

# Translating “gender equality”

Northwestern Russia meets the global gender equality agenda

by Yulia Gradskova



PHOTO: XAM/FLOKRA

The iconic Soviet statue of a male worker and a kolkhoz woman by Vera Mukhina symbolizes the ideal of equality under communism.

## abstract

The article analyzes discourses and practices of gender equality as a part of Nordic cooperation with Northwestern Russia. I explore how ideas and institutions of gender equality were approached by those involved and what problems of “translation” were present. While some of the representatives of the local authorities in Northwestern Russia saw cooperation on gender equality as an opportunity to realize the new ideas, in most of the cases the Soviet-style interpretation of women’s issues as a part of “social problems” and protection of motherhood prevailed.

**KEY WORDS:** gender equality, Northwestern Russia, Nordic-Russian cooperation.

After the annexation of Crimea and the growing international isolation of Russia, it might be difficult to think about local politics in the Russian subregions<sup>1</sup> as having to accord with the international discourse on human rights, justice, or gender equality. However, in the more than 20 years during which Russia was classified as one of the “transitional” and “post-socialist” countries, it was assumed that Russian officials, members of city, subregional, and local elective bodies and civil servants of various categories and levels, would be aware of important international documents regarding global standards of governance, and would be expected to work towards the realization of such standards. Among the many international documents ratified by Russia were the UN’s Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)<sup>2</sup> and the ILO’s Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (ratified in 1998). Together with the Russian Constitution – which preserved Article 19 from the Soviet Constitution on equal rights, freedoms, and equal opportunities for men and women – the international documents constituted the legal framework during the 1990s and 2000s for different activities and institutions seeking to support women’s rights and gender equality.<sup>3</sup>

**THIS ARTICLE IS DEVOTED** to the analysis of the discourses and practices connected to ideas and institutions of gender equality using the example of one of the regions of the Russian Federation, Northwestern Russia. I am interested in how the ideas and institutions of gender equality were approached locally, in particular, by the civil servants involved in the cooperative projects with Western (mainly Nordic) partners.

The article is the result of my participation in the project on gender equality politics in the Baltic Sea region<sup>4</sup> and is based on documents and publications on gender equality in Russia as well as on the interviews with leaders of women’s organizations and civil servants in Northwestern Russia and organizers of Nordic-Russian cooperation. In order to protect my informants in the current hostile political climate with respect to gender equality and feminism in Russia, I refer to them by initials, and have changed some personal details.



PHOTO:RIA NOVOSTI

Valentina Tereshkova at a plenary meeting of Soviet Women's Committee July 1968.

## Gender equality on the democracy agenda

The beginning of the political and economic transformation in Russia that started with perestroika and continued after the breakdown of the Soviet Union gave birth to a vital and diverse women's activism that was supported and encouraged through broader programs of support for civil society and women's rights.<sup>5</sup> The Northwest of Russia played a special role in this process. It is the only region of Russia having a border with the EU (indeed with several EU countries, since 2004) and is the region closest to the northern part of Europe, which is known for its gender equality achievements. These factors contributed to the rapid development of the multilevel Nordic-Russian cooperation, where ideas of women's rights and women's political and civic participation played an important role.<sup>6</sup>

According to CP, one of the coordinators of cooperation with the Baltic countries and Russia on gender issues (in the Nordic Council of Ministers), from the beginning the Nordic organizations viewed the work against discrimination on the grounds of gender as very important.<sup>7</sup> The Nordic cooperation partners (state departments as well as independent organizations) were encouraged to start working together with all public institutions in the ex-socialist countries that were ready to work for the protection of women's rights in one way or another.<sup>8</sup> As for Russia, during the 1990s and early 2000s, the cooperation with the regional and local authorities and civil servants seemed to be very promising, in particular because of a substantial autonomy of subregions from the center as a result of the political reforms of the early 1990s. Indeed, the head of the subregion was usually elected to her/his post, while the subregional legislative body was responsible for some specific set of subregional laws. All of this allowed researchers and some politicians to look at the sub-

regions as unities that could be analyzed from the perspective of different political regimes.<sup>9</sup> The relative autonomy of the subregional authorities was important for the plans to create some kind of local machinery for gender equality in Northwestern Russia in the process of cooperation with Nordic organizations and under the pressure of the local women's associations.

The cooperative activities that included the civil servants varied, including invitations to join the delegations to different subregions of Northwestern Russia to big international conferences, training for personnel and volunteers of the crisis centers, big yearly women's forums (such as the one in Karelia), and excursions for civil servants, leaders of women's organizations, gender researchers, ombuds, and other representatives of Russian society to the Nordic countries in order to observe how gender equality institutions function there.<sup>10</sup> As is the case with other international and national organizations seeking to spread ideas on gender equality and women's rights, Nordic agencies and organizations saw distribution of knowledge about democracy, gender, and discrimination to be one of the important aims of cooperation. Indeed, the partners in Russian subregions were expected to learn about democratic citizenship and ways of defending equality of rights of all the citizens regardless of their gender and sexual identity.

**THE DOCUMENTS PRODUCED** in connection with the cooperative efforts mainly showed "best practices", and presented the Nordic countries as the gender equality experts. At the same time, the Nordic cooperation partners mostly ignored the fact that the Russian population was well familiar with the ideas of equality between men and women due to Soviet equality policies. For example, the President of the Nordic Council, Rannveig Gudmundsdottir, in her speech in St Petersburg in 2005, expressed the hope that one day Russia would experience the same level of

gender equality as women in the West: “Little by little, they [the Russian women] are also beginning to enjoy the same opportunities to play an active part in society and politics as women in the West have enjoyed for decades now”.<sup>11</sup> Such an evaluation of the situation in Russia paved the way for joining the transnational feminist agenda on the promotion of women’s rights in Russia and “unproblematically” making a connection between positive changes for women and the end of state socialism and the beginning of democratization. In the process of cooperation, the positive Nordic experience of gender equality and democracy had to be “translated into Russian” – linguistically but also in terms of more general social adaptation.<sup>12</sup> However, it was no easy task taking into account the Soviet history of the politics of “equality of women and men”. For example, the “big campaigns” typical of feminist organizations in Western Europe did not work properly in the post-Soviet space: these campaigns were rather suspect to the extent that they were “too connected to the practices used during the period of state socialism”.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Nordic model of gender equality was inseparable from the ideas of women’s participation in wage labor and the goal of achieving the same economic status as men. However, as had been shown in the publications on cooperation with American feminist organizations, many women in Russia (as well as many women in other parts of the world), did not see work as “unproblematically liberatory”,<sup>14</sup> especially under current neoliberal trends.<sup>15</sup>

### Obstacles and possibilities for gender equality

The collected interviews and documents show that the reactions of the local civil servants from the different levels of the subregional hierarchy to “gender equality” as a goal for cooperation were diverse. At the beginning, in the mid-1990s, the subregional and local authorities were rather surprised when confronted with the expectation that they support the NGOs working for gender equality and the prevention of discrimination on the grounds of gender. The story told to me by the head of the Gender Center in Karelia, LB, illustrates this very well.

When LB, after visiting the 1995 Beijing conference and a couple of other international meetings of Eastern European women supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers, returned to Petrozavodsk, Karelia, and established her organization there, she decided to start a cooperative effort with the subregional authorities. However, the local authorities were not ready for such cooperation, she recalled bitterly. Indeed, she had to explain to the representatives of the subregional government that “Russia has signed all these (international) documents on gender, thus (at the level of the region) they should be followed”. The local civil servants did not trust her and wrote a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow asking for explanations with regard to the documents that were signed by the Russian state. According to LB, after receiving confirmation from Mos-

cow, and after numerous long discussions, the head of the local administration finally decided in 1998 to create the special commission dedicated to the situation of women in Karelia.<sup>16</sup>

Later on, following the tactics learned in the seminars on lobbying for women’s issues that had been arranged as part of cooperative effort, LB and her colleagues attempted to get the female civil servants interested in women’s NGOs, and women’s rights. It was by no means easy, however:

**We were trying to engage women from the government in our work. We were drinking with some of them, had dinner with the others, were helping to take care of others’ children – so everybody had the possibility of getting involved.**

In time, however, the civil servants from different regions and levels started to participate in the projects involving crisis centers, support for women’s NGOs and the organization of seminars and workshops on different issues related to gender equality.<sup>17</sup> My study on civil servants supports mainly the data received by several researchers with respect to the rapid growth of women’s organizations in Russia: it was usually explained with the help of “window of opportunity” theories.<sup>18</sup> Much like those NGO leaders who, in the situation where civil society activism became popular after the years of “stagnation” under late socialism, wanted to use their organizational skills and ideas related to the opportunity provided by grants to support new women’s organizations, some of the civil servants were ready to take advantage of possibilities for cooperation in order to use their organizational skills and to bring some of those institutions that were functioning abroad into Russia and display their usefulness.

**THE SUBREGION THAT** probably achieved most in the way of the visibility of gender-related issues was the city of St Petersburg. That achievement was not only connected, most probably, to greater financial support from abroad, knowledge resources in the form of gender programs in several universities, and a large number of women’s organizations passionately engaged in activism, but also can be explained by the active position of several civil servants who considered the implementation of gender equality to be important. One of them, X, was one of the key persons in the city “equality machinery” (consisting from three staff members).<sup>19</sup> The last was centered on the Council for Coordination of Realization of the Gender Equality Policy created in 2004 in the St Petersburg’s government. This Council was responsible

for the realization of the Statement for Advancement of Gender Equality; the last version of the statement (the planning up to 2015) was posted on the webpage of the state administration.<sup>20</sup> This statement is a unique document for the Northwest region and for Russia as a whole due to its direct use of “gender equality” in the text. In addition, the state-

**“HOWEVER, IT WAS NO EASY TASK TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE SOVIET HISTORY OF THE POLITICS OF ‘EQUALITY OF WOMEN AND MEN.’”**

ment, from a purely rhetorical standpoint, seems to be fully in accordance with UN and EU policy on gender equality; the main aims of the activities include the creation of the conditions for equal participation in decision making, equal rights, and equal treatment on the labor market, equal access to social protection and health care, prevention of gender related violence, and anti-discriminative measures in the sphere of education.

**CONVERSATIONS WITH** several experts, including representative of the St Petersburg office of the Nordic Council of Ministers (Norden) and C, an expert on gender from St Petersburg University, showed that a lot of the “invisible” work for the adoption of the statement and the beginning of its implementation had been possible to a large extent thanks to the personal efforts of X.<sup>21</sup> In the early two-thousand aughts, X had been a student of the school for civil servants in St Petersburg, where she attended courses on gender, among other disciplines, prepared in coordination with the Moscow Center for Gender Studies.<sup>22</sup> She had become interested in the problems of gender equality and in the application of theoretical knowledge to city policy. Thus, in this case international cooperation on issues of gender equality at the level of subregional government and authorities led to important achievements not least as a result of personal efforts on the part of a particular civil servant.

On the other hand, the success of this cooperative project could be seen as rather limited if we consider its merely declarative character. Subsequent developments of the situation around the statement indicate that the success of the creation of the local machinery was only temporary. Indeed, the composition, functions, and name of the city government’s department responsible for the realization of the statement were changed many times,<sup>23</sup> while progress towards the realization of the goals described in the document ceased for all intents and purposes around 2010.

## The implementation of gender equality

The ideas and institutions of “gender equality” that were brought by the Nordic and other “Western” partners to Northwestern Russia were, as noted above, usually presented as components of the programs for the support of democracy and development. However, as the collected material shows, most of the local leaders of women’s organizations as well as civil servants involved in the gender equality programs had to translate these ideas and institutions into the local context. Such a contextualization often led to significant changes in the interpretations of goals and policies connected to the sphere of women’s rights and the improvement of the situation of women. As my informant C, the gender researcher and participant in the elaboration of the St Petersburg gender equality statement, conveyed to me, “gender” in the title of the regional program could be seen as a kind of neutral and un-

problematic term: “It is something nice and not very clear, not like ‘women’ or ‘feminism’.

Indeed, many of my interviewees, even when discussing issues of rights and discrimination, were still focusing on social rights and their “gender” aspects. Thus, GM, the civil servant from Novgorod, was proud that, during the years of active cooperation with foreign countries, the gender researchers from the university actively cooperated with local authorities and influenced the policy documents: the program for improvement of the situation of women in the Novgorod subregion was adopted. Still, as IB, the leader of an organization of businesswomen closely involved with the local authorities, sees it, it was not exactly a program trying to increase equality:

**But the focus was on the social problems. It was not about women’s education and transformation. It provided support for families with many children, the organization of holidays. . . . It was from 2001.<sup>24</sup>**

At the same time, IB mentioned financial problems as a significant impediment to the successful collaboration of women’s organizations and local authorities in following the Nordic way:

**Concerning the Swedish experience, for example, we were trying to create these resource centers. We know how it should be. But nobody gave us money. In practice, we continue working as such a resource center – we give consultations, we help different women find places in different structures. But, as opposed to Sweden, there is no support for such resource centers that deal with women entrepreneurs, or women trying to participate in decision-making at a different level. And there (in Sweden), such organizations could get money for an office, for activities, some small salaries. We do not have anything like that.<sup>25</sup>**

H, a civil servant from St Petersburg positioned rather high in the local hierarchy, presented a narrative on the development of cooperation with Nordic countries and the progress of gender equality policies in St Petersburg as Soviet-style stories about “victorious progress”, in which “socialism” seems to have been replaced by “gender equality”. She was ready to recognize the importance of cooperation, especially in the early post-Soviet period: “We must be grateful to those programs, the humanitarian, social programs that are realized by the (Nordic) Council of

Ministers, among others”.<sup>26</sup> However, the leading role in her story belonged to the city authorities, while women’s organizations were presented only as “helpers” who “manifest quite high activity” in one or another campaign led by the authorities. Also, the women’s organizations were described as those mainly dealing with giving practical

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PHOTO: YADID LEVY

A sustainable society requires gender equality, because a work force that includes women creates a more sustainable economy.



PHOTO: EPA © EU/NEIGHBOURHOOD INFO

Training on gender inequality in a school in Smolensk, Russia, as part of the EU Partnership, September 24, 2011.

help to families, women, and children, those who receive state financing in order to “perform tasks and provide services important for the state”.<sup>27</sup> The feminist or political women’s organizations were not mentioned at all.

Finally, another civil servant from St Petersburg, J, remembering the story of local politics on gender equality, stated that even if the difficult word “gender” was not easy to explain, the campaign for gender equality was more a success than a failure:

**It was the first plan in Russia for gender equality for women. . . . We made an agreement with all the heads of administration in the city – there are 18 – we made an agreement with all the heads of the committees, thus we received 63 confirmations. . . . And everywhere we had to explain: What should be done so that men and women are equal and for the term “gender equality” to be used like other Russian words. In this way, we explained what “gender” means.<sup>28</sup>**

## Conclusion

On the basis of the material studied, we find that cooperation on gender equality issues was a difficult task with contradictory outcomes. While now it seems obvious that the political agenda of gender equality has failed in Russia (at least for the term of the current political leadership), and that the current Russian government is not interested in independent women’s organizations protecting rights and democracy, the collected materials show rather a complex picture of local discourses and evaluations of attempts to implement gender equality in the region during the last twenty years. Indeed, in some situations, the previous participation of the Russian local authorities and other state-related bodies in such cooperative efforts seems to be manipulative – an attempt to use cooperation and “gender” for their own political goals; in other cases, though, civil servants sincerely tried to cooperate

with women’s organizations in order to establish institutions that would protect the rights of women. In such cases, however, their interpretations frequently seem to be more in accordance with Soviet notions of “solutions to women’s problems”.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on social problems and social rights made by many of my interviewees (as opposed to the emphasis on democracy assistance promoted by most of the Nordic cooperation programs) could also be seen as an attempt to pay attention to the “local problems”, to be more in accord with the post-Soviet context in which neoliberal economic reforms contributed to a decrease in the standard of living for a large part of the population, especially in regard to family welfare. Even if this emphasis on the “social” as opposed to the “political” could easily be explained by the growing strength of the authoritarian regime in Russia, the social aspects of the “women’s question” in contemporary Russia could hardly be ignored (see, for example, recent publications of the Egida organization from St Petersburg dealing with the protection of women’s rights as workers<sup>29</sup>).

Finally, the unsuccessful “translation” of “gender equality” into Russian reveals numerous difficulties and indicates that the realization of the transnational feminist agenda could meet with serious obstacles not only in the countries of the “Third World”, but also in some former “Second World” countries. ✕

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## references

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  - 8 *Sharing a Common Goal: Nordic-Baltic Cooperation on Gender Equality 1997–2007* (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2008).
  - 9 See e.g. Johnny Rodin, *Rethinking Russian Federalism: The politics of Intergovernmental Relationships and Federal Reforms in the Turn of the Millennium*, (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2006); Aleksandr Sungurov, *Institut Ombudsmena: Traditsii i Sovremennaiia Praktika* [The ombudsman institution: traditions and contemporary situation] (St. Petersburg: Norma, 2005); Rimashevskaja et al, *Prava zhenshchin*.
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  - 14 See Jennifer Suchland, "Is Postsocialism Transnational?" *Signs* 36:4, (2011) 850–851.
  - 15 The problems of women's work during the rapid transformation of the labor market is also discussed in a Swedish context: see *Kvinnorna och krisen: Leder regeringens investeringar till en jämställd framtid?* [Women and the crises: do government's investments lead to the equal future?] (Stockholm: Sveriges Kvinnolobby [Swedish Women's Lobby], 2013).
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