DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 04.01.2023 | Sasha Talaver

At the root of Russian resistance

Addressing social and reproductive justice through a feminist lens could become a means to confront Putin's regime and challenge Russian militarism

'Gender' in Russia's current political sphere is gaining in significance as an issue of national security. It is no coincidence that a total ban on LGBTQ+ representations in art and media passed recently, and the Stalinist order of 'Mother-heroine', which honours mothers of ten or more children, was reintroduced. Close to none of Vladimir Putin's recent speeches lacked the mention of 'gender freedoms' and a proclamation of the defence of 'traditional values' against the gender-neutral danger of 'parent number one' and 'parent number two'.

Since 2011, the Kremlin has framed sexuality as a question of national security, argues Dmitry Dorogov. This permitted extraordinary measures to confront the danger, i.e. the prohibition of LGBTQ+ propaganda, but also an instrumentalisation in the case of a military intervention. And, as Elizaveta Gaufman shows, based on an analysis of anti-Maidan group posts on the Russian social media platform *VKontakte*, gender and sexual identities serve as key axes of humiliation of the 'enemies of the Kremlin' and even as justification for geopolitical aggression: Ukraine is represented as a 'damsel in distress', the United States and its leaders are feminised and Europe is presented as the kingdom of homosexuality — 'Gayrope'. Thus, the Russian perception and representation of geopolitics extensively reliy on the lens of gender and sexuality.

'Guardian' of the nation's procreation

This crusade against LGBTQ+ rights and 'gender ideology' allies Putin with various conservative movements across the globe, which use anti-gender campaigns as 'ideological glue' for the unification against Western hegemony. Ironically, however, this struggle unfolds on the discursive field set by the West: it operates with categories like 'gender', 'transgender', or 'cancel culture', showing a desperate desire to be heard and understood in the Western cultural context.

More than international alliances, the declared defence of 'traditional values' is supposed to portray the Russian government as the primary guardian of the nation's procreation. The state's 'protection' of motherhood is crucial to Putin's image as a patriarchal leader and an alfa-male. In light of this, it comes as no surprise that several years ago, many media sources shared fake news about a member of the State Duma, Elena Mizulina's, suggestion to spread Putin's sperm via post to Russian women to procreate. What made this fake claim sound realistic was the positioning of the Russian government, embodied by Putin, as the primary guardian, and hence, the source of the reproduction of the population.

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But the Russian regime barely does anything to improve the material conditions of 'traditional families'. Like an illusionist, it uses an anti-gender rhetoric as a folding screen to replace material benefits with symbolic ones. Apart from maternity capital and recent 'Putin's payments' for poor families, state support for pregnant people and parents in Russia is scarce. The share of families with three or more children among the 'poor' (i.e. households in which the income per family member is below the subsistence level, as defined by Russian authorities) steadily increased over the last years, despite pro-natalist official rhetoric. And the war exacerbates this tendency since many men were mobilised, drafted or fled the country, a considerable number of breadwinners lost their businesses and jobs and utility bills are growing. In contrast, the budget for social benefits is shrinking or already exhausted in some areas. Recently, policewomen in several regions complained that they did not receive their maternity payments because the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as it confirmed itself, ran out of money.

Spending most of the budget on military and propaganda, the Kremlin tries to pacify reproductive/social justice groups through the empty glorification of motherhood and parenthood via orders such as 'Parental Glory' or 'Mother Heroine', which only several dozen families per year receive. The government frames the reproductive effort, giving birth and raising children, as a patriotic deed that can almost reach the level of a military one. No doubt the children born have to become soldiers — and

a mother has no right to sadness. As one Orthodox priest killed in this war advised, women should give birth to more children so that they will not regret, when some of them would be killed in war: 'if a lady, while fulfilling the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, gave up the artificial ways of terminating pregnancies (...) then obviously, she would have more than one kid. Which means she will not be as pained and terrified to say goodbye to her child, even if it's a temporary goodbye.'

Growing resistance of women

Thus, despite an attempt of the Russian government to present itself as the protector of the family, in fact, it demands more than it gives. The state military machine heavily depends on predominantly female reproductive labour — and, over the last decades, the significant resistance against Russian militarism came from exactly this group. Starting from the feminist dissident group that published a call to mothers against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan already in 1980. It was succeeded by the net of Soldiers' Mothers Committees formed in the late 1980s, which played a crucial role in the army reform and resistance to the First Chechen War in the 1990s. Today, the independent protest of mothers and wives of the mobilised soldiers is growing, leading to remarkable developments. Soon after the newly established oppositional 'Soviet of mothers and wives' held its press conference, Putin met the patriotic mothers to honour their reproductive labour and to receive public approval for the so-called 'special operation' from them. Now the main spokeswoman of the organisation is detained.

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These days, where reality in Russia is so extensively reflected in gendered categories, the feminist movement can become particularly productive. The Feminist Anti-war Resistance, one of Russia's most significant anti-war movements, actively engages with mothers' initiatives against mobilisation. Feminist activists participate in chatgroups to support those women who articulate an anti-war position; they, for instance, provide helpful links and manuals about soldiers' rights. Finally, the initiative group of mothers within the Feminist Anti-war Resistance launched a petition for the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Ukraine which reflects on the consequences of the war for reproduction: social benefits cuts, loss of kids and breadwinners, growth of domestic violence. The petition

outlines a crucial perspective for the demilitarisation of Russia, demanding redistribution of the military budget on the protection of parenthood and childhood. It promotes an old argument that war and militarism are incompatible with the right to parenthood and shows that the war deteriorates women's rights.

Indeed, the feminist idea of reproductive justice, i.e., the right both to abortion and parenthood, shows its potential in Russia as a means to confront Putin's regime in its self-representation as a guardian of the population and as a way to challenge Russian militarism, which takes away the right to parenthood and threatens the right to abortion. As Elena Zacharenko suggests, popular support for 'traditional values' in many countries is based on the hypocrisy of neo-liberal 'gender equality' programs that centre on economic outcomes but not on social justice. Thus, addressing questions of social and reproductive justice through a feminist perspective that allows for a variety of family configurations, genders and sexualities is acute — and it can become one of the strategies for the resistance against right-wing populism and militarism.



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