

**2012 -2013 TITLE VIII
COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT**

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*Schisms and solidarities: Feminism, LGBT rights, and activism in the Putin
generation*

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Research Abstract:

While a low level of ongoing grassroots political activism had existed in Russia since the 1990s, the outburst of mass public protests in late 2011 caught most observers by surprise. Even though the protests have since calmed, seemingly without having seriously challenged the Putin regime, the public spaces created by opposition protests became intensely productive sites for Muscovites to “get political,” expressing demands as citizens, learning to self-organize, and coming into conflict over civil rights, human rights, and traditional values. This anthropological dissertation project (nine months of which was funded by the Title VIII CRLT Program) traced processes of solidarity, schism, repression, and resistance among young feminist, LGBT rights, and anti-capitalist activists in Moscow, for whom the mass protests provided an audience for demonstrations and messages that rarely break into state-controlled mass media. These activists occupy ambivalent positions vis-à-vis the mainstream anti-Putin opposition, which has been dominated by pro-market liberals and has included a strain of conservative nationalism, manifesting at times in hostility to the participation of feminist and LGBT rights activists. Putin’s regime has leaned on similar nationalist and “traditional values” discourses to justify its repression of political and civil society activists and organizations, creating an increasingly authoritarian landscape that activists must negotiate. This project examines street protests as key sites for activists’ attempts to reveal and to challenge repression not only from the state, but even from within the opposition itself. Furthermore, it explores how young activists employ a range of tactics, from formal rallies to post-modern protest art, as they attempt to shape the protest movement.



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Research Goals:

As originally envisioned, my planned project focused on studying gender and demographic politics in Russia through an examination of “women’s rights” and “traditional values” discourses among feminist and anti-abortion activism. At the time, coalitions of women’s rights and religious “pro-life” activists were mobilizing around new laws restricting abortion access. I planned to examine activists’ uses of human rights and traditional values discourses to learn about how these globally-circulating ideas are being adopted and used in the Russian context: *What roles do Western discourses play in Russian reproductive politics and what do they mean in the Russian context?*. At the time, it was widely agreed that the Russian public sphere was marked by political disengagement and cynicism, and that civil society organizations were often oriented more toward the interests of their (usually Western) funding sources than toward close engagement with local communities. Thus my planned project was intended to investigate whether this new mobilization around abortion offered a challenge to that view: *What does abortion activism reveal about political activism and state-society relations in Russia?* I planned to conduct participant observation with 2-4 organizations directly involved with activism around reproductive rights, attending meetings and any public events, and interviewing activists about their own motivations, goals, and experiences.

Between grant submission and beginning research, however, current events significantly altered the context of the project. Most important was the rise of mass public protests in Moscow from late 2011 to mid 2012, which provided unexpected opportunities as well as challenges to my research. As the scope of my project both narrowed and expanded, my research goals also shifted. Research remained focused on the same constellation of concerns: gender politics, citizen activism, and state-society relations. However, the project as developed focused more closely on political activism in action, not only through discourse, and paid closer attention to how activists understood and reacted to repression. I collected data through participant observation and interviews to address the following sets of questions:

- 1) What are activists’ goals? What motivates individuals to become involved in political activism, and what constitutes “activism” in their view?

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2) What roles do globally circulating discourses of women’s rights, LGBT rights, civil rights, and traditional values play in Moscow opposition activism and how are they understood by local activists? What conflicts arise around these discourses and why?

3) How does the state affect the landscape of political activity? What forms of repression and opportunity do activists encounter, and how do they negotiate these challenges?

The broader goals of the research remained much the same. As stated in the original proposal, this project provides “ethnographically-grounded examinations of how Russian youth relate to the political discourses surrounding them [...] and of political activism in post-Soviet Russia, all issues that will be critical to the future of the Russian state and Russian society.” Through a close study of micro- and macro-level politics during a period of intense activism, this research allows for critical study of the possibilities for and pressing challenges to democratic engagement in contemporary Russia.

Research Activities:

According to most research, post-Soviet Russia was marked by a lack of political engagement and widespread distrust of “politics” as a means of solving social problems. Civil society organizations were few, and scholarly analysis routinely showed that NGOs tended to be oriented toward the interests of their largely Western funding organizations, rather than engaged closely with their ostensible home communities. When I returned to Moscow for the first stage of research in early 2012 (funded independently), I happened to arrive in the midst of an unprecedented wave of public protests sparked by widespread dissatisfaction with fraudulent Parliamentary elections. The phenomenon of mass opposition protests had an indelible effect on my research. Many activists in the feminist groups I had contacted before participated in these protests, and in March 2012 the arrest and prosecution of three members of the punk-feminist art group “Pussy Riot” brought to the fore many of the themes I had been most interested in, particularly gender politics and the politicization of the Russian Orthodox Church.

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These circumstances meant that much more public protest than anticipated was occurring, and that themes of women's rights and traditional values were playing a central role at the state level as well as among activists. Furthermore, LGBT rights groups in Moscow also took part in the mass protests, allowing me to observe not only the groups' messages, but how they were received by a large public audience. Thus, one half of my planned project proved much more fruitful than anticipated.

Taking advantage of this opportunity, I attended dozens of political marches and rallies of various sizes (from ten participants to tens of thousands), paying close attention to the discourses being used in slogans, chants, speeches, and materials. I photographed signs, recorded speeches, and collected *samizdat* (self-published flyers, newspapers, and magazines), focusing in particular on texts mentioning rights, values, and gender issues. Through this participant observation, I identified several important issues and conflicts within the community of opposition activists, including how to negotiate state repression, how to relate to nationalist/extreme-right opposition groups, and misogyny and homophobia within the left-liberal opposition. As these new themes came to light, I added them to the list of topics about which I collected further observations and materials, as well as to my interview protocol.

Starting with my initial contacts, I interviewed activists and asked to be included in their events, meetings, and other activities. I also asked activists to suggest other possible participants, and made additional contacts in person at political events and rallies. These groups included: the Gender Faction of the liberal-democratic party Yabloko; one other liberal feminist group; a feminist study circle; independent liberal, left, and radical feminists; two socialist groups with differing positions on gender issues; a left-anarchist group; a feminist-anarchist group; an LGBT-rights organization; independent LGBT-rights activists. I conducted 41 in-depth interviews with activists about their views and experiences and (with participants' permission) collected audio at 32 lectures, discussions, meetings, and rallies, as well as taking detailed fieldnotes of all related events I observed. As some activists invited me to join groups on social networking sites, I also regularly collected articles, blog posts, and discussions related to key research themes.

Several significant events and conflicts occurred over the course of the research period. In these instances, I recorded firsthand observations (when possible), collected reports and commentary from mass media, blogs, and social

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networking sites, and discussed the events with activists to learn about their views and reactions and to discover how changing events affected their own activities. Some of these were developments at the level of national and international politics, such as the proposal and adoption of a ban on the adoption of Russian children by US citizens (the “anti-Magnitsky” law) and a ban on “homosexual propaganda” among minors. Other conflicts developed at the grassroots level. For example, many participants in opposition rallies did not support the visible participation of LGBT activists, leading to heated debates over the relationship between the struggle for gay rights and fights for civil rights, workers’ rights, and so on.

As the year progressed, I was on-site as the Putin administration implemented increasingly repressive restrictions on public protest, civil society organizations, and “foreign agents” (ie, Western-funded NGOs), as well as anti-American and anti-gay laws. In this climate, it proved to be difficult to work with conservative activists, many of whom identified the West in general and the United States in particular as the source of many of Russia’s social and economic problems. Many people I approached expressed distrust of my motives; others simply stopped returning phone calls or messages for unknown reasons. By mid-November, I made the decision to focus on the areas of research that were most productive in order to make the best use of my limited time in the field.

The increasingly repressive atmosphere also affected my research with left-liberal activists, some of whom faced violence from pro-Putin or far-right activists, not to mention harrassment by police and the threat of criminal prosecution. In interviews, I spoke with activists about their perceptions of risk and strategies for negotiating the potential dangers of engaging on political activity. I collected information from news media, social media, and interviews about attacks made on activists and about detentions and arrests. In the interest of safety, I avoided attending events that seemed especially likely to attract violence or police attention (for example, rallies that had not been registered or approved by city officials). Within those limits, I attempted to document the ways in which political activism was limited or shaped by repressive policies and actions.

A significant benefit of conducting long-term fieldwork (12 months in the field over a 16 month span, 9 consecutive months funded by the Title VIII CRLT Program) was the ability to observe closely how specific events unfolded in the changing political context and as activist groups’ strategies and networks developed. In particular, I observed two consecutive rallies for International

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Women’s Day, the second of which exhibited the growth and greater organizational experience of feminist and LGBT rights groups, as well as the increased willingness of conservative activists to disturb events and of police to arrest activists en masse.

Throughout the research period, I had the benefit of eight hours per week of one-on-one language classes with faculty in the “Russian Language for Foreigners” department at the International University in Moscow. During these lessons, I worked closely with language specialists on improving my interview questions and conversation skills, understanding and translating colloquial, academic, and legal texts related to my research, and translating an academic paper I presented at the International Conference of the Russian Association of Researchers of Women’s History at Tver State University in October 2012.

Finally, as research participants invited me to join their groups and networks on social media sites, I was also able to observe how activists use new forms of media and virtual spaces. I chatted with activists online, followed debates and conversations related to research themes on public pages, and read and watched many of the same news sources activists relied on for information about current events both within Russia and abroad. Since returning to the US at the end of the fieldwork period, I have been able to use these sites to maintain contact with many of the research participants, which will help ensure that my research remains up-to-date and relevant as I continue analyzing the data already collected.

Important Research Findings:

Opposition protests: The anti-Putin opposition as a whole is difficult to characterize as a “movement.” Its participants range from ‘citizen activists’ protesting election fraud, to supporters of media figures with political ambitions such as Aleksei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov, to groups such as those studied in this project, who view the protests as an opportunity to find an audience for their social and political messages. An additional component of the opposition is far-right nationalist groups, whose participation was the subject of a great deal of debate. Many left-leaning and liberal participants did not want to be associated with the often xenophobic, anti-Western rhetoric of far-right groups, while other figures, such as Navalny, maintained that any group opposed to Putin should be invited to participate. The most common themes expressed at mass rallies were

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demands to fight corruption and fraud, for accountability and control over officials/bureaucrats, for de-centralization of power, and for the removal of Putin himself from office.



*LGBT activist's sign at a rally. "Unity in struggle, and not in disempowerment."
Winter 2013*

Apart from the common demand for "Russia without Putin," many groups' specific demands were directly in conflict, exemplified by several occasions on which far-right protesters attempted to attack LGBT activists at rallies. Toward the end of the research period, the most extreme nationalist groups seemed to have largely broken away from the mainstream opposition. Even so, central figures such as Navalny continue to lean on discourses of "tradition" and national identity to build legitimacy garner support. In interviews, activists fighting for minority rights and protections often expressed strong skepticism that their situation would improve were Putin simply to be replaced with one of these popular figures.

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A banner at an International Women’s Day rally in Moscow. “You can say no to any violence. / Feminists for Civil Freedoms” March 8, 2013

Value of protests: As a preliminary finding, my research suggests that regardless of the long-term effect of the mass street protests (2011-2012) on United Russia’s rule over the country, they were a very productive site for Russian citizens to become politically engaged, express their interests, and develop expertise in self-organization. Protests also created spaces in which residents could engage in conversations about social, political, and economic problems their country faced. In interviews, activists noted that these conversations helped them learn about their fellow citizens’ concerns to better tailor their own campaigns. Furthermore, feminist and LGBT rights activists often viewed protests as a place to engage with fellow politically-engaged citizens, rather than to address the state or political officials. For these groups, a primary goal of participating in public protests was to gain greater support and acceptance for their causes among the public. Activists identified some signs of success in this goal. For example, many LGBT activists pointed out that their groups were more welcome at rallies in recent months.

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An activist passes out flyers at a “white ribbon” protest for freedom of assembly. Winter 2012.

Funding of civil society: With the exception of members of Yabloko, which is a registered, funded, and long-established political party, most activists who participated in this research project were either independent activists or belonged to loosely organized, often unregistered groups that conducted their work on minimal budgets. To the extent that such groups have funding, it comes from membership dues and/or small amounts of money collected at public events either as donations or through the sale of self-published newspapers and magazines.

Decline in/increased difficulty of Western funding for civil society in Russia has had mixed effects. Certainly for groups that had been receiving funding, the loss of grant access will hit hard. Furthermore, Kremlin scapegoating of organizations with Western ties as “foreign agents” has encouraged public suspicion of such groups, as demonstrated by anti-US graffiti on their offices, and recently subjected human rights organizations (including Amnesty International and Memorial) to investigations by federal prosecutors. Clearly such a climate is not conducive to the development of civil society.

On the other hand, research in the 1990s and 2000s found that dependence on foreign grants meant that most civil society organizations were more closely oriented to the interests of their grantors than to building local networks of support. Most of the activists I interviewed were involved with loosely organized groups

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that funded themselves through membership dues and donations—if they were funded at all. In interviews, several activists explicitly noted that the lack of grant funding had freed them from needing to spend time in grant-application cycles or from focusing only on projects that grant organizations expressed interest in. Instead, they could pursue short and long-term projects which interested group members, and those projects would be successful to the extent that interest and support developed among participants and the local community. At the same time, many of the feminist and LGBT rights activists participated on an ad hoc basis with various international projects and campaigns, such as a performance of the Vagina Monologues hosted by the “1 Billion Rising” campaign and a queer film festival supported by Amnesty International.

Limits on civil society: In addition to the funding restrictions mentioned above, the Russian government employs various tactics to limit political activism and civil society activity. The approval process for public rallies is opaque and approval can be denied or withdrawn at the last minute; city officials often relocate rallies to inconvenient locations in low-traffic areas. Activists are frequently detained on false pretexts and occasionally threatened with criminal charges. Perhaps the most well-known recent case was the prosecution and conviction of three members of the punk-feminist art group Pussy Riot for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred,” two of whom remain in prison to date, but several dozen lesser-known activists are similarly imprisoned or in jail awaiting charges. In interviews, activists viewed fines and detentions as a routine consequence of engaging in political activity, despite explicit Constitutional protections for freedom of speech and the right to assemble.

Activists also negotiate what is sometimes termed the “information blockade”: state controls over major television channels and news outlets. These media rarely report on news that reflects poorly on the current administration, or offer misinformation. Activists make use of a broad range of media and methods in order to communicate with one another and to spread their own messages, ranging from social media networks like Facebook and the Russian counterpart Vkontakte, to alternative newspapers, to the face-to-face conversations mass rallies make possible. In interviews, many activists expressed concern over increasing internet censorship and the creation of a blacklist of sites containing “extremist” material or material allegedly threatening to children. An additional law currently under

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discussion would create criminal penalties for “offending the religious sentiments of believers,” which many activists expected the state to use as an additional means of harrasing and prosecuting members of the political opposition.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

Opposition protests: In understanding current opposition politics in Russia, it is important to keep in mind that the opposition “movement” is at best a loose coalition of varied groups with diverse goals and interests. Concerns about corruption, election fraud, and the centralization of power, as well as the continuing fraying of the social safety net, motivate a relatively high level of discontent among the public with the current administration. The protests themselves show a significant public desire to participate in fair democratic political processes. However, this should not be taken to mean that all opposition groups necessarily desire a more open, tolerant, or pro-Western government. Analysts are urged to be careful in identifying the motives and goals of various groups within the opposition.

LGBT rights and women’s rights: The growth of extreme right nationalism in recent years is cause for concern. Russian officials, including Putin, frequently use nationalist discourses and blame Western countries (particularly the United States) for internal political turmoil. LGBT activists and individuals are harrassed and attacked with regularity; in interviews, activists suggested that police often turn a blind eye to these attacks.

Feminist activists identify sexual harrassment in the workplace and domestic violence as significant problems for women in Russia. State support for families continues to decay in the post-Soviet period, while official policy is aimed at encouraging childbearing through pro-family rhetoric, rather than improving the quality of life for women and families or guaranteeing gender equality in the workplace.

While the US is not in a position to directly address these problems, it may still play a role in drawing attention to violence against women and LGBT individuals in Russia.

Furthermore, it is important to note that many Russians are highly informed about current events and domestic policy in the US. For example, feminists in

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Russia often pointed to domestic violence protections in the US as a model for their own demands, while LGBT activists were energized by the legalization of same-sex marriage in several states over the past year. In this way, good domestic policy may be an effective form of foreign policy.

Funding of civil society: During the period of this research study, rumors were circulating (supported by public statements of Russian public) that the US State Department was funding anti-Putin protests and paying opposition activists. New laws within Russia restrict the activities of organizations that receive funding from abroad. Given the current climate, providing such funding is increasingly difficult, and US funding of civil society organizations runs a significant risk of delegitimizing the organizations funded. This project suggests, however, that there may be some long-term benefits to limited civil society funding, as organizations are freed to develop their own local networks of support and to engage in projects they deem most valuable and effective, rather than those which will be most appealing to foreign grant organizations. This possible silver lining aside, the current climate for civic organizations of all kinds is worrisome.

Limits on civil society: It is widely recognized that the Russian government regularly violates civil rights, a conclusion which is only reinforced by findings in this project. Outright repression of activists by imprisonment is not uncommon. Activists expressed concern about encroaching internet censorship. This report calls for the strongest possible opposition to all limits on civil rights, in particular the rights to freedom of speech and freedom to assemble. Furthermore, it urges skepticism of new laws passed ostensibly to protect children, intellectual property, or religious sentiments that may be used to harrass and censor political activists.

Co-curricular activity:

While in the field, I met and consulted with several specialists and researchers in Russian gender studies, including Anna Temkina at the European University in Saint Petersburg, Tatyana Gurko at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Natalya Pushkareva at the Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences. They advised me on the development of my project and pointed me to additional Russian-

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language resources. I also presented a paper in October 2012 at the International Conference of the Russian Association of Researchers of Women's History in Tver, Russia. The paper, entitled "Making history matter: Gender, tradition, and revitalizing Orthodox upbringing in Moscow," was based on early fieldwork research. At this conference, I was also able to meet local scholars and learn about their latest findings. I look forward to developing these relationships further in the future, and to sharing my research findings with them as my dissertation writing proceeds.

Conclusions:

The development of new (albeit temporary) open public spaces in the form of mass street protests provided feminist and LGBT activists in Moscow with new opportunities to build public support and develop expertise in planning, organizing, and carrying out political actions. Their overall successes have been severely hampered by the Russian state's repressive anti-civil society policies, as well as strong strains of conservatism within the opposition itself. Activists' civil rights are routinely violated. LGBT individuals in Russia are vulnerable to harassment and violence, and women have little legal protection from discrimination in the workplace or violence in the home. The current government's tendency to use anti-Western and anti-US rhetoric to delegitimize its political opponents, not to mention newly enacted laws restricting foreign civil society funding, make the position of the US difficult. Nonetheless, this report suggests that the US could play a beneficial role by opposing controls on the internet and publicizing human rights and civil rights abuses in Russia. Furthermore, protecting civil rights and minority rights within the United States provides a strong encouragement to human rights activists in Russia.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/Publications and Presentations:

Having completed fieldwork research, my primary goal is to finish data analysis and write a doctoral dissertation. The expected completion date is May 2015. During the writing period, I plan to produce at least one scholarly article based on the dissertation to be published in an academic journal. I have already begun work on a conference paper to be presented at the annual meeting of the

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American Anthropological Association in November 2013, entitled “Rainbow flags and rotten eggs: Repression as an emergent process in Moscow street protests.” If accepted, this paper will form part of a panel on contemporary authoritarianism. In the future, I plan to continue research on the same themes (political activism, human rights, gender and LGBT issues), perhaps expanding my focus to examine international linkages among activist communities.