



Demonstration on Nevsky Prospect in Saint-Petersburg, Russia on May 1, 2019. Poster reads: "Don't be silent, woman." (Source: Shutterstock)

Engines of Change: The Politicization of the Private Sphere and the Rise of Women's Political Activism in Russia

By Emily Couch

Nearly nine months have passed since thousands took to the streets to protest the exclusion of independent candidates from the Moscow City Duma elections.¹ During this summer of discontent, one particular face pervaded the media coverage: blonde, bespectacled, and ready to go on a hunger strike for the cause.² The face was that of Lyubov Sobol, the longest-serving aide of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Sobol's voice was a rare exception in a political sphere dominated by men. Her prominence signals the growing role of women in Russian political life driven in part by the encroachment of politics into the private sphere. For women in particular, the issue of domestic violence and the

state's response is raising both awareness and action.

In February 2017, Russia decriminalized some forms of domestic violence, making the beating of one's spouse or children—providing it is the first time and no bones are broken—punishable only by a fine of 30,000 rubles, or two weeks in custody, rather than the previous two-year jail sentence.³ In July 2018, Angelina, Maria, and Krestina Khachatryan murdered their father after being subjected to years of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.⁴ The case sparked a wave of protest supporting the sisters, unleashing anger at the state's apparent indifference towards the thousands of women who are attacked and killed each year by their partners.⁵



Moscow, Russia. Group of women protesting for women's empowerment and equality on March 8, 2019 (International Women's Day). (Source: Shutterstock)

The brutal murder and dismemberment of Anastasia Yeshchenko by her university professor, Oleg Sokolov, in November 2019 became another high-profile case provoking public outcry and debate on the issue.⁶

This article spotlights the voices of three Russian activists who show the catalytic role that domestic violence is playing in women's political participation: municipal elections candidate Olimpiada Usanova, politically engaged artist Victoria Lomasko, and NGO employee Nuria Fatykhova.⁷ Their perspectives offer only snapshots of the wide and complex spectrum of women's political activism in Russia, but nonetheless offer fascinating insights on the role of gender in political organization and highlight how traditional gender roles and means of political participation shape—and indeed are shaped by—women activists.

The Duma Candidate

While it was Moscow that garnered international media attention, 31 other regions also held local elections in 2019. Olimpiada Usanova, currently a Galina Staravoitova Fellow at the Kennan Institute, ran as an independent candidate in the elections for Nizhny Novgorod's city Duma. Usanova observes that her region has seen a steady increase in women candidates. In 2010, 11 percent of the candidates were women; in 2015, 16 percent; and, in 2019, 27.5 percent.⁸ Some of these candidates were in fact "spoiler candidates" that the authorities put forward with names similar to those of genuine independent candidates in order to siphon away their votes. For example, Usanova was listed on the ballot as O. V. Usanova, right next to O. V. Ushakova. While these spoiler candidates cast a degree of doubt upon the real number of women participating in the elections, the fact that the authorities deemed it necessary to use this stale tactic suggests that they saw Usanova as a real contender.



Olimpiada Usanova, currently a Galina Staravoitova Fellow at the Kennan Institute

Usanova's activism is not confined to formal politics. Since her campaign, she has also been a vocal figure in the swelling anti-domestic violence movement. She said, "I participated

in protests to support the Khachaturian sisters, and against

domestic violence in my city. There were a lot of protests in different cities on this issue....Most of the participants were women. There were some men, but maybe one for every 50 women...because many men in Russia are very conservative and believe that they should dominate women."

In November 2019, she spoke at a conference in Nizhny Novgorod, during which delegates discussed the draft law on domestic violence.⁹ "I was very radical in this conference," she said. "In my speech I said, 'every day, every 40 minutes, we lose one woman to domestic violence'....After that there was a really aggressive argument. Others said, 'we don't believe these statistics.' It was crazy. Men opposed the law because they claimed it was again 'Russian tradition.' I really said, 'I have a question: Explain, if a man beats a woman—is that tradition? Is beating and killing a woman in the home tradition?'"

Even her friend, the director of a domestic violence organization, advised her that she sounded too radical, and that she should not be so aggressive. "I respect her," said Usanova, "but I was very surprised." This kind of self-censorship, she says, is partly because "some organizations that have state

financing...are afraid of losing it, and that's why they are very careful about mentioning feminism." Usanova's experience with reactions from hostile men and cautious colleagues echoes the problem of "tone policing" faced by women and people of color in the West, who find themselves dismissed as angry or emotional for expressing ideas outside the mainstream.

"If people criticized me, it was because of my political views, not because of my gender," she said of her election campaign. The contrast between the criticisms Usanova received in her Duma versus her anti-domestic violence campaigns is telling. In neither case was the fact of her political participation criticized. As political scientist and author of *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*, Valerie Sperling says: "given the Soviet tradition of involving women in the public sphere... women's institutional political participation is not viewed as any more inappropriate than women's participation in non-state, informal activism."¹⁰ It is telling, then, that the criticism that Usanova did experience was a response to her depiction of women as a group with distinct interests that run counter to the state's agenda. While Usanova the candidate received general acceptance, Usanova the women's rights activist did not.

The Artist

Victoria Lomasko is a graphic reportage artist whose work captures the lives of Russia's marginalized, ranging from protesting truck drivers in Siberia to sex workers in Nizhny Novgorod. In 2012 and 2013, she co-curated the Feminist Pencil project, which showcased politically engaged graphic art by Russian women.¹¹ Her comments on domestic violence are revealing: "Attending a protest against



Victoria Lomasko is a graphic reportage artist

domestic violence is not safe—women participants can be detained by police or be attacked by those who support the abusers.”

While the police may aim to suppress women’s anti-domestic violence activism, their method of doing so further politicizes the issue. Lomasko regards the notion that women’s activism is increasing on a national level with skepticism. Whether or not women engage in activism, she argues, is highly dependent on their location:

Basically, activism in Russia is not developed. And here I do not make a distinction based on gender. Much more important is whether we are talking about big cities, such as Moscow and the northern capital of St. Petersburg, or about the provinces, that is, about the

rest of the country. In protests in the capital, both women and men go, and both genders are involved in activism—in my opinion, perhaps women even more so. In the provinces, public life is practically nonexistent: women are expected only to marry and raise children, and men are only expected to provide financially. To a certain extent, participating in activism is a relatively privileged endeavor; in the provinces people simply survive.

What happens in the provinces—whether that’s women’s activism or something else—is almost invisible in Moscow. The center and the provinces exist like two separate states. I can therefore only comment on the situation in Moscow over the last couple of years: important to me are the activities of young activists, women artists and poets, and founders of “Quiet Picket” like Daria Serenko. Daria and her associates organize pickets in support of political prisoners and against domestic violence, conduct discussions and exhibitions on social and gender issues. I would single out the “Edge of Eve” festival, which is organized by director Leda Garina.

Lomasko’s insights suggest that perhaps the greatest barrier to political activism by women in the provinces is financial. Their inaction speaks not of apathy, but rather of socioeconomic constraints. Moscow pay rates are twice as high as the national average and three to four times that of central Russia or the southern regions, most regions of the northwest, and the Volga regions.¹² A recent study shows that the comparatively wealthy residents

of Russia's capital are more likely to demand institutional change than those of poorer regions.¹³ Women in these regions are particularly affected because they face not only economic hardship but also traditional gendered demands such as raising children and maintaining the household. Political activism—particularly that which is rooted in gender issues—is therefore a luxury many women cannot afford. At least, for now.

The NGO Activist

Nuria Fatykhova is the program coordinator for democracy at Heinrich Böll Stiftung NGO and think tank in Moscow, where she focuses on gender mainstreaming and feminist initiatives. She says,

our foundation is unique in Russia—we run all our projects through a gender lens. I would even say that we have, most of all, projects in which the main figure is a woman...We are currently supporting an activist forum called Women in the Film Industry, we work with the educational project Fem Talks, with the project Women in Philosophy, we support Femfest in several towns in Russia. At the same time, we continue to support women's initiatives in the republics of the North Caucasus. Today the spectrum of women's projects has become very wide—it includes student projects, projects run by women who are around 30 years old, and also women who are older than 40 and 50.

Fatykhova's record of work in different Russian regions, and even in restive ethnic republics in the



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south, counters Lomasko's view that women's activism is limited to Moscow and St. Petersburg. When pressed, she was reluctant to speak further on her foundation's work with women in the North Caucasus, citing safety concerns. Her reticence highlights the acute dangers faced by women in these republics.¹⁴

Fatykhova also differs markedly from Usanova in her perception of sexism faced by women in, or seeking to enter, the political sphere:

The entire public sphere in Russia (both the Kremlin-controlled part and the opposition sphere) is very sexist. Women politicians encounter ridicule, male arrogance...But as in all patriarchal systems, women in Russia have for a long time been divided.

It was very hard for women politicians or women activists to receive support from other women. But now all that is changing. I think that we owe the unique creation of solidarity among Russian women to the #MeToo movement, which launched this mechanism.

Like Usanova, she highlights the nexus of the private and the political in anti-domestic violence protests:

In Russia, we have an action called “I am not afraid to say” ...2019 was a year of unbelievable solidarization of Russian women—the main theme was rape. First there were hundreds of pickets in Russian towns in support of the Khachaturian sisters. And then meetings, lobbying, conferences on the issue of a law on domestic violence. And even more women began to participate because, in the Putin regime, the private sphere is politicized, and it is women who are most involved in this sphere. That’s why it is first of all women who are reacting.

Her assertion that Russian women are beginning to speak with one voice on the issue of sexual and domestic abuse raises the question of whether such nascent solidarity can be extended to other political issues.

Towards a Feminist Future?

In Russia, “feminism” is still very much a dirty word. For example, according to Usanova, Russians think that “if you are a feminist that means you have sexual problems, that you don’t have a partner.”

She adds, “Russian women don’t understand that feminism isn’t about having a partner or your appearance, about who should pay on a date, but about equal rights.”

Accordingly, high-profile activists rarely employ this loaded term. The virulent reaction against feminist punk band Pussy Riot after its Cathedral of Christ the Savior performance is ample demonstration of how Russian society perceives confrontational

“The Russian state prefers social activism to be directed at problems that the state wants addressed (without itself having to expend resources to address those problems).”

feminism. Sobol, for example, made almost no reference to her status as a woman in a male-dominated field during her City Duma campaign last summer. Even back in 2017, when YouTube star Yuri Dud elicited controversy for suggesting that she could not challenge Navalny, Sobol was careful to sidestep the gendered implications by stressing that it was the Kremlin’s repressive policies that prevented any other strong figures from emerging around Navalny.¹⁵

It has long been Kremlin strategy to co-opt civil society for its own purposes: the existence of GONGOs (government-organized NGOs), funded by the authorities in order to neutralize the potentially subversive power of legitimate NGOs, can be traced back to Vladislav Surkov’s youth project Nashi, founded in 2005. The Kremlin has used this strategy in order to delineate the bounds of legitimate and

illegitimate activism.¹⁶ The former is conceptualized as “civil society in the service of the nation.”¹⁷ Sperling expands on this: “The Russian state prefers social activism to be directed at problems that the state wants addressed (without itself having to expend resources to address those problems).”

In the 2000s women made up the majority of activists in the social welfare sphere.¹⁸ The artificial notion of the social (as opposed to the political) plays into existing traditionalist norms that defines women primarily as caregivers. Even today, says Fatykhova, “it is simpler for women to be activists on issues that the patriarchal society considers feminine.”

The blurring of the line between the social and the political is not a new phenomenon. Founded in 1989, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers combined demands for the improved welfare of conscripts with calls for the democratization of the political and judicial systems.¹⁹ In November 2019, a group of women gathered outside the Presidential Administration to denounce the prosecution of the Moscow Duma election protesters. Calling themselves Mothers against Political Repression,²⁰ the group declared in an open letter to President Putin: “The travesty of justice and lawlessness that are being perpetrated in front of the whole country undermine people’s trust in the justice system and the state.” Reminiscent of the Soldiers’ Mothers group, this group blurs the line between the social and the political by invoking the traditional role of women (thereby falling within the bounds of socially acceptable activism) while simultaneously making political demands of the state.

Political scientist Yana Gorokhovskaia’s research has also highlighted the way in which women activists

in Russia deconstruct the false social/political dichotomy:

From 2013 to 2017, I researched how and why activists get involved in local politics and become candidates in elections. In this work, I encountered a lot of women who engaged in activism—either sustained activism or piecemeal activism on a specific issue—before running for office. These women include Elena Tkach, Elena Rusakova, Yulia Galyamina, and others. Some had been local neighborhood activists for a long time and saw a concrete political future for themselves. Others were trying to solve specific problems close to them—unusable children’s parks or badly repaired buildings. They eventually built up networks that became strategically useful when they decided to enter local politics.²¹

The point here is not whether women are deliberately subverting the social/political divide: motherhood as a means of legitimizing political participation is a long-standing tradition in and beyond Russia.²² Regardless of intent, the strong roots that many women activists have in social issues provide a means of entering the public sphere without censure from the authorities or Russian society more broadly which, in turn, allows them to make these issues political. All three activists interviewed here stressed how domestic violence is galvanizing women’s political engagement. Since the state has integrated conservative religious ideology into its conceptualization of the family, anti-domestic violence activism has become inherently political and activists therefore find themselves outside

the bounds of the “acceptable” social activism sphere. As Sperling says, “domestic violence is a political issue, because it is a human rights violation and a matter of discrimination against women as a social group....Trying to punish the perpetrators of domestic violence, and/or to stop or reduce domestic violence, and/or to raise awareness of domestic violence are therefore inherently political acts.”²³

There is no question that Russian women as individuals constitute a powerful force in the sphere of political activism. What remains to be seen, however, is whether group identification as women becomes a valuable means of political organization. The growing resistance to the state’s patriarchal stance on domestic violence, the broad public sympathy for the Khachaturian sisters, and the formation of groups like Mothers against Political Repression do suggest that some kind of cohesive

identity for women in political activism is taking shape.

The irony of the state’s response is that, by failing to respond adequately to the domestic violence question, it actually ignites political activism among women who might have remained in the social sphere. Instead of measuring the political activism of Russian women by the standards of Western feminism, we should instead appreciate how they—on their own terms—negotiate Russia’s particular sociopolitical contexts in order to legitimize their claims and make change. As Fatykhova says, “in Russia, women are the engine of political affairs. When sociologists study those who come to protests, stand in pickets then, in Russia, it is women.”

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

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22. Gorokhovskaia said, “this group [Mothers Against Political Repression] strikes me as very reminiscent of the Argentinian Madres de Plaza de Mayo...using family relationships as a basis for activism against the government or for pressuring the government is not a women’s strategy per se. Nor is it even specific to this time frame in Russia’s history. In the ‘90s, mothers established organizations to lobby the government for better treatment of conscripted soldiers.”
23. From an interview conducted by the author via email. Sperling also said, “using ‘motherhood’ (and more rarely, ‘parenthood’) to legitimize political action is a long-standing tactic of social movement organizing. The Soviet (now Russian) Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers started off in the late 1980s, and still exists as a group that is quite critical of the Russian state on some issues; Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) got its start in the U.S....There’s also a parents’ group that was formed a couple of weeks ago by the parents of Russian women killed in domestic violence incidents; they are arguing that Russia’s deputy minister of justice must undergo a professional analysis to be sure he’s competent for his job.”



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