

# Introduction

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In April 2014, a senior Russian politician who is known better for his scandalous outbursts than his political work was filmed ordering two male aides to “violently rape” a female journalist, Stella Dubovitskaia, who had asked a slightly prickly question about the crisis in Ukraine during a press conference inside the state Duma.<sup>1</sup> Noticing that the journalist in question was not only a female, but a pregnant female, Vladimir Zhirinovskii found another reason to silence her: “[t]his is no place for you if you’re pregnant. [...] Pregnant women should not show up at work. Sit at home and look after your child, got that?” yelled Russia’s former deputy speaker of the Duma.<sup>2</sup> He then added that it was thanks to women like the journalist that the protests in Ukraine had erupted, and “assessed” the female protesters as suffering from “uterine frenzy.” “Without that uterine frenzy there wouldn’t have been Maidan,” concluded the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.<sup>3</sup> The politician’s “diagnosis” was echoed by Russia’s National Television (NTV), one of the main state-backed channels, which produced a program

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<sup>1</sup> See Adam Withnall, “Ukraine Crisis: Russian Pro-Kremlin politician Vladimir Zhironovsky [sic] Filmed Ordering Aides to ‘Violently Rape’ Pregnant Journalist Stella Dubovitskaya,” *The Independent*, Monday 21 April 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russian-prokremlin-politician-vladimir-zhironovsky-filmed-ordering-aides-to-violently-rape-pregnant-journalist-stella-dubovitskaya-9273041.html> (accessed 28 January 2016). The actual phrase Zhirinovskii used was “zhestko nasilovat’.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> In Terrence McCoy, “Russian Parliament Deputy Speaker tells Aide to ‘Violently Rape’ Pregnant Journalist on Live TV,” *The Washington Post*, 21 April 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/04/21/russian-politician-orders-aide-to-violently-rape-pregnant-journalist-on-live-tv/> (accessed 28 January 2016). Zhirinovskii refers to the protests that took place in Ukraine in 2013–14 and which are commonly known as the Maidan or the Euromaidan.

dedicated to the women of the Maidan with the unambiguous title “The Furies of the Maidan: Sex, Psychosis, and Politics.”<sup>4</sup> This televised celebration of open misogyny demonized a number of female political figures, such as Ol’ha Bohomolets’, Lesia Orobets’, Iryna Farion, and Tetiana Chornovol who gained some visibility during the protests in Ukraine, but who have little in common apart from their gender. In a pseudo-scientific analysis of the women’s political and personal lives, the program’s “experts” labelled the women as “furies,” whose unsatisfied libido drove them into the protest movement.<sup>5</sup>

Both Zhirinovskii and the NTV documentary reduced the women who dared enter the public and the political spheres to their uteruses. The women’s desire to participate in political life was equated with an exaggerated and unsatisfied sexual appetite. They were presented as animals who needed to be tamed or as people suffering from an illness that needed to be cured. It is remarkable that such a description of half of the Ukrainian protesters could be voiced by a high-ranking politician and supported on national television in the twenty-first century with no repercussions for either of the two parties. It is precisely because such a reduction of politically active women continues to be possible that this special issue is not only timely, but also urgent.

This special issue is based on papers given at a workshop held at the University of Cambridge in June 2015.<sup>6</sup> The participants included not only scholars who study the region, but also academics and activists who have participated directly in anti-authoritarian protest movements. The workshop brought together scholars and

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4 See “The Furies of the Maidan: Sex, Psychosis, and Politics,” *NTV*, 19 April 2014, <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/914656> (accessed 28 January 2016).

5 *Ibid.* The program focused on Ukrainian women, but also mentioned Dalia Grybauskaitė, the President of Lithuania, the US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, and other Western female politicians whom the filmmakers “accused” of being lesbians and thus pathologically ill.

6 The workshop “Gender, Nationalism and Citizenship in Anti-Authoritarian Protests in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine” was funded by the Centre for East European Language-Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) and Cambridge Ukrainian Studies. It took place on 20 June 2015 at Robinson College, University of Cambridge.

practitioners who dealt with the questions of gender inequality first hand and who could share their in-depth knowledge with each other. The workshop was of great benefit to those present, but, as is often the case with a discipline that positions itself, deliberately or otherwise, outside of the mainstream, the knowledge at the workshop was mostly shared among the “converted.” Therefore, it was agreed that the findings of the workshop should be voiced through a publication that could bring the discussions of gender to a larger audience. The *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* seemed like a perfect outlet for this task. The articles that comprise this issue deal with questions that receive little attention outside of the field of gender studies. By disseminating them through a publication that deals with broad issues relevant to the region we hope to reach a wider readership, and demonstrate that the understanding of gender perceptions, relations, and representations is vital for the understanding of the region and its political, social, and cultural processes.

The focus on protest movements is highly suitable for this purpose. Revolutions, protests, and demonstrations tend to arise when there is an urgent need for change, and when a critical mass of the population is ready to bring this change about. The countries that form the focus of this issue have all witnessed numerous attempts to bring about such changes in the post-Soviet years of their existence. Those who set the agendas of the protests, participate in them, and deliver the outcomes often include a cross-section of their respective societies, yet the general perception of the protest activity tends to be associated with certain individuals, usually heteronormative males, who become the emblems of the anti-authoritarian struggle of their nations, and who rarely aim to represent the interests of groups that also stand against authoritarian regimes, but which, at the same time, are against patriarchy. Alexei Navalny, for instance, one of the leaders of the opposition in Russia, who describes himself as “nationalist democrat,” is a fierce critic of Vladimir Putin, yet as an Orthodox believer he condemned the actions of his fellow critics of Russia’s President, “Pussy Riot,” as “repulsive,” stating that he would be

angry if his daughter behaved similarly.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Navalny argued that the women of “Pussy Riot” should not have been imprisoned, not because he supported their protests, but because he believed that it was not right to keep mothers of small children in prison.<sup>8</sup> By comparing his fellow protesters to either naughty daughters or pitiful mothers, the leader of the opposition, similarly to Zhirinovskii, deprived them of their political agency. Examples of similar attitudes from other countries discussed in this issue serve as evidence that even though women can be politicians, protesters, and revolutionaries, the attitude towards them is shaped by the perceptions of gender that are prevalent in society.

All papers in this issue discuss protest activity in one form or another. Given the temporal proximity of the Maidan events in Ukraine, it is unsurprising that this particular protest movement is discussed in several contributions. Tamara Martsenyuk’s paper and my own article look at various groups within the Maidan protest movement. Martsenyuk examines the experiences of LGBT activists during the Maidan and demonstrates that, in order to be able to participate in what has been termed the Revolution of Dignity unhindered by their fellow-protesters, some of them chose to suspend their LGBT activism for the duration of the revolution, while others promoted the notion of the “correct gay identity” and the idea of “homonationalism.” Martsenyuk also assesses the outcomes of the Maidan protests and the degree of their success in defending human rights, including those of the LGBT community. In my own article I examine the use of the protest space through the lens of gender. While women were certainly present at the Maidan, the space they occupied was often regimented by the male protesters. That said, the female protesters managed to find certain “pores” in the physical and ideological boundaries of the Maidan and succeeded in going beyond them, both in the process of challenging the patriarchal order, and while obeying its rules. Comparing

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7 Marc Bennetts, “Did Pussy Riot Destroy Russia’s Anti-Putin Movement?,” *Lacuna Magazine*, 12 March 2014, para. 11, <http://lacuna.org.uk/openlacuna/did-pussy-riot-destroy-russias-anti-putin-movement/> (accessed 28 January 2016).

8 *Ibid.*

perceptions and representations of gender relations on the Maidan with those in other protests, in particular the Arab Spring, I conclude that the active participation of women in the protest movements does not necessarily guarantee their liberation.

The question of protests is continued in Darya Malyutina's article, but her focus is drawn to the difficulty of conducting qualitative research in the middle of politically charged atmosphere while maintaining a balance between the researcher's academic and political interest in the protest movement. Malyutina explores how her ethnicity and her gender impacted her work as a researcher of protest activism among the Ukrainian diaspora in London in 2013–14. Malyutina concludes that the participation of a researcher in protests as a “supportive interlocutor” allows for a more intimate look at the movement and, to a degree, enables the researcher to become part of this movement. At the same time, she stresses the vitality of critical reflection on the researcher's own experiences.

Evgenia Ivanova's work retains the focus on political activism, but takes her readers away from the emblematic protest activity of taking to the streets to another medium: political calendars, which have appeared in Belarus and Russia. Ivanova argues that, “the female political calendar format proves to be a fruitful platform for exploring and performing issues surrounding women's political agency in Belarus and Russia.” At the same time, she states that “the manifestation of political agency via one's own, explicitly female, body is like walking on eggshells,” as while appearing on political calendars can present an opportunity for women's engagement with politics, at the same time, the presence of female bodies in the calendars can also further the objectification of women.

Visualized political activism is the subject of Olenka Dmytryk's contribution. In her assessment of the Ukrainian and Russian feminist art scenes Dmytryk identifies a recent shift in the position of the artists raising issues of gender in Russia and Ukraine from “I'm not a feminist, but...” to “I'm a feminist, therefore...” She argues that the 2010s have brought a new wave in the development of feminist art in these two countries. Dmytryk states that the “I am a feminist, therefore...” stance has been adopted as an instrument of gender and sexual dissent, and that it has become a way of resisting

conservative neo-traditionalist trends in Ukrainian and Russian societies.

Changing trends are the focus of the somewhat experimental, non-academic part of this special issue. As the workshop on which the issue is based included practitioners from outside of academia, so does this issue. One of the three contributions that comprise this section discusses the metamorphosis of feminist art in Russia from within, as it is written by an active participant of these developments, Nadia Plungian. Plungian identifies the clear “turn to the right” in Russian society as a whole and in the arts in particular. She then gives her understanding of how this new conservative trend has affected the art scene in Russia. Plungian observes the tendency to use gender as a trendy device by artists who have little to do with feminism and who, in fact, support the regime and promote its traditionalist stance.

Another non-academic contribution to this journal is an interview with Maria Berlins’ka, an active participant of the Maidan protests and someone who has been fighting against the systemic discrimination of women who have joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces since the start of the conflict in the Donbas region. This interview offers an assessment of the Ukrainian protests from inside, as experienced by a female protester, and identifies some of the key difficulties women faced during the Maidan. The final piece in this section is by Iryna Kosovs’ka, a member of the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, and is also based on a personal story. In her review of *Central and East European Women in the Second World War* (2015), Kosovs’ka compares her own experience of political violence with that experienced by women in the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

While each article in this issue naturally offers an in-depth analysis of the question it studies, reading them alongside one another also offers a cross-national and cross-disciplinary look at the region, raising questions that find resonance in all three countries discussed here. After all, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine have

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<sup>9</sup> See Gelinada Grinchenko, Kateryna Kobchenko, and Oksana Kis’, eds., *Central and East European Women in the Second World War: Gendered Experiences in a Time of Extreme Violence* (Kyiv: Art Knyha, 2015).

a similar past when it comes to gender relations: they all went through the pseudo-emancipation of communism. The post-Soviet idea of gender equality entails both disillusionment with something that existed on paper but had little implementation in practice, and nostalgia for times when women and men had similar opportunities, at least in theory. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the collapse of even the perception of gender equality that had existed for decades. Inequalities, double and multiple burdens carried by women, glass ceilings and overt discrimination resurfaced and were exacerbated in the post-Soviet times. Economic calamities and political upheavals meant that the question of gender equality was deemed untimely. The transition from communism experienced by Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine had a different impact on men and women. In their assessment of the status of women after communism Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson state that

[a]cross Central and Eastern Europe, there have been more benefits for men than for women from the transition: men are richer, more men head new companies, more men own privatized firms, and [...] many more men hold political power. Women have suffered more from the loss of social services, women dominate professions that remain in the resource-starved state sector, and women and women's issues have not been a central part of the postcommunist political landscape.<sup>10</sup>

The tackling of these inequalities through the formation of feminist initiatives has not been particularly successful in the countries in question, as feminism remains a dirty word for much of the population there. The collapse of the communist ideology meant that it could be replaced by other ones, most notably nationalism, which brought their own patriarchal values and norms, and with them, what Dubravka Ugrešić labels “the three ‘Ps’”: the Politician, the Priest and the Poet.<sup>11</sup> The fourth “P” Ugrešić adds is the

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson, *Living Gender after Communism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), vii.

<sup>11</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “What is an Author Made Of?” in *Europe in Sepia* (Rochester: Open Letter, 2013), 188–214 (204).

Policeman who facilitates the work of the other three.<sup>12</sup> These four “Ps,” i.e., the state, the church, the conforming arts, and the punitive system are all patriarchal and often authoritarian. They have been dominating Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine for the entire post-Soviet period. It is of little surprise, therefore, that the generations that grew up or matured on the ruins of communism have been regularly rebelling against these four “Ps”.

This issue invites its readers to consider the concept of another “P”: the Protester. While it exists to oppose the other four, does it succeed in opposing patriarchy and authoritarianism? The issue does not aim to definitively answer this or many other questions that arise in the articles it contains. Its purpose is to keep the discussions of the coexistence of feminism and nationalism, gender and citizenship, anti-authoritarianism and patriarchy burning and make them spill over from the field of gender studies into other disciplines.

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<sup>12</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić in a public lecture “On Women in Politics, Men in Power and Obstinate Ways of Misogyny and Xenophobia,” at University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London, 12 January 2016.