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FEMINIST TRANSLOCALITIES

Decolonial and anti-racist
feminisms in Russia and beyond

by **Alexandra Biktimirova
& Victoria Kravtsova**

abstract

This article describes the current developments of feminist discourses and activism in Russia, as well as in the former USSR in general, towards inclusion of more intersectional perspectives: antiracist, disabled and trans*/non-binary. It reviews the contemporary feminist movement in Russia, provides some examples of intersectional projects and focuses on *Feminist Translocalities* – a project based jointly in the former USSR and Germany, as part of which an exhibition about intersectionality in the histories of these countries travelled across Russia. Describing this and other activities within the *Feminist Translocalities* project and focusing on anti-racism as a vector of the development of the feminist movement in Russia, the article shows that it is shifting towards more attention to other discriminations, thus also encouraging a similar trend in the broader society.

KEY WORDS: Feminism, gender, decolonization, racism, post-Soviet.

Translocalities are dots flickering on the map, the opposition of the hierarchy of the center and the periphery, the formation of a working network connected by a common context, the past and, possibly, the future. Fluid, rigid, unstable, in the process/processes, in transition and becoming, spreading forces, searching for new and old meanings. Borders become bridges between worlds, points of connection by coincidence, not obstacles. This is where the possibility of (re)existence arises. A change of place or location is an opportunity to coexist in two spaces at the same time. So cultural processes move, change, give a new ground for thinking and a field for joint work.

(curator of the "Feminist Translocalities" exhibition in Kazan)

In his dissertation about grassroots feminism¹ in Russia, Vanya Solovei points out that the country is "better known for conservative and neopatriarchal policies; feminism, according to a widely held notion, hardly has a place there".² The same can be said about the former USSR in general. Scholars either assume that there is no feminism in the region or address

only "specific feminist mobilizations",³ focusing on such visible cases as *Femen* or *Pussy Riot*. This article aims to counter these misconceptions and show that there are strong grassroots feminist movements in Russia, as well as in other parts of the former USSR, and all of them are becoming more aware of the need to look at other logics of discrimination. In all countries of the former USSR, individuals and activist groups are increasing the visibility of debates on intersectionality,⁴ decolonization⁵ and antiracism. Even in Russia, despite the general hostility towards discussions about racism and coloniality in a society filled by neo-imperialist ambitions that have revealed themselves to the fullest in the current attack on Ukraine, feminist activists are raising voices to make society more sensitive towards intersecting discriminations. In this article we look at the developments in the contemporary feminist movement which have not yet acquired their place in the academic literature, using the example of *Feminist Translocalities* – a project network we are ourselves part of. This article is a self-reflection.

We refer to the contexts of different post-Soviet states, as feminist debates are not limited to a single country of the former USSR but are happening across the region – this is connected to the presence of a common Russian-language space and similar challenges. However, it would also be wrong to homogenize the former USSR – states have different trajectories in the development of their feminist communities, which depend on their economic and political conditions. For instance, the feminist community in Ukraine and the ways it builds connections has been greatly affected by the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbass in 2014 and has transformed even more with the full-scale intervention of Russia in 2022. Though we mention research done in the other countries, the main focus of this article is Russia, home to both its authors – a country that is trying to become "as 'white' as possible",⁶ thus marking even its own citizens as external to the nation and "always migrants".⁷ This "not-quite-Western, not-quite-capitalist"⁸ racialized empire experiences the desire "to get revenge for the lost battle with the Western modernity"⁹ and tries to gather back together the now independent territories by economic coercion and war. The policies of Moscow affect relations within feminist networks, leading to polarization of activists from Russia and the countries that suffer from the actions of its government. Russian activists are also prone to reproduction of the colonial and imperialist logics of their state. We as authors socialized in this country are aware of our positionality and try to be as reflexive as possible. By referring to our colleagues from other countries from the former USSR we want to give due respect to their contributions to the development of feminist activism and research. We want the reader to decenter feminism in Russia and look at it as shaped by the knowledge produced on formerly colonized or still colonized land. However, we also believe that there might be points where we have not been reflex-

ive enough of our positionalities and the context we write about. We ask the readers to excuse us for that.

THIS ARTICLE MENTIONS other intersectional perspectives, like that of persons with disabilities, but focuses on the emerging field of antiracism in Russia. Describing the latest developments in the local feminist movements, it contributes to the literature on feminist discourses in Russia, as well as in Eastern European and Central Asian regions. We first review the existing literature on feminism in Russia, also making reference to writings from the other parts of the former USSR. After that, we deal with the feminist movement in Russia, which Solovei defines as "a grassroots network of loosely connected individuals and groups identifying as feminist and maintaining contact with each other".¹⁰

This movement "consists of informal, unstable collectives that easily dissolve and reemerge in new constellations".¹¹ Next, we focus on how racism is discussed in Russia. Then we describe *Feminist Translocalities* – a project, as well as the exhibition of that name that travelled through Russia in 2021–2022. We write about the topics and authors represented within the project and thus demarcate the field of the contemporary grassroots feminist movement in Russia. Lastly, we discuss the most recent activities and plans of the

project relating to articulating ways to speak about race and racism in the former USSR.

This article is based on participant observation of both authors as active participants of the Russian feminist movement. The authors are themselves participants in the project described in the article, so their analysis and interpretation of it comes from the inside and inevitably contains bias.

Literature review

In this part of the article we briefly review the literature on feminism in the former USSR and mark the gaps we see in it. Right now, we are witnessing "an increasing scholarly interest"¹² for feminism in the former USSR – also from decolonial and queer perspectives.¹³ However, as Vanya Solovei believes, "it may be premature to think of these studies as forming a common field of academic inquiry".¹⁴ The existing scholarship¹⁵ reflects the general lack of awareness of the specificities of the situation in the region, focusing more on Russia than on other countries and putting an emphasis on the state and its policies as the main frame of reference.¹⁶ The second category is works that focus on specific feminist mobilizations and "make little to no reference to the existence of a more encompassing feminist movement".¹⁷ The cases analyzed in them are also the most visible, like *Pussy Riot* in Russia or *Femen* in Ukraine.¹⁸ Furthermore, separate feminist campaigns are always described as "new kind of activism", erasing the histories before them.¹⁹ A reader unfamiliar with the local context, only having access to these studies, would see feminist movements in the former USSR as weak, recent

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Feminist Translocalities in Novosibirsk.



Feminist Translocalities in Kazan.



Feminist Translocalities in Kaliningrad.

Round table devoted to the 30th anniversary of the First Independent Women's forum in Dubna.

and fragmented. We agree with Katharina Wiedlack that such a depiction “links feminism to Western modernity and progress, reviving a cold-war East/West dichotomy”²⁰ and supports the global structures of inequality by fueling the so-called “lag discourse”,²¹ where non-Western feminists perceive themselves and their homeland as unable to ever “catch up” with the “West” in terms of equality.

THE LAST IMPRESSION one can get from existing studies is one of feminism as a movement of the privileged few.²² More recent research by Olga Sasunkevich demonstrates that it might have been true for the 1990s, but not now, when the movement has grown and broadened its agenda, becoming more sensitive to the interests of marginalized groups.²³ Solovei agrees with her: the feminist movement is “neither elite nor homogeneous”.²⁴ Another aspect that is observed in some publications is conflicts between feminists – for instance, between activists who identify as either radical or intersectional. Solovei believes that this “major ideological division” in the feminist scene has been present since around 2013, when a trans* feminist perspective was articulated by Yana Kirey-Sitnikova.²⁵ While in the “West” this debate is associated with waves of feminism, in the former USSR these strands of feminism appeared simultaneously.²⁶ Like the inclusion of trans* persons, other logics of discrimination that intersectional feminism is concerned with have not yet received much attention from the scholarly community. However, the field is growing – especially in recent years. This article is another contribution.

The need to look beyond just gender, whiteness and ability in feminist scholarship and activism has been articulated at least since the early 2000s, when Madina Tlostanova²⁷ and Svetlana Gorshenina²⁸ raised debates about decolonization of feminism(s) in the former USSR. Yulia Gradszkova²⁹ revealed the colonial character of the Soviet policies towards non-white women of the Empire, *natsionalki*.

Svetlana Peshkova³⁰ described the situation of women in Uzbekistan, who deny the colonial gaze of Western feminism, showing the complexity of their subjectivities. Olya Reznikova³¹ published her research with feminists in the North Caucasus, highlighting their sensitivity to the different privileges they and Russian activists have. Debates about racism are mentioned by Perheentupa,³² who argued that intersectionality was reserved for privileged feminists who had time to educate themselves. Vanya Solovei demonstrated how Kazakhstani feminists problematize the lack of solidarity from Russian activists.³³ He also criticized the arrogant attitude of the feminists from Moscow and St. Petersburg towards activists from “the regions” and their “saverist” approach to Muslim women.³⁴ Victoria Kravtsova and Anna Engelhardt wrote about the contemporary definitions of “decolonization” in relation to feminism.³⁵ Lana Uzarashvili³⁶ and Aleksandra Biktimirova³⁷ published articles about non-white feminisms in Russian media, emphasizing the fact that talking about race and colonialism is indeed possible in the context of the former USSR.

Research on decolonization of feminism in Russia is influenced and informed by the work done outside of Russia. For instance, in Ukraine, postcolonial research has been present since the late 1990s. In recent years *The Combahee River Collective Manifesto*³⁸ was translated into Russian and Ukrainian by Tatsiana Schurko and Lesia Pagulich and Mariam Agamyran³⁹ published statements on racism in the former USSR. Maria Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik⁴⁰ created the concept of “uneventful” feminism, which combines “anti-nationalist and anti-colonial agendas, including feminist critique of racism, homophobia, transphobia, and cisheterosexism”.⁴¹ A collective of scholars from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have criticized the way they are positioned against “Western” and “Russian” feminists.⁴² These activists-researchers inspired the authors of this article to do the *Feminist Translocalities* project and are just few examples from the big list of authors who discuss feminism in relation to

decolonization and antiracism in the former USSR. The field is constantly growing and this article is a contribution to it. In the next part of the article we focus on one of the vectors of the development of the feminist movement in Russia – criticism and analysis of the racism and xenophobia in society.

Talking about racism in Russia

In order to describe the context in which *Feminist Translocalities* was created, we need to focus on the (ir)reflexivity of the questions of racism in the Russian society. The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has again revealed the post-Soviet (post)colonial structures still influencing the lives of people in all states of the former USSR. In the field of international relations, we have witnessed such countries as Kazakhstan, Georgia or Kyrgyzstan staying neutral or even supporting Russia's actions due to the lingering dependency they have on its resources. Inside of Russia, an unexpected surge of national movements has happened – activists from different regions have condemned war from a decolonial perspective and articulated the need to differentiate between them and ethnic Russians. Large-scale immigration of Russians to the countries of South Caucasus and Central Asia has also served as trigger for a new wave of Russian chauvinism and racism, with Russians wondering why local people do not speak Russian and completely ignoring the independent histories of the places that welcome them.

The war thus again confirmed the need to talk more about the fact that Russian Empire and USSR have a long history of colonization of neighboring land and racialization of non-Russian populations. By now, “a strong body of research accumulates rich historical evidence and compelling analyses of Russian coloniality”.⁴³ However, as Shchurko and Pagulich⁴⁴ note, the post-Soviet space is rarely analyzed in the context of colonialism and imperialism and seems to be “raceless”. Even “the word race is rarely pronounced, even though the practices of racism are instrumental in nation construction”.⁴⁵ Sociological research on Russia also does not use race as a category.⁴⁶ Researchers from Eastern Europe, such as Miglena Todorova (2006) or Catherine Baker (2018), have demonstrated that the same is present

in the discussions about the Balkans – while Eurocentrism is problematized, race remains invisible.⁴⁷ As Baker puts it, there is a “largely unexamined assumption that race is something that happens in the postcolonial West and ethnicity is something that happens in the Balkans”.⁴⁸

AS THE EXAMPLES of the authors above prove, those who write about race in the post-socialist context are researchers who share a feminist perspective. Thus, discussions about racism in the region are closely interlinked with feminist research and activism, which has inspired *Feminist Translocalities* – a project that, among other things, tries to understand the mechanisms of racialization and develop categories necessary to discuss race in the region. Criticizing racism and xenophobia in the countries of the former USSR, one often hears arguments about the impossibility of transferring the US-American experience to the local ground. Opponents of antiracist activists criticize them for merely “importing” ideas from the West. This is similar to what is being said about feminists, as mentioned in the introduction to the article. So for us, both feminist and anti-racist work discussing local terminology. For instance, defining whiteness and indigeneity is relevant for this article. Whiteness we perceive as a spectrum, in which white people of Russian origin, with Russian citizenship and from big cities of the country are the most privileged in the region. Those of them who support the Russian ethno-national project presents themselves as “true Europeans” and claim whiteness, for instance, through articulating political homophobia.⁴⁹ They are well-networked with the right in Europe and receive support from them.⁵⁰ Indigeneity is, at the same time, defined through the suppression of language and culture, be described as indigenous if we use these instruments of colonization. Thus, all peoples of the former USSR other than ethnic Russians can be described as indigenous if we use the definition above.

Grassroots initiatives and activists who represent regional groups and have a non-Russian/indigenous background lack visibility both within the country and internationally. As a series of interviews recently conducted by the author of this article has

proven, there is still no unified opinion on what definitions and categories to use to discuss the topic – at least, in Russian.⁵¹ For instance, while Russia is characterized by imperialism and the advancement of the Russian population, other Slavic peoples of the former USSR, such as Belarusians or Ukrainians, also have more privileges than those who are not “Russian-passing” – a term offered by our interlocutors to describe a person who looks similar to Russians and will not be recognized as the “Other” until their accent, religion, city of origin etc. is revealed (this applies to, for instance, some Mari, Udmurt or Komi people). Representatives of non-Slavic peoples, such as Tatars or many of the groups inhabiting the North Caucasus, can also sometimes have a “Russian” pass and not face discrimination until their actual identity is disclosed by their name or other markers. Thus, it becomes hard to apply the category “people of color” in the same way it is done in the West.

As Salem and Thompson⁵² argue, the US-centered approach to racism is unproductive in Europe, as some forms of it will remain uncovered. For instance, in Germany attention must be paid to the role of faith and religion⁵³ and the local history of concepts of *Klasse* and *Rasse*.⁵⁴ Outside of the “West” US-American categories also do not work – like in India, where the caste system must be taken into account.⁵⁵ As Lana Uzarashvili writes, “It is clear that colonial and racist regimes are different, and discrimination against Black people in America is different from that directed at them and other non-whites in Russia. However, the way people are categorized in empires shows similarities.”⁵⁶ Even though Eastern Europeans are denied “whiteness” in Northern and Western Europe,⁵⁷ locally they are still white. The discrimination against them is different from racism and sometimes, like in the case of Russians, even makes their claims to “whiteness” stronger.

THE GROUPS THAT face racism everywhere in the world – “indigenous people, Roma people, migrants and ethnic and religious minorities caught in inter-imperial conflicts”⁵⁸ – are also racialized in the former USSR. Also, Black people, regardless of their background, are discriminated against in all post-Soviet countries. There are also specific forms of racism connected to the Russian and Soviet history. Racialization has different degrees, depending on each individual’s country of origin, appearance, name, and knowledge of Russian. In Russia, a significant part of its local population – namely, indigenous peoples of the Volga-Ural region and North Caucasus, Siberia, the Far East and the North – also face discrimination, especially when they come to Central Russia from their regions. For instance, people from North and South Caucasus, described as “white” in the US, are called “Black” by local Slavic populations. North Caucasians, as well as people from Central Asia, face the most hostility in such cities as Moscow or Saint-Petersburg.

The complex ways of racialization in the former USSR require more attention from the scholarly community. Activists of the *Feminist Translocalities* project try to understand how racism works locally and create categories to describe it. This is the first and the most crucial focus of the project right now, as the war in Ukraine has once again demonstrated the urgency of the

need to debunk Russian racism and reveal it to supporters of Russia for instance, among the left in Europe and the US. The project, which consists of activists and researchers, mobilizes its resources to conduct an intersectional analysis of the Russian society. In the next chapter we describe the context of the feminist movement in the country and then link it to the decolonial and antiracist critique brought about by the *Feminist Translocalities* Project.

Feminism in contemporary Russia

The history of the contemporary feminist movement, according to Vanya Solovei, begins in early 2000s. In the 1970s and 1980s, “an independent feminist movement emerged among dissidents opposing the Soviet regime”.⁵⁹ This is also when Western feminist texts first began to be “read, translated, and disseminated”⁶⁰ in Russia. In the 1990s, a number of women’s rights and LGBTIQ* NGOs emerged in the country with financial support from US-American, European and international organizations and foundations, and the first scholars began to get acquainted with the field of gender studies at conferences and through personal contacts.⁶¹ Solovei demonstrates “Russian and Eastern European feminists’ agency in interacting with Western theories” and “how Western feminists have, in turn, benefited from Russian and Eastern European thought and critique”.⁶² However, the opponents of feminists continue to use the rhetoric of them “betraying Russia for Western money” to discredit activists. This is a part of the general trend to label everything which questions gender binary and heterosexuality as “Western influence”. Jennifer Suchland calls this trend “sexual ‘Cold War’”.⁶³

From the 2000s on, it is possible to speak about a feminist movement – “a grassroots network of loosely connected individuals and groups identifying as feminist and maintaining contact with each other”.⁶⁴ This movement does not have support either from the state, or from the mainstream opposition (for instance, Alexey Navalny is known for making jokes about feminists).⁶⁵ The position of men has strengthened in the political and economic spheres and a new ideal of masculinity is formed that supports existing power structures.⁶⁶ Women are encouraged to reproduce by the financial incentive of the so-called “maternity capital”.⁶⁷ Heterosexuality is promoted by the state, which has close ties with the Orthodox church – since 2013 there is a law that prohibits the “propaganda of non-traditional values among minors” that allows the police to arrest individual activists and groups. Not all feminists are directly affected by the law, but it also serves as an instrument against them. For example, the definition of a play about gender stereotypes as “propaganda” was one of the reasons behind the case of Yulia Tsvetkova, who has been on trial for several years for posting body positive content on social media. The heterosexual nuclear family model is promoted as a basis for the Russian nation⁶⁸ and those who do not comply are at risk of being arrested, fined or even jailed. In 2021, many media activists and feminists faced stalking, threats and intimidation. Some people receive insults; addresses and personal data are being disseminated by the ultra-right activists through their channels.⁶⁹ The repressions are getting more intense: while

only two years ago it was possible to organize pickets and demonstrations without having issues with the police, in 2020–2021 activists were detained for any kind of peaceful protest, including single-person pickets.

NEVERTHELESS, THE FEMINIST movement in Russia is growing and developing. The main activities of feminist activists and groups are (self-)education, assistance to victims of violence, individual blogs and websites, feminist festivals, free psychological assistance to women and LGBTIQ*, lectures and seminars, excursions to cities and street interventions to criticize sexism and make women’s history visible. In a lot of cities feminist initiatives have formed their own communities – for instance, in Kaliningrad there is *Feminitiv*,⁷⁰ in Kazan, *FemKyzlar*,⁷¹ in Ulan-Ude, *YaSvoboda*.⁷² In Ufa, Syktyvkar and Moscow feminist festivals are held every year. The main activities of the feminist movement, however, happen online. Nika Vodwood makes a YouTube blog, Mira Tai and Lolja Nordic are active on Instagram, Anna Engelhardt, Sasha Shestakova and a number of other activists are on Telegram. There are feminist podcasts like *Propaganda Feminisma*⁷³ and *FemTalks*.⁷⁴ Right now, the Tiktok community is also growing. Above we have provided examples of intersectional feminists – however, TERFs and right-wing feminists are also active online.

In recent years, feminist have also gained a significant presence in art. There are a lot of individual artists working with feminist topics, as well as collectives, such as *Naden’ka* from Omsk or IIIIIIII (ShShSh) from Moscow. There are online platforms for publishing feminist theory and literature, the biggest of which is *F-pis’mo*⁷⁵ on Sygma. There are several creative writing courses led by feminists, two self-published feminist literary magazines, as well as a feminist publishing house, *No Kidding Press*. Feminist literature, like the poetry of Oksana Vasyakina, Daria Serenko or Galina Rymbu, is recognized internationally and translated into different languages. There are several feminist bands: *Lono*, *Punchy Peach*, *Pozory*. Many journalists have feminist views and try to push this agenda into media – thus, in some media outlets it is possible to use gender-inclusive language. Feminist researchers create blogs like *Feminist Chizh*⁷⁶ or *Philosophy of New York*⁷⁷ to communicate their research via social media. There is also a growing number of educational activities – since the start of the pandemic, three courses on feminist theory were launched: by Daria Serenko and Sofia Sno,⁷⁸ by *FemTalks*⁷⁹ and by Anna Engelhardt and Sasha Shestakova.⁸⁰ Also crucial for the development of local knowledge is the reading group and translation seminar *Levochki*⁸¹ created by Hanna Otchik, an activist from Belarus based in Russia.

Some of the initiatives described above deal with inequalities within the feminist movement. The most visible of these is inequality between “center” and “periphery” of Russia. Center is represented by Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Like activists from Central Asia, activists from other cities feel that they lack

resources and visibility in comparison to the former “center” of the empire;⁸² activists from smaller cities and non-central regions of Russia have less visibility than those from Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, the centers of activist life, who often represent the entire feminist movement of the country. Activists fight these inequalities and defend their self-sufficiency and independence from the center. The number of translocal collaborations that do not involve the “center” is growing, as feminist collectives from different parts of the former USSR create networks and collaborations that do not reproduce the hierarchy of the former empire. Kazakhstani feminists deliberately make events only for people from Central Asia, like the feminist festival *FemAgora*.⁸³ There are also collaborations that include persons from all parts of the former USSR apart from Moscow and St. Petersburg, like the *V Teme*⁸⁴ symposium organized by *Shtab* and *Labrys* in Bishkek. Within Russia, an example of a decolonial regional initiative is *Feminism in the Regions*,⁸⁵ a podcast by activists from Ufa and Tomsk. During the pandemic, activists Sonya Sno and Dasha Serenko created *FemDacha* – a retreat for feminists that mostly hosted activists from the regions.

Intersectional activism is also getting more and more powerful in Russia. As interviews⁸⁶ with activists from Russian regions have demonstrated, many of them believe that more discussions about racism within the feminist movement are needed. Such activists as Lana Uzarashvili, Anna Engelhardt, Vanya Solovei, Sasha Shestakova, Maria Tunkara and Medina Bazargali are doing decolonial and antiracist online activism. In 2020, a project called *Agashin*⁸⁷ was launched that spread the voices of non-

white persons in Russia. In 2021, an online campaign, “How to speak about racism in Russian?”, was organized by Agashin together with *Feminist Translocalities* to raise awareness about the complexities of race and racialization in the former USSR to demonstrate that the region was never “outside of race” and local activists are not “importing” ideas from the “West” but creating localized understandings of the way intersecting discriminations are

constructed in different ex-Soviet states, thus also contributing to global debates about race and racism. Thus, *Feminist Translocalities*, together with other projects, highlights and encourages the interconnectedness of feminist and antiracist discourses. The next section describes the activities of the project in more detail.

Feminist Translocalities

Feminist Translocalities is a project that aims to bring more intersectional perspectives into Russian-language feminist discourses. *Feminist Translocalities* operates through different media. It includes a multimedia portal, two printed magazines and a traveling exhibition. It is also a project network that supports other feminist initiatives with small grants. *Translocalities* has a broad geography, but mostly focuses on the former USSR. It was started in 2020 by Victoria Kravtsova, a feminist activist and researcher from Russia. The project started by assembling

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Feminist Translocalities in St. Petersburg.

a translocal network of feminist activists from all former Soviet countries, with a specific focus on those who pursue decolonial activism or represent marginal groups in societies, such as activists from smaller cities, representatives of ethnic minorities or people with disabilities. The group gathered to discuss common challenges and relevant issues in a zine and on the website, as well as to organize public events that transmit feminist knowledge, such as online workshops on decolonizing feminism or a series of discussions on the methods of feminist research with participants from Central Asia, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

Feminist Translocalities aims to connect (queer) feminist initiatives from different places and maps their activities to represent the diversity of the contemporary feminist movements in the former USSR, making an accent on art and activism by BIPOC and persons with disabilities. The project aims to contribute to the formulation of a radically inclusive anti-racist feminism aligned with local circumstances of the former USSR. The initiatives within the project encourage collaboration between researchers, artists and activists. For instance, a recent initiative was an artist residency in Ufa for non-Russian artists and researchers based in Russia. Translocal projects support local artists and researchers in broadening their perspectives, understanding the systematic character of the problems they struggle with and searching for common ground to cooperate. In these collaborations, tools to fight coloniality and racism are developed and possibilities to build new alliances arise. The participants of the project are leftist feminists who critically reflect the past of the USSR as colonial. It thus becomes possible to build coalitions of a new character and not reproduce the colonial and imperialist bias often present in the relationships between people from Russia and other parts of the former USSR. This way, the projects lives on and develops even after the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022.

Feminist Translocalities' biggest project in Russia is the traveling exhibition with the same name, created in the context of the year of Germany in Russia. The exhibition is devoted to the



Feminist Translocalities in Kaliningrad.

role of BIPOC women, trans* and non-binary persons, as well as women, trans* and non-binary persons with disabilities in the history of the former USSR and Germany. The works collected and produced for the exhibitions are mostly easily reproducible and also available on the project website. Apart from photo, video and graphic works, the exhibition includes posters that one can also find on the website in the form of a newspaper. The exhibition took place in Saint Petersburg, Omsk, Togliatti, Perm, Chelyabinsk, Krasnodar, Novosibirsk, Kazan, Ufa, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad and Ekaterinburg. Its format is DIY and differed from a classical traveling art project. In each city a local team of curators choose how what the exhibition would look like, depending on their ideas about the goals of the project and the available location. Some made an open call for local artists; others organized a residency beforehand. One team spent most of the money on renovating the local community center which also served as the exhibition space.

EVEN THOUGH THE LOCAL activists responsible for the exhibition were called “curators”, the project dismissed the classic concept of curatorship. This term described an organizing function that a person performed locally but required neither specific education nor previous experience in the field. In the selection of artists, the project was also anti-hierarchical, not rejecting any proposals if they were in line with the main focus of the project: sensitivity to intersecting discriminations. The composition of the *Feminist Translocalities* zine is based on the same principle. It contains texts by researchers, activists, and artists collected by an open call, one of the goals of which was not to reject anyone if the text or work matched the theme of the zine. The zine was also available at the exhibition in an “all languages” version, which was chosen to show the Russian public that the Russian language is not always the local “lingua franca”.

The exhibition questions our understanding of history and tells us about experiences that have been consistently excluded from it. It centers the role of BIPOC, LBQ-women, and

trans*persons with and without disabilities in the stories of resistance. Going beyond the academic perception of history, one could recognize and imagine what was forgotten or even never known. The exhibition and the zine are about polyphony of experiences. Moving from referencing the past to constructing alternative futures, the exhibition contains a second part called “feminist utopias” that includes statements by activists about what a feminist future could be. Statements by various activists informed the visitors about the queer feminist futures they would like to see. This speculative modeling helped to understand what problems exist today, what worries different activists. This is another opportunity to observe the general vector of development of the feminist movement today. Utopia becomes a tool for dealing with the present and moving into the future, taking into account the often-traumatic experiences of the imperialist and colonial past. The audience of the exhibition were mostly people who already had an interest in feminist topics and wanted to deepen their knowledge.

The *Feminist Translocalities* exhibition places the experience of BIPOC women at the center of the history of the Russian Empire and the USSR by presenting historical portraits of non-White activists from Germany and Russia. Aleksandra Biktimirova, as well as Tansulpan Burakaeva, Ainaza Karakay and Diana Khalimova, for instance, created portraits of Islamic⁸⁸ feminists who were active in the 19th and early 20th century in contemporary

Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Their main goals combined protecting the local language and culture, and demonstrating the possibility to combine the two identities – of a Muslim and of a feminist. Islamic feminists are also present in the former USSR today, especially in the parts of Russia, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan with large Muslim populations. Intersectionality implies that religion and feminism can coexist. Islamic feminists are an example of a global movement that shows that it is possible. They look for exceptions and alternative readings of the stories and narratives within religious texts and traditions to prove that Islam was not created as hostile to women. They disagree with white, secular feminists, who mostly believed that Muslim women need to be freed from patriarchal oppression by getting rid of Islam. However, researchers often come to wrong conclusions, classifying as Islamic feminists all Muslim women who live an urban life, have their own businesses or stable jobs and do not differ much from other urban women who do not practice Islam. It is an instance of colonial thinking to believe that this already means being a feminist, as it implies that without contesting Islam, women have no opportunity to make a career and participate fully in social life. *Feminist Translocalities* is attentive to this, as well as other marginal perspectives in the feminist mainstream.

Apart from racism, another topic central to the exhibition was disability. At several exhibitions the key role was played

by the *Caring Theater* project. This transdisciplinary initiative curated by Kira Shmyreva investigates issues of access and care. The project is a collaboration with various people with disabilities, all of whom tell their stories through video works, texts and installations. It calls for an end to their social isolation. In *Caring Theater*, neurodiverse persons, persons with disabilities or chronic illnesses are not just receivers of care from volunteers. They are friends, family members, employers, sexual partners who both give and receive care. Criticizing ableism, the project rethinks the interaction between people with different physical abilities. *Caring Theater* raises the question of different ways of living offered to disabled people today, of which only personal assistance can guarantee an appropriate quality of life. It calls on the world to stop the “freak show” of inclusive projects and tell just one story – horizontal and full of care.

EVEN THOUGH SOME PARTS were similar, each exhibition was different, depending on the context of each city. It was supplemented with new voices, local stories, often unfamiliar and forgotten. The exhibition in Kazan, for instance, included several zones: an interactive corner of the *Caring Theater* project, historical posters, tables with poetry and essays about migration, queer-ness and search for identity. Also, posters about the first Soviet feminists from Olessya Bessmeltseva’s *Leningradski feminism* project were presented, coming into dialogue with the inter-

“THE PROJECT AIMS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE FORMULATION OF A RADICALLY INCLUSIVE ANTI-RACIST FEMINISM ALIGNED WITH LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE FORMER USSR.”

views connected in the framework of *Feminist Translocalities*. Maria Dmitrieva, who curated the first exhibition in St. Petersburg, said that for her, the concept of the exhibition had as its goal the creation of a collective affect, through which polyphonic discussion about feminist utopias was made possible. Maria Dmitrieva used additional audiovisual and sculptural elements that changed the neutral space of the exposition, which was divided into the main exhibition hall, a safe space to

rest and read and projections in different places. The exhibition was made more accessible through the organization of space: It was possible to get acquainted with the works while sitting or lying down.

Masha Alexandrova, a member of the *Naden’ka* art group that curated the exhibition in Omsk, says that for her, the most important aspect of the exhibition was the fact that it revealed and highlighted the multiplicity of feminisms. This exhibition included a presentation of *Barzzine*, a zine about feminist punk bands from the countries of the former USSR. The zine was made in cooperation with *Feminist Translocalities*. According to Masha Alexandrova, this and the adaptation to the space of *Levaya Noga* gallery gave the exhibition the vibe of a punk concert or disco. Daria Abdulina, who curated the project in Kaliningrad together with Alice Che from the local feminist group *Feminitive*, liked the simple and mobile character of the exhibition, as well as the horizontality of the concept, in which there was no pressure on

local organizers. The specificity of the project in Kaliningrad was an artist residency that lasted for a week before the exhibition. During the residency sculptures and installations had been created, which then constituted a significant part of the exhibition. Tansulpan Burakaeva, curator in Ufa, liked the mobility of the project and the possibility to easily reproduce it. The exhibition in Ufa was organized in the context of *FemBayram*, an annual feminist festival. A participatory installation, *Korama*, was added to the exhibition. It was a patchwork blanket sewed during the exhibition that included the stories of mothers and grandmothers of local women. In Krasnodar, the exhibition also took place in the context of a bigger event, *Trening Fantaziya*. Here Daria Kucher invited five artists from the region to participate in the exhibition and a feminist experimental musician, Anna Garcia, to play at the opening. She integrated the exhibition into the library of the local contemporary arts center. Lira Ryazanova, the curator in Ekaterinburg, highlighted the intersection of feminism and disability, as well as gender studies and decoloniality as crucial topics that motivated them to work on the exhibition. In Ekaterinburg, the exhibition included works by feminist artists from the Ural region, as well as a series of lectures.

Most of the exhibitions passed without conflicts. According to Aleksandra Biktimirova, who curated the exhibition in Kazan, it was supported by the local feminist network, as well as other activist circles and local media and no conflict situations arose. The exhibition in St. Petersburg coincided with an outbreak of a conflict about transphobia within the local feminist community, due to which part of the exhibition had to change location. The reception from outside, however, was unproblematic. The exhibition in Chelyabinsk was one of the most stressful for its curator, Vlad Michel. Due to the pandemic situation, the local team decided to organize the exhibition outside. They integrated posters and installations into the context of several streets in the city and gave guided tours through the exposition. After three days, a local right-wing group came and destroyed the exhibition. Lira Ryazanova, the curator in Irkutsk, also reported attacks by right-wing activists – in this case they happened online before the opening, which the right activists were trying to ban by coming there, as they said, “with weapons”. Conflict of a different nature happened in Novosibirsk – there the curators chose to cooperate with a municipal gallery, which decided to censor part of the works during the preparation of the exposition.

THE EXHIBITION, as well as the zine that one could read when visiting it, interpreted post-socialism as a global condition, focusing on its imperial and colonial aspects. It asserted and emphasized the diversity and significance of the experience of queer feminist researchers and activists from post-socialist states. The project shares a decolonial perspective in that it focuses on knowledge from the peripheries, supports unknown or less known activists

and does not set any formal academic, artistic or journalistic requirements for its content. *Translocalities* contain decolonial and feminist reflections on the histories of one’s own country, family, and personal histories of the search for “home”. The authors of the exhibition and the zine question the past and present of the countries of the former USSR, claiming the place of homo- and trans*sexuality, disability, and the experience of non-white women in it. Talking about the challenges of feminist and LGBTIQ* activism, the work of NGOs and the discipline of gender studies, *Feminist Translocalities* shows the diversity and complexity of the stories of resistance. All texts can be read on the project website. Out of the variety of topics and authors, we would like to highlight the contributions by Sasha Talaver⁸⁹ and Yulia Gradskova⁹⁰ about representation of non-white women in the Soviet leadership on different levels, as well as international organizations led by the

USSR, a zine interpreting the research about the contemporary position of women in Kyrgyzstan by Diana U,⁹¹ as well as a text about the double coloniality of gender activism and research in Central Asia by Alтынay Kambekova.⁹²

Feminist Translocalities is, first of all, a network and an open process. As it maintains feminist ethics of work, it aims to never become fixed, institutionalized or frozen into a hierarchy. The plans of the project include increasing the visibility of the project network to articulate new ways of developing regional politics contrary to those again revealed by the current war in Ukraine – a regional unity based not on the sole fact of having a common past, but on the wish to critically engage with this past and seek new foundation(s) working together in decolonial alliances.

Conclusion

In this article, we articulated the growing presence of intersectional voices within the feminist communities in the former USSR, particularly focusing on Russia. Our main argument is that attention towards the intersectional character of discrimination is growing both in the activist and scholarly communities, which means that new language and ethics are being developed. The core of the anti-racist movements is constituted by feminist activists. The same can be said about the activism of persons with disabilities – feminists with disabilities such as members of the *Zhenschiny. Invalidnost’. Feminism* group, are one of the most active.⁹³ Like Solovei, we argue that “debates over difference and inclusion are a crucial area in which the feminist movement produces emancipatory knowledge and innovative practices that can be carried over beyond the feminist communities to larger society”.⁹⁴

Researchers Lesya Pagulich and Tatyana Shchurko believe that “decolonial theory, critical race theory, Black feminist thought and queer of-color critique have powerful tools and theoretical frameworks to address such issues as colonialism, imperialism, and structural inequality in the transnational

perspective”.⁹⁵ Criticizing liberalism as the only scenario proposed to the countries of the former USSR, researchers suggest paying attention to its interpretation by Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, who view “post-socialist imaginations” as “radical and decolonial imaginaries of collectivity and political action”,⁹⁶ destabilizing and dismantling “Western hegemony, imperialism, colonialism, and racial capitalism”.⁹⁷ Fighting coloniality means being attentive to the hierarchies within the global and local feminist communities, criticizing racism, and supporting non-white and non-central grassroots initiatives and voices. The more translocal collaborations happen in the “periphery”, the more internal and external criticism gets vocalized. This increases the visibility of groups with fewer resources and more “marginal” agendas. This offers us a different perspective on feminism in Russia – not as a weak and unorganized community that has to face the mighty state apparatus, but as a powerful movement embedded into a global network of feminist activists who stand on the principles of intersectional justice.

Aleksandra Biktimirova says: “I hope that in the future such projects will expand and turn from a single solo statement into collective ones”.⁹⁸ According to Solovei, “through continuous discursive action, [activists] have established a feminist perspective as an integral and legitimate element of the public sphere in Russia”.⁹⁹ Right now, we believe, the feminist movement is increasingly dealing with difference – it questions “its own practices and enters into debates over inclusion. It becomes an experimental platform where new ways of being, working, and thinking together are produced and tested, potentially to be offered to the larger society”.¹⁰⁰ Feminist communities in the former USSR are building more horizontal ties. More solidarity and cooperation result in the polyphony of voices and the presence of more anti-colonial, disabled, queer and non-white perspectives in feminist activism. The activists from the “center” begin to take steps to check their privilege and share resources. Conversations about forgotten histories, national and ethnic identity and its absence happen online and offline. Anti-colonial rhetoric enters the fields of art, journalism and academia. Activists from the so-called “national minorities” of Russia, as well as representatives of indigenous nations of the other post-Soviet countries are deconstructing the perception of Russia, as well as of the former USSR as “Russian”.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the *Feminist Translocalities* network focused on anti-war activism. The same was done by all other feminist and decolonial activists. Some, for instance, have created a horizontal *Feminist Anti-War Resistance*¹⁰¹ project – a online community mobilizing to protest against war online and offline. Feminists also organized such actions as *Women in Black*, *Anti-War Sick-List*¹⁰² and *Zolotoy Kluchik*¹⁰³ and are, for instance, assisting forcibly displaced persons from Ukraine in escaping from Russia into Europe. The nature of the current anti-war resistance again shows that the most active participants of mobilization and assistance initiatives are representatives of marginalized groups – women, LGBTIQ* persons, BIPOC, and disabled activists. They are the ones most sensitive to the patriarchal and militaristic nature of the Russian regime and see how

Russian imperialism is reproduced even in the anti-war and anti-Putin activism of such liberals as the team of Alexey Navalny.

In the current turmoil of Russian (neo)imperialist war, uplifting non-Russian voices from the former USSR and debunking the colonial and racist nature of Russia becomes even more important – also in Germany, current base of the project, where many people, including leftist activists, are not aware of the colonial and imperialist nature of Russian politics and thus do not do enough to support Ukraine. Right now, the voices of BIPOC, disabled, queer activists, who consciously stay grassroots and “uneventful”,¹⁰⁴ become louder and harder to ignore; they form new collaborations and alliances. *Feminist Translocalities* supports this process by offering opportunities for collaboration and resources. The white or white-passing persons from Russia from the project network seek ways to step back and let activists from Ukraine decide where to invest the available resources. For instance, a member of the project group from Ukraine has inspired us to create an appeal to decolonize Russia.¹⁰⁵ The project, based on the concept of *translocality*, erases the familiar hierarchy of periphery and center, so that marginalized experiences and knowledges come to the fore of feminist debates. Feminist and decolonial thought become the main instruments of resistance and a basis for uniting different groups on the basis of mutual assistance and care – for each other, as well as for the Earth and the (future) peace. ✪

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