

In a similar vein, Manizha's music video 'Not Slavic enough' offers a satirically provocative portrayal of immigrant life, but this time from a female viewpoint. The carnivalesque exaggeration of cultural difference, visualised through a variety of items, such as counterfeit luxury-brand clothes, colourful headdresses, enormous faux gold accessories, hookahs, and rugs, are mixed with oriental musical and dance elements serving as a 'racial metonymy' of non-Russian otherness (Yangeldina 2024, 100). Moreover, Manizha's video highlights the sustained othering of female non-Slavs within Russian society, reflecting fears about their cultural and religious differences. This is done via representations of veiled Muslim females – a backwards, mysterious, and subordinate femininity associated with procreation and large families. On a different level, this video centring around Manizha – an assertive, independent, and successful Muslim female 'other' – challenges a whole set of patriarchal and colonial hierarchies within a former Russian empire.

Thus, through its camp-like representation of Central Asian identity, Manizha's video creates a female version of the exoticised Caucasian or Central Asian – i.e., non-Slavic, non-White – immigrant type familiar from the Teymuraz character mentioned above. In Manizha's case, the camp becomes an element of a quest or celebration. The video's empowering message is highlighted via the dynamic detective plotline that reclaims the immigrant labourers' agency. Furthermore,

by turning the racialised markers of her ethnic otherness into symbols of female empowerment, Manizha attempts to reclaim her racialised female agency. This message is strengthened by an empowering rap section, in which Manizha challenges her home country Russia to acknowledge her hybrid Tajik-Russian identity, to which she refers with the imaginary identity of *mestiza* (cf., Kravtsova 2022): 'who do you think, who do you think you are?/I've been made by mama Russia and my Tajik papa/Listen, listen, you *Rossiia*, Miss Manizha is *mestiza*.'

When Manizha plays the role of the female protagonist – the detective character – she 'loses' her pompous leopard-patterned fake fur and jewellery and changes into a Western-style man's black-and-white suit. In her final encounter with the villain antagonist, Manizha's clothing combines a Matrix-style long coat with a crop top. Thus, even though the video's narrative points to empowering non-Slavic females, its visual arrangement hints that heroic deeds cannot be undertaken in traditionally feminine attire – and even less so in the attire of a racialised and exoticised woman. In this sense, the video's sartorial code seems to point out that the agency of racialised women is limited. This almost unconscious message is highlighted at the end, when cultural stereotypes are juxtaposed with poignant last verses, played in a slow rhythm that contradicts the overall upbeat melody: 'I'm an emigrant/Of my soul/Feeling ashamed of myself/I lose my life.' This section is visualised with a deserted steppe where the detective-protagonist, played by Manizha, falls in front of the antagonist, a villain called Padezh, which is the Russian word for the grammatical term 'case.' As the villain turns around to reveal their face, it turns out to be Manizha herself, symbolising her internalised need to assimilate with the Russians by learning flawless Russian (cf., Zhaivoronok 2021) and turning her back on, and experiencing shame over, her Tajik heritage.

After this subversion of the stereotypical masculine imagery of ethnic otherness into female empowerment in 'Not Slavic enough', Manizha plays further with this intersectional identity in 'Russian woman', performed at the Eurovision Song Contest in Rotterdam in May 2021. In this case Manizha's popularisation of intersectional feminism occurs for the inter/national audience(s), as she strategically and conspicuously plays with Slavic cultural references vis-à-vis Russian multiethnic nationhood. Most significantly, the female agenda and feminist empowerment take centre stage here. The lyrics describe the feminist awakening of a disenfranchised rural girl who waits eternally for a helping (male) hand, until she hears the empowering call to 'break the wall' of patriarchal norms, and step out of her prescribed female roles.

At the start of the song Manizha chants about Russian women's centuries-old struggle for equality and calls for their agency in confronting societal stereotypes, which define women as obedient wives and child bearers, and prescribe beauty standards. Her stage performance is supported by lyrics in Russian and English, Manizha's change of attire and movements, as well as images and empowering text-bites projected as a video on the background. Manizha starts her performance dressed in a huge matryoshka-style gown – a patchwork of various regional patterns – and a flowery Russian headscarf to represent the multi-cultural diversity of the Russian Federation. During the performance, Manizha steps out of her

dress, which only allowed her to hover across the stage in a timid folk-dance style, thereby revealing a red unisex overall typically worn by a manual worker, which enables her to switch to a dynamic hip hop dance.

Multi-ethnicity is highlighted by her backing vocal group comprising four singers of various ethnicities, and a background of multitude of mini screens depicting 'Russian women' singing with Manizha in unison. Representing different ages, religions, cultures, occupations, body shapes, sexualities, and gender identities, these women bring out the diversity of the 'Russian woman' presented in Manizha's song. This grassroots participatory component of the show, in which hundreds of participants contributed via a dedicated Instagram profile (@Manizha_russianwoman; see also Wiedlack and Zabolotnyi 2023, 258), was an unusual and original innovation to the Eurovision performative genre. These clips, forming a visual mosaic, subverted the hegemonic uniform image of the Russian woman based on patriarchal, ethnic, and colonial stereotypes. While some contributors still reproduced this stereotype, in the collage they were depicted side-by-side with non-White, non-heterosexual, and non-cis-women, some of whom were identifiable by the rainbow symbols.

There is one more reason why this intersectional vision of the 'Russian woman' serves as the musical climax of the performance. This aspect might have been less prominent for those unfamiliar with Russian feminist activism, but important for those 'in the know.' Interestingly, the collage included clips by online celebrities and activists such as Milaya Olia and Mariam Alieva; independent journalists from liberal and oppositional media, such as Ekaterina Gordeeva, Alla Gutnikova (*Doxa*), Elena Kostiuchenko (*Novaya Gazeta*); as well as actresses who have appeared in feminist media projects, such as Aleksandra Bortich and Varvara Shmykova. Thus, the collage creates a bridge between pop culture and grassroots feminist activism. Also, for anybody who recognises these figures, the collage appears as an 'alternative' vision to the conservative neo-patriarchal Russia represented by the political elite. In this respect, Manizha's performance has a clear connection to the feminist media activism of the influencers, media, and civil activists discussed in this book. It literally weaves the feminist media-activist network (Chidgey 2021) that is normally absent from Russian mainstream media outlets into a state-sponsored representation of Russian womanhood for the international audience, in the soft power format of the Eurovision contest (Zhaivoronok 2021). Of course, this layer of the performance is not explicit and, perhaps, does not translate in its entirety to either a Russian-speaking or an international audience. However, an informed or curious viewer can access the individual clips on Instagram, which constitutes an extension to the performance both in time and space. Instagram posts also include written messages from each contributor, which range from ultra-conservative takes on gender roles and women's social position to more progressive and critical ones, such as the 'Russian woman struggles to get her voice' and the 'Russian woman is rightless and duty-bound. I wish I could be invisible and free' (@Manizha_russianwoman).

As our reading of Manizha's two performances shows, her representation of the Central Asian and Muslim cultural other problematises the racialised stereotype of an oriental woman, which is often portrayed to global audiences as mystical

and overly sexualised, yet subordinate and lacking agency (Tlostanova 2010, 109–113). Manizha's rejection of this stereotype is even more obvious on her social media channels, which are instrumental to her personal brand and audience outreach. Whilst Manizha appropriates the Tajik aesthetic in her social media brand, she blends it with elements of Eastern spirituality, wellbeing, and body positivity. This echoes the patterns of the ethnic representation of gender roles within neoliberal and postfeminist frameworks. Similarly, Manizha's emphasis of her ethnic background – particularly through her playful appropriation of traditional clothes and accessories – aligns with the global phenomenon of commodifying and commercialising ethnicity and cultural hybridity (Meiu et al. 2020; Kuo 2005; Thompson 2010). However, this commercialisation of cultural difference does not challenge unequal political structures related to ethnicity or race, but depoliticises them and 'foster[s] an understanding of multi-culturalism as a matter of surfaces and styles' (Thompson 2010, 340; Kuo 2005).

In summary, on the one hand, the public figure Manizha promotes via her music videos, stage performances, and self-curated social media feed reclaims her ethnic otherness and stands against the White hegemony of the Russian pop scene. On the other hand, her branding of cultural difference is essentialised and turned into a medium of commodification and capitalisation. This turns her ethnicity into a question of 'stylistic choice', which, by obscuring the related political struggles may eventually lead to a reinforcement of the 'unmarked' category of whiteness (Thompson 2010, 339). The next section analyses Manizha's mediation of anti-racist discourses in Russian online liberal media, which adds another dimension to our discussion of popular feminism and intersectionality in contemporary Russia.

Xenophobic backlash and intersectional counter-discourse in the making

While the international audience might have read Manizha's Eurovision performance as a progressive view of Russianness, at home it triggered a sexist and xenophobic backlash, during which racist remarks directed at Central Asians dominated the digital media, especially social media platforms. A part of the Russian public was outraged by the fact that a singer with a Tajik background had represented 'Russianness' in an international arena. These opinions aligned with the trend articulated by Avrutin (2022, 107–108) as follows:

> […] [a]t the turn of the 21st century an important shift took place in how ethnic Russians viewed themselves and the world around them: not only in terms of national-historical symbols, myths, and legends, but also through the prism of race and whiteness. Russianness and whiteness mutually reinforced one another and were often juxtaposed to blackness.

While this backlash itself has been covered at length elsewhere (Wiedlack and Zabolotnyi 2023, 257–259; also, Zhaivoronok 2021; Kollektiv malykh rek 2021), here we consider the ways in which Russian feminism-friendly media covered the criticism directed at Manizha in light of her Eurovision participation. In particular,

we focus on an almost two-hour-long YouTube interview Manizha gave to the journalist Ekaterina Gordeeva in spring 2021 (Gordeeva 2021). This coverage adds to the variety of popular feminist discourses developed in a reactive dynamic with the conservative media and online publics, and gives insights into the formation of an intersectional feminist counter-discourse within the Russian media sphere one year prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Gordeeva, a well-known independent journalist representing Russia's liberal media, is also known for her pro-feminist stance.[4] Her audience includes both Russian speakers supporting feminism, as well as others outside of this group. Gordeeva held this interview when Manizha was preparing for the Eurovision Song Contest while having to deal with public hate and online criticism. Gordeeva's interview taps into Manizha's public image as an ardent advocate for women's rights, while promoting anti-racism via discursive patterns and framings that are familiar to Russian domestic audiences.

An essential component of the video is a discussion between Gordeeva, Manizha, and five of Manizha's female friends representing different ethnic groups, centring on the meaning of the 'Russian woman' feeding off Russian gender stereotypes. Manizha and her friend Mariam Alieva, an influencer and activist dealing with honour-related violence towards Muslim women in the North Caucasus region, describe the types of sexism they encounter as women's rights advocates. For example, they both point out that it is common for a woman involved in human rights activism to be called a feminist in order to insult and discredit her work. Alieva continues by saying that, in the North Caucasus, '"feminist" is worse [an insult] than prostitute.' Despite this, the conversation goes on to establish a positive attitude towards feminism, setting the tone for the subsequent discussion of the 'Russian woman'[5] – the obvious purpose of which is to respond to the hostile backlash by showing the lived reality of xenophobia and racism that these women experience.

The discussion exposes different forms of everyday xenophobia, for instance, in the form of racist slurs and social exclusion. Manizha shares a story from her childhood, describing how other children in the nursery picked on her 'blackness', and how the day care workers mistakenly called Manizha by her Tajik surname instead of her first name. The conversation also demonstrates that racism and xenophobia are practiced within 'hierarchical boundaries' and 'in a multi-layered landscape' (Avrutin 2022, 6), as when Manizha's friend, musician Vasilisa Savos'kina, whose grandfather is from Congo, notes that she was insulted 'a bit more rudely' than in Manizha's example. Savos'kina's refusal to reiterate the insult in question signals, among other things, differing experiences of xenophobia, varying discursive boundaries around racism as compared to xenophobia, and the role of celebrity culture, which dictates a 'doctored' articulation of the racialised hierarchies of ethnic and cultural exclusion. While this discussion can be seen as succeeding in introducing an alternative, inclusive, and non-harmful way to understand xenophobia and racism as a lived experience, it also exposes the discursive boundaries based on the 'hierarchy of othering' (Miazhevich 2023), as Savos'kina's experience of racism, which was perhaps too hurtful to be openly talked about as part of this upbeat

conversation, is not included in their shared experience of 'everyday xenophobia.' Indeed, during Gordeeva's interview, no one explicitly uses the term 'racism', but the speakers resort to euphemisms such as 'nationalism' and 'problem.' At the very beginning, Manizha briefly discusses racism as a global issue and refers to the 'Black lives matter' movement, using the term 'xenophobia.'[6]

Remarkably, the 'Friendship of peoples' is used as an overall positive frame of multi-ethnicity, and is repeated multiple times during the conversation. For example, Manizha's casting director Margarita Saiapina explains that, for the purpose of Manizha's Eurovision performance, she searched the internet for the 'Russian woman' and found it to be a 'fountain of love and Friendship of peoples.' Here, she evokes both the Soviet ideology of internationalism as well as the actual fountain of the 'Friendship of peoples' at the VDNKh Exhibition Centre in Moscow – one of the most iconic monuments of Stalin-era architecture. The expression is soon repeated by another friend of Manizha's, Linda Mendez Kintana, who was born to parents without Russian citizenship and who lived in Russia for over 30 years without a passport or citizenship. For lack of a better expression, she identifies herself as 'a child of the Friendship of peoples' in order to answer Gordeeva's question: 'who do you think you are?' The concluding remarks of the episode bring us back to Saiapina, who asserts that the 'Russian woman' is both a fountain of 'Friendship of peoples' and 'nuclear energy which remains peaceful – like it is the power of a Russian woman.' The latter comment refers to (masculine) scientific ideas of progress and the Cold War arms race, which is a paradoxical merger of militarised masculinity with a positive spin on a multi-ethnic 'Russian woman.'

In terms of debunking racism, it appears highly problematic to evoke the Soviet discourse of internationalism, as even in Soviet times this was merely an ideological tool, while grassroots xenophobia flourished as an everyday practice and was apparent in Soviet media (e.g., Avrutin 2022; Djagalov 2021; Matusevich 2009; Miazhevich 2023).[7] By reproducing a hollow concept of the 'Friendship of peoples', devoid of shared meanings to mitigate online racism and to popularise an intersectional feminist sensitivity, Gordeeva's interview is in danger of replicating the persisting disjunction between imposed and lived everyday realities. Indeed, the everyday racism discussed at length by Manizha and her female friends is not reflected upon in relation to the outdated 'Friendship of people' or when striving to define a multi-ethnic Russian woman (cf., Kollektiv malykh rek 2021).

To conclude, the image of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and, more ambiguously, intersectional feminist Russia was offered during the backlash as an alternative to the xenophobic, nationalistic, and White supremacist Russia via different mediations supporting Manizha. Gordeeva's video, as a response to the anti-racist discourse, attempted to speak to the general Russian audience. However, it placed a disproportionately high symbolic value on failed Soviet multi-culturalism instead of probing current understandings of gender and ethnicity and the roots of proliferating extreme views. In turn, other media channels, identifying as oppositional, discuss misogynist and racist underpinnings of the backlash more explicitly, addressing them as not merely everyday issues, but also structural problems in Russian society. For example, *Radio Svoboda*'s video[8] asserts that Manizha's

performance 'challenges the imperialist and patriarchal stereotypes still existing in today's Russian society.' And, in another interview with Manizha by journalist Elena Kostiuchenko for *Novaya Gazeta*, Manizha explains that 'many people have identified these points of racism that we have at a deep level. We are aware of many ways in which we are racist.'

Intersecting anti-war stance and ethnicity in Manizha's post-2022 performances

As our discussion above shows, Manizha's hybrid identity (in part built on an imaginary *mestiza* identity in 'Not Slavic enough'), which embraces an interplay with the position of the post-Soviet cultural 'other' intertwined with (post) feminism, constitutes an essential feature of Manizha's self-branding. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had a substantial impact on the ways Manizha operationalises these dimensions of her image. Here, we examine the shifts in Manizha's cultural and gender identity post-February 2022. This section is largely based on her song 'Standing between two walls' and its music video, and the clip 'Journey to the mountains of Tajikistan to record "Gun"' (Horsman 2024). This data is supplemented with Manizha's interview with Ksenia Sobchak (Sobchak 2022).

Here, Manizha's identity struggle gives way to another kind of cultural conflict, one between war-waging Russia and the Western world. When Manizha condemned the military invasion, her concerts throughout Russia were cancelled. In the interview she gave to Ksenia Sobchak, Manizha explains that, despite her anti-war stance, increased negative attitudes towards Russia had hindered Manizha's advancement on the international stage, as international labels expected her to be outspokenly 'anti-Russian', which she refused to be (Sobchak 2022). This in-between position is obvious in Manizha's song 'Standing between two walls' (hereafter 'Between two walls') and its music video, both released in 2023, which reflect Manizha's experience of being silenced – or 'cancelled' – both in Russia and internationally. The video shows a group of female dancers performing everyday chores on a black filming stage (see Bacon 2023). All the performers have a white cloth in their mouths to illustrate that ordinary people in Russia are forced to keep on with their everyday lives whilst remaining silent about the war. Neither the lyrics nor the video focuses on Manizha's Tajik origin. Instead, this is expressed indirectly via a line highlighting her history of displacement because of the Tajik civil war in 1994: 'I was born during the war/ Been a refugee for a half of my life/I know how it feels when you are nobody.' Despite Manizha's experiences of racist encounters when representing Russia in Eurovision in 2021 (discussed above), this song now gives way to the expression of affinity with 'Russians', 'who welcomed me' when fleeing the war, and Russia appears as 'the only place that I can call home.' Paradoxically, it is not Manizha's ethnicity, but rather her Russian citizenship that suddenly becomes the marginalising element, as the lyrics attest: 'nobody looks past my passport, no, no/My nationality is where I go, go.' Manizha portrays Russian citizens as

victims of the political system: 'average people, and the politicians didn't care about them/They still don't care about them.'

This echoes the stance of two prominent female celebrities – Ksenia Sobchak (see Chapter three) and a cult pop singer Alla Pugacheva (Miazhevich 2025a). Pugacheva calls the establishment the perpetrator, and 'the nation – the victim or hostage "trapped between a rock and a hard place who have no room for manoeuvre"' (Miazhevich 2025a, 4). Consequently, as Manizha claims that she is 'fighting for peace' and will 'stand for people' with 'love and humanity', it remains unclear who constitutes the people she is standing for.

Whereas in 'Between two walls' Manizha stresses her refugee background instead of her ethnicity, in her later video 'Gun', and especially in the 11-minute mini documentary about the recording of 'Gun', Manizha's Tajik background becomes merged with her refugee history. What makes this recording so special is that Manizha and her producers from the United Kingdom meet in Tajikistan to record the song's vocals. The video depicts Manizha's return to her homeland that civil war had forced her to leave. She could not record this song either in Moscow or in London because of travel restrictions due to the war in Ukraine. Hence, Tajikistan appears as a 'neutral' location outside of both Russia and the 'West', where Manizha and her British team can meet, adding another dimension to this symbolic return to her roots.

In addition to framing Manizha's personal history as a refugee, the video foregrounds her gender. In part, this is driven by Manizha's advanced pregnancy mentioned during the first few minutes, which turns this venture to Tajikistan into an even more complex symbolism, as this visit includes her unborn daughter, the gender of the child explicitly mentioned in the video. It is also articulated metaphorically via a legend that Manizha retells to the camera. According to this legend, 40 Tajik women asked God to turn them into mountains to protect their families by preventing Genghis Khan from entering Tajikistan. Unsurprisingly, those are the same mountains where Manizha and her team record the song. Hence, the video's narrative connects Manizha and her anti-war song to the legendary women who protected their homeland by sacrificing their lives for the cause. Manizha's connection with these mythological women is highlighted towards the end of the video, when Manizha tells the camera how, when she was singing in the mountains, she felt the 40 women 'look[ing] down at me', stating that she was 'the 41st.' Through this legend, Manizha's history as a refugee is harnessed to reinforce her song's anti-war message and her own position of opposing the war and standing up for peace. Overall, the video promotes the idea of women as agents for peace and resistance to war that is based on their traditional maternal role as their families' protectors, a role that is prevalent and was even institutionalised in Russian society through the committee of 'Soldiers' mothers' (Caiazza 2002). At the present moment, this role is being deployed in the anti-war activist work by the FAR (see Chapters seven to eight; Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024; Perheentupa et al. forthcoming).

Furthermore, the legend passed down from Manizha's grandmother forms a matrilinear continuum to the women-shaped mountains of Tajikistan. This

interconnection is underlined by Manizha's British producer, who states that, despite all the technical obstacles, recording in the mountains 'gives Manizha a chance to connect back with nature and the nature of her homeland.' While this comment is clearly intended to emphasise Manizha's Tajik roots, to claim authenticity and credibility for this anti-war song, it nevertheless repeats the tendency to link othered subjects such as women and people of colour with nature (Plumwood 1993). By drawing this connection between Manizha and the 'nature of her homeland', the White, male British producer reproduces the exoticising stereotype of non-White women as being inherently more in touch with 'wild' nature.

However, it is not just Manizha who is portrayed through an exoticising gaze, but Tajikistan as well. Even though the country is presented as Manizha's 'homeland', the images recorded in the video point to the exoticness, developmental disparity, and modernisation logic of backwardness vs. progress. The most obvious examples of this are short clips of children and women in traditional dresses that do not relate to the story, but rather feed orientalist stereotypes of the East (Said 1978). The clips of Tajik people in the video alternate with panoramic bird's-eye views of nature, in particular a ridged mountain range, that illustrate the country's wilderness. The video depicts the struggle to reach the location for the shoot, which is inaccessible to new vehicles designed for urban areas. Manizha describes the location as 'innocent and wild', feeding further into orientalist logics. When a dilapidated jeep with cracks on the windscreen driven by a local man barely makes it to the spot, it is depicted next to a large herd of passing cattle, confirming the place's untamed, traditional, and somewhat backwards nature.

By underlining the exoticness, non-modern, or rather timeless character of Tajikistan, the viewer's gaze constantly appears to belong to an outsider, and it fails to mediate closeness, nostalgia, or any kind of personal sentiment. Instead, the images of people and landscapes in the video look like postcard pictures that reproduce stereotypes and national clichés, instead of mediating an authentic portrait of lived everyday life in the region. Because of this, even though Manizha and the producers keep mentioning that Tajikistan is Manizha's 'home country', she ends up appearing just as much an outsider as the filming crew accompanying her. Despite the distance between Manizha and her place of origin, her personal history and experiences as a refugee underlined in the video seem to reclaim her in-between positionality, as in 'Between two walls.' Manizha becomes not only a representative for refugees and immigrants from the post-Soviet region, but also a spokesperson for refugees all over the globe. As Manizha explains at the beginning of the video, whereas her song had originally specifically addressed the civil war in Tajikistan, '[n]ow it's not just a song about the war in Tajikistan, it's a song about war in Ukraine, in Gaza, and all wars around the globe.' This more universal pacifist stance, aimed at a more global audience,[9] along with a more consistent use of English in both Manizha's music and social media presence, suggest that her hybrid identity incorporates a global cosmopolitan identity (Beck 2006).

Having encountered an orchestrated campaign to ostracise her, on the one hand, Manizha continues serving as a cultural mediator of anti-war sentiments via her songs. However, her anti-war stance is brought forth primarily through her own

experience as a refugee from the civil war in Tajikistan. While this positionality, arising from her personal experience rather than political views, enables Manizha to communicate with the Russian audience, at the same time it reaches out to a more global audience and becomes a source of affinity with refugees all over the world. This also means that by resorting to a very general message of peace, the claim loses its subversiveness and becomes depoliticised.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the ways Manizha plays with the intersection of gender and ethnic identities, making this intersection the centre of her celebrity brand. Manizha represents a particularly fruitful case in terms of the popularisation of intersectional feminism or 'intersectional sensibility' within Russian media spaces, as she challenges the patriarchal gender roles that denote the subordinate role of women, and the imperial Russian centre. Specifically, Manizha displays the multi-layered complex positionality of a successful non-Slavic female via her music production and her advocacy for women's and human rights, which undermines local patriarchal culture(s). By foregrounding ethnic groups from Central Asia and underprivileged migrants in her work, Manizha's celebrity status destabilises the colonial power hierarchy which downgrades representatives from the geographical periphery.

As our analysis shows, Manizha's music videos and stage performances provide a medium for re-constructing and bringing out the complexity of (non-)Russian female identity for both domestic and international audiences. Whilst, in the composition 'Not Slavic enough', Manizha addresses the non-White ethnicity carved onto her appearance as ironicised through racial metonyms, in 'Russian woman' she advocates for the mosaic of Russian intersectional identities, and claims to embody some of them. As an artist, Manizha has some room for manoeuvre when performing ethnicity and engaging with the topics of racial and ethnic discrimination on stage and in her music videos. However, the potential of this positionality is depreciated in the public domain, due either to public criticism, such as the backlash trigged by her Eurovision performance, or Manizha's own convoluted viewpoints on gender, ethnicity, and feminism, which are partially informed by the contradictory idea of Soviet multi-culturalism or 'Friendship of people.' Thus, this case highlights difficulties when re-translating a Western feminist theory of intersectionality to the authoritarian post-Soviet context.

Still, Manizha turns the ideas of female empowerment and ethnic origin into a source of celebrity capital. She effectively accumulates visibility by tapping into various audiences and platforms and by mainstreaming certain ideas without making them overtly political. This overinvestment in celebrity culture and her own brand management prevents Manizha from fully realising the radical political potentiality embedded in a public intersectional feminist positionality. Further, as shown by our longitudinal monitoring of Manizha's media presence, her communication strategy resembles the chameleon-like nature of Ksenia Sobchak (see Chapter three). Unlike the more straightforward and assertive Sobchak, however, in

her interviews, Manizha resorts to asking rhetorical questions, avoids giving direct answers, shifts agency claiming a lack of understanding, or ignores contradictions in her answers over time. Her case is yet another manifestation of the elusive feminist stance dominating Russian celebrity discourse (as discussed in Chapters three and four).

The full-scale Russian war in Ukraine has added yet another layer onto Manizha's already complicated balancing act between liberal values and political reality. Unable to sustainably and clearly oppose the full-scale invasion whilst in Russia, Manizha has resorted to a performative subversive form of communication and adopted a more universal pacifist message. Rather than highlighting her Tajik background, Manizha's post-2022 music and media content foregrounds her refugee experience, feeding into her universal anti-war stance. Manizha's subsequent pregnancy and related personal experience have dictated the introduction of themes such as motherhood, children, continuity, and ancestral lands. It remains to be seen what music productions and cross-media engagement Manizha will demonstrate in the near future.

Next chapter – on the Moscow-centric feminist lifestyle media outlet *Wonderzine* – will continue the discussion of the intersection between postcolonial dynamics, neoliberalism, and the feminist media ecology in Russia.

Notes

1 They also highlight the complexity of using terms such as 'person of colour' and 'White' as identity categories in this context. There are several feminist activist and creative projects (e.g., Biktimirova and Kravtsova 2022) as well as online initiatives (Yangeldina 2023, forthcoming) actively advancing anti-racist language and terminology in the Russian and post-Soviet contexts.
2 We have consulted a set of other interviews and media sources as complementary material and refer to them occasionally. They were not selected as primary material as they do not significantly add to the primary data and/or focus on other topics than gender and ethnicity.
3 This is, however, rapidly changing following the Russian military attack on Ukraine, as the terminology of decolonial discourse has been swiftly adopted by feminists and activists from various ethnic minorities (Yangeldina forthcoming). Instead of intersectionality, decoloniality has become the key theoretical framework for addressing post-Soviet ethnicity-based inequalities.
4 During the interview it turns out that Gordeeva is writing a book on feminism in Russia.
5 These opposing societal narratives further clarify the need and reasons for ambiguous engagement with feminism or a 'feminist' identity label, as discussed in previous chapters.
6 On the Russian response to BLM, which showed a remarkable degree of racism, see Wiedlack and Zabolotnyi 2023; Djagalov 2021.
7 Other historians have addressed the banal use of racist language by the Soviet literary intelligentsia, who bolstered their criticism of Western culture, such as jazz music, 'with most nauseous racist stereotypes' (Matusevich 2009, 26). Maxim Matusevich remarks that even the most esteemed Soviet cultural figure 'Maxim Gorki wrote a devastating essay "On the Music of the Gross," which in effect evoked the worst racial stereotypes common in the West' (Matusevich 2009). On the racist legacy of late Soviet intelligentsia, see Djagalov 2021.

8 Released on the YouTube channel *Nastoiashchee vremia*.
9 The universal character of Manizha's anti-war position is also highlighted in the music video for 'Gun.' The oriental-like setting of this video disconnects it from the war in Ukraine and alludes rather to the wars in the Middle East. However, as the people in the video represent different races and ethnicities, it is impossible to link it to any particular nation or location, which confirms the song's more universal messaging. Because of this universalism, however, the video suffers from the lack of an actual political message.

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6 *Wonderzine*: neoliberal feminist media and its confluence with Russian centre-periphery dynamic

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Introduction

Since the early 2010s, a new wave of 'feminist hypervisibility' (Banet-Weiser 2018, 7) has permeated glossy women's magazines in the West. Riding this wave, publications such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Elle*, *Vogue*, and many others have shifted their focus from romantic relationships, fashion, beauty, and conventional gender representations to explicitly feminist content (Favaro and Gill 2018; Petersson McIntyre 2021). Even *Playboy*, a men's lifestyle magazine often seen as a bastion of hegemonic masculinity, has tried to catch up with the emerging trend, featuring headlines like 'You can't have feminist liberation without choice' (Clark-Parsons 2022, 9).

This renewed interest in feminism among women's magazines has not bypassed Russia. Feminist ideas of inclusivity and diversity have begun to infiltrate the Russian editions of *Vogue* (Vogue Russia 2018) and *Elle* (Slavinskaia 2017). The editor-in-chief of Russian *Cosmopolitan* (Sokhranova 2017) published a column asserting that 'there is simply no reason for a modern woman in a big city not to be a feminist.' And *Tatler* (2020) featured a transgender model on its cover, demonstrating its support for trans rights. However, the first and most consistent women's publication in Russia to make feminism a core part of its brand identity is the online lifestyle magazine *Wonderzine*, which is the subject of analysis in this chapter.

Wonderzine was launched in June 2013 by *Look at me media* (LAM). By 2013, this media group, which had grown out of the eponymous blog *Look at me*, which was dedicated to streetwear style and culture among Moscow's youth, included several popular hipster media outlets. *LAM* targeted the Westernised middle class of Russia's largest cities, whose identity – since Soviet times – had largely been shaped by the consumption of Western goods and cultural models (Gapova 2015). Therefore, when feminism began to re-enter the cultural mainstream in the West, *LAM* quickly caught on to the trend and responded by launching *Wonderzine*.

Nevertheless, the changes occurring during this time in Russia's socio-political context were not particularly conducive to the development of progressive initiatives in the areas of gender and sexuality. In 2013, Putin signed a law banning 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientations among minors', signalling a conservative shift in state ideology (Cassiday 2023). Additionally, in the previous year,

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two members of the punk-feminist group 'Pussy Riot' were sentenced to prison for their anti-Putin performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The trial of 'Pussy Riot' was accompanied by intensified anti-feminist rhetoric, including from representatives of official authorities (Mason 2018).

Thus, *LAM* decided to launch *Wonderzine* at a time when feminism was gaining traction in Western media but was increasingly at odds with the conservative shift in Russia. This historical conjuncture presented a challenging task for the magazine. *Wonderzine* had to navigate a delicate balance: it needed to leverage the growing popularity of feminist discourse to attract a loyal (Westernised) audience and establish a brand identity, while simultaneously avoiding direct confrontation with the regime and mitigating potential risks. This predicament was similar to that faced by some Russian celebrities, who also had to find strategies to incorporate feminist messages without provoking dangerous consequences (Zhaivoronok 2020; Chapters three to five).

In addressing this challenge, *Wonderzine* embarked on a path of rebranding feminism in a neoliberal fashion (Favaro and Gill 2018). From the feminist perspective, this strategy entailed both significant benefits and notable drawbacks. The neoliberal format, where feminist messages were often intertwined with market-driven narratives of empowerment through consumption (Petersson McIntyre 2021), allowed for the 'domestication of feminism' (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015) for broader audiences. Consequently, depoliticised and framed within the context of consumer culture, feminism was presented not as a collective struggle for systemic societal change, but as a series of personal choices that women could make to improve their own lives. Therefore, as we demonstrate further below, *Wonderzine*'s feminism was not perceived as politically dangerous or subversive. On the contrary, this form of feminism fitted well within the ideological framework of the authoritarian neoliberalism under Putin (Morris 2021), where 'women emerged as the ultimate neoliberal subjects in Russia and paradigmatic citizens' (Cassiday 2023, 130). This compatibility with the regime's ideology allowed *Wonderzine* to operate without significant political backlash until the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, positioning it as a safe space for discussing feminist ideas within the constraints of the existing political environment.

Thus, despite the inherent depoliticisation and individualism of neoliberalism (Saraswati 2021; Morris 2021), *Wonderzine* nonetheless made a significant contribution to the formation of a feminist media ecology in Russia, and consequently, to the development of more politicised feminist formations (see Chapter seven). Through its interactive digital architecture and presence on various social platforms, *Wonderzine* created opportunities for networking and communication among different users, including feminists. Additionally, by inviting feminist activists as guest writers, the webzine gave them a platform to express themselves and reach *Wonderzine*'s audience. As we further argue, *Wonderzine* established a programmatic media format that was later adopted by other Russian online women's magazines, such as *Burning hut*, *Kosa.media*, and others. This format included inclusivity towards people with diverse gender and sexual identities, empathetic reporting (Shtorn 2025) on partner violence victims, and the use of

gender-sensitive language (Iakovleva 2020). Thus, we argue, neoliberalisation was not only restrictive and demobilising, but also brought some gains to feminism in Russia in the context of a pronounced conservative and anti-Western turn in the country.

On the other hand, certain discursive patterns of *Wonderzine*'s neoliberal feminism strongly aligned with Russian neocolonial power dynamics between the centre and the periphery. By focusing on the experiences and aspirations of urban, middle-class women, *Wonderzine* marginalised the voices and concerns of women from less privileged backgrounds. This selective representation reinforced existing social hierarchies and perpetuated the dominance of the metropolitan elite over the rest of the country (Aristarkhova 2002). Consequently, despite the magazine's progressive stance on issues of gender and sexuality, it remained significantly less sensitive to matters of class inequality and the exploitation of peripheral regions by the centre.

In this chapter, we will look at the period from the magazine's launch in June 2013 to June 2022, when *Wonderzine* stopped updating its website after being labelled a foreign agent in Russia. Thus, the time frame covers nine years of *Wonderzine*'s activity before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a few months after. In our analysis, we adopt a synchronic (Foucault 2023) perspective: acknowledging that the webzine went through different stages in its development, we focus more on stable patterns in its discursive production, as well as on its cumulative impact on media professionals and readers. In the final section of this chapter, however, we specifically analyse *Wonderzine*'s transformation after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in order to assess how this example of neoliberal feminist media responded to the unfolding military and political crisis.

In analysing *Wonderzine*, we draw primarily on three data sets: the archive of articles available on its website[1]; interviews with four professional journalists[2] who cooperated with the magazine in differing capacities; and netnographic data (Kozinets 2019) – comments left by *Wonderzine*'s readers on its social media accounts or website. These three data sets are not analysed separately, but rather constantly speak to each other within this chapter, within an overarching argument built on the resulting polyphony of different perspectives and voices. This methodological approach contributes to a non-reductionist understanding of neoliberalising feminism as a 'contingent assemblage' (Puar 2012) of different actors. In particular, it allows us to access digital media as a heterotopic space, which creates a possibility of interaction and solidarity between its readers, transcending neoliberal feminism's limitations.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, we examine the main characteristics and contradictions of *Wonderzine*'s neoliberal feminism. Next, we discuss in more detail the positive contributions the webzine has made to the development of a feminist culture and media ecology in Russia. After that, we shift our focus from the magazine itself to its readers, and discuss *Wonderzine'*s digital platform as a heterotopic space that enables the co-existence and polyphony of different voices. Drawing on frequent reader criticism, we then explore the intersection between neoliberalism and Russian colonial dynamics, which led to the exclusion of certain

women's experiences – such as those of the working class and residents of small towns far from Moscow – from the magazine's representational strategies. Finally, as a form of conclusion, we discuss how *Wonderzine* responded to the crisis triggered by the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The 'weird duality' of neoliberal feminist media

As its first editorial content, *Wonderzine* published 15 interviews with female professionals – editors-in-chief, designers, bloggers, and other creatives (Adyrkhaeva 2013). Titled 'New heroines', this article boldly presented the image of a successful, emancipated, almost Promethean modern woman defying the traditional female roles of wife, mother, and/or sexual object. The format of this piece also has a meaning. The interviews clearly serve a feminist purpose – to give women a voice and allow them to share their experiences. Moreover, these women are not asked stereotypical questions about the secret to family happiness or their beauty routine. They are given an expert role in which they evaluate current trends in their professional fields, thus following another feminist call 'to take women seriously.' Thus, from the very beginning, *Wonderzine* prioritised women's empowerment and emphasised professionally successful femininity (McRobbie 2015).

Subsequently, *Wonderzine* has regularly published explicitly feminist material. The webzine consistently covered domestic and international feminist protest actions, including hashtag campaigns, such as #ЯнеБоюсьСказати (#IAmNotAfraidToTell), #MeToo, and #ЯнеХотелаУмирать (#IDidntWantToDie) (see Chapter two), but also feminist street protests. For example, the webzine has annually reported on March 8 demonstrations held by feminists in various cities, as well as other notable feminist protests, such as a series of pickets on Red Square in 2017 (Zhaivoronok 2025), demonstrations in support of the Khachaturyan sisters, and campaigns advocating for the introduction of domestic violence legislation.

The magazine was also educating the public about various feminist currents and agendas. For instance, it had published articles about cyberfeminism, intersectional and Muslim feminism, and raised public awareness about topics including body positivity, neurodiversity, and sexual harassment. Moreover, the webzine critically discussed important socio-political issues, including changes in abortion legislation, and domestic/partner violence. It also published pieces highlighting the experiences of various vulnerable groups in Russia, such as sex workers and transgender individuals. Additionally, *Wonderzine* featured a significant number of feminist celebrity-oriented texts (Favaro and Gill 2018), with headlines like 'Jennifer Aniston speaks out against body shaming', 'Emily Ratajkowski wrote an essay on women's right to sexuality', and 'Manizha has launched an app against domestic violence' (see more on Manizha in Chapter five).

However, although the magazine did publish explicitly feminist content, most of its articles still focused on beauty, fashion, and entertainment. This type of material provided readers with tips on how to achieve Nicki Minaj's make-up look, which coat to buy to look stylish in the upcoming autumn, and how to use dating apps. These consumption-related articles were not merely placed alongside feminist

articles but were often intrinsically integrated with them. For instance, one article discussed a lip balm produced in collaboration with US feminist legend Gloria Steinem, and another advertised *Monki*'s 'minimalist Venus symbol pendant', designed to remind onlookers that 'women rule the world' (Wonderzine 2018). Thus, in characteristically neoliberal fashion, the outlet often positioned feminism not as a political movement, but rather as a consumable brand, a sort of 'wearable feminism' (Favaro and Gill 2018; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012).

This tendency was also highlighted by media professionals during their interviews. Diana, a journalist and cultural critic, boldly characterised *Wonderzine* as 'a typical neoliberal feminist outlet.' When asked to clarify what she meant by 'neoliberal', she provided the following answer:

> Neoliberal feminism is grounded in consumption and is heavily tied to it. Within its logic feminists have to wear, for example, T-shirts: "we should all be feminists", watch the Barbie movie, and consume a lot of pink plastic merchandise. Your ideology and views turn into a commodity, and you constantly present yourself to the world through this commodity. (Diana, June 2024)

Continuing on this topic, Diana pointed out that *Wonderzine*'s economic model relied heavily on advertising, product promotion, and collaborations with both international and domestic brands. As a result, consumerism-oriented articles – on Rihanna's new lingerie collection or the latest trends in streetwear fashion for instance – appeared in *Wonderzine* far more frequently than actual feminist content. As Diana explained, neoliberal feminism 'tries to adapt all the ideas of women's emancipation to increase purchasing power, because women [...] are a huge market, and this market needs something appealing.' Diana's observation aligns with Ratilainen's (2021, 247) argument that, in the post-Soviet market economy, women are often regarded as 'the most reliable consumers.' Therefore, *Wonderzine* pragmatically engaged in 'the traffic in feminism' (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017) to attract a female audience, while its strategic objectives were market-oriented, rather than political. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer argue (2017), such traffic in feminism often 'does more' than merely depoliticising and commodifying feminism: it 'shores up' the very ideological nexus of the neoliberal order. By highlighting the recognition and market rewards achieved by the most privileged, it allows capitalism to be celebrated for providing equal opportunities to women. Meanwhile, it obscures the broader structures of inequality where 'the billions of women whose labour and bodies will continue to be exploited for the profit of those at the top of the social hierarchy' (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017).

Diana is not the only one to perceive *Wonderzine* as a neoliberal feminist outlet, with other Russian feminists unaffiliated with the journal (e.g., Ivanova 2016) expressing the same stance. In her interview, journalist Karina pointed out that *Wonderzine* represented a commercialised, glamourised, and Moscow-centric version of feminism. She also noted that the webzine's communication strategy was inconsistent and contradictory. Karina characterised this strategy as being permeated by a 'weird duality', which she understood to be the combination of

messages with contradictory meanings and/or different semantic registers. As an example of this duality Karina mentioned an article about gender violence that was followed by the review of a popular TV series, *Game of Thrones* (Karina, May 2024). While the former, according to the journalist, was serious, actual feminist material touching on a very important issue in the Russian context, the latter was an example of content that was irrelevant – and almost nonsensical to most Russian readers.

The readers indeed often expressed similar sentiments. One user in particular effectively captured this 'duality' of *Wonderzine's* communicative strategy in her comment:

> Reading *Wonderzine*'s [articles] makes you feel like you are in the circus […] Let's consume consciously! Oh no, let's go buy 25,000 roubles worth of pantaloons. Corporations exploit women's labour! Oh no, just look at the new blouse in Zara! Seriously? (Wonderzine 2020)

This comment clearly conveys the reader's confusion and frustration, stemming from the inability to meaningfully interpret such contradictory messages. It underscores a broader issue with *Wonderzine*'s (and more broadly neoliberal feminism's) stance. On the one hand, it highlights gender discrimination, including the exploitation of female labour, and engages in a feminist critique of beauty standards. On the other hand, it simultaneously encourages readers to indulge in consumption, sometimes refashioned as 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012), purchasing goods from the very corporations that both exploit women's labour and promote those damaging beauty standards. This contradiction often undermined the credibility of the publication's stance, leaving readers with the feeling that *Wonderzine*'s feminism was just a spectacle, 'a circus.' According to Karina, the Russian feminist community often mocked *Wonderzine* for this 'weird duality', treating it as a sign of the magazine's inauthenticity or faux feminism (Khader 2024).

Thus, it could be argued that, in the spirit of the 'neoliberal double bind', *Wonderzine* exploits 'a disjunctive synthesis' (Collett, Giappone, and MacKenzie 2022, 2) of social justice and individual freedom. While it promotes a social justice agenda – critiquing exploitation and gendered inequalities – it also emphasises individual autonomy and increased choice. Within this logic, individuals endowed with personal agency have to choose for themselves how to respond to information about corporate exploitation of women's labour: either by becoming conscious consumers and solidarising with the exploited, or by turning a blind eye to exploitation and following fashion trends instead. They can also decide how to deal with beauty standards, either by resisting them or by using them to their own advantage. As Favaro and Gill (2018) argue, within this approach every choice is seen as feminist, as long as it can be claimed to be freely chosen by women. As they further explain, such 'choice feminism' is 'profitable for magazines, which have been able to continue to "sell" everything from diet and exercise routines to cosmetic surgery through a language of empowered individual choice' (Favaro and Gill 2018).

However, from the perspective of building collective resistance to capitalism and sexism and changing the dominant structures of inequalities, the neoliberal double bind is seen as paralysing rather than enabling (Collett, Giappone, and MacKenzie 2022, 1).

'The positive impact': on neoliberalising feminism's gains in the Russian context

However, as Elisabeth Prügl (2015) convincingly argues, neoliberal feminism is not a universal and solidified formation, but rather a series of contingent alliances between feminist forces and market incentives that are shaped by both local and global contexts. Thus, instead of 'neoliberal feminism', it might be more appropriate to speak about the 'neoliberalisation of feminism', recognising the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries (Prügl 2015, 615). Prügl attempts to go beyond the critique that neoliberal feminism is co-opted and used as a tool for recuperating, rather than undermining, gendered inequalities. Her approach suggests that, along with exploring the uniform effects of neoliberalism, we need to investigate variations in the effects produced by the processes of neoliberalisation. Thus, it is necessary to examine 'neoliberalising feminisms' in specific contexts, looking at the ways 'in which select feminist movement ideas are being integrated into neoliberal rationales and logics, what is lost in the process, and what is perhaps gained' (Prügl 2015).

Thus, if we follow Prügl's insights, we should not just accept the argument that, in the final analysis, *Wonderzine*, as a media-incarnation of the spirit of neoliberal feminism, just reproduces economic and gendered structures of inequality. Rather, we need to stick with its 'weird duality' and further investigate the cultural and political effects it produces. As Prügl (2015) astutely demonstrates in her research, neoliberal feminism in certain contexts can be beneficial to various groups of women, not just White upper-middle-class professionals or celebrities. Therefore, it is worth asking: what are the gains of neoliberal feminism in the Russian context, if any?

After mentioning that feminists often ridiculed *Wonderzine*, Karina noted that, at the same time, feminists considered '*Wonder'* (Вандер) to be 'the only and most serious feminist media in Russia', and Karina expressed a strong personal belief that the magazine had an overall positive impact on the development of feminism in Russia. She argued that it was precisely because of this strategic use of its 'weird duality' that the magazine succeeded in reaching a wide audience and spreading feminist discourses beyond the narrow circle of feminist activists:

> *Wonderzine* has created a media about feminism that is not frightening for the general public to read. You might find an article about, say, gender violence legislation next to a review of make-up collections, followed by a review of a popular TV show like *Game of Thrones*. So, it's a truly commercial, glamorous media. I'm aware of the [feminist] criticism of glamourisation, but in the case of *Wonder*, I think it had a positive effect. Glamourisation has demarginalised

> feminist discourse and made feminism a topic of discussion not just within feminist and non-binary communities but across society. And to achieve this, it was perhaps necessary to place articles about gender discrimination and intersectional feminism alongside material about expensive trendy designer coats. (Karina, May 2024)

Karina suggests that *Wonderzine* has popularised feminism by using glamourisation, this powerful technique of capitalist imagination (Baker 2017), to adapt and domesticate it to the Russian context. By juxtaposing feminism with make-up collections and clothing line reviews, glamourisation effectively neutralised its radical and, thus, potentially disturbing aspects. As the journalist further hinted in the interview, if feminism is associated with non-binary communes or other non-normative forms of life, it may sound 'frightening' to a general reader in Russia due to its stark break from the conventions of capitalism and heteropatriarchy. Yet glamorous feminism, associated with the conspicuous consumption of femininity-focused accessories, offers a vision of the more desirable 'good life' and 'successful femininity' (McRobbie 2015), without transcending the acceptable limits of neoliberal respectability.

Diana, who boldly portrayed *Wonderzine* as a neoliberal feminist outlet in her interview, was also positive overall about the journal's social impact. She stated that, in her opinion, *Wonderzine* has made a significant and positive contribution to the development of feminist culture in Russia. She particularly emphasised the publication's role in highlighting the issue of domestic violence and spreading awareness about mental wellbeing. Two other study participants also acknowledged the magazine's positive role in promoting feminist values and attitudes in Russian society. Journalist and editor Oleg pointed out that the magazine consistently used empathetic language toward vulnerable groups, listening to and sharing their perspectives and using their preferred gender pronouns. Thus, the publication represented the diversity of gender identities even at the level of language and pronouns, which is still quite rare in the Russian context. *Wonderzine*'s role in transforming public language in Russia has also been noted in previous research. Yakovleva, for example, highlights *Wonderzine*'s role in the creation and public dissemination of new terms, mostly borrowed from English, such as 'body shaming', 'body positivity', 'ageism', and the like (Iakovleva 2020). The emergence of such terms allows new issues to be articulated in the public sphere and provides a language for groups that previously lacked the means to articulate their experiences or positions[3].

Journalist Polina, a freelance contributor to the magazine, noted that *Wonderzine* has set new standards in Russian journalism for discussing sexual violence and interacting with survivors. She emphasised that journalists from some other publications might ask tactless or rude questions, thereby re-traumatising a survivor. In contrast, *Wonderzine* takes a sensitive approach:

> We let her [a survivor of sexual violence] know that we believe her words [...] we give her a voice, and we provide a safe space where she can speak, remain

> anonymous or reveal her name, choose not to answer certain questions, and talk without fear of being asked rude or demeaning questions. (May 2024)

According to Polina, this approach has allowed *Wonderzine* to become an important platform that amplifies the voices and perspectives of survivors of sexual violence.

Furthermore, as noted by Diana and Oleg, it was precisely the balance between feminist-oriented and consumption- or beauty-oriented texts that enabled the magazine to create a sustainable financial model. As Oleg pointed out, *Wonderzine* demonstrated the very possibility of the successful existence of a women's media channel that covers topics 'beyond the framework of traditional glossy magazines' and 'writes about them in a new language.' He asserted that *Wonderzine*'s model allowed the publication to not only financially stay afloat, but to 'gain new territory, grow, develop, and expand.' As noted by Polina, Karina, and Diana, *Wonderzine*'s business model influenced other women's post-glamorous media that appeared in Russia in the late 2010s (*Burning hut*) or after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (*Kosa.media*). *Wonderzine* also positively impacted on the visibility of feminism in the broader ecosystem of Russian oppositional media, such as *Meduza* and *Holod.media*.

Thus, the neoliberalisation and glamourisation turned into some gains for feminism in Russia. In the context of a pronounced conservative and anti-Western turn in the country (Kratochvíl and Shakhanova 2021; Laruelle 2016), launching any feminist magazine was a risky endeavour. However, *Wonderzine* devised a successful economic model, which enabled it to operate without depending on state support or foreign funds – the problem which had plagued feminist initiatives of the previous generation (see Hemment 2007; Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2014). Moreover, *Wonderzine* was successful in producing feminist discourses that were accessible for broader audiences, and thus made feminism more visible in Russian society. In that context, the neoliberal deradicalisation of feminism could be considered an effective strategy by which to circumvent control from both the state and right-wing vigilantes, and to get the message out to a broader audience. It could be further argued that, within the Russian assemblage of neoliberal authoritarianism (Morris 2021), *Wonderzine* was strategically allying with neoliberalism to draw a line of flight away from state-imposed traditionalism[4].

Audiences as micro-counterpublics

Yet *Wonderzine* itself, as a form of digital media, can be also seen as a platform that accommodates diverse viewpoints, diverse authors and, most importantly, diverse readers. Therefore, to better understand the webzine's contribution to the broader feminist media ecology in Russia, we need to go beyond an assessment of its editorial content and discourse. As a Web 2.0 era media outlet, the webzine focused on reader interactivity. For example, the website had a 'community' section where users could publish and discuss their own and others' posts. Additionally, the site offered a commenting option, allowing readers to leave comments under any article. Moreover, *Wonderzine* established accounts on various social networks,

ranging from a few thousand followers on Facebook to over 80,000 on VK. This allowed webzine readers to use these platforms to discuss its content, express their thoughts and opinions, communicate with the editorial team and authors, or chat with other readers.

As is typical for many digital media outlets, *Wonderzine* heavily relied on contributions from freelance journalists and creators. These self-employed authors enjoyed considerable autonomy, often independently choosing the topics for their pieces. For instance, Karina mentioned that she had conceived the idea for her first feminist article herself – an analysis of sexism in Russian comedy shows – and proposed it to the editor-in-chief, who approved it for publication. Thus, for Karina, working with the magazine provided valuable experience in publicly expressing her feminist views, and offered a platform for her to reach a large audience.

Oleg, who was part of the editorial team, explained that *Wonderzine* strategically invited diverse authors to collaborate, even those whose views did not entirely align with the publication's stance. He stated: 'we had been inviting external authors with whom we did not agree, but we nevertheless were interested in their opinions, interested in different voices.' These invited authors included a significant number of activists, such as feminists and those from the 'Psichoaktivno' movement, which advocates for the rights of neurodivergent people. Thus, *Wonderzine* actively provided a platform for diverse voices, including Islamic, intersectional, cyber- and even leftist feminists. The webzine enabled these activists to express their views and gain access to its audience. This was especially important for those feminists who ran their own blogs, as they could convert readers of their pieces published on *Wonderzine* into followers.

As already emphasised, the audience also had the opportunity to express their opinions. During our digital ethnography of both *Wonderzine*'s website and its social media accounts, we observed that the readers often performed as micro-counterpublics (Fraser 1990). While the magazine operated within the public sphere, its comment sections on digital platforms represented temporary micro-arenas of expression that were only accessible to visitors of certain platforms (the website or social media) at specific times. Within these micro-arenas, users actively formulated and defended their own agendas and perspectives on various issues, which could be quite critical of the magazine. Additionally, these micro-counterpublics, emerging in the comment sections, often attempted to influence *Wonderzine* itself, that is, to influence public discourse (see Fraser 1990 on the dynamics between the public sphere and counterpublics). For example, some commentators were demanding that certain issues should be covered, that specific linguistic means (such as feminitives or borrowings from other languages) should be used (or not used), and that individual users or groups of users (e.g., men) should be banned from posting comments.

But *Wonderzine*'s communication strategy, built on this combination of contradictory messages, led to the co-existence of diverse audiences with contrasting positions within the same digital spaces. For some users, the webzine was primarily about interesting cosmetics reviews, fashion collections, and the lives of various celebrities. Diana noted in her interview that the most popular articles

on *Wonderzine* were exactly those about beauty products and Western pop icons. According to her, this type of content often attracted an audience with 'right wing' attitudes. Our observations during the digital ethnography confirm that it was not uncommon for *Wonderzine*'s readers to use the comment sections to complain about the 'overabundance' of feminist content in the webzine, criticise articles on body positivity or racial inclusivity, or express xenophobic sentiments.

On the other hand, a significant portion of *Wonderzine*'s readership identified as feminists. Naturally, feminists engaged in debates with the 'right wing' audience. However, they also criticised the magazine itself, with different feminists offering various critiques. For instance, Oleg noted in his interview that radical feminists constituted a substantial segment of the audience, which is unsurprising given the popularity of radical feminism within the Russian feminist community (Yangeldina 2023). Oleg observed that radical feminists often criticised *Wonderzine* for its positive coverage of transgender and intersex individuals. Another topic that drew criticism from radical feminists was the magazine's handling of issues related to religion. As Oleg remarked, 'where feminist agendas intersected with religion, the editorial team likely sought to find a balanced approach,' whereas radical feminists consistently criticised religion, particularly Islam[5].

However, as our digital ethnography revealed, even those feminists who were critical about *Wonderzine* mostly perceived its platforms as feminist spaces or as domains belonging to feminists, in other words, to themselves. Notably, many feminists considered these spaces – these micro-counterpublics within comment sections – as being performatively created by them and existing semi-independently from the webzine. For instance, feminists who criticised *Wonderzine* and dismissed its communication as inconsistent or elitist could simultaneously praise the community formed within its platforms. As one user put it:

> I, like many other *Wonderzine* readers, continue to stay here only for the comments. In them, I have asked questions many times, read interesting answers under posts, and learned a lot of new things. I've found many like-minded people here. My desire to read the magazine is fading, but the community still keeps me here. (Wonderzine 2020)

According to this and similar comments, *Wonderzine* provided a space where feminists could gather, share their experiences and knowledge, exchange information, and find like-minded individuals. Thus, it became a crucial hub for feminist discourse, offering a sense of community and solidarity. Feminists sometimes valued this space and opportunity even more than other resources created by the webzine. It allowed them to connect on issues that mattered to them, fostering a supportive environment where their voices could be heard and validated.

Confluence between neoliberal feminism and Russian colonial dynamics

Following Prügl's (2015) framework, it is crucial to consider not only the context-specific benefits of neoliberalism, but also its associated drawbacks. Are there

other significant political consequences of *Wonderzine*'s neoliberalising feminism in Russia, beyond commodification and depoliticisation?

To address this question, let's revisit 'New heroines' – the inaugural editorial piece published in the webzine. This article featured interviews with 15 professionally successful women from various creative industries. The protagonists, dubbed '15 cool girls – here and now', are portrayed as 'energetic, professional, self-sufficient' women who 'accelerate the processes around them' (Adyrkhaeva 2013). Despite their diversity, common patterns in their representation are evident. The accompanying photos depict young and middle-aged women, predominantly Slavic/European passing, dressed in stylish outfits from global fashion brands. There is no excessive make-up, traditional garments, or religious attributes. Instead, we see symbols of Westernised modernity – skateboards, coffee mugs, and *NB* sneakers. All of the images are set against a pale pink or blue pastel background, colours that Saraswati (2021, 76) identifies as being emblematic of the digital feminist aesthetic that is prevalent on social media platforms.

At first glance, it might not seem as if there is anything remarkable in these representations, as professionally successful White middle-class women are universal role models of neoliberal feminism (McRobbie 2015; Favaro and Gill 2018; Rottenberg 2018, 2022). On the contrary, even the original subtitle 'Kul gerlz' is just a Cyrillic transliteration from the English 'cool girls', denoting the article protagonists' belonging to the global creative class rather than the Russian context. However, the article contains one literal connection to their location.

Among the questions concerning their professional backgrounds, the interviewer asks the 'new heroines' only one unrelated to their careers: 'how has *Moscow* changed recently?' or alternatively: 'what do you lack in *Moscow*?' This question, always posed last, seems rather unexpected as it deviates from the article's overall logic. After all, the title promises stories of successful women in general, not just those from Moscow. However, the interviewed women are not asked how Russia, or specific regions and cities, have changed. The focus is exclusively on Moscow, indicating that all 15 women are located in *the* city. Furthermore, the specific phrasing of the question – 'How has Moscow changed recently?' – implies that the interviewees were either born in Moscow or have lived there long enough to meaningfully comment on recent changes. This last question implicitly suggests that the list of 'cool girls' comprises true Muscovites, not city newcomers. Thus, the image of a modern, professionally successful woman becomes inextricably tied to Moscow as a global neoliberal city (Kangas 2013).

This Moscow-centric focus is further evident throughout *Wonderzine*'s regular columns, such as 'Cosmetic bag' or 'Wardrobe', which predominantly feature Muscovites. Other regular articles – guides to shopping centres, boutiques, and local designers' showrooms, as well as recommendations for weekend activities, exhibitions, and concerts – by default focus on Moscow and almost never cover places or events in other cities. As journalist Karina characterised *Wonderzine* during an interview: 'it is a very Moscow-centric publication, essentially it is a magazine for wealthy Muscovites.' Thus, although never explicitly stated in the magazine's description, *Wonderzine* is a thoroughly Moscow-focused publication.

While Moscow is clearly at the centre of the webzine's attention, other Russian regions were either not mentioned at all in its issues or portrayed through typical colonialist tropes: as backward, exotic, or dangerous (Tlostanova 2010). For instance, the Jewish Autonomous Region is never mentioned, and the Vologda Region is only mentioned once – and even then, only in passing. The Kostroma Region is also only mentioned once, when a Kostroma-based service made it to the list of quality spa hotels compiled by a journalist from Moscow. Many other regions are referred to either in the context of danger (incidents) or backwardness (conservative traditions and customs). For example, Chuvashia is cited twice: once in an article about a massive prison complex in the republic, and once in the context of discussing the partial military mobilisation in the autumn of 2022. The Republic of Ingushetia is mentioned 14 times, with five articles discussing criminal offences, two addressing the spread of HIV, four on conservative traditions (such as bride kidnapping, clitoridectomy, and honour killings), and one discussing alcoholism. The only article in which Ingushetia is referred to positively is about a woman from Western Europe making a car journey through the Caucasus. Travelling through the republic, she observes, 'Good roads, two rows of trees on the sides, very beautiful Ingushetia outside the window.' Thus, through the optic of a Western tourist gaze, both the long history of Ingushetia and its current political complexity are erased. All we see is a blur of natural landscapes and road surfaces.

It is noteworthy that the regions are only viewed from the perspective of Muscovites or Westerners, as the opinions and voices of residents from these peripheral areas rarely make it into *Wonderzine*'s Moscow-centric outlook. Consequently, many of the readers felt invisible and excluded from the narratives. They frequently left comments criticising the Moscow-focused nature and the lack of representation of women from other regions in *Wonderzine*. The most extensive discussion of this kind began on April 27, 2020, and continued for nearly a month. It started with a post by a user in the 'community' section of the website, complaining that '*Wonderzine*'s editorial team does not listen to its readers' (Wonderzine 2020). In reply to this message, other users joined the discussion. Ultimately, readers posted 368 comments within this thread, prompting even the editor-in-chief of *Wonderzine*, Yulia Taratuta, to respond to the critical debate.

In this discussion thread, readers criticised *Wonderzine* for its 'overabundance of articles about successful women.' They also pointed out that the magazine portrayed modern emancipated Russian women as living exclusively in Moscow. Meanwhile, women with other backgrounds, especially those from the regions and working-class professions, received no attention. One user articulated these grievances against the publication as follows:

> Is *Wonderzine* a site for ordinary girls from impoverished Russia with an average salary of 25,000 roubles [US $325], or is it a site about the luxurious lives of the residents of the Garden Ring? It seems that the editorial team is simply not interested in ordinary life in our country; they have cocooned themselves in their cosy world and live a fictional life. (Wonderzine 2020)

In these objections, the class dimension intertwines with spatial belonging, underlying the intersection of neoliberal and colonial dynamics that are characteristic of *Wonderzine*. As other users pointed out, these dynamics exclude 'ordinary Russian women' outside Moscow, 'living in Khrushchevkas and working low-paid jobs' (Wonderzine 2020). These women's exclusion highlights a significant gap in the magazine's representational politics. By focusing mainly on affluent Muscovites, *Wonderzine* perpetuated a narrow and elitist view of a modern, successful woman that is characteristic of neoliberal feminism (McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2022). Moreover, by portraying women from Moscow as being emancipated and modern, it implicitly suggested that women in other regions were lagging behind. This approach, where global neoliberal feminism intersected with Russian dynamics of internal colonisation (Aristarkhova 2002; Etkind 2013), marginalised voices and experiences of women from other regions and socio-economic backgrounds. At the same time, it reinforced the centralisation of cultural and symbolic capital in Moscow. And, in doing so, *Wonderzine* mirrored the Moscow-centricity of Russia itself.

Since the fall of the USSR, inequality between Russia's two largest cities – Moscow and Saint Petersburg – and the rest of the country's cities and regions has been on the rise (Zubarevich 2019). As social geographer Natalia Zubarevich notes, in Russia 'the process of pulling resources to the centre is going well' (Zubarevich 2022), but their subsequent redistribution among the regions is slow and uneven. Thus, by extracting from the regions, Moscow has become the focal point for the concentration of power, finances, and other resources in the country, including media and cultural capital (Gladkova, Vartanova, and Ragnedda 2020).

However, this extractivist dynamic is not a new phenomenon, but rather reproduces the long history of Russia's 'internal colonisation.' As suggested by Alexander Etkind in his influential study (2013, pt. II), the country's territorial development and economic and political structure were historically shaped by Moscow's colonial advancement, which initially entailed the conquest of neighbouring lands and principalities (Tver, Novgorod, Ryazan, etc.), followed by the colonisation of the Volga region, Siberia, and the southern steppes. Within these internal colonial dynamics, Moscow functioned as the colonial centre, while all the other regions of Russia were colonised territories that supplied various resources to the Kremlin. This is why the post-Soviet revival of imperial imagination in Russia was inevitably linked to the trope of 'Moscow as the Third Rome', positioning Moscow as a neo-imperial and neo-colonial metropole (Khazanov 1998; Mayhew 2021). As Irina Aristarkhova (2002, 82–84) comments on the logic of Russian coloniality: 'Moscow = Russia', while 'the rest of Russia is destined to ensure that only the Kremlin embodies Russia as such. The rest of Russia, as a whole, is residue, excess, discharge, is "the rest".' This problematic logic, in which Moscow metonymically represents the entirety of Russia while other cities and regions are reduced to 'the rest' and perceived through a Moscow-centric perspective, was precisely what *Wonderzine* enacted.

This confluence with coloniality once again highlights neoliberal feminism's inability to address structural issues, such as inequalities embedded in class

relationships and centre-periphery dynamics, and to critically analyse the current conjuncture and its historical development. Moreover, such a confluence might intensify the perception of feminism as a colonial project, only benefiting privileged Muscovites and being foreign to the concerns of 'ordinary people' (Yangeldina 2023; Zhaivoronok 2018). Thus, *Wonderzine*'s media strategy included both unequivocally progressive elements (empathetic reporting, promotion of gender equality, giving voice to vulnerable groups and activists, etc.) and the reproduction of existing structures of inequality. To more deeply and comprehensively assess the webzine's impact on the perception of feminism among different social groups in Russia, further research is needed.

Neoliberal feminism's response to the war

In the initial days following Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, *Wonderzine* unequivocally articulated its anti-war stance. For instance, the webzine disseminated information regarding a collective letter from Russian educators and kept its readership informed about anti-war demonstrations and anti-war activists being detained. Nevertheless, the publication predominantly endeavoured to address the evolving situation through its established discursive framework of neoliberal feminism.

For example, in its coverage of anti-war statements, *Wonderzine* focused heavily on the declarations of Russian celebrities such as Ivan Urgant, Liya Akhedzhakova and Ekaterina Schulmann, as well as international figures like Angelina Jolie, Marina Abramović, Milla Jovovich, and Yoko Ono. Meanwhile, the voices and experiences of ordinary individuals were markedly underrepresented – during the first 15 days of the conflict, the publication failed to mention the casualties resulting from Russian bombardments in Ukraine even once. Significant attention was also devoted to the exodus of fashion, cosmetics, and accessories brands from the Russian market. Thus, *Wonderzine*'s response to the war was filtered through the prism of consumerism and celebrity endorsements.

Another significant consequence of interpreting the war through the lens of neoliberal feminism was its pronounced emphasis on individual wellbeing. Just hours after the invasion began, *Wonderzine*'s VK account featured a post entitled 'Black stripe: how to take care of yourself in difficult times.' This post was a re-publication of a 2019 article, which offered advice on dealing with stressful situations such as 'job loss, a painful breakup, or the illness of a loved one' (Shagova 2019). It is particularly telling that *Wonderzine* chose to repurpose a text with solutions to *personal* problems as a response to the war as a *socio-political* event. In this way, the neoliberal paradigm quickly reframed a collective tragedy as individual stress and offered remedies accordingly.

In the first 15 days of the war, *Wonderzine* published a total of 24 posts, averaging more than one per day, which focused on therapy, psychology, and other methods of maintaining emotional wellbeing. Specifically, the publication provided its readers with guidance on how to manage their media consumption to maintain productivity, informed them about available psychological services and resources

which could offer free or, more often, paid-for assistance, and gave suggestions on coping with panic attacks, among other topics. In addition to psychological support and self-care advice, the webzine also published articles on managing personal finances during a crisis. During the same period, *Wonderzine* dedicated only one post to the widespread protests across Russia against the unfolding war.

Thus, even amid profound social crisis and fundamental transformations, neoliberal feminism clung to its familiar pillars: celebrities, consumerism, psychotherapy, and self-management techniques. This adherence results in a discourse marked by the previously discussed 'weird duality': it ostensibly addresses the war, yet through the voices of celebrities far removed from the actual events; it appears to discuss the significant changes wrought by the conflict, but focuses on brands like Louis Vuitton exiting Russia; it speaks of collective tragedy, yet offers only individual therapy as a remedy.

However, the authoritarian and repressive Russian state grew intolerant of even this depoliticised and commodified expression of dissent. In March 2022, a Russian court labelled *Wonderzine* as a foreign agent. Shortly thereafter, the publication ceased updating its website, making old articles accessible only through a paid subscription. Despite this, *Wonderzine* continues to publish new content on its accounts on Telegram and Instagram. Yet, as all our research participants observed, the era when *Wonderzine* was a relevant publication capturing the zeitgeist has passed. Even though *Wonderzine* is indeed experiencing a decline, its contribution to developing the overall feminist media ecology in Russia has not disappeared without a trace. Many journalists who collaborated with the publication continue to write about feminism and gender violence. Additionally, some *Wonderzine* readers have become so politicised by the onset of war that they have joined the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, which is discussed in Chapters seven and eight.

Notes

1 Since June 2022, *Wonderzine*'s articles are only available through a paid subscription. However, wherever possible, we provide links to the articles archived on publicly accessible internet-resources, such as *WayBack machine* and the like.
2 The interviewed journalists held various positions within the publication. Oleg was one of the editors at *Wonderzine* for over five years. Diana worked at *LAM* and stated that she had attended meetings during the project planning phase to launch *Wonderzine* and assisted in recruiting staff for the new publication. Diana also frequently wrote for *Wonderzine*, primarily reviewing films and visual culture trends. Karina and Polina are professional journalists who collaborated with *Wonderzine* at different times as freelance contributors. The identities of all journalists are anonymised in this chapter. The interviews were conducted in May–June 2024.
3 At the same time, such borrowings from English may be alienating to certain social groups, and their positive perception may be limited to the educated middle class (see Yangeldina 2023).
4 However, the issue of complicated and multi-layered relationships between feminism, conservatism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism in the Russian context requires further research.

5 In fact, as our netnographic observations revealed, feminists often converged with the 'right wing' when it came to Islamophobia.

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7 Feminist Anti-War Resistance: feminist media ecology and grassroots activism

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Introduction

The onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the subsequent international sanctions, and the intensification of repression against independent media and bloggers by the authorities have caused significant transformations in the Russian media landscape (Chapter one). In addition to increased political risks, media actors are currently dealing with new and substantial economic challenges: the exodus of many international companies and advertising agencies from Russia (Interfax 2022) has compounded the difficulties faced by many liberal and feminist-friendly media outlets and celebrities whose financial strategies depend on commercial collaborations with international brands. Moreover, YouTube's disabling of content monetisation, and TikTok's decision to restrict Russian users' ability to upload new content (RBC 2022; Milmo 2022) have undermined the established media strategies of influencers, (micro)celebrities, and other online content creators.

Thus, the very conditions that facilitated the emergence and development of (neoliberal) feminism in Russia – including access to global social platforms and the presence of corporations willing to invest in feminist-friendly marketing – were radically transformed after February 2022. Consequently, feminism was also compelled to undergo significant transformations, with feminist content producers forced to adapt to challenging media-political shifts. As previously described, Tatiana Mingalimova (Chapter four) had to stay outside Russia to continue her YouTube channel. Similarly, Instagram influencer Sasha Mitroshina, one of the organisers of the hashtag campaign #ЯНеХотелаУмирать (#IDidn'tWantToDie) (Chapter two), also left the country (Rubnikovich 2023). Ksenia Sobchak (Chapter three) remained in Russia but had to repeatedly change her chameleon-like media strategies to adapt to the new environment. And singer Manizha (Chapter five), who represented the country at the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest with her feminist anthem 'Russian woman' (Wiedlack and Zabolotny 2023), spoke about her financial difficulties in a 2023 interview (Sobchak 2022). She explained that these were due to restrictions placed on concert activities because of her anti-war statements and the withdrawal of international brands, which had previously collaborated with her, from the Russian market.

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Alongside financial and organisational transformations, political shifts also occurred. Feminism began to actively incorporate an anti-war agenda.[1] Anti-war statements were made by Manizha, Sasha Mitroshina, Tatiana Mingalimova, and many other feminist influencers and celebrities. The anti-war stance was actively supported by *Wonderzine* and other feminist publications, such as *Kosa.media*. However, part of the feminist community felt that anti-war posting and interventions in the media and cultural spheres were no longer sufficient. They felt that, with the onset of the full-scale war, it was time to 'turn into political power', 'the enormous media and cultural power' accumulated by the feminist movement in the country over the past decade (FAR 2022).

Following the outlined logic of political mobilisation, these feminists launched FAR. FAR was established on the second day of the war by a group of feminist 'activist-influencers' (Semenzin 2022) from Russia. They actively utilised their accumulated social and media capital to kick-start this movement and make it visible to media, other anti-war projects, and diverse audiences (Zhaivoronok 2025b). By leveraging various digital media tools and channels, FAR recruited a considerable number of activists globally, including within Russia, organised various protest activities and fundraising campaigns, and attracted significant media attention, both domestically and internationally.

Strategic use of digital platforms and other communication channels allowed FAR to amplify its message and mobilise support rapidly, showcasing the power of mediated feminist activism during the crisis. As both researchers and journalists argue (see Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024; Rossman 2022), FAR gained a reputation as the most influential feminist collective project from Russia and was perceived, especially during the initial months of the military invasion, as the symbol or 'face' of all oppositional anti-war protests in the country. This prominence underscored the critical role of feminist voices in the broader anti-war movement, highlighting their ability to influence public opinion and challenge state narratives.

In this chapter, we will discuss how the emergence and development of FAR are connected to the prior evolution of various forms of mediated feminism in the country. More precisely, we argue that the rise and prominence of feminism within celebrity and influencer scenes, as well as in lifestyle magazines and other professional media, created the conditions for the subsequent feminist anti-war mobilisation. This implies that, even though the discourses produced by figures such as Mingalimova, Sobchak, Manizha, or *Wonderzine* discussed in previous chapters were often individualistic, depoliticised, and focused on self-promotion and the pursuit of personal symbolic and financial gains, they still contributed to the generation of publicly accessible feminist discourses and to the creation of functioning *feminist media ecology* (FME). The concept of FME in this case refers to the interconnected and dynamic network of various feminist media actors and platforms that collectively shape and sustain public feminist discourses and identities. However, this interconnectedness does not imply that every actor within the FME is directly linked to every other actor. As Nunes (2021, 153) notes in the context of discussing organisations, 'there need be no kind of coordination or even

direct contact among the different components of an ecology for them to interact with one another: by acting on their shared environment, they can indirectly shape each other's fields of possibilities.' In other words, even without actual interaction or cooperation, each feminist media actor contributes to the overall ecology, thereby transforming it in one way or another.

This emerging FME includes a wide range of actors, from high-profile influencers, celebrities, and professional media outlets discussed throughout this book, to grassroots activists, anonymous content creators, and individual users. It also encompasses different genres such as memes (Rentschler and Thrift 2015), visual content (Almanssori and Stanley 2022; Glatt and Banet-Weiser 2021), podcasts (Trier-Bieniek 2023), art and literature (Robbe 2024; Perheentupa 2022), and analytical pieces (Novoselova and Jenson 2019), as well as various organisational forms like collective blogs, professional media outlets, and individual social media accounts. Additionally, it involves diverse initiatives, including hashtag activism (see Chapter two), fundraising campaigns, and educational projects. This FME is able to reach and engage with a broad and diverse audience. By offering interpretative tools, cognitive maps, and various repertoires of action, it helps individuals make sense of their experiences and connect them to broader social and political structures. Even though an FME *per se* does not create a political movement, it bridges together multiple resources, making it possible for such movements to emerge (see Ratilainen, Zhaivoronok, and Miazhevich 2025).

Thus, by being an active part of FME, the media outlets, celebrities, and micro-celebrities discussed in previous chapters have played a crucial role in normalising feminist ideas and making them part of mainstream discourse in Russia, thereby laying the groundwork for collective action. The creation of a FME facilitated the formation of a feminist collective identity, 'cognitive maps' (Fuist, Mogford, and Das 2018), and communities and networks that allowed openly anti-war feminist projects to emerge after the invasion of Ukraine. This collective identity provided a sense of solidarity and shared purpose among feminists, enabling them to coordinate their efforts and mobilise together against the war. In other words, we argue that the cumulative political potential of popular/neoliberal/celebrity feminisms should not be underestimated, at least in authoritarian contexts. Despite their limitations and orientation for an individual rather than a collective mode of action, these forms of feminism have played a pivotal role in fostering a politically engaged and socially conscious feminist movement capable of responding to the crisis.

However, neither popular neoliberal feminist formations nor this FME should be viewed through rose-tinted glasses. As we will demonstrate in the next chapter (Chapter eight), the impact of the emerging new media ecology and celebrity and influencer cultures is not always positive. Embedded within the attention economy and neoliberal affordances of digital platforms, the FME has fostered new – and perpetuated some old – forms of inequalities, leading to tensions among activists with diverse positionalities. Its intrinsic media logic sometimes conflicted with the politics of grassroots horizontal organisations. Nevertheless, FAR activists have been trying to deal with the constraining effects of the existing media system by

inventing new media practices that can potentially enrich and transform the FME in accordance with principles of horizontality and inclusivity.

This chapter, however, focuses on the enabling and mobilising influences of the FME. It is structured as follows: first, we provide a comprehensive background on FAR, including its founding principles, organisational framework, and the range of activities and strategies it employs. Following this, we discuss our findings based on data gained from interviews with FAR activists, focusing specifically on neoliberal and popular feminisms' contributions to the formation of a collective feminist identity and the production of a dynamic FME in Russia. We examine how these influences have shaped the experiences and perspectives of FAR activists and the broader feminist movement in the country.

FAR: organisational matrix and repertoire of action

FAR is a dynamic and digitally-enabled transnational network of feminist activists. It rapidly emerged as one of the most prominent oppositional actors in Russia, gaining recognition both domestically, from other anti-war movements, and internationally. In September 2023, FAR was awarded the prestigious Aachen Peace Prize, and its members were invited to contribute to the UN Human Rights Council (FAR 2023). The Russian authorities' designation of FAR as a 'foreign agent' in November 2022 and an 'undesirable organisation' in April 2024 (see more details in Chapter one) underscores its high visibility and significant impact.

FAR also quickly gained popularity and recognition from the media and liberal audiences in Russia and abroad. In its first month, FAR's Telegram channel amassed over 20,000 followers, increasing to more than 30,000 two months later (see Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024). Moreover, FAR successfully mobilised its followers into becoming activists who joined the movement and established local cells in their respective cities, and in countries including Finland, Germany, South Korea, the USA, and Armenia.

In its initial weeks, FAR disseminated information and coordinated anti-war demonstrations in Russia and other countries. However, following the tightening of Russian legislation, the movement shifted its focus to protest tactics that were less risky for activists. For instance, they encouraged their supporters to disseminate information about the war on banknotes, and advocated for replacing supermarket price tags with messages about the casualties of the conflict and other anti-war information. Sasha Skochilenko was detained in April 2022 for such an act of replacing price tags, and remained imprisoned until April 2024, when she was released as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and the West (Kishkovsky 2024).

Another FAR initiative was called 'Women in black', referencing the tradition of women's anti-war activism (Fridman 2011). As part of this campaign, FAR urged its supporters to gather in public spaces dressed in black on designated days to mourn the victims of the war. Participants were also encouraged to take photographs at the event locations and send them to a secure and anonymous bot. These photographs were published on FAR's Telegram channel. Then, in November 2024, FAR activists participated in a march of the united Russian opposition in Berlin. In

collaboration with the 'Vesna' movement, they devised the 'Delivered from Russia' campaign, urging participants to carry posters with slogans and demands sent by Russians who were unable to protest themselves (Fokht 2024).

In this way, FAR activities constitute a direct link to the specific 'spatial tactics' which became the defining features of the Russian feminist movement in the 2010s (Perheentupa 2022, 70–98). Perheentupa argues that, as institutions and spaces designated for feminist activities disappeared, activists adopted various tactics to occupy and redefine urban spaces as sites of feminist activism. Concurrently, the concept of a hidden 'underground' as a safe space for activism became significant among feminists, providing a base for protest campaigns. Perheentupa notes that hidden forms of activism in the Russian feminist movement coexist with visible forms, thus the interplay between visible and invisible activism has shaped the movement's repertoire of actions as much as digital communication.

One more factor linking FAR to the pre-war feminist movement is its versatile and creative use of communication technology. Digital platforms provided the primary means for feminist activists to network, organise protests, and engage in diverse ideological and discursive work throughout the 2010s (Yangeldina 2023; Rossman 2021). Researchers have observed that the development of communication technologies and the diversification of the media environment in Russia enhanced the feminist movement's visibility in society, despite its recent lack of access to the formal political arena managed by the establishment (Rossman 2021; Zhaivoronok 2025a). The increased visibility of feminism in global media and popular culture also made feminism accessible to individuals who were not previously interested in the feminist agenda (as illustrated in previous chapters), rendering it a somewhat fashionable phenomenon in Russia (Ratilainen 2022; Zhaivoronok 2020). These factors have enabled FAR to rapidly attract both passive and active supporters.

Methodology

We conducted two rounds of interviews with FAR activists. The first round, conducted from September 2022 to March 2023, involved 16 activists. The second round took place with six activists in January and February 2024. In all these interviews, we explored the interviewees' feminist beliefs, as well as FAR's activities, organisational structure, and the role of various media in the movement. For this chapter, it was particularly important to learn how the respondents had become feminists and what sources facilitated their feminist awakening. Upon analysing the collected data, it became evident that FAR's successful recruitment of followers, volunteers, and activists was made possible precisely because the earlier development of mediated feminism in Russia had created the necessary conditions for this success. Specifically, this prior development had established a complex, dynamic, and publicly visible FME, which played a crucial role in facilitating the emergence of a collective feminist identity and a political sensibility among the activists.

In the following sub-sections, we explore how the feminist identities of FAR activists were formed, and how various feminist media actors influenced this

process. This includes examining the impact of neoliberal and popular feminisms, as well as the influencer scene, on the development of their feminist consciousness. We also consider ways in which these different media forms contributed to shaping the activists' understanding of feminism and their engagement with the movement. The respondents' names are anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

Feminist collective identity: the interplay between personal experiences and digital media

All the activists we interviewed had already identified themselves as feminists prior to joining FAR. Most of them chose to join FAR, rather than other anti-war projects (see Terekhov 2023; Austausch e.V. 2022), precisely because this initiative resonated with their feminist values and identities. Therefore, it can be argued that the development of FAR and the recruitment of its activists and followers were made possible because at least some groups and individuals in Russia already had an informed (and positive) understanding of feminism, and certain individuals identified with feminism. This raises a critical question: what kind of historical, cultural, and social processes contributed to the formation of this collective feminist identity in Russia?

When evaluating how individuals develop their understanding and beliefs about feminism, research has shown that exposure to feminist ideas – such as having feminist family members or friends, or taking women's studies courses in college – is a consistent predictor of identifying as a feminist (see Kelly 2015, 82 for an overview). However, in our interview sample, neither gender studies courses nor feminist-identifying family members were mentioned by the participants as inspiration for their feminist identity.

This can be explained by the fact that women or gender studies courses were, and are, rare in Russia (Temkina and Zdravomyslova 2014). Having a family member with feminist viewpoints is also quite unlikely – feminism, both as a personal identity and as a collective movement, was not encouraged during Soviet times. Despite experiencing some growth in visibility and reach during the 1990s (Gradskova 2020; Kochkina 2007), it remained unpopular across society until the second half of the 2010s (Gapova 2007; Markowitz 1995; Sperling 1999). Therefore, publicly available information about feminism was scarce, and feminist identities did not extend far beyond NGOs and a small number of universities or research centres.

This situation was illustrated by one of our informant's accounts. Tina's feminist awakening occurred in the mid-2000s, before the explosive spread of social platforms and other digital media. At that time, according to her, feminism in Russia 'was not very [developed]', and information about it was hard to find. Therefore, despite her family belonging to the Moscow intelligentsia – a milieu closely connected to both NGOs and academia – 'feminism' remained an unfamiliar and incomprehensible concept to her for some time. However, after getting married, Tina came across a psychology book that briefly mentioned feminism. This sparked her interest, leading her to seek out other books on feminism

and discuss her readings with friends. Eventually, she found like-minded individuals with whom she subsequently launched a feminist initiative.

While a book had played a crucial part in Tina's awakening, digital media also played a role in developing her feminist identity, as later on she recounted how YouTube videos and blogs had contributed to her awareness of various feminisms. In contrast, for our younger respondents, digital media had been decisive from the beginning. Daria, whose coming of age occurred in the mid-2010s, described her path to feminism as follows:

> I am trying to remember when I first became interested in feminism because initially I had a history of abusive relationships [abiuzivnye otnosheniia] […] And I felt that something was wrong […] At that moment I started reading feminists [on social platforms]. At first, I rejected many of their ideas; there were things I didn't like[…] but gradually I got drawn in. I started by reading public pages, then feminist accounts, and eventually began looking for movements. (Daria, January 2023)

But what was common in both Tina's and Daria's stories was the connection between mediated and intimate experiences. In Daria's narrative, turning to online feminist resources was linked to her personal situation – abusive relationships. Tina also emphasised that her turn to feminism was connected to specific life experiences – disillusionment with marriage and objectification (she felt that within her family, she was treated as a 'beautiful, convenient [piece of] furniture'). Almost all our other study participants also highlighted the influence of personal experiences along with media engagement on developing their feminist identity. These personal experiences included domestic violence, bullying at school, the absence of a father figure, a 'family matriarchy', motherhood, abusive relationships, and everyday sexism. This aligns with previous research findings that personal experiences of sexism and discrimination predict feminist identity (Kelly 2015, 82).

However, not all women encountering gender-based discrimination and/or violence eventually develop a feminist identity. Moreover, as critical researchers remind us, experience *per se* does not have a self-evident, objective meaning and significance; rather, 'experience is always a work of interpretation that is collectively produced' (Bhambra and Margree 2010, 61). In other words, to interpret any experience as an instance of sexism or gender-based discrimination, an individual needs access to some kind of feminist or para-feminist interpretative devices and cognitive maps (Fuist, Mogford, and Das 2018) in a form accessible to them. Our research participants had found these interpretative tools through the FME, particularly via online discourses and communities.

This suggests that, in the digital era, media and personal experiences are deeply interconnected in the process of becoming a feminist. Feminist media content provides individuals with interpretative tools that enable them to make sense of their own experiences and connect their personal stories with a broader understanding of social and political structures. These interpretative tools are crucial for transforming personal grievances into a collective feminist consciousness.

Like Daria, most other participants in the study emphasised that their feminist identity development had been influenced by both their individual life trajectories and the media discourses available to them.

Moreover, digital media also served as a space where our research participants were able to find like-minded people or those with similar experiences, connect with them, and form (virtual) communities. This opportunity was especially important for individuals with non-binary gender identities, who often face additional layers of marginalisation and may struggle to find acceptance in offline spaces (Lukinmaa 2022; Kislitsyna 2021). The internet offers a relatively safe and accessible platform for these individuals to explore their identities and build supportive networks. For instance, Zhenia, an agender person, shared their journey to feminism:

> Q: Could you please tell us how you became a feminist?
> A: Well, it's actually a very long and complicated story, related to the fact that I am an agender person. I grew up feeling like I was a 'wrong' woman, different from all my classmates […] And then I got access to the internet, and I started reading various things, finding people who were similar to me. And eventually, here I am, in the Feminist Anti-War Resistance. (Zhenia, October 2022)

In this narrative, Zhenia too weaved their personal experience as an agender person with their media practices. Notably, Zhenia established a symbolic connection between the moment they 'got access to the internet' and the time they 'eventually' joined FAR. This highlights the pivotal role of digital media in facilitating not only individual identity formation, but also collective political mobilisation. Without digital media, Zhenia would not have been able to join FAR, and FAR itself, as a digitally-enabled social movement, would have been impossible.

But Zhenia hinted at something else as well. They mentioned that joining FAR was facilitated not only by using the internet, but also by engaging with online communities and discourses: 'I started reading various things, finding people who were similar to me.' Thus, it would not have been possible to develop a feminist and activist identity without digital technologies, but equally, it would not have been possible without the feminist cyberculture and pop culture created by various feminist actors – from early feminist forum administrators to anonymous content creators, feminist magazines and journalists, and a highly visible scene comprising feminist influencers and celebrities – producing various discourses and creating spaces for socialising. These actors have collectively contributed to a rich and diverse feminist media landscape that provides both content and community for individuals seeking feminist perspectives.

Different sources and the FME

However, digital media's effect on the development of feminist identity does not necessarily imply the influence of the specific forms of popular and neoliberal feminism that we analyse in this book. Previous research has shown that a significant

contribution to developing a feminist consciousness comes from various DIY educational, informational, or art initiatives (Clark-Parsons 2022; Hannell 2023; Novoselova and Jenson 2019; Rentschler 2014). In particular, researchers have demonstrated that grassroots activists' digital projects contribute significantly to the formation of feminist identities and solidarity networks in Russia (Solovey, 2022). At the same time, as discussed earlier, researchers display some scepticism regarding the impact of popular and neoliberal feminism on the development of feminism as a political movement (see Banet-Weiser 2018; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017; Scharff 2024).

When discussing the media figures and projects that had influenced them, our study participants mentioned both grassroots feminist projects and forms of popular feminism. For example, two activists cited *Wonderzine* (Chapter six), and one mentioned Tatiana Mingalimova (Chapter four). However, those most frequently mentioned were influencers and micro-influencers: Daria Serenko (X/Instagram), Nika Vodvud (YouTube/Instagram), Zalina Marshenkulova (X/Telegram), Tatiana Nikonova (Telegram), Sasha Mitroshina (Instagram), and Mira Smallchurch (TikTok/Instagram). Among the more grassroots media projects, research participants named various feminist groups and public pages on social platforms: feminism visually (*feminizm nagliadno)* (VK/Telegram), IFreedom! (*IaSvoboda!*) (Telegram), Queens of spades (*pikovye damy*) (VK/Telegram), female logic (*zhenskaia logika)* (VK/Telegram), Fem-time (*Fem-vremia*) (Telegram), *Wrongfem* (VK/Telegram), *patriarchy bullshit* (FB), and *FEM Talks* (Telegram/SoundCloud).

Based on these responses, it can be asserted that neoliberal feminist media and influencers do indeed contribute to the development of feminist political identities and the dissemination of feminist discourses. However, ultimately, developing a collective feminist identity is not dependent on any single type of media resource or figure, but rather on the collective presence of diverse feminist media actors – that is, on the FME as a whole.

This argument about the salience of a media ecology over individual feminist media actors is also supported by the fact that some of our study participants did not follow any feminist media or influencers at all. They received information about feminism by consuming content from sources where feminism was not the primary focus. For example, one activist stated that she learned about the situation with feminism in Russia by reading liberal opposition media:

> I think that the feminist agenda is not only present in feminist media and blogs. It also permeates through various so-called Russian opposition figures and publications. (Aiuna, December 2022)

Another activist told us that a music blogger had played a significant role in her feminist journey:

> I follow bloggers who adhere to feminist ideas, but feminism is not the main focus of their activities. Initially they are engaged in something else, either music, creativity, or something else, and they also promote the feminist

> agenda […] A significant contribution to my understanding of feminism was made by Oleg Antonenko […] He is a blogger and musician, very talented, sings beautifully, and is a very pleasant, cosy, and homely person. He used to share a lot of information about feminism and women's rights. (Eloise, September 2022)

The statements by Aiuna and Eloise highlight several important points. Firstly, they remind us that, before the war, Russian feminism had achieved significant success. It ceased to be marginal, unpopular, and almost invisible to the general public, becoming a significant and influential phenomenon in Russian public life (Ratilainen, Zhaivoronok, and Miazhevich, 2025). It can be argued that, as a counter-public (Fraser 1990), that is, as alternative organisational form of publicness (Kalinina and Beyes 2024), feminism had the opportunity to influence the public sphere, penetrating discourse in cultural fields (Robbe 2024), professional media (Chapter six), and other media actors. This meant that, in the second half of the 2010s, as seen in the examples of Aiuna and Eloise, it was not even necessary to read feminist media or follow feminist bloggers to develop a feminist consciousness. One could just read liberal media and follow bloggers in the fields of culture, entertainment, or beauty.

Another important observation is that our research participants actually consumed information about feminism from different types of sources. They switched between platforms VK, X, Telegram, etc.), as well as between formats (text, audio, and video-based) and genres (interviews, memes, educational videos, reviews, etc.). From their perspectives, individual actors were important, but more critical was the FME which enabled different feminist voices to be heard and opened up various opportunities for the respondents to engage with feminist ideas via various formats and genres.

Continuity and discontinuity

Hannell (2023) identifies two types of narratives about becoming a feminist: continuous and discontinuous. In a continuous narrative, the development of feminist identity is presented as a natural progression from the individual's earlier life trajectory. Sheryl Hercus (2005), analysing the process of becoming feminist, labelled such journeys as 'always feminist.' These narratives are characterised by an emphasis on the consistency between feminist identity and women's previous experiences and individual trajectories. In becoming feminists, the women Hercus interviewed did not report experiencing dramatic changes in values, beliefs, or their sense of self because of a feminist awakening. Quite the opposite, they insisted that they were feminists even before they learned about feminism.

This type of narrative was prominent in our interviews, as many research participants connected the development of their feminist identity to experiences and situations from their early years. For example, one of the activists stated that he 'understood from childhood that feminism and women's rights are important' (Anton, April 2023). Another interviewee asserted that she had been a feminist

from an early age because she was raised in a 'matriarchal' family, with only female family members present: her mother and her sister (Raisa, March 2023).

Thus, in continuity narratives, our research participants saw the development of their feminist identities as an extension of pre-existing values and attitudes. These activists described their feminist awakening as a process of recognising and articulating beliefs they had always held, rather than adopting new ones. This continuity provided a sense of stability and coherence in their personal narratives, reinforcing the idea that their feminist identity was deeply rooted in their life experiences.

However, other research participants emphasised discontinuity (Hannell 2023, 30) between previous experiences and becoming a feminist. For example, in Daria's quote above, she stressed that it was originally difficult for her to accept feminist beliefs. At first, she had disliked and disagreed with many feminist statements, and it was only after browsing through various feminist bloggers on different platforms that she became 'drawn in.' Eloise, another activist, spoke directly about the unintentional nature, at least in the initial stage, of her feminist becoming:

> I started to get into feminism quite by accident. I just started following the channel of an LGBT couple, two girls who lived in Denmark […] And they promoted feminist ideas in a soft way […] And then gradually, thanks to a confluence of circumstances, various media, and largely thanks to TikTok and certain people, I began to understand what feminism was in general terms and what it meant for me. I fully began to identify with feminism around the age of 15–16. (September 2022)

Thus, Eloise highlighted that her journey to feminism was not directly tied to her own life experience. Rather, her consumption of media content itself became the primary driver on the way to her feminist awakening. This confirms the argument that becoming feminist does not need any specific prior experience or particular social or biological location (Bhambra and Margree 2010). Instead, it requires access to feminist conceptual frameworks, interpretative devices, and practices. This is why the impact of media is crucial, especially in contexts like Russia, where feminist discourses are not widely disseminated by institutions other than the media.

Making feminism more accessible

Thus, digital technologies and culture have not only increased the quantity of publicly accessible feminist resources, but also transformed their quality, content, and accessibility. As argued in Chapter four, micro-celebrities and influencers have made feminism understandable and relatable for young women, who are interested in celebrity, lifestyle, and popular culture. Lana expressed this well when asked about the role media played in her activism:

> I'm exactly this resource that you can mobilise very easily […] And so there are more and more people like me thanks to the media […] that is, now a person

> does not need to read ten volumes of feminist theory [to become a feminist]. (Lana, December 2022)

Of course, one could argue that reading volumes of feminist literature has never been a prerequisite for forming a feminist identity. However, Lana's statement is not without merit; on the contrary, it eloquently highlights the monumental changes in access to feminist knowledge brought about by digital media, both within the Russian context and beyond (Clark-Parsons 2022).

Indeed, to declare oneself a feminist, it is not necessary to read feminist theory all the way from Mary Wollstonecraft to Maria Lugones. However, it is evident that, to develop a feminist identity, an individual needs at least some level of knowledge about what feminism is and who feminists are (Bhambra and Margree 2010; Hannell 2023). Sources of such knowledge can include friends, family, cultural and educational institutions, political organisations, or various media (zines, YouTube videos, or radio programmes). It is preferable that these sources present feminism in a positive light rather than as an object of ridicule[2]. But where could our research participants, whose coming of age occurred in the mid-2000s or early 2010s, find such discourses?

In the 1990s, Russian feminism in its epistemological project largely relied on attempts to translate Western feminist discourses into the Russian context. As Ratilainen (2021, 248) writes, 'one of the ways to describe the early post-Soviet academic feminism is to call it a "translational project".' During that period feminism in Russia primarily developed through NGOs and academic courses in gender or women's studies (Hemment 2007; Kochkina 2007; Sperling 2015, 245). Both NGOs and academia produced public discourses on feminism, but these were not intended for a mass audience. Reading and understanding such texts required specialised skills and specific knowledge to make sense of social science terminology or the bureaucratic language of NGO reports. This confirms Lana's statement. Even in the early to mid-2010s (before the emergence of 'Pussy Riot'), to gain any understanding of feminism one had to either read academic literature (as Tina did) or follow NGO activities. Other types of discourses aimed at young women – such as zines or feminist songs like those of the 'Riot Grrrl' movement – simply were not available in Russia, or were very marginal.

This is why a significant predictor of feminist identity in Russia at that time was English language proficiency. Since feminism in post-Soviet Russia advanced under the influence of Western theories and funding, mastery of English was a vital skill (Hemment 2007). As feminist sociologist Elena Zdravomyslova (2002) emphasises, during the 1990s, English proficiency allowed individuals to establish international contacts and gain access to English-language literature, which held high symbolic status within the feminist community. As one of the informants in Zdravomyslova's research expressed, 'The main task of our movement is learning the English language. It is the cornerstone of contemporary feminism in Russia' (Zdravomyslova 2002).

However, in our interview sample, only one activist referred to English-language sources when discussing how she had become a feminist. All the other interviewees

had relied mainly on Russian-language media to develop their knowledge of feminism. Our research participants demonstrated a significant understanding of key feminist concepts and approaches, including having an awareness of various feminist currents such as cyberfeminism, intersectionality, and radical feminism, and appreciating the differences between them. This suggests that the development of mediated feminism had led to the production of a significant amount of Russian-language feminist discourses – textual, visual, and audio – which reduced the importance of understanding the English language. In other words, if someone could read a cyberfeminist blog, follow an intersectional influencer, and listen to a podcast about decolonial feminism in Russian, then English was no longer necessary to immerse themselves in feminist discourses.

Thus, the advent of digital media and popular feminism has democratised access to feminist ideas, making them more widely available and easier to understand (see Keller 2016 for a similar argument). This shift has allowed individuals to engage with feminist concepts without needing to delve into dense academic texts. Instead, they can access a variety of feminist content through blogs, social media, podcasts, and videos, which present these ideas in more relatable and accessible formats.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traced the relationship between the development of Russian feminism prior to 2022 and the emergence of anti-war feminism following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To do this, we introduced the concept of *FME* to designate the interconnected and dynamic network of various feminist media actors and platforms that collectively shape and sustain public feminist discourses and identities. We argue that celebrities, influencers, and neoliberal media, like those examined in this book, have made an undeniable, albeit controversial (see Chapter eight), contribution to the formation of a diversified and functioning FME in Russia. This became evident in the narratives articulated by our FAR respondents. Naturally, the identified trends are indicative and can be extrapolated up to a certain degree.

By analysing data gathered from interviews with FAR activists, we identified the following positive shifts brought about by the spread of mediated feminism: the normalisation of feminist discourses among certain social groups; the formation of a collective feminist identity; the increased accessibility of feminist interpretative tools to a wide audience; and the diversification of formats and genres of feminist discourses. Notably, the emergence of popular forms of Russian-language feminism has reduced the dependence on Western, predominantly English-language sources of feminist knowledge which was characteristic of feminism in Russia in the 1990s (Zdravomyslova 2002; Hemment 2007).

We also noted that, due to the diversity and prevalence of feminist discourses in contemporary media, especially digital media, feminist knowledge has become more accessible to a broader audience. Unlike in the 1990s, the formation of a feminist identity is no longer tied to academia, NGOs, or activism. Our informants immersed themselves in feminism through watching YouTube videos, following feminist influencers on X and TikTok, and reading blogs on VK. Moreover, as

some study participants' experiences show, feminist discourses extended beyond strictly feminist resources, becoming subjects of discussion in non-specialised media: liberal outlets and media related to contemporary culture in a broad sense.

Thanks to accessing feminist discourses, our informants had gained interpretative tools (Bhambra and Margree 2010) through which to understand their own personal experiences, such as abusive relationships, objectification, and marginalisation. This indicates that, in the digital age, both mediated and personal experiences are deeply intertwined in the process of becoming a feminist. Feminist media content provides individuals with these interpretative tools, helping them to further link their personal stories to a broader comprehension of social and political frameworks. These tools are essential for converting personal grievances into a collective feminist awareness.

Consequently, the establishment of a FME has supported the development of a collective feminist identity, cognitive maps, and the creation of communities and networks. These networks have enabled the rise of openly anti-war feminist initiatives following the invasion of Ukraine. This collective identity has fostered a sense of solidarity and shared purpose among feminists, allowing them to coordinate their efforts and mobilise together against the war. The growth of these networks and communities highlights the significant role of this FME in fostering collective action and supporting social movements.

Notes

1 However, pro-war feminism has also emerged (Johnson 2023, 8; Silbaugh and Zhaivoronok 2023).
2 For example, Eloise and some other informants stated that, before they became interested in feminism, they had only encountered the term in negative contexts (see Chapter two), such as being ridiculed in comedy shows. The activists did not believe that these negative mentions of feminism had influenced the development of their feminist identities. Instead, they viewed such discourses as obstacles.

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8 FAR mediated activism: contradictions between media logic and feminist collective action

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Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, the development of the feminist media ecology (FME) in Russia prior to 2022 was constructive for the FAR's ability to mobilise supporters and recruit activists during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, as we have demonstrated throughout the book, the entanglements between feminism, media technologies, and cultures are almost always ambiguous and ambivalent, because the FME is 'nested in broader ecologies that overlap in various ways' (Nunes 2021, 151). Indeed, as noted by Tufekci (2013, 854), the emergent new media ecology 'create[s] multiple and conflicting dynamics rather than a simple strengthening of one path'.

From the point of view of infrastructure and digital affordances, FME relies on digital platforms and messengers that operate within the logic of neoliberalism and 'data extractivism' (Reutter 2024; Saraswati 2021). From a socio-cultural perspective, feminist discourses are heavily influenced by celebrity and influencer cultures, with their individualistic and depoliticising ethos (Pruchniewska 2018; Savolainen, Uitermark and Boy 2022; Semenzin 2022). Moreover, Russian feminists are under constant pressure from Putin's authoritarian and conservative regime, which distorts political representation, limits opportunities for political expression, and manipulates publicly accessible information (Litvinenko 2022; Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024; Zhaivoronok 2025a). The feminist media activism that emerges under these conditions cannot help but bear the imprint of such a politico-technological environment. Hence, it is necessary to discuss not only the positive, but also the more challenging and contradictory influences of the media ecology on the dynamics of feminism's development following the onset of the full-scale invasion.

That said, in this chapter, we focus on the challenges feminists faced navigating digital media technologies and cultures as transpired in our interviews with FAR activists. Our data shows that the movement's reliance on media as its primary infrastructure was not always viewed positively. In some cases, the media logic and digital culture seemed to contradict the goals and underlying principles of FAR as a feminist political movement. By surfacing the challenges of doing activism primarily through digital media, this chapter also contributes to scholarship on the

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limits of 'connective action' – action that is organised through the means of digital communication networks instead of the more traditional logic of 'collective action' based on established groupings and collective identities (Bennet and Segerberg 2013; see also Shahin and Ng 2022).

Moreover, as we will show, our interviewees often possessed a clear and nuanced awareness of the limitations inherent in contemporary media systems. This included recognising the biases, neoliberal logic, and techno-social affordances that shape both media content and its distribution. Despite this awareness, many activists expressed a sense of powerlessness in the face of these structural constraints. At times, they described the logic of techno-capitalism that underpins digital media architecture as being just as rigid and unyielding as the restrictions imposed by Putin's regime. Paradoxically, some felt that they had more influence over the latter than the former. This simultaneous awareness of both the constraints and affordances of media infrastructures, coupled with a sense that these systems are immutable and lack alternatives, is what we refer to as *media realism*.

Drawing inspiration from Mark Fisher (2009), we define *media realism* as a mode of political and cultural consciousness that is shaped by this dual awareness. It emerges from a contradiction embedded in political practice: activists recognise the structural limitations imposed by the attention economy, platform algorithms, and media logic, yet also acknowledge that these very systems remain the most accessible and effective tools for oppositional communication, mobilisation, and resistance. Despite these constraints, digital media are still widely regarded as the most effective instruments for resisting authoritarianism in Russia. Thus, *media realism* does not equate to a passive acceptance of the status quo. Rather, it represents a form of strategic adaptation – a way of navigating a media environment that is both enabling and inhibiting. This underscores the complexity of the current political moment, in which technological advancement simultaneously opens space for political resistance and egalitarian experimentation, while also giving rise to new reactionary formations (e.g., Jones 2022; Kay 2024).

Thus, in this chapter, we analyse our respondents' attitudes regarding the limitations of using digital tools for their activism. Additionally, we reflect on the consequences of the prolonged duration of the war in Ukraine and FAR's changed juridical status between our two rounds of interviews. When the second round of interviews was conducted in January to February 2024, the war had already been ongoing for two years with no end in sight. During that time, FAR had been declared an 'undesirable organisation' in Russia (OVD-Info 2024b). On the one hand, our research participants interpreted this as a sign that the movement was regarded as influential by the authorities and a potential challenge to the Russian government. On the other hand, the status of 'undesirable organisation' has significantly increased the risks of engaging in activism, especially in Russia.

We have divided the issues and perceived adverse effects of the digital mediascape for activism into three aspects, namely: the impact of influencer culture and the attention economy on grassroots feminist projects; digital communication and the problem of activist burnout; and the broader contradictions between the media logic and the logic of grassroots politics. This chapter contributes to the field by

extending the focus of research beyond the Western context, by showing how these phenomena have been reshaped by authoritarianism, the military crisis, and the subsequent politically-driven relocation of activists to outside Russia.

Influencer culture, visibility accumulation, and FAR

As previously noted (Zhaivoronok 2025b), FAR was initially founded by a group of feminist activist-influencers (AIs), who played a crucial role in its development. Therefore, it is worth analysing in more detail the role that influencer culture and its ethos have had on FAR. Firstly, the AIs were vital for establishing FAR as an organisation. Their role was particularly crucial in the early stages, as they wrote the movement's influential manifesto (FAR 2022) and were probably responsible for creating and managing FAR's accounts on Telegram and other digital platforms. They also leveraged their social and media capital to spread information about FAR and attract new supporters. From our interviews, we know that AIs also put considerable effort into maintaining internal communication within FAR and establishing its organisational framework. Thus, these influencers invested a lot of their media capital, time, skills, and other resources to kickstart and design FAR, which would not have grown to be as visible and prominent without their contributions. In that sense, FAR is a testimony to the AIs significant achievement in advancing feminist political organising and mobilising.

Despite the central role that AIs played in forming and developing FAR, it is nevertheless critical to delve deeper into the interplay between the collective dynamics and the individualising aspect of the influencer culture imposed on FAR. It is important to emphasise that the AIs were not the sole bearers and disseminators of influencer culture within FAR. It can be argued that influencer culture, as a crucial component of the international FME more generally, plays a significant role in shaping a hegemonic feminist sensibility that traverses diverse social backgrounds and operates independently of any one person's social capital. In essence, individuals do not need to be influencers themselves to engage with and adopt the logic underlying influencers' performances. That is the logic of social capital accumulation within the attention economy (Saraswati 2021; Semenzin 2022; Tufekci 2013).

As influencers become the paradigmatic feminist activist figures in the global context (Scharff 2024), media visibility becomes the lens through which the weight of each individual activist's contributions to the feminist movement is measured, and their position within the symbolic hierarchy of activism is defined (Semenzin 2022). In other words, the significance of an individual activist's efforts and the importance of their contribution to advancing the feminist cause tends to be measured by the number of followers and media mentions generated. Thus, visibility becomes a marker of an activist status (Tufekci 2013, 850). Consequently, visibility has emerged as a new form of activist capital and, correspondingly, created what we call *hierarchies of visibility,* as well as inequality between activists. By its very nature, visibility represents a form of inequality that is impossible to overlook, as it is created through maximum public exposure (Faucher 2018). Visibility

is a form of conspicuous inequality that accumulates and reproduces itself in plain sight. This is exactly what we also traced among the FAR activists. As one research participant remarked, speaking about FAR during an interview:

> I think that this tension between the group that is more media-visible and the group that is less media-visible does exist. (Tina, January 2023)

For the majority of our informants, the division between invisible and visible activists was obvious. The only difference was in their attitudes towards this division. Many activists we spoke with emphasised the positive role of 'visible' (*vidimye*) or 'mediated' (*mediinnye*) activists – emic terms – within FAR. For instance, they highlighted that AIs are very useful as they attract media and public attention to FAR, thereby amplifying the movement's voice and significance:

> In general, any media figures contribute greatly to the movement by creating media buzz […] that is, endless discussions on Telegram channels and on other platforms. (Lana, December 2022)

Other activists noted that AIs' presence as the movement's faces or spokespeople made FAR seem more relevant and trustworthy to its audience. Additionally, some pointed out that AIs made FAR's communication feel more personalised, which was beneficial:

> The advantage, probably, is that there is individual charisma, which provides a certain energy of recognition, those kinds of things that charisma gives. (Tina, January 2023)

Existing studies (e.g., Peter and Muth 2023; Dafrizal et al. 2025; Harff and Schmuck 2023; Kruikemeier et al. 2013) are in line with our observation that AIs' communications made FAR's political discourses more comprehensible and relatable for a wider audience, especially young people. In turn, this increased comprehensibility and relatability potentially enhanced their engagement and participation in political activities. Moreover, as we argue elsewhere (Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024, 35), the AIs significantly contributed to recruiting FAR activists whilst acting as the movement's 'public faces' and spokespeople for the international media. However, for some people, the AIs posed a barrier against them joining the movement, namely for those social media users who did not like the AIs' social media personas or communication styles.

Interestingly, the same activist who highlighted some positive effects of this personalised communication also emphasised its negative side effects. In their opinion, reliance on a limited number of AIs as FAR's figureheads had led to an over-identification of the movement with those individuals. This created challenges, as the personal actions and statements of these AIs may have been conflated with FAR's official stance, leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the movement's goals and values. As the respondent put it:

> The fact that FAR has a limited number of public faces also creates its own challenges because this association of 'FAR equals this person' becomes so strong that when the person writes something on their personal Twitter, people start perceiving it as if FAR wrote it. (Tina, January 2023)

Thus, even though their personalised communication made the collective appear more accessible and relatable to the audience, it also risked transforming individual personal expressions into the voice of the entire movement, giving them symbolic control over the organisation's communication (Tufekci 2013, 857). This sometimes resulted in situations when FAR's position was overshadowed by the narratives of its most visible figures (see Zhaivoronok 2025b).

Importantly, some respondents problematised the issue of visibility when speaking about tensions between activists with differential visibility or media capital. This was because, while some AIs accumulated additional media visibility and social capital by representing FAR, less visible activists' contributions did not always receive similar recognition and symbolic rewards within the movement. This disparity created a sense of injustice and frustration among less visible activists, who felt that their hard work and the value of their contributions were being overlooked and/or diluted. As one activist expressed it:

> Therefore, I feel upset for the activists who put in a lot of effort but, so to speak, their work, the value of their work, does not get recognised, it gets diluted. (Sofia, February 2023)

Of course, for many activists, not being visible in the media was a matter of safety, as visibility could bring the risk of prosecution from the authorities. But those who were abroad and didn't plan to return to Russia any time soon perceived greater visibility as a kind of symbolic reward for their input. However, as another activist pointed out, the current system of redistributing visibility within FAR is structured in such a way that 'those who are more visible in the media receive more support, while those who are not visible or less visible in the media, the unknown, remain unknown,' adding: 'in my opinion, this is, well, not very fair' (Pala, October 2022).

In FAR, this unequal distribution of visibility and support led to hierarchical structures emerging within the organisation. This, in turn, contradicted the principles of equality and horizontality on which its operational and organisational logic was built. These growing hierarchical relationships created a potential risk for the movement's cohesion, solidarity, and collective decision-making. For example, several activists we consulted believed that the power imbalance resulting from inequalities in media and social capital had become an obstacle to horizontal decision-making, as it gave certain influencers' opinions and positions more weight than others:

> Our structure is horizontal but still, a certain core has emerged, and I don't want to call it a leading core, but let's say […] a core with a greater concentration of social capital within FAR. (Raisa, March 2023)

This statement was echoed by another activist:

> Well, horizontality is great in theory, but there is always a power imbalance in one way or another, because there are more media-visible and less media-visible activists […] And the more or less media-visible ones may have different resources […] Often it turns out that, if you have different resources, you seem to have more opportunities to do bigger things […] Therefore, not everyone always has the opportunity to reach out and participate in decision-making on an equal footing. (Pala, October 2022)

As these quotes from our interviews demonstrate, the emergence of these hierarchical structures created significant challenges for FAR as a horizontal and inclusive movement. The concentration of social and media capital among AIs can lead to a centralisation of power, where the voices and perspectives of less visible activists do not get similar attention and weight in collective discussions and public representations. This hierarchisation can undermine the principles of equality and inclusivity that the movement strives for, as the decision-making process becomes skewed in favour of those with greater visibility and resources. Moreover, based on our interviews, we ascertained that this power imbalance can provoke feelings of frustration and disillusionment among less visible activists, who may feel that their efforts are under-appreciated and/or overlooked. This can weaken the movement's cohesion and solidarity, as some activists may become disappointed and alienated.

Activist burnout and the reliance on digital media infrastructures

Six follow-up interviews carried out approximately one year after the first interview round revealed another issue that FAR had faced, namely exhaustion and burnout among its activists. The ongoing war without any sign of peace in sight made the situation harder to bear. One interviewee described the atmosphere between activists in their local group as a 'general burnout, general tiredness, general sense of powerlessness, demotivation caused by everything happening' (Pala, February 2024). As another respondent pointed out, activist work in FAR required significant emotional labour, which had caused their own subsequent emotional exhaustion and disengagement from activism:

> Well, activism is simply emotional work in the first place, and when […] emotionally I am […] like a dead battery it becomes impossible, of course I don't have any resources to re-engage in the process. (Aiuna, January 2024)

At the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the initial shock sparked action, yet after two years of war, the state of affairs had become normalised, leading to inaction. This stagnation was also visible in diminished media coverage of the movement – a situation that had changed drastically from FAR's early phase (Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024, 30–32). Our exiled respondents expressed

their wishes for more support from the local media, and discussed the difficulty of finding possibilities for collaboration.

Similar experiences of burnout, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion have been noted in various previous studies on activist work and social movements (e.g., Gorski et al. 2018; Gauditz 2024; Basas 2015). Activist burnout is recognised as a wider phenomenon, in which 'long-term activism-related stressors deteriorate activists' physical or emotional health or sense of connectedness to their movements, impacting their effectiveness or abilities to remain engaged' (Gorski et al. 2019, 365). The danger of emotional exhaustion and activist burnout is higher among 'high-risk' activists working in hazardous and precarious circumstances (Peña et al. 2021). FAR affiliates' exhaustion was increased further by Russia's repression of all anti-war activists (see OVD-Info 2024a) and the consequent risks they faced in their everyday lives.

We argue that, since FAR is an activist project that relies heavily on social media infrastructure, there is a strong connection between its digital communication tools and activist burnout. This burnout was manifest in FAR members' disengagement from activism and it became clear in how they followed the social media channels of the movement. Some of our respondents – who still subscribe to the different FAR chats – no longer had the energy to respond to messages. Rather, they just followed passively what was going on. One respondent had muted her FAR chats and only opened them up for a quick look from time to time, while another had unfollowed all activist channels. Another said they had left all activist chats but were still subscribed to the main channel, even though they had practically stopped following it. However, most of our interviewees had not totally disconnected from FAR's social media channels and chat rooms. Instead, they were waiting for a new push – either internal or external – to become 'activated' again.

This burnout and exhaustion translated into an overarching experience and permeated other spheres. In addition to discussions and activities in FAR channels quietening down (e.g., chat coordinators were not as present in the discussion channels as they had been before), the reduced activity became evident in local cells, which had either cut down their activities or become completely inactive. One respondent, who wanted to re-activate the local cell of which they were part, encountered a lack of response, as it had become 'dead' in its members' eyes. Nevertheless, the inactivity of regional cells did not necessarily mean an end to all activist work or to people's engagement with FAR as an organisation. One of the interviewees suspected that those local activists who had strong connections with FAR's core group might have continued their work or kept in touch with the movement's 'main' channel.

While the quietening down of chats and deactivation of other FAR media are symptomatic of activists' fatigue, we argue that FAR's heavy reliance on digital media itself increased the activists' risk of burnout. As has been shown, especially among young people, a 'heavy' use of social media is linked to a heightened risk of emotional exhaustion due to constant exposure to distressing information (e.g., Supa et al. 2024; Caporino et al. 2020). In this case, FAR members were exposed to

a dense flow of information and had to be continuously available online. Hence, the disengagement with FAR channels reflects a certain kind of media surfeit resulting from this onslaught of communication at the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As one of our respondents explained: 'the amount of [contact] was just too overwhelming and I couldn't take it, no one could. So, at some point we just became overloaded and now people are having a small rest' (Sofya, January 2024). This kind of pressure to always be connected with an activist circle is one of the main stressors within digital activism (Supa et al. 2024), and its role in wearing down FAR activists should not be underestimated.

The impact of this heavy use of, and reliance on, digital communication channels was already evident on FAR activists during our first round of interviews in 2022. For instance, being involved in FAR activities through social media and digital communication applications required reliable internet access and a constant readiness to participate in online discussions. One respondent described the situation in the following way:

> […] you're connected to six chat rooms, each of which is constantly producing messages, it's hard for me, for example, to be in such a flow of information, because, well, it's just a lot, I can't do it 24/7, it's very exhausting for me. (Pala, October 2022)

In addition to adverse effects on their mental well-being, the activists spoke about resource inequalities. Specifically, as a digitally-based organisational structure, FAR was inevitably based on the idea that all its activists had similar time resources to participate in its actions. Our interviewees explained that their available time was connected to other material and social resources, such as employment, health, family, and their general economic situation. For example, people working full time had less opportunity to participate in collective decision-making than those working part time or studying. Hence, the indiscriminate expectation driven by the digital platforms was seen as potentially reinforcing economic and social injustices within the movement, in clear contradiction to the ideal of horizontality (Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024, 35; Zhaivoronok 2025b).

However, while some respondents described their increased passivity towards FAR's social media channels and digital communication, others highlighted an opposite trajectory when talking about their local cells and building up of tight communities of 'like-minded people'. One interviewee stressed gaining a sense of belonging and connectedness with their local cell, while feeling progressively distanced from FAR as a global movement. Respondents explained this increased sense of interconnectedness with local activist cells and their members specifically through their reduced reliance on digital communication tools and the significance of face-to-face interactions between participants. Our first round of interviews showed that, while the global FAR movement favoured text-based digital channels with infrequent video conferences, some local cells preferred in-person gatherings. The interviewed activists highlighted the importance of the sense of belonging to their local cell, and the fact that the experience of belonging to a community had

formed through their increased familiarity with people that was enabled by 'live' interactions.

In this sense, the importance of face-to-face communication for forming a sense of community supports earlier studies regarding the challenges posed by digital communication (e.g., Epley and Kruger 2005; Wiederhold, 2020; Walther and Whitty 2020). Digital communication is typically associated with a greater risk of misunderstandings and miscommunications, and it requires extra cognitive and emotional efforts, which makes digital interactions less rewarding and more difficult to maintain in the long run (cf., Sygma 2024). This point became obvious at the level of transnational communication in the movement, where digital and text-based communication did not actually enable community building, but rather left individuals with a sense of solitude and isolation, as one activist described:

> We have chat rooms where all local cells and coordinators communicate, but there, for example, they don't always respond. One activist from [location anonymised] wrote there that she needed support, and nobody answered her, only I answered […] I feel some kind of, because FAR is a very global, very big movement, you don't feel any kind of community with other [cells …]. (Anton, February 2023)

The importance of local cells and their face-to-face interactions were emphasised particularly by activists who had been forced to emigrate. For them, the support and belonging to a community provided by their local cell was regarded as valuable 'social capital' – not only in relation to activist engagement, but more generally too:

> What is still keeping me? Oh well, in the first place, if we are totally honest […] It is the social capital. In immigration all possible social capital is absolutely invaluable […] It is kind of a social capital, in case I need anything, I have this group of people who I can turn to. (Aiuna, January 2024)

This social value kept the activists engaged with their local cells even when they had become inactive in FAR's (global) digital media channels. In other words, 'social glue' with members of a cell was one of the main factors that kept activists involved in the movement at the local level.

Finally, one of the reasons respondents told us they continued their FAR engagement was a sense of obligation or civil responsibility, as well as the 'social' motivation. The feeling of interconnectedness with others also helped them to bear the mentally and emotionally draining political and social situation. As one activist put it: 'at the moment, the motivation to stay [in FAR] for me is that I feel the immense support from my colleagues, I feel the belonging to the big cause, and certainly it helps me to not flip out completely' (Daria, February 2024). The importance of the community that was formed through FAR activism was deemed so high that our respondents spoke of the need to keep engaging even beyond the war in Ukraine: 'well, there is also a motivation not to stop operating when the war ends.

Because we are already a really solid collective with cells, structure, and communities' (Daria, February 2024).

To sum up, even though digital media and communication tools primarily enabled FAR's working under the Putin regime's political repression and following the mass emigration of activists, the digital forms of activism and interaction also generated burnout and exhaustion, leading to disengagement from the movement. In contrast, the local cells that combined digital communication with face-to-face interaction and engagement seemed to provide a more positive environment and address a growing exhaustion with and detachment from (activist) social media. These experiences of FAR activists underscore the importance of face-to-face interaction in the digital age, both for wellbeing and to sustain supporters' engagement with the activist work.

From *media realism* to an alternative FME?

Being permeated by a neoliberal logic, it is not surprising that the contemporary media and media culture also had some negative effects on FAR activists and the organisation itself. These included the emergence of new inequalities, power imbalances, burnouts, and the resulting disengagement depicted above. Surprisingly, in our interviews, activists repeatedly stated – both explicitly and implicitly – that changing the media, their *modus operandi*, is impossible. In other words, the media have their own logic, and activists have no choice but to submit to this logic. We have termed this feeling or sensibility *media realism*, analogous to the term 'capitalist realism' coined by British cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009).

In his influential book *Capitalist realism: is there no alternative?* Fisher analysed the ideology and cultural politics of contemporary societies. His main idea is that, following the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, Western societies have become incapable of imagining any alternative to the capitalist model. According to Fisher (2009, 2), contemporary neoliberal societies are characterised by 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it'. However, Fisher emphasised that the inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism did not mean that people would stop seeing the flaws of the capitalist system. On the contrary, these flaws would become obvious and widely recognised. However, instead of trying to overcome them, capitalist realism insists that these flaws must be accepted and endured, because capitalism is the only system, the only reality out there, with no alternative.

Similarly, our research participants were acutely aware of the shortcomings in the contemporary media system but felt that this system is the only reality, that it cannot be changed, and thus must be accepted. For example, one activist acknowledged that the accumulation of media capital had led to the centralisation of power among certain AIs, and considered this process problematic and detrimental to FAR and the logic of anti-war activism in general. However, she stated that this dynamic cannot be changed, as it is dictated by the logic of the media itself:

> On the one hand it is clear that, from the perspective of the movement and the logic of resistance, this is not very good, but it is quite understandable. Media are media [*Mediika est' mediika*]. (Lana, December 2022)

Commenting on the same uneven dynamic of media capital accumulation among activists, another respondent said that she did not see how it could be changed:

> It seems that this is just how the distribution of resources in the media is structured now, unfortunately, and it is something we have to accept, like the absurdity of capitalism. (Pala, October 2022)

It is worth noting that not only FAR has had to adapt and conform to the logic of the media. Almost all the anti-war initiatives that emerged after February 2022 are struggling with the same, or similar issues. For instance, researchers from the Austausch e.V. analysed 28 Russian anti-war projects and assert in their report that:

> Almost all anti-war initiatives *have to* structure their work according to the rationale of the media space: presenting themselves and competing with others for the attention of subscribers, since this is how most get the resources to work. Media work and the (not always pronounced, but background) competition take up a considerable amount of volunteers' and the initiative participants' work. The winners are initiatives built by media specialists, social entrepreneurs, and journalists who have a lot of experience and know how this field works. (Austausch e.V. 2022, 47; italics added)

Thus, most anti-war initiatives are forced to structure their activities according to the existing media logic, despite the significant negative consequences that this entails. The competition for media attention can foster a sense of rivalry rather than collaboration among different initiatives. Moreover, as we have shown in the section on AIs above and, as pointed out by Austausch e.V. (2022), this situation can potentially lead to the emergence of new hierarchies within anti-war projects, with those who have media capital and media skills gaining more power than others and having greater influence in collective decision-making. Competition and emerging hierarchies can weaken the overall movement, as resources and efforts are diverted towards attempts to gain media visibility rather than building alliances and working together towards common goals. Moreover, this struggle for visibility consumes a considerable amount of time and effort from volunteers and those participating in such initiatives, which could otherwise be spent on other, potentially more productive and beneficial activities.

This tension or even contradiction between following the media logic and responding to the actual needs of anti-war activism was also highlighted in one of our interviews:

> Those activists who effectively do media work say, 'look, we are doing media work, look, our number of subscribers has grown by this much, these media

> have said this and that about us, isn't that great! We are doing well, let's praise ourselves'. And they are right in the sense that it is indeed successful media promotion. But another group of activists […] these two groups find it difficult to understand each other to some extent because they have different values, yes […] the other group, which wants to do horizontal work, says, 'yes, yes, it's good that the media talked about us, wrote about us, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, but who are we? Are we just journalists? Or can we try to do something else? Not just be the media, but also do something else?' And this is difficult, difficult to combine […]. (Tina, January 2023)

This quote illustrates the internal contradiction within FAR between those who prioritise media visibility and others who seek to maintain a more horizontal and substantive approach to activism. The former group measures activists' success by media metrics, while the latter values grassroots engagement and collective action. As our informant noted, these approaches are based on different values. This is an important point. Essentially, Tina asserted that following media logic is not inevitable, that such adherence is a result of choices based on values and, presumably, on the ways in which different groups understand activism and the role of media in political activities (see Zhaivoronok 2025a).

From the interview with this activist, it was quite clear that there is a group within FAR that does not believe the movement should focus on media visibility and conform to the rationale of the media space, especially when such conformity negatively impacts on its grassroots and horizontal organisation. In other words, this group questions the logic of media realism, which suggests that activists have no choice but to embrace the rationale of the current media system with all its shortcomings. Their attitude demonstrates that feminist activists are critically reflecting on their experiences of interacting with media, producing alternative knowledge and practices. This critical reflection is crucial, as it highlights activists' agency in shaping their media strategies and approaches. By questioning the inevitability of media logic, these individuals open up possibilities for alternative ways of engaging with media that align more closely with feminist values and goals. This can involve developing media practices that prioritise inclusivity, collaboration, and substantive engagement over mere visibility.

Talking about such practices during their follow-up interview, one research participant mentioned that, at one point, FAR had adopted an 'explicit communication regulation' – a document establishing the movement's rules of engagement with the media. The main goal of this document was to formalise FAR's interaction with journalists, including redirecting their attention away from AIs towards less visible activists and those who handle the topics of interest to journalists. As the participant explained:

> For example, if journalists ask: '[AI], tell us about decolonial activists,' the AI would say: 'friends, we have a decolonial coordinator, or rather coordinators, who handle this issue. Please talk to them'. That's roughly how it works. (Daria, February 2024)

Daria also observed that the introduction of this policy had not fundamentally changed the situation though, as journalists still tend to interact with the most visible activists. Nevertheless, this measure did help to make the voices of less-known activists more visible to some extent.

In any case, the immense symbolic significance here is in the attempt to invent alternative ways of interacting with the media that are not based on neoliberal hierarchies and competitiveness but on feminist principles of inclusivity, support, and solidarity. Such practices open up possibilities for further experimentation with media practices and, we hope, for a reconfiguration of the FME, where feminist political values and goals will take priority over the attention economy and data extractivism of major digital platforms.

Conclusion

Our analysis of FAR demonstrates that the relationship between digital media and (feminist) activism is not unequivocal. On the one hand, the digital platforms and communication channels provide significant possibilities for activism in an authoritarian context where civil society and/or the free expression of oppositional political views are restricted. As the emergence and development of FAR illuminates, digital media offers important channels for both mobilising masses of people outside activist circles and for disseminating information that is censored in the official national media. On the other hand, as the activists' interviews illustrate, the benefits of digital media for activism cannot be separated from the inherent problems within the media logic that pose a risk to activist efforts and their underlying principles.

For a horizontally-structured movement such as FAR – that aims at inclusivity and equality – the neoliberal influencer culture built into the digital media platforms generates imbalances in media visibility that leads to uneven accumulation of social capital among the activists. Whereas the AIs appear as a resource to accelerate the initiative's media visibility, the potential negative associations and attitudes attached to their media personae may, in turn, lead to negative responses from the audience. To fully grasp the actual impact of AIs on FAR's political communication and its effects, further studies are needed, in particular reception studies among different audiences.

Further, the media metrics easily turn media visibility into the main measure of activist success. This feature results in an unintentional emergence within the movement of what we call the *hierarchies of visibility*. These not only contradict the underlying principle of horizontality, but also pose a threat to cohesion and solidarity within the movement, as activists with lesser media visibility may become frustrated and discouraged by the unequal division of media-generated social capital. Also, the resources that digitally-enabled activism necessitates – technological devices, internet connection, time – might put the activists into unequal positions. On a larger scale, the media logic and competition for media visibility are not limited to members within one activist movement, so it also positions the different anti-war initiatives in competition against each other. This hinders their

mutual collaboration, as each movement's resources are diverted to compete with one another for media attention. As this competition benefits influencers and other media specialists with the necessary experience and skills for working in the media environment, it underlines the need to study existing (un)successful media activist strategies.

In addition to such unintended hierarchies, our findings indicate that FAR's reliance solely on digital media and communication tools increased experiences of activist burnout. This is in line with previous studies on digital activism (Supa et al. 2024; Caporino et al. 2020). The exhaustion and burnout of activists within the FAR network frequently led to disengagement. However, the possibility of face-to-face interaction within local cells kept those activists more engaged with FAR. This finding brings to the fore the 'collective-connective' action dilemma (Bennet and Segerberg 2013), as the digital tools of communication are not enough to create a lasting bond that will keep activists engaged in the movement. Instead, face-to-face interaction is vital for sustaining engagement and creating a sense of community.

In the case of FAR, the authoritarian context it was operating in made the questions of social media use and media visibility more complex than Western media activism, in which activists are not faced with criminal charges for their engagement. For example, the question of FAR AIs and their more visible and mediated status was dictated not only by the capitalist media logic, but also by safety issues. Those AIs who had migrated from Russia were in a relatively safe space to resist the war openly, unlike many of the anonymous and invisible activists who stayed in the country and whose public activism could have posed a severe security threat for them. The question of safety led to the reliance on digital communication tools, even though this resulted in symptoms of activist burnout, because securing the anonymity of activists who remain in Russia was a necessity rather than a choice, and digital tools achieved this. Furthermore, as the activists had migrated all over the world, these digital tools enabled them to communicate even in the situation where face-to-face contact was not possible because of the distances between them. It could be argued that, for FAR, which was constrained by the Putin regime's authoritarian political control, digital media held more of a progressive potential as opposed to the official media that was censored and controlled by the Russian government.

In these circumstances, activists might have regarded the capitalist media logic as a 'lesser evil' compared to the repressive state machinery. However, this did not mean that our respondents overlooked the limitations of the existing media architecture, as it is underpinned by neoliberalism and the attention economy. On the contrary, some considered the dominant media logic to be a significant obstacle to developing effective and sustainable anti-war activism and to building solidarity among various opposition movements and factions. Moreover, the perception that the existing media logic was immutable – a phenomenon we characterise as *media realism* – served as an additional source of frustration for our participants.

However, some of our respondents were not just critical towards the existing media logic, but were also hoping to find alternative and more horizontal means of doing media. These activists did not see the neoliberal media logic as a fact,

but rather as a value that could be changed. Yet, as FAR activists were only in the stage of looking for and developing alternative media practices during our research period, further research is required to ascertain if they have succeeded in finding new, more inclusive modes of activist media. While our analysis focuses on one particular activist movement, FAR, our findings underscore the need for further research to understand the intricate relationship between various types of activism and the media more generally.

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9 Conclusion: conceptualising the feminist media ecology

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This book has explored and conceptualised various expressions of mediated feminism – from celebrity figures to grassroots anti-war activism – within the precarious contemporary Russian context. We began by providing an innovative insight into the process of re-articulating the Russian feminist agenda that is shaped by digitalisation, transnational currents, the restructuring of the celebrity landscape, and broader political transformations. We covered digital affordances and communication tools from feminist hashtags to self-branding by celebrity figures to DIY micro-media professed by the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) movement.

Our analysis of mediated feminisms in this book started with insights into a series of high-profile feminist media campaigns, including hashtag movements against sexism, and domestic violence, bringing together ordinary users, political and civil society leaders, as well as influencers. Despite the diversity of actors involved and the varying motivations behind their participation, we emphasised that the cumulative effect of these actions was a marked increase in the public visibility of feminist voices, discourses, and vocabularies across Russia's mediascape.

To further investigate the role of accumulating media visibility and popularity in the dissemination of feminism in Russia, we then focused on feminist celebrity *actors*. Unlike Western popular feminism, which has to address the following duality – how to mediate between individualised neoliberal and collectively-driven and social justice-informed feminism – we revealed how Russian celebrity feminists also have to concentrate on navigating and mediating between a set of frequently ambivalent grassroots viewpoints and, most importantly, increasingly rigid and conservative establishment positions. Hence, only certain topics and aspects of feminism were mainstreamed, to avoid possible antagonism from the public and hostility from the establishment. In doing this, the celebrities we studied frequently over-engaged with the neoliberal frameworks of spectacular feminism and conspicuous consumption to signal their disinterest in, and detachment from, political feminist activism.

Our insights into the mediation of feminism in Russia via celebrity figures thus exposed the specificity of the individual celebrities' convoluted and ambiguous engagements with feminism. Russian feminist celebrity figures strategically drew from their celebrity capital, combining feminist ideas with their media and

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professional stance. In all three cases focusing on an individual celebrity figure – Ksenia Sobchak, Tatiana Mingalimova, and Manizha – we identified pronounced tensions around their appropriation of feminism. Overall, our analysis revealed these celebrities' elusive, tenuous, and ambivalent engagements with a diverse set of feminist ideas. This observation was further confirmed by our analysis of the neoliberal feminist outlet *Wonderzine*, since its publication strategy and engagement with feminism were defined as a 'weird duality' by its staff and were seen as being contradictory by its pro-feminist audiences. Paradoxically, this very contradictory communication style was perceived by both journalists and segments of the audience as a key factor behind *Wonderzine*'s success in destigmatising and popularising feminism for a wider public in Russia. Rather than presenting a coherent feminist agenda, *Wonderzine* adopted a flexible strategy that blended elements of lifestyle journalism, consumer culture, and feminist discourses. This allowed the outlet to reach audiences who might otherwise be alienated by more radical or explicitly politicised feminist messaging.

Having said that, the role of celebrities and neoliberal feminist media in an authoritarian and neoconservative context should not be underestimated. It appeared that highly visible feminist actors in Russia often presented themselves as *purposefully apolitical* and overinvested in performative visibility, to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the political environment. Probing further the *discursive* component of current Russian feminism, we identified several ways that such ambiguous and ambivalent expressions of feminism subvert the status quo. Subversion relates to the evolving multiple positionalities of the actors, who are driven by predominantly opportunistic and profit-driven (self-)promotion. However, in the absence of any established structures allowing people to leverage collective grievances, or available public spaces for negotiating feminist ideas, the celebrity mediation of feminist ideas has become a sphere of influence through which various actors happen to advance gender equality and women's rights, often whilst simultaneously pursuing primarily profit-oriented projects.

Due to the timeframe of our research that covered case studies from 2012 to 2024, our analysis of celebrity feminism was supplemented with an inquiry into anti-war feminist activism after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the shifting geopolitical landscape, FAR – a digitally-enabled activist initiative aimed at opposing the Putin regime and its war in Ukraine – emerged as the most publicly visible feminist actor in Russia. FAR successfully leveraged this visibility to recruit new activists and supporters, as well as to establish connections with other political and civil society actors, both within Russia and internationally (Zhaivoronok 2025). This success was, in part, built upon digital media practices developed by Russian feminists prior to the full-scale invasion (Ratilainen and Zhaivoronok 2024). As our analysis of interviews with FAR activists has demonstrated, effective recruitment and mobilisation were made possible not only through its strategic media use, but also due to the existence of vibrant feminist media networks within the Russian mediascape. This encompassed diverse actors, from militant grassroots feminist media to neoliberal feminist platforms and apolitical feminist influencers, all of

which contributed – albeit unevenly – to the visibility and resonance of FAR's public communication strategies.

However, FAR's reliance on pre-existing feminist media strategies – many of which were grounded in a neoliberal media logic and the attention economy – was not without complications. As our research highlights, some activists expressed concern that using influencers as public faces of the movement contributed to the reproduction of internal hierarchies and inequalities among activists, leading to a range of tensions. Several research participants noted that the operational logic of contemporary media – driven by metrics such as views, likes, and shares – fundamentally contradicts the principles and values of grassroots feminist activism. The inability to challenge or subvert this media logic was, at times, seen as a source of activists' frustration and burnout.

This focus on a diverse set of mediated feminist actors – from celebrities belonging to the Russian elite to social media influencers and militant grassroots activists – allowed us to not only trace the dynamic multi-faceted interaction between global and local feminism(s), but to more precisely conceptualise this assemblage of feminist discourses and actors under the notion of a *feminist media ecology (FME)*. First, through a rich set of case studies examining various media actors operating in the domains of macro-, meso-, and micro-celebrity, we have demonstrated that, in its broad definition, the notion of such an FME embraces an interconnected and dynamic network of media actors and platforms that shape and sustain public feminist discourses. We need to stress here the flexibility of the FME's fluctuating assemblage of various structures and actors. As we have seen in the post-2022 mediascape, its infrastructures can unpredictably dissipate, for instance, due to wartime censorship on the media that resulted in dramatic changes within both the platform economy and the economy of visibility. Equally, the actors demonstrate diverse forms and degrees of engagement within the FME, such as a media-savvy influencer monetising feminism as a 'cool' topic, a grassroots activist managing multiple communications in semi-anonymous digital channels, or something that can be called 'T-shirt feminism' – our example of a teenager wearing a T-shirt with a feminist slogan before she was fully mindful of feminism, which brings us back to the quote from one of our interviews provided in the Introduction.

Furthermore, our case studies highlight how mediated social capital via personalised channels has contributed to the dissemination of feminism in Russian media spaces. An illuminating case in this regard is the high-profile celebrity Ksenia Sobchak, who strategically brings together diverse guests with varying degrees of visibility onto her show, including feminist influencers, staging mediated encounters where mainstream celebritified discourses collide with mutable feminist positionalities. We encountered a relatively narrow network of such actors who engaged in the production of mainstreaming feminist ideas, adopting women's empowerment discourses to the Russian political context of a hegemonic neoconservative ideology. It was possible to determine this set of actors because the celebrity figures and influencers seemed to interview the same set of prominent figures. This type of social networking was also seen within the celebrity cases selected for this book, as Manizha was interviewed by both the high-profile celebrity figure

Sobchak and the social media influencer Mingalimova. In a similar way, the lifestyle media drawing from a neoliberalised form of feminism are networked with feminist counter-publics, thus becoming a vital node for more militant feminist voices, simultaneously offering a platform for further feminist networking and knowledge sharing. We want to highlight that this '(a)political engagement [as] a manoeuvring tactic' is one of the key features of 'the post-Soviet postfeminism' (Miazhevich 2025), and that feminist celebrity networks aimed to mediate diverse women's perspectives – feminist and non-feminist alike. The diversity of feminism-identified media resources then contributed to a collective feminist identity which formed within Russia's repressive political context.

A similar 'manoeuvring tactic' within the FME could also be traced in relation to an emerging intersectional sensibility, as was analysed through the case of Manizha, and her ways of addressing her Tadjik origins. Highlighting the technologically networked multi-platform quality of her celebrity, we observed that, while Tadjik culture constitutes a significant part of the aesthetics of Manizha's artistic image, through her music she also manages to expose racialised hierarchies relating to 'non-Russian' or 'non-Slavic' identities in contemporary Russian society. We found out that Manizha's public image captures a certain feminist intersectional sensibility emerging from these representations and further, as merged with Soviet discourses of multi-culturalism and a purported 'Friendship of peoples.' Manizha's case also showcased the uneasy position of anti-war public figures in Russia, as she manoeuvred her own anti-war position via a universal pacifist message instead of openly expressing a stance against Russia's war on Ukraine.

Thus, this book has foregrounded that the FME plays out precisely this interconnectedness and mutual shaping of actors and discourses across ideological and media boundaries, emphasising that each feminist media actor – regardless of intent and motivation – inevitably transforms the broader feminist media landscape. At the same time, we have discovered that an overemphasis on mediation reproduces new forms of inequality and hierarchy, because the operational logics of contemporary neoliberal media architecture often contradicts the goals and values of grassroots feminist activism. Furthermore, our analysis in this book has confirmed that there are other actors within the FME, such as misogynistic trolls or pro-state feminists, who can potentially hijack feminist discourses, while feminist media popularity can be co-opted by other groups. This requires further investigation.

The rhizomatic online network structure presupposes a multitude of connections, which can potentially lead to a diffusion of both overtly and covertly feminist discourses to various actors without direct connection within the network. However, we observe that certain nodes connecting parts of the network – represented by more prominent celebrity figures – accumulate more weight and power than the other ones. These more visible feminist celebrity figures can be considered as more powerful nodes within the horizontal digital communicative structures. This hierarchisation of a supposedly horizontal network structure produces certain challenges for the collective feminist action. The book has discussed how this fluctuating irregularity within media networks produces a hierarchy of visibility.

This uneven visibility produces varying levels of celebrity capital, which is even more important for media-enabled feminist figures than professional celebrities, and gets accumulated through time and media engagement. With this view of media networks, our study informs the reconsideration of the 'political' in the Russian context. As authoritarianism discourages people from engaging with politics by dismantling democratic institutions, mediated networks become one of the domains outside the formal political institutions within which people can participate in producing and reproducing mediated agencies. If not always overtly political, the media networks discussed in this book communicate informed positionalities and potential agencies that have to do with institutionalised power, the body politic, and visions of future (perhaps more equal and progressive) gender regimes.

Having said that, the FME is a subject to numerous risks and adverse influences – from the rise of far-right ideologies to neoliberal competition and the erosion of feminist solidarities through intra-group conflicts. Therefore, we hold no illusions about the possibility of a conflict-free coexistence between different feminisms and feminist actors. On the contrary, following Chantal Mouffe (2011), we view agonistic (and at times antagonistic) relations as an inherent feature of democracy – and, by extension, as a sign of a productively functioning FME. At the same time, we suggest that taking an ecological approach can serve as a practical principle – one that foregrounds the potential for solidarity and shared purpose among diverse feminist actors.

In other words, like any ecology, an FME does not exist in a state of equilibrium – it is constantly evolving under the pressure of external forces and internal contradictions. It is a complex and dynamic system involving a multitude of actors with diverse positions and interests, and, in this book, we have only begun to sketch its contours within the Russophone context. There is scope to scrutinise diasporic groups, considering the spread of FAR activists worldwide, and branch out to question the workings of other comparable collaborative transnational alliances. We hope that our novel concept of an FME can serve as a catalyst for rethinking and transforming the modes of engagement of at least some of the actors within this environment, or as placed in a different historical or political context.

Overall, this book has shed light on both meanings and practices of mediated feminisms in Russia, and provided an enhanced understanding of the interrelationship between media, culture, and grassroots society in Russia. These findings will enrich evolving transnational scholarship (Dosekun et al. 2023; Fotopoulou 2016) and regional studies on post-Soviet feminism (Biktimirova and Kravtsova 2022). Our unexpected finding – that this media field has contributed to grassroots activist mobilisation of an anti-regime, oppositional movement (FAR), in almost the most transgressive form possible within the current Russian political context – contributes to broader scholarship on social movements at the intersection of digitalisation and rising authoritarianism.

Finally, as we have outlined how the Russian case adds to our understanding of mediated celebrity feminism, we need to acknowledge several important aspects that remain beyond the scope of this book, due to its imperative to focus on post-February 2022 developments. One of these aspects is the need to account for other

actors who play an important role within the assemblage of the FME, such as cultural production teams – important agents 'behind the scenes' who inform the analysed outputs. Another important outlook on FME would come from the perspective of its media users. This would require secured access to the field, which is not always possible in a wartime context, and might be more challenging with the increasing prospect of an ongoing polycrisis. Other related 'behind-the-scenes' elements include networks' big data mining, and an investigation of the discussed celebrities' monetisation mechanisms. Finally, the intersection of celebrity culture and the establishment of forms of pro-state, state-managed feminist groups and/or anti-feminist groups will be of particular interest in the decade to come.

This is particularly pertinent considering Donald Trump's re-election as US President in 2024 and subsequent anti-gender mainstreaming in the USA and other countries. One way to better understand the upcoming challenges is by historicising the observed phenomena. We propose an urgent need to place FAR into the historic continuum of women's peaceful but tenacious resistance in authoritarian settings, such as Argentina's 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo' (1977–2006), the Polish 'Solidarity' movement with Anna Walentynowicz's role in the Gdansk strike, and the 'Women in black' movement initiated by Israeli women against the occupation of Palestine, who are currently peacefully challenging militarist governments all over the world, which directly inspired FAR's offline protests.

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