

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF FEMINIST CRITIQUE IN AUTHORITARIANISM

Revisiting Western Knowledge-Transfer
in Russia and Serbia

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*This is ten percent luck, twenty percent skill
fifteen percent concentrated power of will
five percent pleasure, fifty percent pain
and hundred percent reason to remember the name*

Fort Minor "Remember the name"

Disclaimer: Part of this was written in bed under the influence of music

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a *critique of the critique* of transnational feminism in post-communist Europe. The critique of transnational feminism asserts that the process is, in essence, a unilateral knowledge-transfer, and as such functions as one among many exercises of Othering the West has employed vis-à-vis its Semi-Other since the fall of communism. Using case studies of Russia and Serbia, this research challenges this argument from three angles.

First, it shows that it is ahistorical. Transnational feminist encounters occurred in the communist period, and were characterised by Soviet Russian and Yugoslav feminists' independence and assertiveness. Second, by applying the critical theory framework to over sixty interviews with feminists in Russia and Serbia that were conducted by the author, an empirical examination demonstrates that a critique of knowledge-transfer is marginal in both cases. This acts as a springboard for the third and central claim.

Based on a computer-aided, post-Marxist discourse analysis of the interviews, the thesis argues that feminists' priorities undergo a fundamental shift under authoritarianism. In settings where authoritarian regimes propagate an anti-Western discourse, that relies on anti-gender discourse in attempts at Othering back, the subversion of this hegemonic discourse becomes the priority for feminists on the ground. From this perspective, the argument proposed by critical theory – that transnational feminism is a form of Western domination expressed through knowledge-transfer – resonates with the authoritarian discourse. This is why critique of knowledge-transfer is not only marginal, but rejected in an effort not to become complicit in the authoritarian discourse. As a result, Russian and Serbian feminists focus on formulating alternative signifiers for knowledge-transfer in order to subvert the authoritarian regime. First, they endorse knowledge-transfer but attach positive meanings of agency and empowerment to it. Second, they reframe it as an exchange between equals. Finally, they reject the dichotomous boundaries of West/East associated with it.

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Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness", 1952

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.*

[...]

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend*

Dedicated in gratitude to Andrin

Table of Contents

COPYRIGHT	I
ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VIII
TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS	XI
ABBREVIATIONS	XIII
A NOTE ON THE TEXT	XIV
PART I	1
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Topic, research questions and relevance.....	1
1.2 Clarification of terms	7
1.2.1 Transnational feminism	7
1.2.2 Knowledge-transfer.....	11
1.2.3 Critical theory.....	15
1.3 Literature review.....	18
1.3.1 The dominant paradigm.....	18
1.3.2 The critical framework	21
1.3.2.1 <i>Constructing post-communist Europe as Semi-Other</i>	21
1.3.2.2 <i>Feminist knowledge-transfer as a form of Othering</i>	24
1.3.3 Authoritarian Othering	36
1.3.3.1 <i>Russia's and Serbia's double coloniality</i>	37
1.3.3.2 <i>Anti-Western and anti-gender discourse</i>	41
1.4 Thesis outline.....	48
2 THEORISING CRITIQUE IN CRITICAL TIMES	50
2.1 Knowledge-transfer as discourse and discourse as power	51
2.2 Epistemological implications	59
3 METHODS	64
3.3 Cross-case comparison	64
3.4 Interviews.....	69
3.4.1 Russian feminists	70
3.4.2 Serbian feminists.....	74
3.5 Sources and coding.....	81
3.5.1 Empirical test.....	84
3.6 Limitations	87
4 TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS DURING COMMUNISM	90
4.1 Introduction.....	90
4.2 Yugoslav feminists ask, 'what is happening to the American woman?'	91
4.3 Soviet feminists proclaim, 'democracy without women is no democracy' ...	96
4.3.1 Feminist dissent and samizdat	96
4.3.2 Perestroika and feminist democratisation	101
4.4 Conclusion	107
PART II – RUSSIA	110
5 CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE-TRANSFER IN RUSSIA	111
5.1 Introduction.....	111

5.2	A paradoxical power asymmetry.....	113
5.3	The periodization of critique.....	116
5.4	The personal is unequal	117
5.5	A rebuttal against false consciousness.....	123
5.6	A defused critique	126
5.7	Conclusion	127
6	CRITIQUE IN A STATE OF FEAR OF THE STATE IN RUSSIA.....	130
6.1	Introduction.....	130
6.1	The scope of repression.....	135
6.1.1	The anti-gender studies backlash	141
6.1.1.1	<i>The Moscow Gender Studies Centre</i>	141
6.1.1.2	<i>The Ivanovo Gender Studies Centre</i>	143
6.1.1.3	<i>Gender Studies at the European University of St. Petersburg</i>	145
6.1.2	The reassertion-regression nexus.....	148
6.2	Living targets.....	150
6.2.1	The feelings hostility evokes.....	155
6.3	Transforming oneself through knowledge-transfer	158
6.4	Rebounding the boundaries 'knowledge-transfer' creates.....	162
6.4.1	From transfer to exchange	162
6.4.1.1	<i>In defence of an own feminist heritage</i>	167
6.4.2	'Gender' is no symbol of oppression	174
6.5	Conclusion	183
	PART III – SERBIA	186
7	CRITIQUE OF KNOWLEDGE-TRANSFER IN SERBIA.....	187
7.1	Introduction.....	187
7.2	An unequivocal absence of power asymmetry?.....	188
7.3	The power of donors and gender mainstreaming	190
7.3.1	Co-optation of gender mainstreaming	192
7.3.2	Gender mainstreaming as a threat to feminist identity	198
7.4	On silences and outcries.....	202
7.4.1	Silencing of anti-nationalist self-description	203
7.4.2	Silencing of feminist intellectual capacity	207
7.5	Conclusion	210
8	CRITIQUE FROM AN ANTI-STATIST PERSPECTIVE IN SERBIA.....	212
8.1	Introduction.....	212
8.2	The authoritarian and anti-gender nexus.....	214
8.2.1	Mechanisms of authoritarianism	214
8.2.2	Engendering Genderism in Serbia	219
8.3	Feminists' priorities	227
8.3.1	Disingenuity and regression	236
8.3.2	Disillusion and dilemmas.....	246
8.4	Revoking the notions knowledge-transfer evokes.....	252
8.4.1	A source sought and found	253
8.4.2	Sharing instead of transferring	259
8.4.2.1	<i>On own heritage and own struggles</i>	261
8.4.3	Transcending boundaries.....	265
8.5	Conclusion	270
	PART IV	274

9 CONCLUSION	275
9.1 Key findings and contributions	275
9.2 Avenues for future research	289
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	292
Personal interviews in Russia	292
Personal interviews in Serbia.....	293
APPENDIX 1: SHORT SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	322
Russia	322
Serbia	326

Table of Illustrations

Graph 1: Frequency of term “family” per 100,000 words out of 10,000 Kremlin publications between 2000 and 2019.....	44
Graph 2: How the micro discourse at the level of feminists resonates with the hegemonic discourse propagated by the authoritarian regime.....	57
Graph 3: Frequency of “yes” and “no” codes.....	113
Graph 4: Code cloud to show relations in terms of co-occurrence between codes pertaining to present atmosphere.....	151
Graph 5: First dimension: Being made into a target via negative attributions to feminist identity.....	152
Graph 6: Second dimension: Experience targeting via hostile reactions that follow from identifying as a feminist.....	154
Graph 7: Occurrence of all Serbian codes ordered by their frequency.....	187
Graph 8: Analytical map of codes related to gender mainstreaming.....	194
Graph 9: Code cloud displaying co-occurrence between codes pertaining to present atmosphere.....	244
Table 1: Elements of interpretive comparison.....	68
Table 2: Periodisation of generations and their political context.....	70
Table 3: Overview of Russian interview participants.....	79
Table 4: Overview of Serbian interview participants.....	80
Table 5: Coding scheme for the empirical test.....	86
Table 6: Co-occurrence with code “external”.....	112
Table 7: Co-occurrence with code “internal”.....	112
Table 8: Co-occurrence of “external” and “silencing of the present”.....	118
Table 9: Inductive coding scheme for present political environment in Russia.....	132
Table 10: Inductive coding scheme for emotions associated with present political environment in Russia.....	133
Table 11: Frequencies of codes associated with the political context.....	135
Table 12: Frequencies of emotive codes associated with the present political context.....	156
Table 13: Frequency of “yes” and “no” codes.....	189
Table 14: How gender mainstreaming is constructed as a threat to feminist identity.....	199
Table 15: Co-occurrence with codes “external” and “internal”.....	203
Table 16: Inductive coding scheme for present political environment in Serbia.....	227

Table 17: Inductive coding scheme for emotions associated with present political environment in Serbia	228
Table 18: Frequencies of codes associated with the political context.....	232
Picture 1: The Drug-ca conference in Belgrade in 1978	92
Picture 2: The Dubna conference in 1991	104
Picture 3: Burger King using Shurygina’s meme in an advert	121
Picture 4: Tereshchenko’s artwork	136
Picture 5: ICGS’s sealed door as found on June 4 th 2015.....	144
Picture 6: ICGS’s Director, Olga Shnyrova after recuperating the centre’s belongings on July 2 nd 2015	145
Picture 7: Manipulated screen during Vučić’s TV debate with supporters.....	218
Picture 8: WiB protests are regularly fenced off by police as shown here	226
Image 1: Russian coding example with translation	134
Image 2: Serbian Coding example with translation.....	230
Image 3: Coding example with code repetition within same segment.....	231
Image 4: Comparison chart of all Serbian interviews and the codes related to present political atmosphere and the consequences it has.....	235

Abbreviations

General

- CEDAW UN Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
- CEE Central Eastern Europe
- UNSCR UN Security Council Resolution on “Women, Peace and Security” 1325

Russia

- EUSPb European University in St. Petersburg
- EUSPGS Gender Studies Centre at the European University of St. Petersburg
- ICGS Ivanovo Centre for Gender Studies
- ISEPN Institute for Socio-Economic Problems of the Population
- MCGS Moscow Centre for Gender Studies
- MLF Women’s Liberation Movement
- NEWW Network East-West Women
- RAS Russian Academy of Sciences
- ROC Russian Orthodox Church
- TCGS Tver Centre for Gender Studies
- PCGP St. Petersburg Centre of Gender Problems
- WDIF Women’s International Democratic Federation

Serbia

- AWC Autonomous Women’s Centre
- ACfG Alternative Centre for Girls
- KtK Kvinna till Kvinna
- NEWW Network East-West Women
- RWF Reconstruction Women Fund
- WiB Women in Black
- WSC Women’s Studies Centre

A note on the text

I only transliterate Russian names and sources, using the modified Library of Congress transliteration system. I do not transliterate the soft sign, so for instance it will be: Natalya and not Natal'ya.

I do not transliterate Serbian names and sources but consistently use the Latin rather than the Cyrillic spelling.

All translations are my own unless indicated differently.

PART I

1 Introduction

1.1 **Topic, research questions and relevance**

This thesis challenges the well-established critical theory which asserts that transnational feminism in post-communist Europe boils down to unilateral Western knowledge-transfer of feminism, which ultimately reifies global power hierarchies. Proponents of critical theory on transnational feminism argue that it is a form of Othering exercised through Western knowledge-transfer and should therefore cause resistance among feminists who are subject to it. One main shortcoming of this argument is, however, that it is skilfully *asserted* theoretically, but not *demonstrated* empirically.

This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it runs against critical theory's own foundational commitment. Critical theory of Western knowledge-transfer was born as the antidote against mainstream democratisation in general and feminist literature in particular. They were both said to reinforce unequal power structures between West and East, and to contribute to the Othering and silencing of feminists in post-communist¹ Europe. Since the inception of critical theory, its vocation has been to lay bare the hidden power structures that condition our way of producing knowledge, because knowledge is never neutral or objective. From this ontological standpoint of a world that is only intersubjectively created follows the epistemological imperative to take the meaning-making process seriously, which is required in order to move from causal explanation to critical understanding. The consequence should therefore be to give these silenced Eastern European feminists a voice and to try to understand how they themselves attribute meaning to Western knowledge-transfer. Yet, the vast majority of critical scholars fail to do precisely this. For the most part, the works that will be discussed further in the literature review draw from an analysis of Western accounts of feminism in post-communist Europe. While this approach is

¹ I understand post-communism as a temporal term that describes all countries in Europe that used to be communist, including the former Soviet Union and communist Central and South Eastern Europe.

valuable and legitimate, it fails to make the critique “come full circle.” As much as they accuse Western knowledge-transfer of being unidirectional, so is their analysis: they discuss the problem primarily within the frame of a West/East logic, and, apart from their own gaze, do not engage with how “Eastern” feminists really perceive it, if they do at all. Critical scholars from post-communist Europe itself, among them Kašić and Blagojević, depict their colleagues as lacking consciousness to explain why they are “eager to learn” from the West (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2009: 17) and obey the external gaze upon them (KAŠIĆ, 2004: 79).

To draw upon the idea, however, that this “self-consciousness” is a direct result of Self-Orientalising (an argument that can be found in: GEORGIEV, 2012: 16), not only renders the argument tautological and is particularly problematic given past feminist struggles around the concept of false consciousness². Crucially, it stands in opposition to critical theorists’ commitment of taking individuals’ meaning-making process seriously for emancipatory science and politics. On the contrary, it follows that agency is a prerogative that only those who resort to resistance against knowledge-transfer can claim. All the other feminists, in contrast, are caught in a dead-end, where they either lack consciousness of their discrimination at home (as mainstream Western literature would see it) or of their oppression by Western feminists (as the critical scholars would argue). The critical literature, therefore, appears not to be genuinely

² Feminist scholars were among the first to point out the patronising character of any argument built on *false consciousness* and respective consciousness-raising. Stanley and Wise famously argued: “the idea of ‘false’ and ‘true’ consciousness, with ‘true consciousness’ being what revolutionaries have, is offensively patronising. It denies the validity of people’s own interpretations and understandings” (STANLEY & WISE, 1983: 119). This debate has been particularly pronounced in the so-called “sex wars”, where radical feminists perceived the consumption of porn or at times even the enjoyment of heterosexual intercourse as a surrender to male domination. Another feminist discussion where this has been strongly present is that of pious, in particular Muslim, women. Mahmood poignantly asserted that the core problem of feminist scholarship is that it has predominantly focused on politically subversive agency (MAHMOOD, 2005: 153). The label of *false consciousness* has therefore allowed it to ignore other modalities of agency, which neither strives to subversion nor resignification of a hegemonic (in this case patriarchal) discourse (MAHMOOD, 2005: 153). In Mahmood’s view this leads at best, to a rating of other worldviews as provisional, at worst, to an advocacy for their extinction (MAHMOOD, 2005: 197-198). The argument of *false consciousness* by virtue of discarding other people’s perceptions is therefore always a potentially totalising exercise, which feminists have attempted to solve by resorting to standpoint epistemology.

liberating but rather to do precisely what it accuses Western feminism of: *mutatis mutandis*, it eventually also patronises women in post-communist Europe.

One core aim of this thesis is, thus, to correct this shortcoming by putting the critical framework to an empirical assessment, to see whether feminists genuinely perceive transnational feminism as a form of Othering through knowledge-transfer that ought to be countered. This empirical test is derived from the critical theory and applied to interviews with feminists in Russia and Serbia. These two countries are chosen as case studies because they fulfil the criteria based on which critical theory postulates its core claim: both are supposed to be particularly important Others for Western Europe, thus making resistance to knowledge-transfer expectable. As shall be seen, the contrast between the expectations the critical theory raises and the realities in both case studies is glaring. A critique of knowledge-transfer is by and large the exception, while dissonance with the very idea of knowledge-transfer is the rule. The absence of critique and indeed outright rejection of the notion of knowledge-transfer my research yields only appears puzzling because of the critical theory's own short-sightedness.

In fact, the second main problem with critical theory, I argue, is that, as it stands, it risks reifying the West/East dichotomy. As much as it emphasises utter disagreement with these categories, its conclusions are nevertheless reached along these dichotomous lines of thought. As such, it ignores that the domestic field of power is more relevant for feminists. In a time when Democratisation has tilted into a sophisticated De-Democratisation in many former communist countries, it is not a far stretch to argue that priorities for civil society have been crucially altered. This is the second core selection criterion for the case studies. Russia and Serbia are not only prime Others, according to critical scholars, thus making both fitting terrain to test the extent of critique of knowledge-transfer. They have both also experienced a steep increase in authoritarianism in the past few years, which is constituted by both anti-Western and anti-gender discourse to justify an assertive self-exclusion from progressive values and civil liberties which are dubbed as "Western".

In more concrete terms, Russia is nowadays classified as a consolidated authoritarian regime by Freedom House (TRICKETT, 2020). Presidential powers have

been expanded to such a degree that the executive controls virtually all key democratic institutions, from parliament and parties to elections, courts, federalism, public administration, civil society and the media (BURKHARDT, 2017). Elections are neither free nor fair and serve to demonstrate incumbents' popularity at both the national and regional level, while the main function of the dominant ruling party, United Russia, is to flag disloyal behaviour early, especially among regional bureaucrats (ZAVADSKAYA, 2017). One of Putin's first reforms when he came to power was to centralise power, first and foremost by abolishing the gubernatorial elections and appointing regional governors instead³ (BURKHARDT, 2020). An additional effective control mechanism is to systematically repress the opposition and independent journalists when they become too threatening, if necessary by violent means⁴, as happened most recently with the poisoning of Navalny. The courts operate fairly well when the issue is not of political relevance; otherwise, interference is used to neutralise political opponents and civil society, even when their power is small, such as in the disproportionate Pussy Riot trial or in the repression of a feminist candidate in local elections (as discussed in chapter 6.1). The "foreign agent" law, originally adopted in 2012, is not only used to significantly limit NGOs' margin of manoeuvring and to disavow them, but has now also been extended to journalists, thus increasing the already extensive state control over the media (TRICKETT). The Russian state directly or indirectly owns or controls the key pillars of the media: television stations, most radio stations, many newspapers, and most regional media (ibid.). As a result, an

³ Gubernatorial elections were reinstated in 2012, but research suggests that in the meantime formal and informal mechanisms were established to ensure the desired outcome nevertheless, both in terms of who is elected and the political lines they follow (DEBARDELEBEN & ZHEREBTSOV, 2014). This has most recently been shown in the Moscow-ordered ousting of the Governor of Khabarovsk, which was followed by the biggest protest movement Russia has seen in its far-away regions in recent years.

⁴ As a report by the Russian independent media outlet Proekt (2020) shows, Navalny is only the latest victim in a series of political poisoning in Russia. The editor of Mediazona and Pussy Riot activist Piotr Versilov had signs of serious poisoning in 2018. Vladimir Kara-Murza, the deputy director of Open Russia, an oppositional social movement originally created by Mikhail Hodorkovsky, was poisoned twice – in 2015 and 2017. The famous journalist Anna Politkovskaya was first poisoned in 2004, on her way to report about the terrorist siege of a school in Beslan, Chechnya, before she was murdered in 2006. The strong oppositional candidate Boris Nemzov was also murdered next to the Kremlin in Moscow in 2015. Authorities did not identify a culprit in any of these incidents, if investigations were taken up at all.

alternative reality in which the majority is depicted as supportive of the president is propagated (VOLKOV, 2020).

Serbia, on the other hand, was characterised for the first time as officially backsliding in its democratisation process in 2020. Freedom House now calls it a hybrid regime, whose development is not towards more democracy, but more authoritarianism (CSAKY, 2020). The mechanisms through which Aleksandar Vučić has consolidated authoritarian control follow a similar pattern as in Putin's case. Key institutions have been captured, first and foremost parliament, which has been "flooded with debate" by the ruling party in order to obstruct the work of parliamentarians (BIEBER, 2020: 265). Vučić furthermore called regular elections at the beginning of his accession to power to annihilate the opposition parties, thus creating a de facto one-party state. Arguably the most powerful tool however, is the system of patronage Vučić has set up (RADELJIĆ, 2019: 164). The ruling Serbian Progressive Party has more members than Germany's two largest parties because it is the only way people can get a secure job in public administration. This is particularly appealing in a country with high job insecurity and thus provides Vučić with a direct leverage on constituencies, public administration and private enterprises that depend on public procurement. Lastly, Vučić too has systematically controlled the media, benefitting from his experience as Minister of Information during Milošević's administration (JOVANOVIĆ, 2019: 71) and using loyal media to continuously attack the opposition and civil society (BIEBER: 304).

In both cases, the rise of authoritarianism is intimately linked to a rise of anti-Western discourse. That discourse, in turn, goes hand in hand with the establishment of an anti-gender campaign, whereby the West, and Western Europe in particular, are depicted as "perverted" by virtue of their gender equality policies (or what is depicted as such)⁵. This, together with the claim that the West is also "hegemonic", successfully creates a narrative that frames feminism as exclusively Western and imported into the

⁵ A lot of fake news circulates in Russia regarding gender equality in Europe. Particularly popular was the claim that Germany wanted to legalise paedophilia, which was propagated by no lesser newspaper than the daily Pravda (RETTMAN, 2017).

respective countries with the intention to implode them, by harming the stability and demographic reproduction of their nation (because feminist emancipation allegedly increases divorce rate and decreases the number of children women have). This endeavour of “Othering back” therefore serves as the perfect justification for the rejection of progressive gender equality and any attack against existing gender policies in the name of self-defence.

Faced with such a backlash, I argue, the space of feminist civil society is significantly reduced. As a result, feminists prioritise the devising of new subversive strategies, of which discursive resistance to their authoritarian government’s narrative is a fundamental part. In such a hostile context, the critique of transnational feminism as Western knowledge-transfer appears not only trivial but also profoundly risky. It resonates dangerously with the discourse propagated by the respective regimes, which is why feminists are adamant about avoiding critique of knowledge-transfer in order to avoid any potential complicity with the regime. The failure to reconceptualise Western knowledge-transfer in a way that goes beyond the West/East dichotomy signals a deeper failure to recognise that the use of this concept represents a serious risk for them. As long as transnational feminism is narrated in antagonistic, dichotomous West/East terms through the concept of knowledge-transfer, this leaves room for the authoritarian regime to manipulate those arguments that aim to be emancipatory for their own conservative agenda: the establishment of a new hegemonic field where anything emancipatory is attached to a dominating “West”.

Only by listening to feminists in post-communist Europe and by going beyond an analysis of power relations that is stuck in a West/East dichotomy can we see the salience of the domestic context. Only then do we understand the initially puzzling absence of critique of knowledge-transfer and outright rejection of it as a conceptual imaginary as an act of feminist resistance against authoritarianism at home. And only then do we see that this resistance also entails the creation of alternative articulations for feminist know-ability and community, which no longer resonate with the national discourse, which represents feminism with borders and as a tool for subjugation.

The above outlined shortcomings of the critical literature on transnational feminism should not lead to an interpretation that mainstream literature is *a contrario*

unproblematic. Neither the critical nor the mainstream literature are about feminists on the ground and both reproduce the detrimental West/East dichotomy, be it through its implicit assumption as in mainstream literature or its involuntary reification among critical scholars. Despite their common problems, I argue that a *critique of the critique* is imperative on an analytical level because it does not stand by its own foundational commitments. A flawed critique is furthermore problematic because it becomes vulnerable and cannot reach its full emancipatory potential. Finally, and importantly, the conclusion that transnational feminism is not seen as reproducing global power hierarchies is particularly relevant in times of rising illiberalism and gender-backlash both East and West. If anything, this is a call for more and better, rather than less, solidarity.

To summarise, the key questions that this thesis answers are:

1. What does knowledge-transfer stand for? Is it the lens through which transnational feminism is criticised as an exercise of Othering or does it represent something else?
2. What explains not only the absence of critique of knowledge-transfer but its outright rejection as a concept? What role does the authoritarian environment play in this?
3. What alternative imaginaries are created to substitute the idea of knowledge-transfer and counter the authoritarian hegemonic discourse at home?

1.2 Clarification of terms

Before delving into the literature review of the topic, I would like to clarify the key terms this thesis engages with: transnational feminism, knowledge-transfer and critical theory.

1.2.1 Transnational feminism

There are two prevailing definitions of transnational feminism, which, as I will show, converge in this thesis. As Conway put it, there is a conceptual divide between

scholarship that interprets transnational feminism as a normative debate referring to a particular analytic and methodological approach in feminist knowledge production and, on the other, an empirical reference to cross-border feminist co-operation (CONWAY, 2017). The former originated as a critique of US/Eurocentric feminist scholarship that was unreflective of the power relations it (re)produced by taking the experience of the white woman as main referent and treating “other” women as an object without agency. Transnational feminism provided an alternative scholarly tradition, where the racialized positionalities of women in the Third World, shaped by colonialism and imperialism were understood as sites of specific knowledge production that should serve as a starting point to critically reflect dominant frameworks of emancipation (TLOSTANOVA, THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & KOOLAK, 2019: 83). In a self-reflexive book chapter on her essay “Under Western Eyes”, which to this day counts as the fundamental building block for this scholarly tradition, Chandra Talpade Mohanty defines transnational feminism’s commitment as follows:

“I wrote ‘Under Western Eyes’ to discover and articulate a critique of ‘Western feminist’ scholarship on Third World women via the discursive colonization of Third World women’s lives and struggles. I wanted to expose the power-knowledge nexus of feminist cross-cultural scholarship expressed through Eurocentric, falsely universalizing methodologies that serve the narrow self-interest of Western feminism. [...] I also wanted to chart the location of feminist scholarship within a global political and economic framework dominated by the ‘First World.’” (MOHANTY, 2003b: 222-223)

The second established academic school on transnational feminism, studies cross-border feminist organizing under this label. This is sometimes also referred to as “global sisterhood” or “global feminist activism”. Following Hawkesworth’s definition this type of transnational feminism involves women from more than one country “who seek to forge a collective identity among women and to improve the condition of women” (HAWKESWORTH, 2006: 27). This type of transnational feminism is located at different levels, from global, to regional, to local and advocates for political, policy and normative issues that explicitly challenge the patriarchal order which is defined as the root cause for gender inequality (MOGHADAM, 2015, FERREE & MUELLER MCCLURG, 2003: 54). They draw from various organizing strategies (street protests, petitions, conferences and coalition building) and despite the contextual differences, there are a number of similarities in how they frame the problems and demands, form networks,

and engage with public institutions (NAPLES & DESAI, 2002, STIENSTRA, 2000). According to Moghadam these similarities include adoption of discourses on women's right as human rights, references to international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or Security Council Resolution 1325, campaigns to ensure women's civil, political, and social rights in a time of neoliberalism and rising fundamentalism that particularly threaten women's reproductive rights as well as solidarity across borders and coalitions with other civil society actors to increase leverage (MOGHADAM, 2015: 55)55. The UN Decade for Women (1976–1985) and the subsequent UN conferences on women (between 1975 and 1995) that were fundamental for building a global women's rights agenda are often referred to when speaking of this type of transnational feminism.

This scholarship is, however, not only concerned about the ways of organizing across borders but equally looks at the power relations within these feminist networks. In particular the UN conferences have served as illustrations for First World feminists' arrogant, ignorant and imperialistic treatment vis-à-vis women from the Third World (ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, FEJERSKOV & COLD-RAVNKILDE, 2019: 46, OLCOTT, 2010). Similar grievances and tensions then happened simultaneously in the space of lived transnational feminist activism and transnational feminism in academia. Indeed, already Mohanty stressed in "Under Western Eyes" that we should think about the "connection between feminist scholarship and feminist political organizing while drawing attention to the need to examine the political implications of our analytic strategies and principles" (MOHANTY, 2003b: 223). As such she never envisioned the conceptual separation that followed later. That is why, as Conway discerned (CONWAY, 2017: 209), in her more recent work Mohanty speaks of feminist academic practices, in which she includes theoretical, pedagogical and textual practices, as well as feminist activist practices, by which she means "collective action in groups, networks, and movements around feminist visions of social transformation" (MOHANTY, 2003a: 5).

Keeping with Mohanty, this thesis uses the notion of transnational feminism in both senses. I posit that in the context of post-communist Europe one could not think about transnational feminism purely in normative terms for academic feminist

knowledge production without also discussing trans-border feminist solidarity. Transnational feminist co-operation at the end of communism inherently meant to transfer theoretical knowledge if not as the backbone then at least as theoretical accompaniment for collaboration and activist organizing, which could be criticized as Eurocentric. This is particularly evident in that women civil society organisations simultaneously received financial support as emerging gender and women's studies centres across the region. So these two parts of transnational feminism went hand in hand. The *space* this research examines is thus that of cross-border connection between feminists from post-communist countries and the West. The *problématique* it discusses is that of whose knowledge is said to travel in which direction and to what effect within this space. More concretely, it addresses the critical assertion that it is Western feminist knowledge, both theoretical and practical, that unidirectionally travels eastward, thereby cementing unequal global power relations.

It should be noted that I am aware of yet another strand of scholarship that critically engages with transnational feminism from a post-socialist perspective. Given the origin of the normative debate in US academia, transnational feminism soon became a proxy for women of colour and incorporated the post-colonial feminist agenda (TLOSTANOVA, THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & KOOLAK, 2019: 83), which as a result eclipsed the experience and grievances of feminists in post-socialist Europe (CONWAY, 2017: 220). Feminist scholars from post-communist societies have demonstrated the negative effects of the three worlds geographical imaginary in the analytical framework of transnational feminism, which posits First World hegemonic feminism against subordinate Third World women but ignores the existence of the Second World (SUCHLAND, 2011, CERWONKA, 2008). The important recent work of Redi Koobak, Madina Tlostanova and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (TLOSTANOVA, THAPAR-BJÖRKERT & KOOLAK, 2019) shows how transnational feminism grounded in postcolonial feminist critique has overlooked knowledge production and theory from post-socialist Europe and thus advocates for the inclusion of this "missing other" in the definition and debates about transnational feminism. Importantly, this comes from a strand of scholarship that already decentres the West and where the critique I will develop in the following literature review is actually already lived by. It is thus not the primary

referent of this thesis when I speak of transnational feminism, but rather the one that is to this day still “mainstream” both in terms of academic knowledge production and cross-border feminist organizing.

As has been shown, the way feminist knowledge is produced, by whom and whose knowledge is deemed authoritative has been an inherent part of any discussion around transnational feminism. Whether this process is analysed through the concept of translation, diffusion or knowledge-transfer is a matter of scholarly choice as shall be seen in the next section.

1.2.2 Knowledge-transfer

The obvious alternatives to knowledge-transfer would have been the concepts of diffusion or translation. The latter is predominantly used to theorise the travelling of feminist ideas from one context to another. The concept of translation thus tends to focus on actual translation of tangible feminist work, of either academic or literary nature. Lóránd for instance refers to the translation Western theoretical work to theorise “the process of transfer of Western feminist knowledge” that she argues was at the basis of formulating New Yugoslav feminism in the 1970s (LÓRÁND, 2018: 2). By speaking of the “basis” of New Yugoslav feminism, Lóránd emphasises what is common to most work on translating feminist knowledge: the stress of actors’ agency. Translation’s most powerful conceptual contribution has indeed been to challenge the idea of unidirectionality in the process of transferring ideas. Latour’s use of the Actor-Network Theory was fundamental in this debate. Latour theorised the movement of ideas as a continuous process of social interpretation in which human agency is central to producing meaning (LATOUR, 1986). Following on from this, Czarniawska stipulated that translation essentially describes that to “set something in a new place is to construct it anew” (CZARNIAWSKA, 2012: 27). We should therefore not assume that ideas possess inherent meaning, rather it is the actors involved in the process of “adopting, appropriating and localising an idea or a practice” that endow it with meaning (ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, FEJERSKOV & COLD-RAVNKILDE, 2019: 18).

Bogic’s research on *Our Bodies, Our Location: The Politics of Feminist Translation and Reproduction in Post-socialist Serbia* (BOGIC, 2017) demonstrates precisely this.

Focusing on the 1990s, her work neatly picks up research where Lorand's left it. Similar to Lóránd she highlights Serbian feminists' agency in the translation of the *magnus opus* *Our Body, Ourselves*. Bogic argues that they consciously left certain parts out or phrased them differently which to many made them look apolitical (ibid.: 201). But in the context of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, which entailed attacks on women's bodies, their priority laid in reaching as many women as possible to tell them about their fundamental rights over their body (ibid.).

However, even though the concept of translation is predominantly used to discuss agency, scholars who work with it also often end up addressing unequal power relations. Bogic for instance argues that feminist translation "is not divorced from geopolitical considerations", that it is "imbued with power relations" and that it therefore ought not to be seen as a peaceful transfer, but rather an "unequal exchange" occurring in a "strongly hierarchical environment" (ibid.: 26). She concludes her research, stipulating that Serbian feminists were involved in a transnational feminism, characterised by uneven knowledge production because the geopolitical relations were in favour of the West. That is why it was primarily Western feminists' classics that got translated in a spirit of transnational solidarity that believed access to knowledge was key (ibid.: 204-206). Importantly, Bogic also acknowledges that even though Serbian feminists grew aware of this asymmetry they remember the collaboration with Western feminists as an almost "magical" time and that even the most sceptical figure, Marina Blagojevic, who was concerned early on about how to translate this Western knowledge into the anti-war reality of Serbia, did not qualify the relationship as "neo-colonial" (ibid.: 207)207. Instead she wrote that they all welcomed any foreign visitors and expressions of solidarity (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2015: 44-45).

Millán draws a stronger conclusion in her research on the post-Soviet space (MILLÁN, 2016). Millán speaks of the traveling of gender and translation of feminism(s) as part of what she defines as "academic capitalism". Academic capitalism, so her argument, became a global process in the 1990s, whereby the countries of the former Soviet bloc were specifically targeted in order to transform their institutions of higher education and research in social sciences (ibid.: 12-13). She no longer sees spaces for feminist agency in this endeavour. They are rather represented as subjected to a

unidirectional process that served the bigger interest of upholding power relations in favour of the West.

“[...] gender studies influenced – or rather, were used to influence – the nature and direction of the post-communist transformation as a whole [...]. The educational policy actors involved here formed the spearhead of a highly asymmetrical functionalization of “gender” as a symbol and instrument of transnational interest politics”. (ibid.: 14)

These politics of interest were in Millán’s view supposed to make ‘gender’ the symbolic marker for Western liberal democracy and Modernity (ibid.: 13-14).

The concept of diffusion differs from translation in two crucial aspects. On the one hand, it is predominantly used to theorize the traveling of international norms and frameworks and even when the focus of enquiry is local civil society it is still put in relation to global governance (see for instance: VAN VLEUTEN & VAN EERDEWIJK, 2014). On the other hand, it is also most often used to theorize this traveling of norms in a more linear, almost mechanical process, decoupled from actors’ influence and agency. Based on the idea that norms travel relatively unchanged from one context to another, scholars in this field tend to emphasize the mechanisms that facilitate said traveling, the most prominent of which have been (FINNEMORE & SIKKINK, 1998). This is well exemplified in Jacob’s, Scherpereel’s, and Adams’ definition that a norm (in this case the norm of gender-based decision-making) “diffuses through the world polity via multiple mechanisms. Actors upload it into international conventions. Nongovernmental organizations, transnational advocacy networks, and domestic actors reinterpret and transport it to regional and local audiences” (JACOB, SCHERPEREEL & ADAMS, 2014: 323). There are however, also an increasing number of diffusion scholars, who grapple with the notion of agency. They have tried to challenge the notion of unidirectionality prevalent in the concept of translation, shedding light on the multidirectional nature of change, whereby actors localise and develop new norms (NIEMANN & SCHILLINGER, 2016). This is where the label of “norm entrepreneurs” stems from (see for example the recent work by: INGEBRITSEN, 2016).

The discussion of agency is intimately related to the scholarly debate of power relations and diffusion. As Engberg-Pedersen, Fejerskov, and Cold-Ravnkilde demonstrate in their newest book on *Rethinking Gender Equality in Global Governance: The Delusion of Norm Diffusion* it is critical to look at the different positions of power,

which of course influence the process of diffusion. Yet they also stress that it is too often simply assumed that norms are getting diffused along a linear line from Western liberal democracies to the Global South. This is precisely what scholars like Steinhilper or Jenser have challenged, showing the huge impact non-Western countries have had in advancing human rights or rights for indigenous populations. The same is true for the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, also referred to as “Women, Peace and Security”, which, when adopted in 2000, for the first time recognised the role of gender in conflict. This international norm was the product of year-long advocacy by civil society and state actors located in the Global South (BASU, 2016: 365-366). And perhaps most strikingly, it was thanks to the women delegates from the Global South, most notably from Brazil, Uruguay and the Dominican Republic that the UN Charter ended up stipulating a reaffirmed faith in “the equal rights of men *and women*” (LUHR DIETRICHSON & SATOR, 2019, emphasis mine).

Most of the cited literature uses the concept of transfer in passing, as a synonym. Lóránd for example, prefers the term translation to conceptualise “the process of transfer of Western feminist knowledge” (LÓRÁND, 2014: 2). Bogic equally challenges the idea of a supposedly “peaceful transfer” of ideas that happens in translation (BOGIC: 26) and the recent comprehensive edited book on the diffusion of gender equality as a norm cites “transfer of ideas and practices” on several occasions (ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, FEJERSKOV & COLD-RAVNKILDE: 1; 18; 102; 111). Knowledge-transfer is therefore an already widely used concept in both schools, translation and diffusion, to describe the overarching process. Both literatures also discuss unequal power relations as factors that crucially influence the transfer of feminist knowledge. This thesis could therefore have been written based on either of the two alternative concepts. And yet, I argue that knowledge-transfer provides two important conceptual advantages that made it the most fitting for this research.

First, as an expression knowledge-transfer best conveys the image of lack of agency, of an externally imposed idea, which, as will be developed throughout this thesis, is the claim feminists in both case studies are most concerned with countering. It is therefore ideal to linguistically capture the essence of the critical argument of transnational feminism in the post-communist space that feminists on the ground

take issue with. Secondly, this research is neither exclusively concerned with the engagement with feminist theories and literature as the concept of translation usually is, nor international norms which traditionally falls within the parameters of diffusion. Rather it understands feminist knowledge as being produced and negotiated at very different levels and in spaces. This ranges from encounters between feminists from the West and post-communist Europe on a purely intellectual level (without a physical interaction), to actual meeting in very mundane, informal settings such as a caravan of solidarity, to formalised international conference and networks. Knowledge-transfer being used to denote the all-encompassing process of knowledge production in existing literature is therefore the adequate term for this study that tries to include the widest range of feminist knowledge possible.

Importantly, however, as I will outline at the end of the literature review and further detail in the theory chapter, this thesis argues that knowledge-transfer should not just be seen as a term or concept, but as a discourse in its own right that is productive of meaning and embedded in highly problematic power structures traditional critical discussions of transnational feminism have so far overlooked.

1.2.3 Critical theory

Throughout this thesis I use critical theory not with a capital C in order to communicate that this is not strictly limited to the Frankfurt School that is usually spelt Capital Theory and which first and foremost refers to the philosophers Adorno, Horkheimer, the early Marcuse, and Habermas. I do so in order to be able to include not only Critical Theory but a vast array of work from continental philosophy of science, such as hermeneutics, genealogy, phenomenology, post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and post-Marxism. Even though it goes without saying that there are pronounced differences and passionate debates between these different schools, Payne and Rae Barbera in their meticulous analysis in the *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* show that the majority of critical theorists grapples with the following three main contentions (PAYNE & BARBERA, 2010: 3-4).

First, on subjectivity and consciousness, they generally agree with the stipulation that born into language, culture, and race, class and gender politics, the subject is

never fully autonomous. Secondly, they all attribute primary value to the role of ideology and hegemony, even though each school prioritises one hegemony over another. Generally speaking, however, and drawing from Marx's conclusion that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (MARX, 1968: 173) and that this social existence is always dependent on the economic structures that shape it, they agree that prevailing ideologies limit independence of the free will. This limitation can, however, be overcome by critique (or revolution), which is the primary political imperative for intellectual in order not to be complicit with the dominant forces of ideology (also called hegemony). Third and following directly from this, critical theorists contend that if "indeed forms of consciousness can be understood as the substance of ideology, education as a conduit of hegemony, and intellectuals as unwitting or complicitous agents of non-violent oppression, then any attempt to know (or theorize) the processes of society must begin with a radical criticism of the dominating forces of ideology in order to disengage consciousness from what keeps it politically unconscious" (PAYNE & BARBERA: 4).

The overarching goal of any critical theorist is therefore not just to discern new forms of knowledge that is rooted in radical criticism and determined to be a force for social change. They are convinced that Enlightenment already contains the seed of its reversal against which they have to resist with their critique:" If enlightenment does not accommodate reflection on this recidivist element, then it seals its own fate. If consideration of the destructive aspect of progress is left to its enemies, blindly pragmatized thought loses its transcending quality and its relation to truth" (ADORNO & HORKHEIMER, 1979: 243-244). To be part of critical theory then means to share the commitment to epistemological politics, that is the responsibility of humanities and social sciences to be emancipatory by questioning the power relations that are at the basis of knowledge production and by resisting complicity with them. A failure to do so, would mean to be complicit and to further Enlightenment's propensity to self-destruction. This understanding is common to all critical approaches, including feminist, post-colonial and anti-racist criticism. The difference between them is where

they locate the decisive power imbalance: patriarchy, colonialism, ethnocentrism and imperialism or racism within the various disciplines (PAYNE & BARBERA: 8).

The broadest common denominator of all these critical approaches is thus their commitment to epistemological politics. They furthermore share the ontological conviction that reality is intersubjectively created. Science's task therefore lies in interpreting the "flow of social discourse" in an attempt to "rescue" the meaning of such discourse from the perishable occasions on which it occurs and to "fix" it in perusable terms (GEERTZ, 1973: 20-21). All of the work I refer to when speaking of the critical theory on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe has these two key characteristics. The majority of the scholarship I cite also has in common an analytical conclusion – albeit reached through different trajectories – that the source of power imbalance is located in the West, also referred to as the Global North, especially in post-colonial scholarship or as the core (of concentration of capital) when it is a post-Marxist critique.

Importantly, from the conclusion of an intersubjectively created reality and the task to expose meaning-making processes also follows the idea of polysemy: language and all signifying structures have more than one meaning. But if "polysemy provides such deconstructive resources for a critique of ideology, then those same resources are to be found in critical texts for their appropriation by the dominant ideology". This is precisely the danger I argue that the critique of transnational feminism has overlooked, for as this thesis will show it has been appropriated by the hegemonic authoritarian discourse and thus making it an inherently dangerous line of argumentation (and not emancipatory anymore) for feminists on the ground. This was then also the realization that drove Mohanty to revisit her own essay "Under Western Eyes" (published in 1988), which she felt she had to do to take "fuller responsibility" for her ideas (MOHANTY, 2003b: 221). She takes stock of a new huge challenge for feminist struggles around the world: fundamentalism with its deeply masculinist and racist rhetoric and a strong shift to the right (ibid.: 229). As a result, Mohanty argues that "while 'Under Western Eyes' was located in the context of the critique of [...] Eurocentrism and of white, Western feminism, a similar essay written now would need to be located in the context of the critique of [...] the unacknowledged power of

cultural relativism in cross-cultural feminist scholarship and pedagogies” (ibid.: 230). It is then in this logic and debate that this thesis is situated. In an urgent acknowledgment that with rising authoritarianism and its anti-gender backlash, originally critical, emancipatory feminist ideas can not only be misread by fellow feminists as a testimony for the impossibility of cross-border feminist solidarity as Mohanty experienced it (ibid.: 224-226), but they get even utilized by authoritarian regimes themselves to undermine any attempt at feminist emancipation, nationally and transnationally. This is where I argue our focus should lie if we want to live by the commitment to epistemological politics today.

1.3 Literature review

1.3.1 *The dominant paradigm*

The dominant paradigm in research on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe is Democratisation. It should be noted, however, that the following does not provide a full list of all the scholarship on Democratisation. That would be beyond the scope of this research. What is necessary, however, is to show where the entry point for critical literature on Western feminist knowledge-transfer to post-communist Europe is located within this overarching academic debate. And this is hence the purpose of the discussion that follows.

With the fall of communism and the “triumph” of liberal democracy over its rival ideology (FUKUYAMA, 1992, HUNTINGTON, 1991), the transfer of everything Western to the East was considered an obvious necessity. After long-time neglect of external actors’ influence in political transformation (O’DONNELL, SCHMITTER & WHITEHEAD, 1986: 5), the overarching view in the 1990s was that Western actors, in particular the European Union (SCHIMMELFENNIG, ENGERT & KNOBEL, 2006), can (and should) promote democracy through diffusion (MCFAUL, 2010, PRAVDA & ZIELONKA, 2001, LEVITSKY & WAY, 2006, BUNCE & WOLCHIK, 2006). Diffusion would refer to the spreading of ideas, institutions, policies and even behaviour from a core site to others (BUNCE & WOLCHIK, 2006: 286-7). It was taken for granted that the West, where consolidated democracies existed, would be the core from which knowledge would stem and be transferred.

It was considered equally obvious that one of the main targets of diffusion should be civil society, which was a key ingredient for successful transition to democracy. Students of social movements, therefore, used a similar framework to theorise how diffusion worked within transnational networks (KECK & SIKKINK, 1998, MCADAM, TARROW & TILLY, 2001, BEISSINGER, 2007, GIVAN, ROBERTS & SOULE, 2010, STRANG & MEYER, 1993, TARROW, 2011). This is why feminists in post-communist countries were mainly conceptualised as core civil society actors and hence drivers of democratisation, who needed support through knowledge-transfer (EINHORN & SEVER, 2003: 174-175, MATVEEVA, 2008: 3, SALMENNIEMI, 2008: 5, HENDERSON, 2000: 65, GHODSEE, 2004: 731, IRVINE, 2013: 245). Feminist knowledge-transfer was therefore thought of as part of a general phenomenon of diffusion from the West to post-communist Europe. Specifically, it is associated with the transmission of supposedly Western gender equality theories, policies and ways of organising (EBERT, 2004: 25; GHODSEE, 2004: 732). This is the definition this thesis refers to when speaking of knowledge-transfer. Following from it, a vast literature discussed the advantages and perils of foreign assistance for local women's movements (SPERLING, 1999, SPERLING, FERREE & RISMAN, 2001, OLSEN, 1997, GUENTHER, 2011), the problems regarding the resulting NGOisation (VUKOV, 2013, BAGIĆ, 2006) and risks of co-optation by the state (LANG, 1997, BILIĆ, 2011), to name but a few.

The dominant paradigm therefore concentrates on knowledge-transfer's successes, with some focus on the occasional negative side effects that need to be rectified. The very necessity of a unidirectional transfer, however, is never fundamentally questioned, let alone the unspoken, underlying power relations that it rests upon. Moreover, this mainstream literature on knowledge-transfer focuses primarily on the "transmitters" of knowledge and the processes through which they effectively (or not) transfer knowledge, whilst neglecting the "receivers" of knowledge. They do not address questions such as: What is their perception of the transfer? How much agency do they have? What do they do with the received knowledge? A notable exception to this is the volume by Sperling, Ferree and Risman. They explicitly argue that the transfer of knowledge through transnational feminist networks is always an encounter between two local feminisms that transforms both (SPERLING, FERREE &

RISMAN: 1159). However, they also claim that this encounter rarely takes place on a level playing field. The transmitters possess more resources (both in a material and symbolic sense of having more authority), which gives them the possibility to define ideas, priorities and strategies for challenging the gender hierarchy and determine whether or not the locals are feminist “enough” (ibid.: 1159).

This is the point where critical literature on Western knowledge transfer picks up. At the heart of this critical literature is the argument that the transfer of any knowledge under the banner of democratisation is a means to domination because it represents and reifies an unequal relationship between the “knowledgeable” and the “ignorant”. The critique of knowledge-transfer is therefore situated within a much wider critical debate on democratisation. Tolstrup, for instance, criticised the mainstream literature on democratisation for its focus on Western actors as positive and effective democracy promoters and its omission of possible counterproductive effects. Many transitologists, according to him, therefore created a “simplified, romanticised picture of the international dimension’s influence” (TOLSTRUP, 2009: 923).

One of the most prominent critics of democracy promotion, however, is Nicolas Guilhot. In his seminal book *The Democracy Makers*, he argues that democracy and human rights, which used to be weapons for the critique of power, were added to the arsenal of power itself in the 1990s and put to use for a hegemonic project (GUILHOT, 2005: 10). His main criticism is that scholars, in particular those studying transnational activism, fail to recognise that “democracy” and “human rights” are not simply *ideas* that are placed on agendas by non-state actors. They are “*mediums* through which conflicts are fought, *fields* within which different actors struggle to establish and impose their legitimacy and their expertise. The most important stake of these conflicts, he argues, is the capacity to define “democracy” and “human rights” and by extension, who the legitimate actors are and what counts as relevant knowledge (ibid.: 19 emphasizes not mine).

This is where critics of Western knowledge-transfer to post-communist Europe resume the argument. Given that the critical stance towards democracy promotion usually involved an examination of power relations between the “first” and “third” world, they first argue that the post-communist “second” world is also concerned by

similar power imbalances. From there, they conclude that knowledge-transfer of feminism is but a small manifestation of the larger hegemonic project of democratisation which also targets post-communist Europe.

1.3.2 *The critical framework*

1.3.2.1 Constructing post-communist Europe as Semi-Other

In a first instance, critical scholars argue that post-communist Europe is created as a Semi-Other, in particular for Western Europe. Wolff explained in his seminal book *Inventing Eastern Europe* that “the invention was inseparably dependent upon the reciprocal process of inventing Western Europe” (WOLFF, 1994: 360). Although he argues that Eastern Europe’s invention in the Enlightenment never attained the full otherness of the “Orient”, it nevertheless served to construct two distinct but complementary halves of Europe, divided along civilizational lines (ibid.: 358). Eastern Europe was constructed as half way between Europe and Asia, and therefore between civilisation and barbarism (ibid.: 357). This emphatic subordination of Eastern Europe was therefore an event in intellectual history, whereby Western Europe could subtly promote and identify itself (ibid.: 360).

According to Diez, this self-promotion gained new impetus after the fall of communism across Eastern Europe. He argues that throughout the Cold War, Europe’s and in particular the EU’s Other was temporal and self-reflexive, namely Europe’s own violent past, which strengthened the EU’s self-representation (DIEZ, 2004: 326). With the end of communism, however, he asserts that post-communist Europe became the embodiment of that past Western Europe had successfully overcome thanks to the EU, a past characterised by war and nationalism (ibid.: 326). This is how a shift occurred from a temporal self-reflexive Othering to active practices of geopolitical Othering, where identity, politics and geography are intimately linked (ibid.: 331). This allowed justifying the push for EU enlargement in parts of the region, as it was now no longer seen as an option for the distant future, but rather as a necessity to guarantee security in Europe as a whole (ibid.: 326).

Russia has been, according to Neumann, a particularly important and consistent Other for Europe. It stands out among the many other Others in the post-communist region “for its five hundred year history of always *just* having been tamed, civil, civilized; *just* having become part of Europe” (NEUMANN, 1999: 110). Since the Enlightenment, Neumann argues, Russia has been seen as Europe’s pupil, who during Enlightenment was a successful one but then turned into one that was misguided, lazy and stubborn (ibid.: 110). Russia is only considered a part of Europe to the extent that it is ready to learn from Europe and has the potential to become its apostate (ibid.: 109). This is quite different from Central Eastern Europe (CEE), which Russia led onto the wrong path and thus needed help to “return to Europe” (ZIELONKA, 2006: 23, MICHNIK, 1989: 150, AGH, 1998: 4).

Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, it is argued, was framed as Europe’s docile learner rather than a challenge (MOROZOV & RUMELILI, 2012: 39). This is why the transition paradigm was so pervasive, for it presupposes disequilibrium and therefore effectively created a discursive frame for the teacher-apprentice relationship between Europe and Russia (NEUMANN: 108). However, it is argued that as Russia relinquished the role of the learner, it became the perfect image of Europe’s past surviving in the present, and therefore had to be actively excluded (MOROZOV & RUMELILI: 40, PROZOROV, 2007: 326). Russia’s Othering, so the argument goes, has thus played a crucial role in drawing different hierarchies within post-communist Europe (CASIER, 2013: 1387) between those “less” and “more” different, and therefore destined for inclusion (CEE) or exclusion.

Critical scholars further argue that the violent breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia established a crucial additional European Other: the Western Balkans. The Balkans had been constructed as “different” already in the 18th and 19th century (TODOROVA, 2009, JEZERNIK, 2007). However, in the 20th century, the Balkans was constructed as inevitably violent and therefore morally inferior to Western Europe. While Western Europeans had always been horrified about certain barbarian practices, it was during the Balkan wars and World War I that the term “Balkanisation” was developed (TODOROVA, 1994: 474). Its connotation was unmistakably negative, denoting a reversion to the tribal, the primitive and the barbarian (TODOROVA, 2009:

3). As such it went hand in hand with a self-perception of moral superiority (TODOROVA, 1994: 475). This is how, in Todorova's view, an image of a never-ending spiral of violent behaviour that was intrinsic to the region was created. Illustrative of this perception is how the scholar Kaplan claimed in his book *Balkan Ghosts* that it was in the "Southern Slavic world", "a breeding ground of ethnic resentments", where Hitler learnt to hate so infectiously (KAPLAN, 1993: xxiii).

There were intervals of more positive Othering, which occurred especially thanks to Yugoslavia's openness and neutrality in the Cold War. As Christos Marazopoulos argues, in the 1980s the European Commission framed Yugoslavia as already "part of Europe" in terms of its identity, norms and practices (MARAZOPOULOS, 2013: 80-85). However, with the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, the image of the primitive and the violent not only returned but was further cemented. Similar to a chain reaction, both the academic and political discussions of the conflict (O'BALLANCE, 1995: 245, CAMPBELL, 1998: 81, ALLCOCK, 2000: 418) successfully enshrined the perception of the Balkans as a "non-European" and particularly conflict-prone region⁶ (WAEVER, 1996: 122, HANSEN, 2000: 349-351, BECHEV, 2005: 71).

According to critical scholars, at the end of the 20th century, CEE had been classified as part of the vague realm of "Western values", while the Western Balkans together with Russia had been constructed as, if not strictly Oriental, then semi-Oriental, "Halb-Asien", "Savage Europe", or "the Other Europe"⁷ in order to reaffirm Western Europe's identity and purpose (TODOROVA, 1994: 478). Against this background, Chari and Verdery propose to go beyond the three-world analogy and instead think of the power relations in the world as between the West and the Rest (CHARI & VERDERY, 2009: 20). This allows seeing that the post-colonialist lens is not limited to a bounded space called the Third World, but is equally relevant for what is

⁶ This was also the time when the Balkans were divided into the Eastern and Western Balkans. The former comprises Bulgaria and Romania, while the latter refers to the republics of former Yugoslavia with the exception of Slovenia but including Albania: Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Croatia. The term Eastern Balkans is almost never used, but the Western Balkans have come to denote a particularly problematic region with troubled countries (MARAZOPOULOS, 2013: 18).

⁷ See, for instance (FRANZOS, 1878, DE VINDT, 1907, WALTERS, 1987)

usually seen as a separate space referred to as the post-communist and formerly Second World (ibid.: 12).

Critical scholars argue that democratisation was a key foreign policy of alterity (GUILLAUME, 2002), to reinforce the necessary Otherness and with it the hierarchy. The end of communism is thus represented as an unprecedented opportunity for mass-scale transfer of knowledge, or as Buchowski called it, the Enlightenment project of educating the *homo sovieticus* (BUCHOWSKI, 2006: 475), in order to solidify the image of the West as embodying the “end of history”. Europe, and the EU in particular, it is argued, embarked on a “mission civilisatrice” (NICOLAIDIS & HOWSE, 2002: 782) in order to appear as a force for peace. To do so, the West chose a politics of alterity, whereby others were represented as violating universal principles. EU and NATO enlargements that excluded Russia are, in this narrative, offered as exemplary illustrations for the reigning triumphalism at the time (BARANOVSKY, 2000, SAKWA, 2017, PROZOROV, DEBARDELEBEN, 2011).

In this policy of alterity, the standards of the Self are not only superior but of universal validity, which is why the others should be convinced or otherwise brought to accept them (DIEZ, 2005: 628). Ian Manners, who coined the term “normative power Europe”, argues that five core norms can be discerned in the vast *acquis communautaire* and *acquis politique* which define the EU: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (MANNERS, 2002: 242). These political, economic and administrative standards, which any country that wishes to apply for membership, needs to fulfil, very clearly “spell out what the EU is and what the candidates countries should become” through transition (NICOLAIDIS & HOWSE: 774). Countries are thus left to decide only on the *when* they will implement the demands, but not on the *how* (HAUKKALA, 2008: 42).

1.3.2.2 *Feminist knowledge-transfer as a form of Othering*

This is where critical scholars on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe take up the argument. They argue that since (i) post-communist Europe is a necessary negative Semi-Other for Western Europe and (ii) the transition paradigm serves as a politics of representation to create and reinforce the hierarchy between the

“knowledgeable”, “civilised” and the “learner”, “barbarian”, transnational feminism, expressed through knowledge-transfer, too boils down to an exercise of Othering. This strand of literature is a direct result of what is commonly referred to as the East/West divide, which dominated the discussion on feminism in post-communist Europe throughout the 1990s.

At its beginning stands scholarly work, both in the East and the West, that focused on how women were largely the “losers of transition”. Scholars demonstrated that in the process of “quasi-retraditionalisation” (MIĆUNOVIĆ, 2012: 64) or “re-patriarchalisation” (DASKALOVA et al., 2012), women were driven out of the public sphere because their representation in decision-making bodies and in the labour market dropped rapidly (HOLMGREN, 1995: 26, BRIDGER, 2000: 129, FUNK, 1993: 327). Moreover, in an increasingly masculinised and hyper-sexualised society, they were commodified (POSADSKAYA, 1993: 164, BRIDGER: 129), their reproductive rights challenged, and the return to traditional gender roles was heralded as a return to “nature” (KLIMENKOVA, 1994: 17-18, WATSON, 1993: 472).

When large feminist mobilisation did not take place in reaction to these obvious injustices, research ensued that tried to understand “why there is no feminism after communism?” (GOLDFARB, 1997). Scholars focused on why there is “resistance” (BRIDGER: 120, JAQUETTE & WOLCHIK, 1998: 14, GODEL, 2002: 331) and “allergy” (EINHORN, 1993: 182), or at least a stark indifference (SUNDSTROM, 2010: 229) to feminism, when gender discrimination is so glaring. This created an image of anti-feminist women in post-communist Europe (OCCHIPINTI, 1996), who challenged the most basic assumptions of Western feminism, in particular the definition of and value added to the public and private spheres (SPEHAR, 2005: 112).

In fact, in a first instance, many women in former communist countries returned to the private sphere as if it was a long overdue vacation (HOLMGREN: 21), which Larissa Lissytkina termed “emancipation without feminism” (LISSYUTKINA, 1999). Unlike Western women who, in the 1970s, fought to be included in the public space, women in former communist countries had experienced this “emancipation from above” (POSADSKAYA-VANDERBECK & CLARKE, 1994: 94) which forced them to be full members in the labour market, as a burden (POSADSKAYA: 175) not a liberation. Since

communist regimes professed gender equality only for the public, but not the private sphere, women faced a triple burden of work, childcare and household.

Moreover, the separation between private and public spheres was nowhere near as neat during communism as in Western societies. In fact, “the private had colonised the public” (WATSON, 1993: 481) because it was in the home where the informal economy flourished and the independent self-published dissident literature emerged (ibid.: 480). In an authoritarian state, autonomy and fulfilment was found for both women and men at home (HOLMGREN: 21) because the domestic sphere was less monitored and more stimulating than obligatory work or meaningless politics (GAL & KLIGMAN, 2000: 50, FUNK, 1993: 322, SHLAPENTOKH, 1989: 13). In addition, crucial aspects of the private (with the notable absence of the topic of domestic violence) had been the object of public debates and policies throughout communism. This was particularly the case for childbearing and childrearing (LOKANETA, 2001: 1409). In the 1960s, for instance, with falling birth rates, most communist countries in CEE reinstated motherhood as a core responsibility of women to the state (GAL & KLIGMAN: 49). And in some era, women who had many children were even rewarded on the model of Stakhanovite workers (ibid.: 48). This is why the Western slogan “the private is political” could not resonate, because many women welcomed the “re-privatisation” of the private sphere (CÎRSTOCEA, 2008: 13).

This is why the encounter between West and East is described as evolving from an “initial curiosity and optimism” (TESCHNER, 2000: 203) to a “shock of cultures” (GAL, 1997: 42), where “surprise”, “disenchantment” (ibid.: 31), “wasted opportunities” (WATSON, 1997: 21), and “mutual misunderstandings” (BRIDGER: 120) reign. Western feminist scholars, it is argued, were perplexed, for they had perceived post-communist Europe as a “virgin” territory where they could verify their theories (CÎRSTOCEA: 8). Instead, one of their core tenets, the private/public distinction which allowed the argument that women’s confinement to the home is oppressive and their inclusion in the economy and polity is liberating, was questioned (JAQUETTE & WOLCHIK: 13).

As a result of the tensions in the East/West divide, some Western scholars advocated early on a rethinking of core Western concepts, particularly the definition of the public and the private, the role of sexuality in feminist struggles, as well as the

conceptualisation of feminism as a struggle against men's domination (EINHORN: 14, HOLMGREN: 26, GAL, 1997: 41-42, WATSON, 1997: 23, GAL & KLIGMAN, 2000: 101, EBERT, 2004: 14; 225). As Ellen Berry argues: "The importance of assuming a mutually interrogative stance as a means of constructing more complete and nuanced accounts of the effects of location and differences is nowhere more evident than in the encounter between first and second worlds" (BERRY, 1995: 3).

However, critics argue, many did not go in this direction; rather than seeing women in post-communist Europe as different, they constructed them as backward. Bridger, for instance, shows how many in the West believed they just needed to be patient (BRIDGER: 130) until women in the former Eastern Bloc would have enough awareness to follow the same feminist waves. Moreover, Jennifer Suchland asserts that unlike the women from the global South, who had protested against the ethnocentrism in Western feminism since the 1970s and successfully spurred an "internationalisation" of women's studies, where a nuanced cross-cultural dialogue was imperative, the same courtesy was not extended to women from post-communist Europe (SUCHLAND, 2011: 845, ROTH, 2007: 464). The key difference for Suchland lies in how critique from the Global South and communist Europe was historically viewed differently. While the Third World was associated with anti-colonialism and critique of the West, dissidents in the Second World were assumed to oppose totalitarianism and communism and therefore to be automatically pro-Western (SUCHLAND: *Ibid.*).

The notion of feminist agency and lack thereof is also at the base of the more recent East/West divide. The argument that communism was void of feminist agency has been brought forward by a plethora of scholars, most famously by Nanette Funk (FUNK, 2014). It is argued that state policies did not liberate women because their inclusion in the labour force exclusively followed a political and economic logic and discrimination on the job market was commonplace (ANSORG & HÜRTGEN, 1999). The same is said about progressive reproductive rights, which were reversed for demographic purposes and sometimes took very repressive forms (LANGENHAN & ROSS, 1999, TRAPPE, 1995, KLIGMAN, 1998). Women under communism are therefore represented as completely lacking agency. This impression of lack of agency is also transposed onto socialist women's organisations, which after an early period of

relative autonomy were reduced to implementing official policies (FUNK, 2014: 350). Although scholars admit that some policies might at times have benefitted women, they argue they were not the result of feminists' agency (Ibid.). There was, as the Romanian scholar, Mihaela Miroiu put it, only "state patriarchy", not state feminism (MIROIU, 2007).

In recent years, however, a number of feminist scholars have challenged this analysis. These researchers do not deny the overwhelming power structures within communist regimes; however, they show that even within these constraints, women could find margins for manoeuvre (NOVIKOVA, 2007, FIDELIS, 2010, HEINIGER, 2015, CHRISTIAN & HEINIGER, 2015: 7). While communist regimes themselves might not have "liberated" women, they provided certain tools which feminists seized to become "more free" (PENN & MASSINO, 2009: 4). Contra Funk, they insist that agency must be contextualised in order to see that feminism during communism was possible (DE HAAN, 2007: vii.). The failure to do so is, in their view, related to the "lingering effects of Cold War thinking" (NOVIKOVA, 2007: 202, DASKALOVA, 2016: 122, GRABOWSKA, 2016: 127-128, BONFIGLIOLI, 2016: 150, GHODSEE, 2015: 251), where the communist bloc is interpreted as a totalitarian monolith, where autonomy was impossible. As Kirsten Ghodsee argues in her direct response to Funk, this interpretation only holds true as long as agency is defined in liberal terms, i.e. as the ability to express and act according to ideas that were anathema to communism (DE HAAN, 2010: 548, GHODSEE, 2015: 251). This narrow definition obfuscates the fact that many women, in fact, really believed in Marxism-Leninism and were convinced emancipators (ibid.). The gender conflicts within the Communist Party institutions, and communist women's gender sensitivity and actions both within and outside official state structures (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2015: 138) in support of women's rights are not seen as valid examples of feminist agency (BONFIGLIOLI, 2016, DASKALOVA, 2016: 122). Instead, they are either ignored or labelled as *aliberal*.

As a result, critical scholars assert that the East/West feminist divide has created an image of politically immature, anti-feminist, oppressed and passive women in (post-)communist Europe, which serves to stabilise the representation of Western women as liberated, active and politically mature (WATSON, 2000b: 102, SPEHAR: 115). It

is against this image that the idea emerged, both in the West and the East, of transnational feminism in post-communist Europe as nothing but a unidirectional Western knowledge-transfer that is not only inadequate, but also solidifies problematic global power relations.

Holmgren cautions early on that Western feminists risk prescribing to a “condescending dynamic of developmental politics” because they take their own experience of oppression as the main reference point for evaluating women’s emancipation in post-communist countries (HOLMGREN: 26). This was later on couched in more critical terms by Watson and Adlam. Watson asserts that transnationalism in post-communist Europe can never be neutral because it is always productive of meaning that reinforces Cold War polarity (WATSON, 2000b: 102). The transfer of feminism is hence also produced by and reproduces asymmetrical power relations. She argues that the core problem of the idea of “transition”, which is, among other things, achieved through feminist knowledge-transfer, is that it erases differences between women’s experiences East and West (ibid.: 103). The transition paradigm only make sense if it is assumed that women on both sides are essentially the same. The only difference that remains is that of gender awareness or lack thereof. She concludes that it therefore reinforces the representation of Western teachers and post-communist pupils (ibid: 108).

Adlam echoes this when she argues that the main problem of transnational feminism is that it serves as a discursive practice, reinforcing the image of Russian feminists as belated pupils. In this view, Russian feminists need help in “developing” through unidirectional cross-cultural knowledge-transfer (ADLAM, 2010: 159). As a result, Russia appears as deficient in its own heritage of feminism and on a new “journey to enlightenment” (ibid: 160). Feminism is transformed into one of many staging posts on this developmental journey, and becomes a litmus test for the country’s democratisation, because it validates the terms of the society it emerges in. The West is effectively created as the provider of a model, in particular the idea of civil society, which Russia belatedly wants to follow. It is therefore expected that Russian feminism will go through the same “waves” of Anglo-American feminism. As a result of this representation of a unilateral model of knowledge-transfer, Adlam argues,

Anglo-American discussions of feminism in Russia focus on expressing disappointment at perceived failures (ibid.: 161). Knowledge-transfer therefore frames Russia as a *tabula rasa*, with neither its own feminist history nor knowledge-production, and which therefore could be occupied through an unproblematic act of cultural transmission (ibid: 161).

A research agenda emphasizing that knowledge-transfer was not unproblematic emerged towards the end of the 1990s, among scholars across Eastern, Central and Southern Europe. First, they clearly denounced the inapplicability of the existing Western framework. Taking up the metaphor of “Cinderella”, which Einhorn originally used to depict women from post-communist Europe as deprived of consumerism and who can finally “go to the market” (EINHORN), the Russian feminist Tlostanova concludes her book with the heading “why cut the feet in order to fit the Western shoes?” (TLOSTANOVA, 2010: 187). Deploying the same metaphor, the Hungarian scholar Fabian compares the effort to use the existing feminist literature to wearing someone else’s clothes, which are either too tight or too loose (FABIAN, 2002: 271).

In a second phase, the references to post-colonial⁸ frames increase⁹. Western knowledge-transfer now stands for an ideological invasion. In Siklova’s *McDonald’s, Terminators, Coca Cola Ads – and Feminism? Imports from the West* (SIKLOVA, 1996), feminism is equated with other Western popular culture products that conquered the

⁸ Post-colonialism refers to a critical theoretical framework, which, unlike post-communism did not emerge right after the collapse of „actually existing colonies“ but two decades later as a critical reflexion of on-going presence of colonialism in the projects of post-independence national elites, nationalism, sovereignty, democracy, and the possibility of knowledge itself MIŠKOVSKA KAJEVSKA (2017).

⁹ The scholarly endeavour to theorise between the posts started in the early 2000s and has developed into a rich and global conversation. Some examples which try to think the relationship the other way round are: the electronic journal *Postcolonial Europe* with a focus on post-communist Europe, supported by Stockholm University (<http://postcolonial-europe.eu>); the Network of Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies in Europe summer school on Feminist Perspectives on Postcolonial Europe (<https://graduategenderstudies.nl/noise-summer-school-2017/>); The British International Studies Association South Eastern Europe workshop on Dialoguing between the posts, which was held in Serbia (<https://dialoguingposts.wordpress.com>) and out of which a seminar series with the same name was born and held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in India (https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=199&v=GyF1aaRqmO4); the interdisciplinary conversation with leading post-colonial scholars, including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, on the relevance of post-colonial theory for post-socialism in the *Ulbanus* issue titled “Empire, Union, Center, Satellite: The Place of Post-Colonial Theory in Slavic/Central and Eastern European/(Post) Soviet Studies (COLLIER et al., 2003).

Eastern market after 1989. In the same volume, Siklova's Czech compatriot, Busheikin, invokes the image of an unequal relationship due to asymmetric knowledge, with a dichotomy between Western "missionaries" and "mothers" on the one hand, and East European "apprentices" and "daughters" on the other hand (BUSHEIKIN, 1996: 14; 20). She also summarises how other colleagues see Western feminists as an "International Feminist Brigade", which "bangs the drum of feminism" in Eastern Europe and can be compared to an "offensive of the Kremlin" (BUSHEIKIN, 1996: 13).

Similar critique is also voiced from the Balkans, with the first international feminist conference in the post-communist world marking a formative moment. The title of the conference, organised by the Women's Studies Centre in Belgrade, Serbia, in 1994, was, according to one of the organisers, purposely chosen to be "What can we do for ourselves?" (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2009: 17). It indicates that they had to be self-reliant and first speak among themselves before opening up to the "outside". It was about defining their own difference, their needs and available knowledge in order to overcome what Blagojević calls an eagerness between Western "teachers" and East European "learners" (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2009: 17). Kašić, the co-founder of the Women's Studies Centre in Zagreb, Croatia, is equally concerned with the power imbalance in the West-East dialogue, which she explicitly frames with the use of post-colonialism (KAŠIĆ: 75). She argues that Western feminists silence Eastern colleagues by speaking on their behalf (*ibid.*: 80). She compares them to colonialists, who were similarly excited about their "discovery" of Eastern feminism (*ibid.*: 78). Moreover, she accuses them of treating Eastern feminists only as "containers" of information, which confirms the lower status in the relationship. All of these are, in her view, essential mechanisms in the process of "Othering" Eastern feminists (*ibid.*: 83). Finally, the Romanian political scientist Miroiu agrees that there is a problem of silencing when Western feminists apply the theoretical templates that were developed based on their particular experience to post-communist Europe (MIROIU, 1994: 109). She hence charges Western feminists with ethnocentrism, which ultimately puts Eastern European women in a position of subordination and reproduces their condition under patriarchy.

These critics explicitly draw from key feminist “dissidents” of Western feminism, in particular postcolonial authors such as TRINH (1989), MOHANTY (1991), SPIVAK (1992), and SHOHAT (1998) and to some degree black (American) feminists like DAVIS (1981), HOOKS (1981) and OYEWUMI (1998). This is precisely how the critical literature on Western knowledge-transfer gained credible validation: the hegemony of Western feminism is not new but has been a matter of fierce debate since the late 1970s. It is therefore convincing that what happened between Western feminists and women from the then-called “Third World” or from minority backgrounds repeated itself in the post-communist East. This is also why the knowledge-transfer of Western feminism proves to be a particularly useful hermeneutical locus to bridge the debates on the problem of power in knowledge production both in democratisation and transnational feminism.

The critical literature on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe is in conclusion based on three major premises. First, it draws from a wide literature postulating that post-communist Europe is and always has been Western Europe’s necessary negative Semi-Other. Second, it argues that transnational feminism is part of the larger project of democratisation, whose ultimate end is to cement the hierarchical relationship between “civilised”, “knowledgeable” Self and “barbarian”, “ignorant” Semi-Other and thus frames it exclusively as unidirectional and asymmetrical knowledge-transfer. Finally, it posits that transnational feminism is additionally inscribed in a long tradition of Western feminism’s hegemony towards all “other” women, which makes it appear all the more problematic. As a result, this strand of the literature shifts the focus. While mainstream East/West literature expected women to mobilise against the glaring discrimination against women during transition, critical literature raises the expectation of resistance against Western knowledge-transfer, because it is an exercise of Othering.

More explicitly, critical literature proclaims that knowledge-transfer leads to what I call temporal and geographical Othering. In temporal terms, knowledge-transfer is represented as a discursive practice in which post-communist feminists become the “laggards” that need to follow the Western model in order to develop into equal players (SPEHAR: 115). This refers to what Kulpa and Mizielinska, in *De-centring*

Western Sexualities called the “hegemonic temporality of the West” (ADLAM: 160, WATSON, 2000b: 102, KULPA & MIZIELINSKA: 18). It denotes the fact that the West’s development is constructed as continuous, linear and progressive. They argue that when communism “collapsed” into Western narration, Eastern and Western Europe became one. And yet although they were now sharing the same present, they were discursively maintained as “parallel” and separate (KULPA & MIZIELINSKA: 17). Paradoxically, what for post-communist feminists would mean “stepping forward,” since they can now formally organise, is cast as “going backward” because they are assessed on a Western historical, sequential narrative (ibid.: 16). They are discursively created as “lagging behind” and being “just at the beginning,” which forces the “Western present” as post-communist Europe “future”.

Temporal Othering is said to be accompanied by a geographical Othering, which refers to knowledge production and dissemination as organised around a core and semi-peripheries. The former is claimed to silence the latter in order to exclude it from access to the centre, where universal knowledge lies. Post-colonialism is the most used critical framework to argue that knowledge-transfer creates post-communist Europe as a *tabula rasa* that lacks indigenous feminist history and knowledge. This silencing of the semi-periphery is a precondition to make unidirectional transfer from the West both unproblematic and necessary (ADLAM: 161). Following from Said’s assertion that the orientalised Other is not and cannot be a free subject of either thought or action (SAID, 2003: 3), they argue that the post-communist semi-Other cannot speak for itself either. This is perhaps best illustrated in Tlostanova’s article “Can the Post-Soviet Think?” (TLOSTANOVA, 2015), which she directly borrowed from Spivak’s seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (SPIVAK, 1992). Through the means of “sanctioned ignorance”, which she again takes from Spivak (1999: 164), she argues that post-communist subjects have been denied the right and ability to think and reduced to “native informants” (TLOSTANOVA, 2015: 43; 49). The key difference between post-colonialism and post-communism is hence merely a temporal one, with the transfer taking place either during or after colonialism, versus primarily after colonialism (VERDERY, 2002: 20).

This silencing of local knowledge has two dimensions: past and present. The former regards the denigration of feminist agency in the communist past outlined earlier. This kind of reasoning is necessary in order to stipulate that it cannot serve as a legitimate historical reference and heritage from which to draw for contemporary struggles. Only then do post-communist feminists effectively become a *tabula rasa* that can be filled with knowledge via a unidirectional transfer as Adlam claims (ADLAM: 161). In addition, it is said that this depiction makes it hard for feminists at the semi-periphery to diffuse their knowledge and feed it back to the core in present days. This tension is particularly visible in Daskalova's answer to the Western academic Funk, who assessed her scholarship on feminist agency during communism. She accuses her of engaging with only six pages of her vast scholarship, thereby neglecting the hundreds of pages she has written on women's movements and feminism, and yet taking the liberty to educate her (DASKALOVA, 2016: 122). Only because Funk belongs to the scholarly community of the "global North" and because the work she discusses does not, can she forget about academic standards and blame the work of weaknesses it does not have (ibid.).

In this geographic constellation, which the Serbian sociologist Marina Blagojević has called "core versus semi-periphery," the latter is reduced to a location, which can at best provide local examples to enrich universal theory (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2009: 39). That it can, and in fact should, be a separate epistemic standpoint from which knowledge about and for the semi-periphery is created, is hence effectively ignored (ibid.: 55). Western feminists can thus dismiss the local knowledge and take a maternalistic stance towards feminists in post-communist Europe (TLOSTANOVA, 2013: 62). This is why Kašić laments that they do not see her and her colleagues as peers, but as mere contacts and sources of information (KAŠIĆ: 78). Ultimately, the conclusion follows that Western feminists dominate because they have the power to define what feminism is and means (DASKALOVA, 2016: 121).

I argue that this critical literature framing transnational feminism in the post-communist space as an exercise of Othering with the proxy notion of knowledge-transfer has two important shortcomings. On the one hand, the argument is theoretically pervasive because of the larger debate on hegemonic Western feminism

it is situated in, but it lacks empirical evidence. On the other hand, and more importantly, its analysis of power relations is focused on the West versus East dichotomy and thus remains blind to the domestic shifting power relations under the rise of authoritarianism in the region that have become more salient for feminists on the ground.

Adlam for instance speaks of the feminist cross-cultural exchange as informed by power relations between Western and Russian culture (ADLAM, 2010: 301-302), but she does not cite a Russian feminist who stipulates this. As an indication, she provides an extensive and novel overview of Russian feminist thought in the 1990s which Western empirical accounts of feminism in Russia have overlooked. With the exception of Nosova (NOSOVA, 2004), however, the actual cited work (ADLAM, 2010: 316-324) by feminist academics like Posadskaya (POSADSKAYA, RIMASHEVSKAYA & ZAHAROVA, 1989), Zherebkina (ZHEREBKINA, 2003), Temkina (ZHEREBKINA et al., 2000), and Pushkareva (PUSHKAREVA, 2000), does not relate this claim. Adlam furthermore acknowledges that “feminism’s contested standing in Russia is also due to the widespread perception of it as an ideological and theoretical import from the West” (ADLAM, 2010: 304), thus suggesting an awareness that there are also domestic struggles that influence transnational feminism in Russia, but without any further expansion. Instead she dedicates her analysis to how feminism got institutionalised in higher education and “reproduced some of the worst methodological excesses of Soviet ideology” (ibid.).

Watson, another prolific critic of transnational feminism as a form of “politics of difference in Eastern Europe” (WATSON, 1997), which constructs the West and the East in terms of the presence-absence of freedom, only cites (WATSON, 2000a: 191) one article by Yugoslav feminist Drakulić (DRAKULIĆ, 1998) in which she testifies that East European women did not dare to speak up to their Western interlocutors. The rest of the article is pervasively argued but without being based on feminists’ actual lived experience of transnational feminism. In Kašić and Blagojević’s case this is inasmuch different as their critical account draws from their own experiences. As Kašić puts it in her article on why she found an intellectual home in post-colonial studies, “As a woman and feminist, living in the Balkans, I have been confronted with multiple images [...]: mythical, idealistic images of the ‘Eastern sisters’ as ‘fantastic’, ‘fresh’,

‘authentic’” (KAŠIĆ, 2004: 72), all of which have Othered her. Yet the paper does not include voices by other feminists from the region with similar grievances, so as readers we are just left to believe that the claim of Othering is shared by her peers across the region. Blagojević on the other hand, offers unverifiable empirical evidence based on “informal contacts with fellow colleagues” from post-communist countries, which she argues, convinced her “that there is widespread dissatisfaction with many of those [transnational] encounters, and often a shared feeling of exploitation by Western feminist scholars” (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2009: 17). To further demonstrate how feminist knowledge production at the semi-periphery of the Balkans is characterised by unequal power relations in favour of the West, Blagojević only resorts to the highly problematic argument of *false consciousness*. She contends that the lack of widespread critical engagement is primarily due to a “desire for the West” and “a self-colonizing tendency”, coupled with intellectual elites wish to become part of the core (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2009: 34; 40).

In part, this is due to the fact that critical scholarship focused on the early transition or was produced before the rise of authoritarianism really showed its destructive force. As I will demonstrate, these works are therefore situated in an early liberal period when there was still room for such critical engagement. It is this room has been shrunk with the ascent of authoritarianism and thus become much more important to feminists in these contexts and which this thesis urges critical scholars to acknowledge if we want to adequately pursue our commitment to emancipatory, epistemological politics.

1.3.3 Authoritarian Othering

I challenge the above-outlined argument that Western hegemony in transnational feminism, expressed through unilateral knowledge-transfer, is the primary concern for feminists in Russia and Serbia. In an authoritarian context, I argue, the domestic power structures become much more salient and, in particular, authoritarian regimes in Russia and Serbia conduct their own form of what I term “Othering back”. To justify their authoritarian setup, governments in both cases resort to an anti-Western discourse, whereby democratic values and civil liberties are situated as exclusively

Western and the West in turn as an oppressor, who wants to impose these values and liberties. While the term “knowledge-transfer” as such is not used by either regime, the notion of an imposition of Western, foreign values is well enshrined in their public political discourse. As a result, any progressive voice and movement within the respective countries can be easily discredited as alien and Western-influenced, if not Western-paid.

In order to formulate a *critique of the critique*, I chose Russia and Serbia as cases because they fulfil the following two key criteria. Critical theory asserts that they have both been particularly important Others and I argue that they have employed “Othering from within” against the West and that gender plays a fundamental role in this narrative. Gender functions as the primary allegedly alien Western value that is imported into these countries via feminist knowledge-transfer in order to undermine them. Before further delving into this mechanism however, it is important to highlight why this Othering from within is particularly acute in Russia and Serbia.

1.3.3.1 Russia’s and Serbia’s double coloniality

I propose that if we want to study resistance to Othering as the critical framework expects it, Russia and Serbia are particularly fitting cases because of their hybrid position. They fit Tlostanova’s definition of Janus-faced empires (TLOSTANOVA, 2015: 47), which are empires that are othered as “not-quite-Western” and therefore feel as a colony in the presence of the West, yet also mimic European colonisation as “caricature civilisers” in their own “non-European” colonies (TLOSTANOVA, 2015: 47). This is why both have also pursued Othering within their own empires¹⁰. In other words, the direct result of the felt Othering is secondary Eurocentrism, which in turn leads to secondary Orientalism (TLOSTANOVA, 2015: 47). This phenomenon, which I call double coloniality, is why architects of the Serbian nationhood applied essentialism to national Others, in particular Muslims, Jews, Turks and Albanians, throughout the 19th and 20th century in order to justify their domination or expulsion

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion on the distinction between the „dominant nations“ – Serbs and Russians – and the nature of „empire“ in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union see: (PAYNE & BARBERA, 2010: 8)

(MÜLLER, 2009, BAKER, 2018: 63, STEFANOVIĆ, 2005, BJELIĆ, 2009). In the same period, the Russian and later Soviet empire undertook a similar colonial project in the Caucasus and Central Asia under the banner of a “civilizing mission” (TLOSTANOVA, 2010: 65).

More importantly, double coloniality not only leads to secondary Orientalism, but also to a more accentuated resentment against the “true” emperor in the West. Because they are only “caricature civilisers”, which are constantly confronted with the double mirrors – one directed by Europe at them and one they project to their own colonies – the Janus-faced empires develop inferiority complexes and ideologies of the besieged camp (TLOSTANOVA, 2015: 46). As a result, they tend to drift further into assertive self-exclusion and jingoist revenge that are directly related to the West (ibid.: 50). Veljko Vujačić’s seminal work on *Nationalism, Myth and the State in Russia and Serbia* demonstrates how in both countries ethnic and civic nationalism are a historical consequence of anti-Western *ressentiment* due to perceived relative backwardness (VUJAČIĆ, 2015: 307).

He also argues that the same *ressentiment* has been mobilised in recent years in Russia in order to justify an increasingly assertive foreign policy, of which the annexation of Crimea has been the culmination (VUJAČIĆ, 2015: 307). The resentment, it is argued, stems from a discrepancy between actual status and potential power in the post-Cold War order, which is aggravated by the sense of a “lost empire” and nourishes a feeling of national humiliation. The only cure to this humiliation is thus to restore the balance by refusing to obey the “superior party” (ibid.: 308). In order to do so – echoing Guilhot’s (2005) critique on Democratisation – the Western double standards are pointed at and extended as a proof that human rights only serve as a cover up for the furthering of particular, especially US, interests (VUJAČIĆ: 308). Russian Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov made this explicit in a 2005 speech where he called the democratic revolutions¹¹ in post-communist countries illegitimate attempts

¹¹ These refer to the „coloured“ revolutions in three countries of the former Soviet Union: the “rose revolution” in 2003 in Georgia, the “orange revolution” in 2004 in Ukraine, and the “tulip revolution” in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan.

to “impose” democracy and which required a significant counter-reaction to avoid “exports of revolution”. This commitment was echoed by Putin in even clearer terms in a speech at the Munich Conference of Security Policy in 2007 and which is considered to mark a clear watershed moment to a more assertive foreign policy:

“We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state’s legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the *economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations*” (PUTIN, 2007 emphasis mine).

This is how, in the name of Russian uniqueness – the idea that there is something quintessentially distinct to Russian people, eternally preserved in the “Russian soul” (PAIN, 2016: 51) – the break with progressive values and civil liberties framed as “Western universalism” was paved. This break is neither inherent to Russians nor inevitable for the Russian state. Instead, it was the result of year-long advocacy by an Eurasianist elite that had started in the mid 1990s and was firmly established as Russia’s new foreign policy during Putin’s first presidential term (JACKSON, 2003: 6).

Yet as a direct consequence of being a Janus-faced empire, this assertive self-exclusion was never fully implemented. Russia continued to validate the Western framework of progress, including its hierarchies and mode of conduct, but to keep an ambivalent relationship to it (RESHETNIKOV, 2018: 210). It was neither ready to reject it nor to accept that in this framework it could only be a learner because it does not fulfil the standards (ibid.: 211). There is still widespread poverty, the economy is fragile, its institutions do not work properly and the nature of its domestic regime is not deemed acceptable. A self-defeating strategy was therefore adopted: to strive to become a “proper” great power by employing “improper” means (the autocratic regime and the fabled own greatpowerhood) and self-referentially legitimising that decision, arguing that those means were actually what really underpinned political greatness (ibid.: 220). In the eyes of the “proper” great powers, however, this approach obviously contradicted the aim of the exercise, which is why the much yearned-for recognition was never granted. Given that this “coping mechanism” never achieved the soothing effect it was supposed to (ibid.: 220), aggressive foreign policy acts as a compensation mechanism to get instant but also short-lived recognition.

Serbia is distinct from Russia in this regard insofar as resentment expresses itself differently. Since the country is in the process of EU accession, there can be no open anti-Western hostility. However, many authors have cautioned that the very fact that a country proclaims its commitment to EU accession and officially embarks on the process must not be mistaken for genuine adherence to Western values (HUGHES, SASSE & GORDON, 2004, SCHIMMELFENNIG, ENGERT & KNOBEL, 2006). Recent undemocratic developments in Poland and Hungary are certainly a testimony to this. The case of Serbia, however, democratisation scholars argue, is special because its political elites co-opt the Europeanisation process with a double discourse (STAHL, 2011, SUBOTIĆ, 2010). Double discourse refers to the Serbian political elite's strategy of offering polished policies in Brussels that allow them to pretend they believe in core European values, while telling the domestic audience that this is just a necessary evil to get access to EU benefits. These tokenistic gestures void of any real commitment to democratisation have also been referred to as a "peacock dance" (BOZOKI, 2018).

Importantly, the strategy of double discourse entails using the West as a scapegoat at home whenever it is suitable. Vučić regularly uses the loyal media to defame independent media as Western conspirators. This happened most famously in his yearlong campaign in 2014 against one of the most prestigious outlets: the Balkan Investigative Reporters' Network (BIRN) and their online journal *Balkan Insight*. He personally attacked these reporters as paid by Brussels to undermine the Serbian state (NIKOLIĆ, 2015). Other clear manifestations of resentment against the West include the condemnations of the 1999 "NATO aggression", and of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), with which Serbia had to co-operate in addition to the usual Copenhagen criteria for EU accession. Both are used by nationalist parties as examples of domination, humiliation and lack of respect on behalf of the EU and the West more generally (NOUTCHEVA, 2009: 1079, STAHL: 474, FREYBURG & RICHTER, 2010: 368). Vučić does not publicly take this line of argumentation. However, he has made it an integral part of the double discourse to embolden domestic nationalist tendencies in order to claim in Brussels that his hands are tied and that certain democratic reforms are unacceptable for the "Serbian people".

1.3.3.2 Anti-Western and anti-gender discourse

Key for this thesis is that Russia's assertive foreign policy as well as Serbia's co-optation of Europeanisation are embedded in an Othering back in the form of an anti-Western discourse, which chiefly relies on the demonization of gender. Gender is, in both cases, as Eszter Kovats and Maari Poim said, the "symbolic glue" for conservative, nationalist parties (KOVÁTS & PÖIM, 2015). From post-communist Europe, to France, Germany, the US and Brazil, "war on gender" as a consolidating tool for conservative and nationalist politics has become a truly transnational phenomenon (KOROLCZUK, 2015). The aspects of gender theory that are picked for attack vary. Most dominant, however, are gender theory's challenges to biological determinism and heteronormativity. The former refers to the idea that gendered roles and expectations are socially constructed and not contingent on one's biological sex, which is why present inequality is the result of systematic discrimination. Societies should thus strive to ensure gender equality through certain policies. The latter refers to the notion that neither gender nor sexuality automatically follow from one's biological sex. People can have a different gender from the sex they were attributed to at birth and they can feel attracted to the same sex. All of these established claims in gender studies are attacked as a deviation from nature.

The hostile alliances that conduct these attacks on "gender" depend on the most common denominator on which conservatives in each context can agree that it represents a threatening "colonisation" of the nation. Sometimes "gender" is equalled to communism, as for instance in Poland. In France and Germany, it stands for an exaggerated political correctness and individualism, while in Brazil it is related to anti-imperialism (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2019: 34). While their agendas differ, with some being nationalist, others openly homophobic and racist, and others posing as family and children's protectors, they all have one thing in common: a conservative, anti-liberal agenda that they advance by positing "gender ideology" as a degenerative menace for their respective societies (KOROLCZUK: 46). This is exactly what has happened in Russia and Serbia, too, to justify their government's authoritarian turn.

Russia's self-exclusion from "Western universalism" is framed in defensive ideational terms. Russia is not only proclaimed to be unique, but also to have to defend this uniqueness against Western civilisation (PAIN, 2016: 51), and, in particular, against the Western idea of gender, in order to preserve itself. Discursively, this is achieved by depicting the West as having slid into perversion due to "gender ideology", which is best illustrated with the concept of "Gayropa" that is used to refer to Europe (RYABOVA & RYABOV, 2013). The concept became popular right after Putin began his third presidential term in 2012. In the context of France legalising gay marriage and the possibility of Russian children being adopted by homosexual couples abroad, "Gayropa" was introduced not only to signify Europe's moral deviation, but even that of its democracy, which was referred to as "Homocracy" (ibid.: 32). Gender figured as the shortcut to dismiss democratisation altogether and to present it as a threat. The notion that "from now on homosexual Europe will be harassing normal Russia under the pretence that it is teaching us democracy" (RADIO ECHO MOSCOW, 2013), has been repeated at the highest echelons of Russia's power structures. In March 2013, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov criticised the EU because it presents Western values, in particular the protection of the LGBT community, as universally given and strives to impose them on Russia (TSYBIN, 2012). The need to strengthen "national security in the moral sphere" in light of the West's "aggressive" promotion of homosexuality around the world was even discussed by the Security Council (NEWSRU, 2013).

Putin, himself, has used gender to Other back, claiming that gender in the sense of normalising homosexuality is the antithesis of Russia's traditional values as an Orthodox Christian civilization, and retaliated that the West's attempt to destroy these values is fundamentally undemocratic (PUTIN, 2013b). Speaking at the Valdai International Discussion Club, he further warned about the dangers of letting these traditional values be undermined:

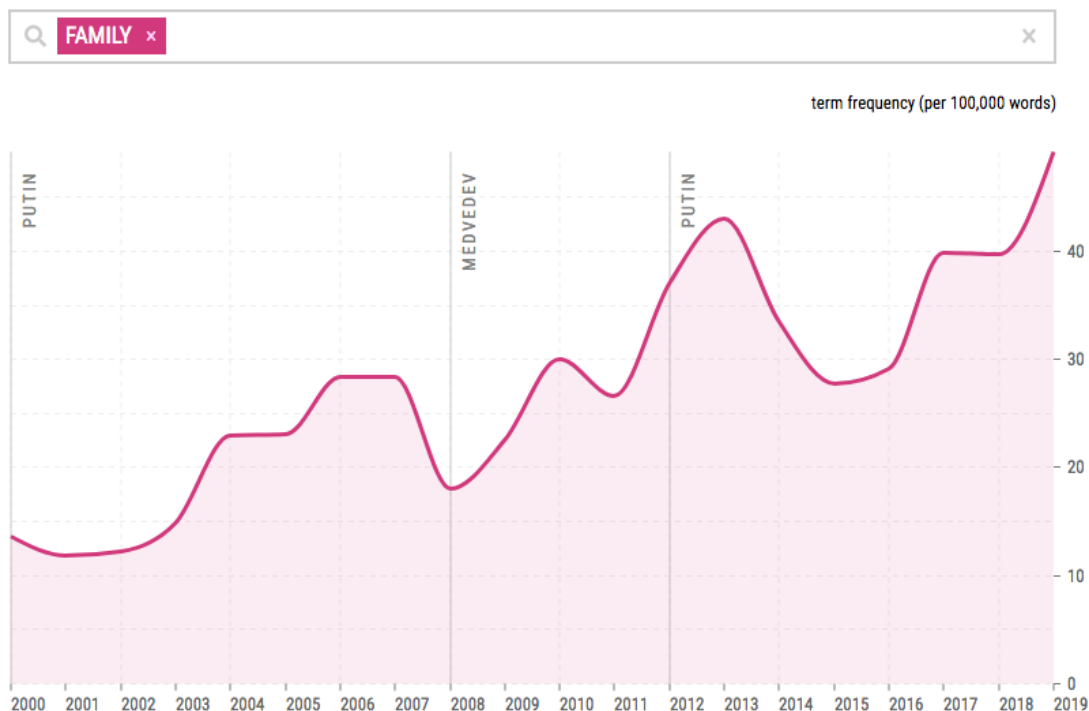
"We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan." (PUTIN, 2013a)

This type of Othering back thus conversely depicts Russia as the true bedrock of Christianity and, with no little irony, of Western civilisation, because it preserves traditional heteronormative values (NEUMANN, 2016: 1383).

The direct result of this discourse was the adoption of a nation-wide anti-gay propaganda law in the same year. It was framed as a clear statement against Western cultural imperialism (WILKINSON, 2014: 365) and signalled that if Russia had a “sovereign democracy” (CASULA, 2012: 200) that departed from Western universalism, that also meant it would have its own “moral sovereignty” (HEALEY, 2017: 7). Another tangible consequence of this discourse was the “foreign agent law”, which forced “politically active” NGOs to register as foreign agents. The definition of “politically active” was purposefully left as vague as possible, in order to employ the law against any civil society organisation that was too critical of the government. Discursively important is here, that any NGO that advocated for the respect of human rights and the rule of law could thus be branded as a Western-paid agent. This strategy that has been used to dismantle feminist organisations (JOHNSON & NOVITSKAYA, 2019: 260) and (as will be discussed in chapter 6) gender studies centres in particular.

The demonization of gender has not only lead to increased violence against members of the LGBT community and a clampdown against feminist academics and activists. It has also meant that the traditional, patriarchal and nuclear family was dialogically strengthened. The trope of protecting the family is used to signify Russia’s moral superiority compared to the degenerated West. As can be seen in the graph below, references to the family have steadily increased throughout the past twenty years of Putin’s rule. However, there is a clear peak around his re-election for a third term 2012, which was also the time when the anti-Western and anti-gender discourse consolidated.

Graph 1: Frequency of term “family” per 100,000 words out of 10,000 Kremlin publications between 2000 and 2019



Source: (DEKODER.ORG, 2020)

This strengthening of the traditional family showed itself most strikingly in the 2017 de-criminalisation of domestic violence. While the campaign to criminalise domestic violence had started as early as the 1990s and experienced numerous failed attempts (2012 and 2014) until a law was finally passed in July 2016¹², the dismantling thereof only took six months. Under the leadership of MP Elena Mizulina, who had also been at the forefront of the anti-gay propaganda law, domestic battery¹³ was once again equated to an administrative offense (akin to an infringement against parking or smoking rules) and any distinct mentioning of domestic violence in Russian legislation erased (GORBUNOVA, 2018: 28). Crucially, during the campaign against what Mizulina

¹² With the new law first time instances of non-aggravated (i.e. causing physical pain but not amounting to light injury) battery among *strangers* became punishable under article 6.1.1 of the Code of Administrative offenses, while non-aggravated battery among *close persons* defined as a spouse, parent, child, adoptive parent, adoptive child, sibling, grandparent, grandchild, guardian, trustees, or person in a common household was defined as a criminal offense under article 116 of the Criminal Code.

¹³ The law enshrines that there is no distinction between domestic and other forms of violence. As a result, as long as intimate partner violence happened for the first time within the same year and “only” amounted to “non-aggravating” harm, it is not punishable (GORBUNOVA, 2018: 28)

euphemistically dubbed the “slap bill”, she stipulated that NGOs fighting for the domestic violence law did so solely for their own pecuniary interests. Moreover, she stipulated that they received funding from abroad and were thus part of a Western-led “feminist lobby” (ORLOVA, 2018: 88) against Russia’s sovereignty and values (GORBUNOVA, 2018: 27).

In comparison, the anti-Western and anti-gender discourse in Serbia is more subdued. Being in the process of EU accession means that the country’s government is at least formally still committed to the idea of gender equality, which is why the defamation of it and the connection to the West are subtler. Before “gender ideology” also started circulating in Serbia’s public discourse, it was preceded by “homosexual ideology” (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2019: 39). This frame appeared every year when debates about the hosting of the Pride March erupted. In 2011, a Serbian political science journal dedicated a whole issue to the topic of the Pride. One of the featured articles, with the title *On the Pride Parade and the State’s weakness*, exemplifies how in Serbia, too, homosexuality is decried as not only a Western deviation but also a form of colonisation. The author first asks: “Isn’t it interesting that all Western diplomats take such a strong interest in the marginal issue of the Parade? Is it possible that they are so estranged from reality and so colonially-minded about their model that they do not see the resistance and frustration this triggers here – or is this perhaps exactly their aim?” (VUKADINOVIĆ, 2011: 140). He then continues to allegedly highlight the hypocrisy of leftists, who are against imperialism but do not realise that by fighting for the Pride, they are complicit with that same imperialism (ibid.: 141). Having branded the Pride Parade as a provocation and a form of Western colonialism, the article concludes with an emphatic call to the government to forbid it and to show decisive resistance (ibid.: 142).

Part of the Serbian government’s strategy has been not to emulate this kind of arguments. The government is aware that the Pride is seen as a “litmus test” for Europeanisation and that hosting it therefore brings immediate validation from Brussels (SLOOTMAECKERS, 2017a: 528). Instead, fringe conservatives in both the political and, as shown here, the intellectual sphere, are left to promote this kind of anti-gender view to ultimately benefit from it. Yet, by not pushing back the hatred

against it promulgated at the fringes, the government, for example, enabled the violence that accompanied the Parade in 2010. That way, it had the ideal pretext to explain to the EU why it could no longer support it (ibid.: 528). This is why, Sloomaeckers argues, the Pride has been hijacked by the Serbian government for the sake of “tactical Europeanisation” (ibid.). In line with the government’s double discourse strategy, Vučić has, in return, performed his endorsement for gender equality via punctual pinkwashing (SLOOTMAECKERS, 2017b). This happened most notably when he appointed the first openly female gay prime minister in the region, which was euphorically greeted as a sign of tangible progress, thereby obscuring that she had been manipulated for purely decorative use (BIEBER: 285).

In recent years, Zaharijević contends, the “homosexual ideology” has been replaced by “gender ideology” which has been used to attack feminists (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2018b). Yet although the trope changed, the colonial representation stayed. “Gender ideology” is still presented as a Western and in particular EU-driven colonialism that is imposed on “indigenous” Serbian people through accession reforms (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2019: 33). While feminists have a long history of being attacked in Serbia, this usually happened because of their unequivocal anti-nationalist stance. More recently, however, they are being branded as traitors because of their alleged “gender extremist” agenda (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2019). One famous incident in this regard was when the government presented a new sexual education package in 2017. Two single hostile op-eds against the package were published by Serbian Sputnik News, presenting “a number of public intellectuals” who warned that “gender ideology” was waging a war against the family under the pretence of prevention (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2018b: 95). The Ministry in charge was accused of being manipulated by Western lobbies in order to destroy Serbia’s national identity and, as a result, the Minister of Education was dismissed and the newly appointed one ended up “confessing” that the package had been demanded by the EU (ibid.: 95). Similar to Russia, this narrative has also been the backdrop to anti-gender policies in the name of the family, such as the pro-natalist Strategy for Encouraging Births adopted in 2018.

In both countries, this strategy of Othering back has established new terms against the West and gender that have become stable features of the public debate.

Gender has effectively become a shortcut for treason, and is systematically used against a variety of types of democratic opponents, even when they are not directly pushing for more gender equality. For example, in Russia, Navalny has been branded as the candidate for homosexuals (RYABOVA & RYABOV, 2013: 35) while in Serbia, the premises of Ne Davimo Beograd, a civil society initiative that fights a big construction project in the capital, have been attacked and vandalised with anti-LGBT graffiti. A crucial difference between the two countries, however, remains: Serbia is still in the process of Europeanisation, which has a restraining effect on the rhetoric at the official level. The Serbian government thus does not itself use gender to exemplify Western hegemony. However, it allows the dissemination of anti-gender propaganda by a numerical minority and frames any concession with regards to gender equality as a necessary evil against a more dominant EU. Serbian officials have to succumb to in exchange for economic benefits.

Overall, both authoritarian governments are using Othering back against the West to justify their mode of governance and the restriction, if not attack, on civil liberties as a national defence against Western imperialism. This is why I argue, in authoritarian times, feminists witness a perversion of the critical framework of Othering by their regime and are therefore adamant to avoid complicity with it and instead seek new avenues to subvert it.

As a result, I propose we should not just conceive of knowledge-transfer as a concept, but as a discourse itself (which I will amply discuss in the next chapter). For to insinuate that feminist knowledge is primarily transferred from West to the post-communist East as critical scholars do, is productive of meaning; a meaning that dangerously resonates with authoritarian regimes' discourses in Russia and Serbia, according to which feminism is alien and imported to their unique and virgin societies as a form of Western ruse and attempt at subjugation. To treat knowledge-transfer as a discourse is then to recognise that its central stipulations create meaning that is open for appropriation for non-emancipatory goals and that said meaning can only be understood through an analysis of prevailing power structures. At the time of my research the most important power relations for this thesis, I argue, are not the ones

between an allegedly hegemonic West and an Othered post-communist East, but between an authoritarian regime and its feminist citizens, activists and scholars.

While the respondents in this research may not have used the exact term knowledge-transfer, their reactions need to be assessed from within the context of authoritarian backlash that goes hand in hand with a clampdown against feminist activism and scholarship. From such a contextualisation, it becomes intelligible that all their utterances stand in direct (subversive) connection to the hegemonic discursive regime that uses the line of argumentation behind the notion of knowledge-transfer to justify the anti-gender backlash and its own authoritarian governance. As I will show interviewees' responses are grounded in their interpretation of a hostile political environment that spurs them to formulate discursive practices that counter the manipulation of knowledge-transfer in authoritarian discourse: They highlight their agency and perceived equality that characterizes their interactions with Western feminism and feminists to push back against the image of oppressive asymmetrical power relations; They stress their own heritage to resist the allegation that feminism exclusively stems from the West and is transferred to their country; And finally they emphasize their awareness that boundaries, which are the precondition for knowledge-transfer to make sense as an imaginary in a first place, are only erected with the political intention to divide and weaken them and thus need to be rejected.

1.4 Thesis outline

Having situated the research in the larger academic debate on knowledge-transfer, and explained the nexus between anti-Western and anti-gender discourses in both cases in this Chapter One, the thesis will continue to elaborate its theoretical argument in the next chapter. Drawing from post-Marxist discourse analysis, it will specifically set out the key concepts involved in analysing knowledge-transfer as a discourse and viewing feminists' absence of critique of knowledge-transfer as a form of subversion.

Chapter Three will provide a detailed overview of the terms on which the two case studies are compared, as well as the sources and the analytical methods employed, including a detailed description of how I intend to empirically test the propositions of

critical theory. Chapter Four is the only chapter where both countries will be discussed simultaneously. It is a historical chapter, in which I counter the ahistorical claim that transnational feminism only ensued with the end of communism, giving way to knowledge-transfer *en masse*. I, instead, highlight that transnational connections were present well before, albeit to different degrees and of different nature.

From there, the thesis is divided in two main parts, which follow the same logic but are separated according to case study. The first part, consisting of Chapters Five and Six, is dedicated to Russia. Chapter Five applies the empirical test to establish whether transnational feminism is perceived and criticised as an Othering knowledge-transfer, and if so, how dispersed this perception is among Russian feminists. Chapter Six inductively looks at how Russian feminists make sense of their political environment and the implications it has on their activism. Here, special focus is placed on their discursive strategies in terms of rejecting the notion of knowledge-transfer and proposing new imaginaries of transnational feminism as a means to subvert the authoritarian regime at home.

The second part, composed of Chapters Seven and Eight, is concerned with Serbia but continuously draws comparison to the preceding Russian case study. Following the same structure, Chapter Seven first unpacks the extent and nature of critique of knowledge-transfer according to the empirical test. This is followed by Chapter Eight, which examines feminists' perceptions of the authoritarian political setting, and how they equally reject the idea of knowledge-transfer, by re-defining feminist know-ability and community in an attempt to subvert the anti-Western and anti-gender discourse in Serbia.

2 Theorising critique in critical times

This thesis addresses the empirical shortcoming of critical scholarship in seeking to understand what knowledge-transfer as a discourse *does* in the minds of post-communist feminists. To do so, it investigates *how* the discourse on knowledge-transfer is embedded in larger power structures. These power structures account for *why* some actors decide to criticise knowledge-transfer and *why* others not do not, but vehemently oppose critique and actively subvert it. It hence addresses in the second instance critical scholarship's theoretical error of focusing on West/East power relations at the expense of domestic ones, thus ultimately reifying dichotomous power structures that are detrimental to feminists' struggle. In other words, this thesis does not take issue with critical scholarship's core assumption that knowledge-transfer is a discourse with the potential to create power imaginaries and influenced by a larger power structure. What it does criticise is the lack of empirical investigation of this argument and its theoretical short-sightedness, which it remedies by demonstrating how feminists on the ground re-conceptualise knowledge-transfer. The thesis thus improves, rather than wholeheartedly discards, the critical scholarship.

This *critique of the critique* therefore takes the same ontological starting point of analysis as critical scholars¹⁴. This means adhering to two standpoints of philosophy of science. First, knowledge-transfer is not treated as an object that exists and can be studied as a fixed entity from outside. Instead, it is treated as a discourse that creates meaning from which concrete knowledge and actions derive. Second, discourse does not take place in a vacuum but is intimately related to relations of power and struggles for power. The next two sections elaborate each of these theoretical understandings in more detail.

¹⁴ I share Joe Soss's (SOSS, 2006) view that it is unhelpful to think of scientific enquiry as something that is carried out by a specific type of researcher, who already has a predetermined onto-epistemological standpoint and therefore calls herself a "post-structuralist" or an "interpretivist". One should start with the question and pick the most suitable methodology. So the logic of enquiry changes, not the researcher as a whole, including her core belief of knowledge and reality.

2.1 Knowledge-transfer as discourse and discourse as power

First, acknowledging that knowledge-transfer is a discourse means to share the ontological understanding of critical theory of social reality as being culturally mediated and intersubjectively constructed (SCHAFFER, 2017, SCHWARTZ-SHEA & YANOW, 2013: 46). To say that knowledge-transfer is a discourse is thus to say that it is productive of meaning. Such an approach is referred to as qualitative-interpretive analysis and is part of an anti-naturalist stance, which considers that human life is different from the rest of nature, because it is meaningful and historically contingent, so that its study should not take the natural sciences as a reference (BEVIR & KEDAR, 2008: 505). Clifford Geertz famously put it that social science should be “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (GEERTZ, 1973: 5). From this perspective, there are no real social entities a researcher can objectively study from outside. Things do not acquire meaning because they exist, but because human beings endow them with meaning through discourse (HALL, 2001: 20). Discourse then becomes co-constitutive of social reality. It constitutes reality by creating objects of knowledge, identities and relationships between people and groups of people and is at the same time constituted of reality because it helps to sustain its status quo as much as it can transform it (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992: 62). As a result, discourse becomes in itself a site of enquiry.

Second, to theorise knowledge-transfer as discourse and discourse as co-constitutive of reality entails situating any discursive analysis in a wider field of power relations. The discourse analysis aims to connect the micro to the macro level by showing how a specific discourse is shaped by relations of power and domination and in turn reinforces or subverts those relations (FAIRCLOUGH, 1995: 132-133, FAIRCLOUGH, 2001: 354). Of the myriad of discourse analytical approaches, I draw from the Essex School framework, because it builds an analogy between linguistic (micro) and social systems (macro) and therefore provides a powerful tool for political analysis (HOWARTH, 2000: 13).

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the founders of the Essex School, take from Saussure his distinction between signifier and signified: the signifier stands for a word's sound-image, while the signified is the concept which the signifier designates

(HOWARTH: 19). Combining this linguistic element with Foucault's and Gramsci's theory that discourses are connected to power because they can establish a hegemonic meaning, they theorise hegemony as follows: the "hegemonic project" is pursued through "articulatory practices" which construct nodal points that partially fix the meaning (signified) of a signifier (LACLAU & MOUFFE, 1985: 113). Articulation here refers to discursive practices which turn "floating signifiers" into "moments" within a discursive totality whose identities thereby become "modified" (LACLAU & MOUFFE: 105). The power struggle is thus over the ability to "partially fix" the meaning of a signifier by attaching specific signifieds to it. To achieve this form of hegemony is desirable, because each field of meaning creates a social and political construction with respective relations between objects and subjects and "subject-positionings" (HOWARTH: 102). When the meaning of a signifier changes, this has an impact on other terms within this system of meaning and induces change both in the identities of individuals or groups in that system and in the relationships between them (TORMEY & TOWNSHEND: 95).

This hegemonic domination is, however, only ever partial because of the intrinsic contingency of meaning (HOWARTH: 103). From Lacan, the Essex School takes the idea that the full recognition of the self by the "Other" is always open to doubt, which is why the "Other" in all its symbolic forms is responsible for the unstable identity (LACLAU & MOUFFE: 125). This is why there is always scope for antagonism and why the hegemonic project aims at fixing meaning through symbolism to make up for the lack of a stable identity. It strives to do so in two ways. As a first step, a "chain of equivalence" between different concepts is established. That way, the differences between those concepts are blurred away. Since this equivalence can only hold against a common "enemy" or Lacanian "Other", a corresponding difference is also created in order to stabilise the meaning. I argue that rising authoritarianism in Russia and Serbia entails a hegemonic project that wants to endow "the West" with a negative signified. Due to the chains of equivalences and corresponding subject-positionings, this in turn affects both the new meaning attached to knowledge-transfer and the changing role of feminists as resistance fighters against the hegemonic project. The next paragraphs explore this dynamic in greater detail.

During the initial liberal¹⁵ period, the hegemonic discourse endowed “the West” with positive meaning. In the aftermath of communism, “the West” was anchored as a positive signifier in all post-communist countries, including Russia and Serbia¹⁶. Transition being the dominant paradigm at the time, “the West” represented the endpoint of history and of development for both countries. It was believed both abroad and at home that they would and should transform themselves into a reflection of said “West”. It was further argued that Western knowledge-transfer was vital in order to achieve this transformation. The dominant chain of equivalence at the time was therefore: *West = endpoint of transition = post-communist countries in transition = knowledge-transfer necessary = acceptance*. The corresponding difference that was needed in order to stabilise this discursive construct was that of the West representing the antipole of the communist past, which former communist countries wanted to overcome: *West ≠ communist past*. In this initial hegemonic field during the liberal period, knowledge-transfer was thus a vital element in the chain of equivalence that supported the dominant positive meaning of “the West” as a model to which to transition.

Consequently, all civil society actors who promoted what was seen as Western knowledge were framed as essential democratisers. At the time, feminists’ subject-positioning was hence that of an indispensable supporting actor in the country’s transition. What is relevant here is not whether feminists themselves perceived their position as such, but that this was the subject-positioning the dominant hegemonic

¹⁵ When I speak of liberal, I do not mean a free economic market, but a political system in which civil liberties are respected and key institutions work freely. This includes (but is not limited to) democratic governance, in particular the independence of legislative, executive and judicial branches of the state, as well as fair and transparent electoral competition, and change of power and freedoms like freedom of assembly and expression, manifested in particular through a strong civil society and independent media. For this reason, this thesis at times uses the terms “illiberal” or “illiberalism” rather than “authoritarian” or “authoritarianism”.

¹⁶ Post-communism and transition did not neatly follow each other in post-communist Serbia because of the intervening decade of violent disintegration of Yugoslavia. This is why scholars also speak of “delayed transition” in Serbia, which only started after Milošević’s ousting in 2000 and put an end to the “early illiberal transitional years” (ANASTASAKIS, 2013). When I speak of the transition paradigm in the initial liberal period, this thus denotes two different starting points for the two case studies. In Russia, this starts with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, while in Serbia it only becomes dominant on the official political level in 2000.

field assigned to them at the time. The position of essential democratisers was associated with positive signs inside the field, which conferred them far more leeway. What matters for this thesis is less who and how many decided to use that freedom to criticise knowledge-transfer, but that feminists actually had a choice at that point in time. With hindsight and from the perspective of my participants, who are articulating their perceptions during a period of authoritarianism, it becomes clear that this choice is a privilege they no longer enjoy. The context has changed so dramatically since the initial liberal period that the very idea of endorsing knowledge-transfer as a concept, let alone engage in its critique, is simply no longer conceivable. Instead, I argue, not to be critical of knowledge-transfer and to reject the very notion of knowledge-transfer *tout court* has in fact become a vital subversive strategy for feminists.

Rising authoritarianism installs a new hegemonic discourse; one which attaches a negative meaning to “the West”. To do so, a different chain of equivalence is established in order to fix the meaning of “the West” as an oppressor who uses knowledge-transfer strategically: *West = domination = feminist knowledge-transfer as a tool for subjugation = defence*. The difference that is used to stabilise this new meaning is that West and East/Balkans are intrinsically dissimilar: *West ≠ East/Balkans*. Only through this representation is it possible to frame progressive values as exclusively Western and their transmission as a danger for the ostensibly unique Russian and Serbian contexts, in which traditions and morals that are incompatible with this knowledge exist and therefore need protection. This is argued to be especially true for families. Through the trope of “the family”, the transfer of Western feminist knowledge is framed as a particularly significant threat to the country because it leads to the homosexualisation of society and the breakup of families. This is how feminism becomes represented as a ruse, whose aim is to destabilise demographic reproduction and pervert the nation.

While, as previously discussed, Russia and Serbia counter this threat differently and their anti-Western discourses take distinct shapes more generally, both countries’ authoritarianism establishes a new hegemonic field which attributes negative signs to “the West” and to knowledge-transfer. Within this novel hegemonic field of meaning, knowledge-transfer is no longer a welcome process, but a threatening one. Conversely,

feminists' subject-positioning is no longer that of democratising agents who are part of a larger encompassing transition. Rather, from the regime's perspective, they are dangerous traitors, who support Western domination and actively contribute to the nation's destruction through knowledge-transfer. Here, too, what matters is not whether feminists identify with this subject-positioning. Subject-positioning is not synonymous with subjectivity, but stands for the role the hegemonic field assigns to a subject.

It is in this regard that I argue that the Essex School provides a helpful framework for analysis. It highlights that relations of power at the macro-level, which I contend is the domestic hegemonic discourse in both case studies, crucially shape feminists' perceptions of knowledge-transfer. I use the way in which the Essex School embeds discourse in wider power relations to illuminate the very conceivability of knowledge-transfer and a critique related to it. As such, this thesis is also the first to apply post-Marxist discourse analysis in an authoritarian setting. Traditionally, the framework is applied predominantly by scholars who focus on populism in liberal democracies (DE CLEEN, 2017, KIM, 2017, STAVRAKAKIS, 2017, PAPASTATHIS, 2015). This is to a large degree related to Laclau and Mouffe's own focus on leftist populism and radical democracy. In her recent book, Mouffe further posits that democratic external circumstances need to be present for a discursive struggle to be possible.

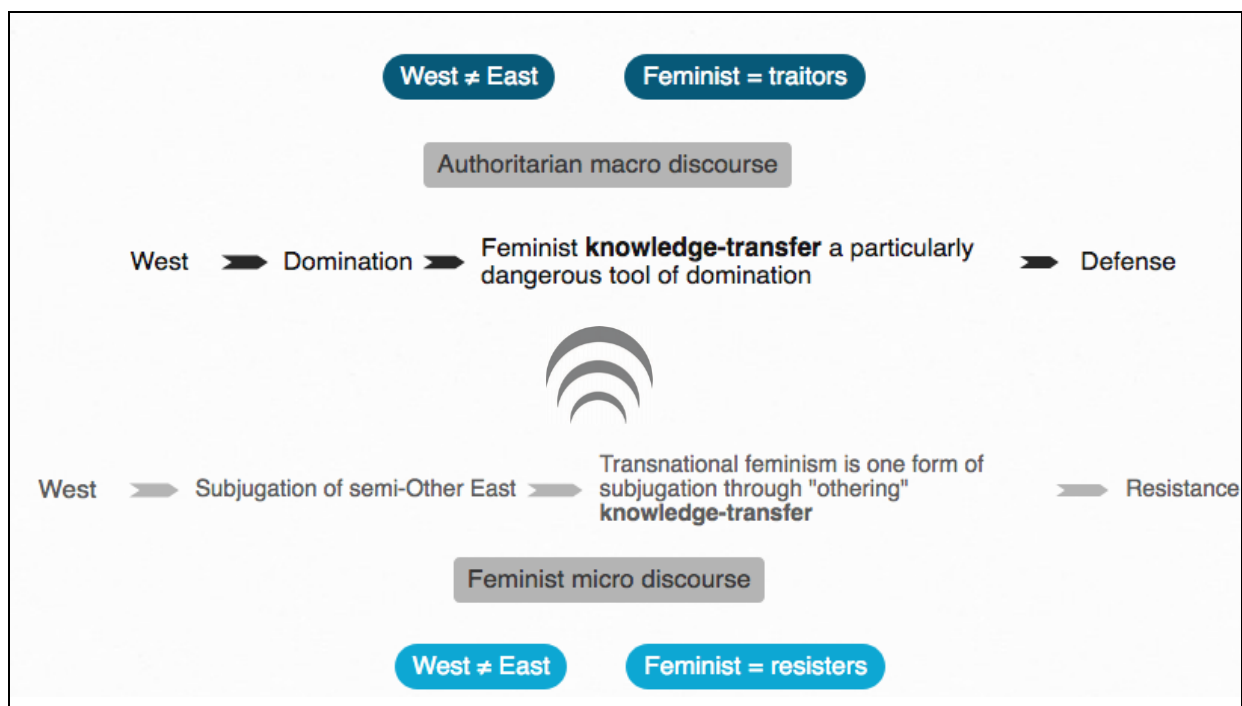
“For relations of subordination to be transformed into sites of an antagonism, one needs the presence of a discursive ‘exterior’ from which the discourse of subordination can be interrupted. This is precisely what the democratic discourse has made possible. It is thanks to the democratic discourse, which provides the main political vocabulary in Western societies, that relations of subordination can be put into question.” (MOUFFE, 2018: 42)

This “exterior” democratic discourse is not given in authoritarian regimes. However, Mouffe's argument that social agents' “consciousness is discursively constructed and that political subjectivities are shaped by competing political discourses” (ibid.: 55-56) is not contingent on democratic settings. In authoritarian countries people too situate themselves in the social world and give meaning to their lived experiences based on the discourses surrounding them. The framework is thus transposable to a non-democratic context, albeit with an important distinction. Mouffe defines discursive practice as social agents' “insertion in signifying practices, involving words, affects and

actions that allow them to acquire forms of subjectivity” (ibid.: 73). I propose that in an authoritarian environment, the opposite is equally true: absence of critique as a form of non-insertion into the hegemonic discourse is a strategy for feminists to assert their opposition to the regime in power. Moreover, even though the external circumstances are not those of democratic pluralism, the hegemonic discourse, like any other discourse, remains a site of potential contestation. I thus also argue that in a context of significantly contracted space for civil society, this discursive resistance is one of the last and most important spaces for contestation of the authoritarian regime.

In the liberal period, feminists had a margin for manoeuvre and could decide for themselves what knowledge-transfer signified. Within a context of authoritarianism, however, their leeway is significantly reduced and the contestation of the new hegemony becomes imperative. During authoritarian periods, both knowledge-transfer and feminists have negative attributes and are seen as threats. Knowledge-transfer is now represented as a tool for Western domination and feminists are, by virtue of their normative agenda, framed as dangerous transmitters of the knowledge of the dominant. For this reason, what knowledge-transfer *does* in their minds in this context is fundamentally different from what it might have represented in liberal times. They no longer have the leeway to deliberate what knowledge-transfer stands for in their view. Knowledge-transfer, as a discourse presented by critical theory, now resonates with the superposed hegemonic anti-feminist discourse that the authoritarian regime propagates. While it may not be the intention of proponents of a critique of knowledge-transfer, this dangerous resonance is the discursive effect seen by feminists from their vantage point as actors embedded in an authoritarian system. As illustrated in Graph 2, there are three crucial elements that create the problematic resonance: in both discourses the West is framed negatively as an oppressor, that chiefly operates via an imposed, unidirectional knowledge-transfer, and against whom resistance and/or defence are hence essential.

Graph 2: How the micro discourse at the level of feminists resonates with the hegemonic discourse propagated by the authoritarian regime



In addition to the chain of equivalence for each discourse, the rounded elements indicate the necessary difference to stabilise the chain as well as the resulting subject-positioning for feminists. With regards to difference, the authoritarian discourse juxtaposes East and West as inherently different, while in critical theory this dichotomy is indirectly reified as an effect of its line of argumentation. As for subject-positioning, feminists are expected to resist knowledge-transfer according to critical theory. In the hegemonic discourse, however, they are represented as traitors by virtue of importing “dangerous intellectual goods”.

Because of this resonance, critique of knowledge-transfer becomes inconceivable for feminists. To engage in such critique would mean to insert themselves into the hegemonic discourse and thus to risk potentially being hijacked by, or at least complicit with, the very regime they oppose.

In illiberal times, feminists’ core aim is to destabilise the temporary fixing of “the West” as a negative and threatening signifier. While the new hegemonic field might assign them a certain subject-positioning of transmitters of dangerous knowledge, they still have the agency to decide to subvert both that assigned position and the entire hegemonic project through the articulation of antagonistic meanings. They do so both because it is one of the few meaningful ways to resist the regime and to assert their own oppositional subjectivity. Feminists exercise subversion through several discursive strategies: a refusal to criticise knowledge-transfer; a redefinition of

knowledge-transfer; and a rejection of the concept *tout court*. Anything that could boost the hegemony, even if non-deliberately, needs to be undermined. A critique of knowledge-transfer therefore becomes inconceivable because it could be co-opted by the regime. Any critique of the “West”, and especially that of Western knowledge-transfer, could be used against feminists by their own regime, regardless of the fact that its anti-Western discourse stems from very different origins. More importantly, the very notion of knowledge-transfer has to be rejected in order to destabilise the hegemonic field of meaning attached to the “West”. In this antagonistic imaginary, there is no space to articulate Western domination, or borders of knowledge, or an inherently different East. When they represent Western feminists as respectful and useful enablers, feminists in Russia and Serbia allude to empowerment instead of domination; when feminist knowledge does not stem from transfer, but through sharing and exchanging among equals, they replace the notion of knowledge-transfer; and when feminist knowledge is represented as without knowable origin or geographical boundaries, the entire authoritarian edifice is shaken. These are the discursive strategies by which, I argue, feminists in Russia and Serbia create antagonistic meanings of knowledge-transfer as a means of subversion.

The Essex School of discourse analysis thus allows us to understand what knowledge-transfer *does* in authoritarian contexts from feminists’ point of view. It explains *why* feminists are not critical of knowledge-transfer. And it shows *how* feminists subvert the authoritarian regime. Within authoritarianism, the very notion of knowledge-transfer, not to mention its critique, becomes unimaginable for feminists who aim to subvert authoritarianism. What they decide to do instead is what Laclau and Mouffe term “a contesting hegemonic activity” to generate a “crisis of social identities” and a multiplicity of signifiers (LACLAU & MOUFFE: 136), which is always possible since no meaning is ever fully fixed. What from afar seems to be an *absence* of critique, is thus in fact the *presence* of an intrinsically political act of subversion. And what appears as a simple *rejection* of knowledge-transfer as a concept, is in reality the *articulation* of alternative signifiers in order to create a contesting hegemonic activity.

2.2 Epistemological implications

Since this thesis is a *critique of the critique*, it keeps with the critical theory's ontological commitments and operationalises them as elaborated above. Epistemologically speaking, it is thus committed to *elucidating* feminists' meaning-making process of knowledge-transfer as a discourse and to *exposing* the wider power relations in terms of hegemonic discourses that influence that process, to borrow Schaffer's terminology (SCHAFFER, 2017). Conducting a qualitative-interpretive¹⁷ analysis, however, also brings important epistemological implications with regards to validity.

Given that interpretive research holds that human action and discourse are co-constitutive of reality, its explanatory capacity lies in constitutive causality. The "Two Cultures" (KING, KEOHANE & VERBA, 1994: 3) within social sciences tend to pit qualitative and quantitative research methods against one another. The former is predominantly framed – both within and without the community of qualitative researchers – in terms of understanding that is opposed to causation (BECK, 2006, SHIVELY, 2006, MAHONEY, KIMBALL & KOIVU, 2009, HOLLIS & SMITH, 1991). In most cases, this is done in direct allusion to Weber's definition of "explanatory understanding" through "emphatic evidence" (WEBER, 1980 [1921]: 4). This type of understanding is argued to be distinct from causality. These claims stem from a very narrow notion of causality in terms of necessary and sufficient¹⁸ causal effects. (KURKI, 2006: 192). In recent years, this narrow notion of causality has been rethought, with several scholars arguing that qualitative-interpretive work should reclaim causality and show that it offers "constitutive causality" (SCHWARTZ-SHEA, 2006: 109, YANOW, 2012: 51-53) or

¹⁷ Rather than speaking of qualitative-interpretive research, I prefer the shorter term "interpretive research" as an umbrella term. This is in part because since the so-called "interpretive turn" in social sciences, this is how social sciences that moved away from natural sciences as a model are most often referred to (SOSS, 2006: 131). This should not be interpreted as conflating qualitative and interpretive approaches. There is indeed a strand of qualitative research that does not rely on phenomenological ontology and interpretive epistemology but instead follows positivist foundations (naturalist ontology and empiricist epistemology), such as surveys and process tracing.

¹⁸ This narrow definition is the result of over 300 years of Humean tradition, which is anchored in empiricism and thus sees causal relations exclusively as observable, regular and deterministic, as is found in the natural sciences (KURKI, 2006: 192).

“contingent causality” (BEVIR & BLAKELY, 2018: 36). In this view, the efforts to “understand” are presented as a prerequisite for a meaningfully adequate explanation (SOSS, 2006: 134). Or said differently, we can explain people’s behaviour because we fully understand their motivating beliefs (BEVIR & KEDAR: 305).

If explanatory validity is given because an interpretive study theorises on the basis of knowledge that is connected to specific human beings in specific historically and culturally understood settings (SCHWARTZ-SHEA & YANOW: 47), this has important implications for another scientific criterion: generalisability. An interpretive study is necessarily as situated as its cases and cannot rise above those specific contexts. Consequently, it is irreconcilable with generalisability because this would presuppose universalism and neglect historical and contextual specificities and create trans-historical generalities which do not hold up. It is not in search of a “law” but of “meaning” (SOSS: 134). This does not mean that interpretivism strictly rules out the possibility of finding general statements that cover a range of diverse cases (BEVIR & KEDAR: 508). Rather, this approach takes issue with two aspects of generalisation. First, interpretivism challenges the very idea that general statements are the summit of appropriate and powerful knowledge (ibid.: 508). On the contrary, it considers conclusions about the unique and contingent aspects of a particular social phenomenon to be at least as insightful and valuable as general statements (ibid.: 508). Second, it refuses the notion that generalisations can be made *a priori*, before actually knowing the specific context in which a claim is expected to be equally true. This does not mean that results gained from interpretive research cannot be useful for or applied to other studies. It simply implies that it is not the responsibility of the researcher to show that the results are generalisable to all other possible settings (SCHWARTZ-SHEA & YANOW: 47). Moreover, aspects other than the results of interpretive research may be relevant to other cases. For instance, while the results of Russian and Serbian feminists’ perceptions of knowledge-transfer are specific to this thesis and its cases, the notion that such perceptions differ between contexts and the idea that investigating those differences helps us understand how feminists see their community and transnational networks, are highly transposable.

It follows that an interpretive study should not be evaluated on the usual criteria of generalisability, but on that of trustworthiness. The researcher's task is to show that the work is sufficiently contextualised so that the interpretive explanations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied (ibid.: 47). Only then will the reader, who has the ultimate responsibility to assess whether the research can be generalised to another context, be able to make that evaluation (SCHWARTZ-SHEA: 209). So trustworthiness and contextualisation, rather than generalisability, are the terms on which interpretive research is evaluated.

This, of course, bears direct consequences for comparative study. The very idea of case selection implies a control of variables before entering the field from an external position (to an objectively observable world). It is about fixing *a priori* a) which concepts are most relevant; b) what their meanings are; c) how they are related; d) and how to test their hypothesised relationship (YANOW, 2014: 132). This is the established and standard procedure for positivist comparative politics (MILL, 1872, RAGIN, 1987, GOERTZ & STARR, 2003, ELMAN, 2005, GEORGE & BENNETT, 2005), but is diametrically opposed to interpretive research with its different methodological priors: that social reality is intersubjectively and collectively created and can only be studied "from within" its specific context (YANOW, 2014: 132). An interpretive comparison can therefore not start by assuming differences and similarities between or among social polities and "controlling" for other variables (Ibid.: 143, SIMMONS & RUSH SMITH, 2017: 127). Instead, it starts with a sense of the relevant differences and similarities and aims at uncovering political processes, which allows including fluid and contradictory processes in the comparison, rather than focusing on variables. It can therefore not be about assessing whether the selected cases are good enough to extract generalisable results from, but whether they explain meaningful situated political processes, which can then be used by others through thoughtful translation of the results to new contexts.

Overall in this chapter, I have explained why this thesis takes issue with critical scholarship's theoretical short-sightedness, i.e. its disproportionate focus on West/East power dimensions, thereby obliterating the potential salience of domestic power hierarchies. I have brought forward an alternative theoretical framework, which

shares with critical scholars the starting point of theorising knowledge-transfer as a discourse that is embedded in power structures, but crucially differs insofar as it situates knowledge-transfer in a domestic power struggle against authoritarianism which tries to attach a negative meaning to “the West”. In the context of rising authoritarianism, I have argued that the critique of knowledge-transfer dangerously echoes the regime’s anti-Western and anti-gender discourse. As a result, feminists’ absence of critique of knowledge-transfer and the outright rejection of it as a concept are now paramount instruments for their resistance against authoritarianism. In so doing, they subvert the new hegemonic project and try to articulate an antagonistic field of meaning where there is no space for domination or a representation of knowledge with borders.

I have also explained that, as this thesis shares the same onto-epistemological starting points as critical literature in order to be an effective critique, it also submits to different evaluative criteria than positivist research. Most importantly, trustworthiness and contextualisation replace causality and generalisability. This logically has implications for comparative research, the core aim of which is not to select cases in order to find results that can be universally generalised, but to explain specific political processes in a particular place and time. It is thus neither about controlling variables nor about fixing the relevant similarities and differences *a priori*. It follows that the comparative method outlined in the next chapter is the result of an abductive research process.

Given that a linear research process (of establishing the concepts and variables before going into the field) is counter-intuitive for interpretive research, an abductive process follows a spiral-like pattern, characterised by a constant back-and-forth between what is puzzling and possible explanations, be it in the field or in the literature (SCHWARTZ-SHEA & YANOW, 2013: 27). The research question and design, including levels of comparison, therefore change over time. It starts “with some sense of a research question” and of relevant similarities and differences based on a priori knowledge, but is necessarily flexible to new insights, which is why puzzles ultimately grow on the back of other puzzles (ibid. 55). The comparative method outlined in the next chapter is therefore the distilled end result of comparative factors that were

deemed relevant both before and after entering the field. After explaining the terms of comparison, I then move on to detailing the sources and concrete methods of analysis used for this research.

3 Methods

This chapter first outlines why Russia and Serbia are ideal cases to formulate a *critique of the critique* that respects the same onto-epistemological postulates of the framework it addresses. It then discusses the interviews as primary sources for this research as well as how they were collected. The subsequent section is dedicated to explaining how these sources were analysed, with a particular focus on the two main aspects of this research: putting the critical framework to an empirical test, as well as inductively researching how feminists in both cases make sense of their political environment and what knowledge-transfer stands for in these settings. The chapter finishes with a discussion on the limits of the proposed thesis.

3.3 Cross-case comparison

This thesis compares feminists' perception of knowledge-transfer in authoritarian times in Russia and Serbia. The level of comparative analysis is therefore the feminist discourses in each country. For Russia, I set the authoritarian time between 2012 and 2017. Even though authoritarian tendencies were abundant before this, Putin's re-election to a third term in 2012 is generally considered to have consolidated authoritarianism (BURKHARDT, 2017, PAIN, VUJAČIĆ, 2015). Particularly relevant to this thesis is the fact that, compared to earlier authoritarian tendencies, we have seen since 2012 both a more aggressive foreign policy and an explicitly anti-Western and anti-gender discourse (HEALEY, TEMKINA & ZDRAVOMYSLOVA, 2014a, JOHNSON & NOVITSKAYA). In the Serbian context, I also concur with the majority of scholars, who argue that Vučić's accession to power in 2014 sealed authoritarianism's ascent (BIEBER, 2020, RADELJIĆ, 2019, KEIL, 2018, RISTIĆ, 2018, WUNSCH, 2016, BIEPAG, 2017). In both cases, I put the endpoint of investigation when the data collection was finished: Russia in 2017 and Serbia in 2016. This is, however, not to say that authoritarianism also ended at those points, and I indeed occasionally refer to more recent events to further contextualise the findings.

To establish a credible critique of critical theory on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe, I chose Russia and Serbia as countries from the region, which the framework this argument is based on, presents as particularly strong Others for

the West. As noted in the literature review, critical scholars who reduce transnational feminism to a Western knowledge-transfer situate their argument in a larger academic body on Othering of former communist Europe. According to that body, Russia and Serbia can be considered as two countries that have been particularly strongly othered. Logically, from a critical theory perspective, feminist resistance against knowledge-transfer, which is said to solidify this hierarchy, would be expected in those two cases. They are, then, appropriate cases through which the first dimension of my critique – that critical theory does not accord feminists’ meaning-making the place it should have according to its own ontological postulates – can be justifiably tested.

The second dimension of *critique of the critique* I advance is that, by focusing on the transnational, critical theory obliterates the salience domestic power structures have for feminists in an authoritarian context. Most importantly, it overlooks its reification of a West/East dichotomy that both authoritarian regimes discursively rely on to justify their mode of governance and their repression of basic rights, in particular that of gender equality. Critical theory has yet to grasp that, in an authoritarian setting, one of feminists’ biggest concerns is this risky resonance with the authoritarian hegemonic discourse, which draws principally from the concept of a unidirectional knowledge-transfer of feminism as emblematic of the alleged Western domination. I argue that both cases are also particularly suited to investigate this claim. Both not only qualify as authoritarian; crucially, Russia as well as Serbia have in fact, due to their double coloniality, strong feelings of resentment. As a result, both have also engaged in strong Othering back against the West, which replicates precisely this connection between Western hegemony and gender. They thus have in common an anti-Western and anti-gender discourse, which I argue is of more importance to feminists on the ground, not least also because this leads to concrete devastating policies against gender equality.

Finally, this thesis asserts that what at first might seem like an important difference between the two cases, namely Serbia’s EU accession, does not translate into a bigger extent of critique of knowledge-transfer among Serbian feminists. As established in the introduction, Serbia’s formal commitment to Europeanisation means that the anti-Western and anti-gender discourse is less stark than in Russia. It

was also shown, however, that the Serbian government resorts to tactical Europeanisation and double discourse. This entails paying lip service to progressive values and reforms, while fostering and validating anti-gender arguments in more extreme circles. Serbian officials then use them to justify in Brussels why Serbia cannot fully adhere to these values and reforms. At home these same officials then profess not to support the reforms, but that they are obliged to endorse them because of the EU, thus effectively fuelling the anti-Western and anti-gender nexus.

While Serbia is not the only country where formal adherence to Europeanisation does not automatically translate to genuine adherence, it does exhibit one rather unique feature: decisively anti-statist feminists. Due to their historical experience during the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, feminists in Serbia are particularly attuned to dangerous tendencies in their government. The gendered nature of the conflict was already apparent to feminists during the prelude to it. Already in the mid-80s, questions of maternity leave, abortion and rape started being discussed in the frame of traditional values or historical dreams of a particular nation (ŽARKOV, 1997: 111). This later culminated, especially in the first part of the “civil war” (1991-1995) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in news of systematic rape employed as a weapon of war (MLADENović & BRANKović, 2013: 8). As the female body was transformed into the battlefield of nationalisms, distinguishing between ethnically “good” kin that should reproduce the nation and “wrong” kin that potentially could reproduce the enemy, feminists resisted accordingly (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017c: 204). Serbian feminists formed organisations to help women refugees and victims of wartime violence, such as the SOS hotline (1992) and the Autonomous Women’s Centre (1993), they created an explicitly anti-war and non-sexist¹⁹ peace organisation called Women in Black²⁰, and actively participated in the anti-Milošević protests that took place in 1991, 1992, (IRVINE, 2013: 250) and 1996/1997 (BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2010: 189, BLAGOJEVIĆ, 1999: 124). In these ways

¹⁹ In summer 1991 the Anti-War Centre had been established but women activists felt it was a sexist environment, which is why they decided to form their own anti-war organisation.

²⁰ The concept of Women in Black groups was originally developed by Israeli women in 1988, when they started holding silent vigils all dressed in black clothes

they challenged the propagated essentialist ethno-nationalist agenda that valued women according to which nation they belonged (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017c: 204). In addition, as public female protesters they resisted women's privatisation (by their nation) and essentialising (to their wombs) (ibid.). Choosing feminism at the time meant rejecting the nation-state of which they had, overnight, become a citizen, as if feminism could in itself confer a citizenship (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2015: 96-97). This is how feminists turned from "dissidents" during socialism into "disloyal citizens" of the new nation-state (ibid.: 96).

As a result, the anti-statist stance is weaved into the fabric of Serbian feminism and is also still widely shared by the younger generation (BIAS, 2019: 6). It has meant that the majority of feminists are automatically much more cautious about both the public discourses and their government's actions, even when on the surface the situation might appear as less problematic still than in Russia. This is why I argue that the factor of EU accession does not contribute to a tangible difference in outcome in the two case studies. Instead it makes for an interesting study for how and why feminists can vividly reject complicity with their regime's discourse even when the authoritarian setting is less advanced. Furthermore, it also allows study of the specific challenges of subverting authoritarianism when it takes place in the process of Europeanisation, making it subtler and thus also creating a number of dilemmas for feminists.

The legacy of a violent conflict also means that the sequence between the two cases is not identical. While in Russia we can largely agree that there was a more liberal period in the 1990s that degraded in the early 2000s and clearly turned authoritarian in 2012, there are more loopbacks in Serbia. The 1990s are characterised as an illiberal transition in the sense that it was a break from communism, but under the authoritarian leader Milošević and thus not destined to democratisation (ANASTASAKIS, 2013). This was followed by a short genuine liberal period in the early 2000s, before an equally gradual degradation towards authoritarianism started in 2014. The similarity this thesis focuses on is that of the latest authoritarian context. The difference in sequence is important to bear in mind, however, in order to understand Serbian feminists' very recent experience of violent conflict and why they are still

today susceptible to authoritarian and anti-gender tendencies even when they are less accentuated.

As case studies, Russia and Serbia overall share important similarities:

- Critical theory portrays both as being exposed to particularly strong Othering;
- Both have authoritarian regimes, which because of their double coloniality are particularly resentful and therefore practice Othering back against the West based on anti-gender narrative

The one seeming difference of EU accession is “neutralised” by the country’s violent recent history, which has inscribed an anti-statist DNA into Serbian feminists. Even though the authoritarianism in Serbia, and with it the anti-Western and anti-gender discourse, is not as explicit as in Russia because of EU accession, Serbian feminists are already equally, if not more, adamant about opposing it than their Russian peers. This is why, I argue, they are equally likely to reject critique of knowledge-transfer in order to avoid potential resonance with the hegemonic authoritarian discourse. These elements are summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Elements of interpretive comparison

		Russia	Serbia
Elements	Othering (according to critical theory)	✓	✓
	Authoritarianism	✓	✓
	Double coloniality	✓	✓
	Anti-Western & anti-gender	✓	✓
	EU accession process	X	✓
	Recent violent conflict	X	✓
Expectations	Level of critique of knowledge-transfer (as advanced by critical theory)	Low	Low
	Level of rejection of knowledge-transfer as a discourse to subvert authoritarian regime	High	High

While the main comparative dimension of this thesis is cross-country between the feminist discourses in each country, I also conduct within-case comparison, by highlighting striking differences between different groups of feminists. These within-case comparison pertains to differences between generational cohorts, urban vs.

regional, as well as between feminist academics and activists. These types of comparisons were not done systematically, however. They are rather the result of a sample, which I strove to make as diverse as possible, and which at times yielded apparent specificities within those groups that I deemed noteworthy.

3.4 Interviews

The main primary sources used for this thesis are in-depth interviews with feminists, which on average lasted one and a half hour. Overall, I collected 36 interviews in Russia during fieldwork²¹ in autumn 2014²² and 2017, and 33 interviews in Serbia during field-research between May and July 2016. The main starting point for identifying potential participants were in both cases gender studies centres and women's organisation helping victims of domestic and sexual abuse. This was an obvious selection process because in most post-communist countries these two types were the first feminist organisations. After having identified these key feminist organisations, I relied on snowballing, which does not pose problems in an interpretive research design since the aim is not to control the research process but to be flexible and open to the possibilities encountered in the field. However, I would not automatically accept suggested participants but judge whether it was appropriate to interview them. These choices were always informed by a concern to expose myself to as many different voices on the same question as possible (SCHWARTZ-SHEA & YANOW: 111), which is reflected in the variety of participants in both cases. Particular attention was given to having also interlocutors from different generations and to contrast the view in the big urban centres – Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as Belgrade – with feminist perspectives from the region. Since generalisability is not the aim of

²¹ The interview with the Russian feminist Valentina Uspenskaya was conducted over Skype during my time in Moscow and the interview with Jelena Višnjić took place over e-mail via a questionnaire upon my return from field-research in Serbia.

²² The first round of fieldwork in 2014 in Russia took place during my MPhil in Russian and East European Studies. The data collected then could be used however, because this DPhil thesis is an extension of the MPhil dissertation. At the time, I only interviewed Russian academics. This thesis however, goes beyond this scope by adding both Russian activists and Serbia as a comparative case studies. Importantly, the collected interviews are re-usable to the extent that the same questions were also asked during the additional field-researches.

interpretive research, representation is not the key scientific criterion this thesis strove for. Rather these regional perspectives were seen as additional and potentially insightful point of views.

As for the different generations, I view them analogous to Mannheim's definition of a group of people, who belong roughly to the same age group and who experience a similar socio-historical period (MANNHEIM, 2017 [1928]). Generation refers to a cohort of feminists (WHITTIER, 1997), who became active under similar socio-historical circumstances. This being said, entering activism at a specific point in time does not mean that one generational cohort is walled off from another nor that it is immune to a changing context. For instance, joining feminism at a time, when liberal transition had just started does not mean that future authoritarian developments will not leave their mark on them. This research mainly distinguishes between three generations which experienced communist, liberal and authoritarian periods. In addition, Serbian feminists were exposed to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The table below lists the different generational cohorts for each case study with their corresponding period of time.

Table 2: Periodisation of generations and their political context

Russia			Serbia		
Generation	Period	Context	Generation	Period	Context
1.	1970s-1980s	Communist	1.	1970s-1980s	Communist
2.	1991-2011	Liberal	2.	1991-1999	Wartime
			3.	2000-2013	Liberal
3	2012-2017	Authoritarian	4.	2014-2017	Authoritarian

3.4.1 Russian feminists

The first and oldest generation are the feminists who got involved in activism already during the communist period. In Russia that meant they were either active in dissident circles and the publishing of samizdat magazines in the 1970s and 1980s, part of the first feminist organisations, especially women's shelters, that emerged in the late 1980s, or involved in the establishment of the first women's studies centres that would advise Gorbachev's government on equality policies. The concrete dates to delimit this period are 1979, when the first feminist samizdat was published, and 1991,

when the Soviet Union was officially dismantled in December. Although the regime change had not yet occurred, the majority of feminists genuinely believed in reforms of their own regime based on a Western model and actively worked towards this kind of democratic transition. Transnational contacts were, however, rather rare. In St. Petersburg Alla Mitrofanova and Olga Lipovskaya are two of the best known “veteran feminists” in this regard. The former is to this day still referred to as a feminist icon by the younger generation, while the latter is well known even abroad for self-publishing one of the last feminist dissident magazines in the 1980s. In Moscow, the most important figures from the time are the members of the LOTUS group, the precursor to what would in 1991 become the Moscow Gender Studies Centre (MCGS), the first of its kind in Russia.

Because of its decisive role, the MCGS was a key cluster for my data collection. Given that it was founded right around the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, it was an ideal place to identify interlocutors who experienced the liberal period. The centre’s co-founder, Olga Voronina, was of primordial help in this endeavour. Not only did she connect me to former members of the MCGS, such as the philosopher Tatyana Klimenkova or the political scientist Elena Kochkina, but also to other allies they had at the time. This is how I had the chance to speak to the famous Muscovite historian Natalya Pushkareva, the founder of the largest Russian Association of Researchers in Women’s Studies, and to Natalya Rimashevskaya, a well-known economist who was an advisor to Gorbachev and played a crucial role in enabling young feminists to found the MCGS in the first place.

As part of the cohort that was active during the liberal period they experienced a time when the hegemonic discourse was still positive vis-à-vis the West. Contemporary public discourse was unambiguous that Russia adhered to transition, which would modernise totalitarian society into a liberal democracy, and in which it had to play a junior role in relation to the experienced West. Conversely, as feminists they were considered as valuable democratisers who contributed in the solicited knowledge-transfer from West to East. Feminists acting during this liberal period therefore experienced regular contact with Western feminists, who wanted to support the country’s road to democracy. Unlike their Serbian contemporaries, they acted in a

time when the state was seen as a potential partner – one that could be lobbied, or at the very least granted them relative freedom to act.

Though the MCGS was the first, the 1990s also saw the creation of other gender studies centres. The second most influential such institution is the Gender Studies Research Centre, which was formed as part of the Faculty of Sociology at the liberal European University of St. Petersburg (EUSPGS) in 1997. It differs from the MCGS to the extent that it taught Master degrees in Gender Studies, which allowed it to reach a large young audience. The MCGS did not have such a licence but had historically found an alternative for spreading its knowledge in the format of summer schools. Today the EUSPGS is one of the last functioning gender studies centres, but, as will be discussed in chapter 6.1.1, also experiences increasing political pressure. Thanks to Voronina I had the possibility to interview the EUSPGS's co-founders (who still lead the centre nowadays): Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova.

In addition to the EUSPGS, there was also the Centre of Gender Problems, which was established slightly earlier in 1993. Although it also occasionally offered lectures, seminars and conferences, gender-related research was not its exclusive focus. Instead it provided a space for more general awareness-raising projects, thus giving a platform to artists but also offering more practical advice such as self-defence and IT classes as well as free legal consultation. Lipovskaya, who had already been active during dissident times in the Soviet Union, co-founded the centre together with the historian Irina Yukina and the psychologist Natalya Hodyreva, with whom I also spoke. Hodyreva was also at the forefront of establishing the “Crisis Centre” in 1992. This was the first organisation in St. Petersburg destined to help victims of domestic abuse. While the Crisis Centre still operates today, the St. Petersburg Centre of Gender Problems had to close in 2004. The similar fate also hit the organisation Mitrofanova founded in 1995: The Cyber Fem Club. Among many other things the Club taught feminists how to create their first website and connected feminists transnationally via email. Today it is no longer active, but Mitrofanova still owns the Philosophical Café in St. Petersburg, which has a large feminist library and is the venue for many lectures. In Moscow is another important organisation that was created in the 90s, *Syostry* [*Sisters*], which opened its first hotline for victims of domestic abuse in 1994. Despite

increasing difficulties to find funding, it is still operative today and is the only independent organisation in Russia to provide psychological telephone support to survivors. I was lucky that two key figures agreed to meet with me: Nadezhda Zamotaeva, who has been active ever since the hotline was created and is now its new director; as well as a new employee, Katarina Bakhrenkova, who has been decisive in ensuring the hotline's financial sustainability by introducing crowdfunding as a funding strategy. Finally, I also got to speak to Elena Trofimova, who was editor-in-chief of one of the first feminist journals, *Preobrazhenie [Metamorphosis]* (1993-1998), which discussed both research and women's writing.

These were largely the first reference points I had, and thanks to which I was recommended further interlocutors from the younger generation. These were more difficult to identify from an outsider's perspective because the authoritarian context has visibly had an impact on feminist organising. The authoritarian regime has systematically persecuted foreign funding, thus making it difficult for the younger generation to create large, visible feminist organisations. As a result, like in Soviet times, one of the last avenues for expressing dissent is art. This is the path three out of my younger participants have chosen as their form of activism, be it through spraying graffiti at night (Lolita Agamalova), writing poetry and distributing it through self-published magazines (Oksana Vasyakina), or painting (Barbara Tereshchenko). Another reasonably safe space, but one which at the same time allows reaching many people, is the internet. Four out of the 13 younger interviewees have decided to locate their activism on the web, be it in the form of a blog (Tatyana Nikonova), a YouTube channel (Lena Volk and Diana Apahonchic) or a public Facebook page (Bella Rapoport).

Activism for the younger generation thus often happens in more isolation and in nowhere near as institutionalised formats as those of gender studies and crisis centres. I did, however, also interview Ekaterina Borodina, who is the only young feminist to have been appointed a lecturer at the EUSPGS. In addition, in my database I also have two platforms whose aim it is to bring together several younger feminists and which are active in both publishing and conducting reading groups as well as awareness raising activities: the Left-Fem Club and Urban Feminism, which both have members

in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Among my respondents, four are part of the former (Mariya Rahmaninova, Natalya Rybalko, Olessia Akimova and Anna Ivanova) while one (Alexandra Talaver) was the co-founder of the latter. All members of this youngest cohort of Russian feminists have not experienced any different leadership than that of Putin. This is a generation that witnessed the times when Russia opted for assertive self-exclusion from Western hegemony, including its ideational component, advocating for moral sovereignty instead, which has led to a clear backlash against civil society generally and against feminist and LGBT activists in particular.

Finally, in order to expose myself also to the view from the regions, I interviewed the members of two regional gender studies centres: in Ivanovo and Tver. At the time of my first research trip to Russia in 2014 there were only four more gender studies centres left outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg: Volgograd, Saratov, Ivanovo and Tver. The centre in Samara had been closed a year earlier after being classified as a foreign agent. The Volgograd centre merely paid lip service to the cause of gender studies in its name, but was conducting highly bio-deterministic research. Saratov was much further away from Moscow and St. Petersburg, where I was based, which is why I decided to add the closer towns Ivanovo and Tver to my database. This is how I interviewed the director of the Ivanovo centre, Olga Voronina, and members of it, Natalya Gafizova and Alena Makrova, as well as the director for the Tver centre, Valentina Uspenskaya.

3.4.2 Serbian feminists

I took the same approach in Serbia, starting with the oldest generation. Members of this cohort had attended the 1978 Drug-ca conference, the first international feminist conference in the socialist world. It built the basis for the group Women and Society, which subsequently organised three formative Yugoslav Feminist Gatherings in 1987, 1989 and 1990, from which the first organisations, in particular SOS hotlines for victims of domestic violence, emerged in the Croatian and Slovenian republic of Yugoslavia. Part of this generation is Lepa Mladenović (as well as Sonja Drljević, who has since passed away). As shall be shown in the next chapter on Transnational feminist encounters during communism, they enjoyed more freedom than their

Russian contemporaries, making their contacts with Western feminists easier and more intense.

Following in large part the impetus of Drug-ca and subsequent feminist organising, the early years of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia also saw the first institutionalised feminist organisations in what was from then on called Serbia. The Women's Studies Centre (WSC) was founded in 1991, the Serbian SOS hotline in 1992, and the Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC), which was an offspring of the hotline in reaction to the Bosnian war, and offered specific help for women who had suffered sexual violence²³, in 1993. Previously-mentioned Mladenović was a driving force behind the latter two and attracted new activists, whom I also interviewed, among them Nadežda Radović and Biljana Branković. The WSC however, brought a new face to the scene, that of the co-founder and later director Dasa Duhaček as well as the young researcher Biljana Dojcinović, who is nowadays a professor in literary studies.

Compared to Russia, the parameters of the war crucially altered the scene of women's organisations in the 1990s. This is why, in addition to the above organisations, my attention was also immediately directed to the very influential group Women in Black (WiB). This group was founded in 1991 and throughout the 1990s held weekly silent vigils in order to protest against the crimes that the regime committed in their name (MIŠKOVSKA KAJEVSKA, 2014: 156). To this day, WiB continues to stage regular protests in Belgrade as well as in smaller cities across Serbia. The founder, Staša Zajović, played an equivalent role to Voronina in Russia: she was incredibly helpful and readily connected me with a myriad of other activists, both within and beyond WiB. This is how I got to know Vera Litričin and Slavica Stojanović, both long-time WiB activists. Lastly, I also had the chance to speak to Violeta Anđelković, one of the members of the Women's Indok Centre. It was founded at the end of the nineties, in 1997, with the mission to collect and archive documents about the feminist movement since the Drug-ca conference in order to pass it on to the next generation. It had to cease operation and offered all the material to the WSC in 2017.

²³ Its original name was the Autonomous Women's Centre against Sexual Violence but today it covers all types of violence perpetrated against women and girls.

Overall, these were all feminists who not only consciously experienced the war, but also actively opposed it and enshrined the anti-statist and anti-nationalist identity into Serbian feminism²⁴. And they all experienced crucial transnational feminist solidarity that will be discussed in chapter 4 and 8.

Since all of these organisations have continued to exist since their creation, they were excellent entry points for finding members of the second youngest cohort, which entered activism in the liberal period between 2000 and 2013. This cohort forms the majority of the Serbian dataset. Among them are (at times former) members of the WSC, such as Adriana Zaharijević, who has developed into one of the most influential feminist philosophical voices in Serbia, the feminist historian Ivana Pantelić and Katerina Lončarević, who has become a pillar of the WSC, not least since she took over the editorship of the centre's journal *Genero*. Ksenija Perišić and Saša Pokrajac both used to work at the AWC, while Sanja Pavlović joined it a few years later, and have also been regular activists with WiB. It is indeed important to point out that the three organisations – WiB, AWC and WSC – are very highly interconnected and permeable, so that one could for instance act as a counsellor at AWC, protest regularly with WiB and lecture occasionally at the WSC. Maja Stajčić, on the other hand, joined forces with Anđelković in 2008 and re-activated the Women's Indok Centre before she became the regional co-ordinator of the influential feminist foundation Kvinna till Kvinna (Kt). The other crucial feminist foundation is the Reconstruction Women's Fund (RWF), founded in 2004 by the WiB activist Slavica Stojanović. Two of the liberal generational cohort I spoke to worked in these two foundations: Milica Miražić at KtK and Mirjana Bobić at RWF.

However, the younger generation has also created initiatives outside of the previously existing organisations. I met with Milica Gudović, for instance, who is part of Atina. As an NGO, Atina focuses on combatting trafficking of women and is financially almost self-sufficient thanks to running a bagel shop alongside. More

²⁴ As Miškowska Kajevska's (2017) research shows this is not to say that all of them took such an unequivocal stance or that intra-feminist disputes over nationalism did not exist. However, this is the dominant narrative and self-identification of the majority of feminists in Serbia.

importantly still for the younger feminist scene is the grassroots festival BeFem, which was founded in 2008 and has since become an established and much-cherished annual happening. I interviewed one of its co-founders, Jelena Višnić, as well as several of its organizing committee, among them Jovana Netković, Milica Batričević, Sanja Dojkić.

The groups within this liberal generation shared common ground in that, where throughout the 1990s feminists operated in a permanently reactive emergency mode, from 2000 onwards they had more freedom to work relatively unfettered. It was also a time of initial euphoria in view of EU accession, which brought a lot of international attention, including from foreign feminist organisations. However, this is not to say that the early 2000s were all fairy tales. Two major instances curbed feminists' hopes early on. First, the progressive Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić, who had been ready to extradite Milošević to The Hague, was assassinated in 2003. After this, a cynical "voluntary surrender" programme was established, which granted war criminals a right to return to Serbia and to face charges while on bail (SUBOTIĆ, 2010: 602). Secondly, when Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 and the EU was foremost concerned about avoiding violent escalation, it was ready to change "Europe for The Hague" to "Europe for Kosovo", making justice against crimes against humanity a currency of the lowest order (ibid.). These were the daunting forbearers.

Moreover, initial euphoria about Europeanisation soon gave way to disenchantment about the economic reforms that went with it and the hardships they caused the younger generation in particular (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017c: 207). This is partly the reason why this generation also has a renewed interest in the socialist past. All of these feminists had no living memory of communism. And contrary to the former Soviet Union, in the post-Yugoslav space communism is much more positively remembered. There is widespread belief that Yugoslavia was the one place where there was "real socialism" (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2015: 96) thanks to a system of self-management, non-alignment and confederalised federalism, which crucially distinguished it from the Soviet Union and its satellite states in the rest of Eastern Europe (JOVIĆ, 2004: 286).

As for the younger generational cohort, starting in 2014, it is only composed by Nađa Duhaček, who is active at the WSC, as well as Natalja Laptošević, who used to work at the AWC before she started studying abroad. Finally, in Serbia too I tried to

expose myself to a different view from the regions and spoke with activists in two cities: Niš and Kruševac. All of them worked with vulnerable women and girls, especially from marginal groups. Among them were Vera Kurtić, Snežana Stojanović and Tamara Mitić, all of whom work at Ženski Prostor (Women's Space) in Niš, which focuses particularly on helping women from the Roma minority. In Kruševac, I spoke to Snežana Jakovljević, the director of Peščanika, which has a similar topical focus, as well as to one of its younger employees, Jasmina Todorović. I also had the pleasure to talk to Jelena Memet, who founded the Alternative Girl's Centre, which works with young women and girls in Kruševac.

Members of both the liberal and authoritarian period have witnessed the shift in hegemonic discourse, where the commitment to EU accession has become mere paid lip service and where progressive values and gender in particular are increasingly portrayed as alien and EU-imposed. In addition, the older generation know very well the devastating anti-gender war propaganda, and have made sure that the younger generations are equally alert to this new hegemonic discourse.

The following two tables (Table 3 and Table 4) provide an overview (because not every single interview participant was mentioned above). They illustrate the variety among my participants both in terms of their affiliation and activity, as well as in terms of generation for both case studies.

Table 3: Overview of Russian interview participants

ID	Generation	Name	Affiliation/Activity					RAIZH	Cyber FemiClub	Left-Fem	Urban Feminism	Artist	Blogger/Writer	Politics
			MGSC	ICGS	TCGS	PCGP	EUSPGS							
1.	Communist: 1970s-1980s	Lipovskaya												
2.		Mitrofanova												
3.		Rimashevskaya												
4.		Voronina												
5.	Liberal: 1991-2011	Anonymous												
6.		N. Hodyreva												
7.		Gafizova												
8.		Khasbulatova												
9.		Klimenkova												
10.		Kochkina												
11.		Makarova												
12.		Muravyeva												
13.		Nikonova												
14.		A. Hodyreva												
15.		Pushkareva												
16.		Temkina												
17.		Trofimova												
18.		Shnyrova												
19.		Suhareva												
20.		Uspenskaya												
21.		Yukina												
22.		Zamotaeva												
23.		Zdravomyslova												
24.	liberal: 2012-2017	Agamalova												
25.		Akimova												
26.		Apahonchich												
27.		Bakhrenkova												
28.		Borodina												
29.		Ivanova												
30.		Rahmaninova												
31.		Rapoport												
32.		Rybalko												
33.		Talaver												
34.		Tereshchenko												
35.		Vasyakina												
36.		Volk												

Table 4: Overview of Serbian interview participants

ID	Generation	Name	Affiliation/Activity										Atina	KTK	RWF	BeFem	
			WSC	SOS	AWC	WIB	Women's Space	ACFG	Peščanika								
1.	Communist: 1970s-1980s	Mladjenović															
2.		Driljević															
3.	Wartime: 1991-1999	Anđelković															
4.		Branković															
5.		Dojcinović															
6.		Duhaček															
7.		Maležević															
8.		Stojanović															
9.		Zajović															
10.		Litričin															
11.		Radović															
12.	Liberal: 2000-2013	Batričević															
13.		Bobić															
14.		Dojkić															
15.		Gudović															
16.		Kurtić															
17.		Jakovljević															
18.		Lončarević															
19.		Memet															
20.		Miražić															
21.		Mitić															
22.		Netković															
23.		Pantelić															
24.		Pavlović															
25.		Perišić															
26.		Pokrajac															
27.		Stajčić															
28.		Stojanović															
29.		Todorović															
30.		Višnjić															
31.		Zaharijević															
32.	Illiberal: 2014-2017	Duhaček															
33.		Laptošević															

3.5 Sources and coding

Chapter 4 is the only chapter in which I did not primarily rely on the conducted interviews as sources. As an opening to the core of the argument, it analyses the historical experience of transnational feminist encounters in both cases. Given that this was not part of the topics that were discussed in the interviews, they could not – with the exception of a few interviews with the oldest generation – meaningfully inform this section of the thesis. Instead, the historical analysis is based on interviews with contemporaries (which were conducted by other scholars or journalists), memoirs, concluding transcripts of the transnational feminist conferences the chapter discusses, as well as secondary sources.

For the remainder of the thesis, the conducted interviews build the bedrock for the analysis. For triangulation purposes, I occasionally also quote feminist publications to further illustrate or contextualise a specific opinion or debate. Among them are academic publications, but also articles feminists wrote in newspapers and magazines as well as blog posts and memoirs. Posts on social media were also considered, provided they were published with the privacy setting on public in order to avoid ethical problems regarding a breach of confidence with the participant.

I relied on semi-structured interviewing, since the objective was to capture the respondents' perception of their social worlds, in particular their view on transnational feminism and the political environment (HERMANOWICZ, 2002: 480). It is important to note that I did not pre-define transnational or Western feminism in the interviews. Rather, I let the interviewees explain what they understand by those terms, by asking in what format they had been in touch with Western feminism or feminists. As a result, their accounts are testimonies of a myriad of different instances of transnational feminism, ranging from conferences and workshops, to reading and translating Western feminist (scholarly) work, to very personal and singular encounters. Furthermore, knowledge-transfer is an academic concept that captures the critique of transnational feminism, but it was not the term my respondents used in the interviews. However, the open questions that left them space to express their views freely on transnational and Western feminism were followed up with so-called judgment questions. These are particularly useful for what Frederic Schaffer has

termed the elucidative strategy for grounding, which uses ordinary language interviewing to unpack the meaning people attach to concepts (SCHAFFER, 2017). Judgement questions are used because, by forcing interviewees to express an opinion and to make discriminations, they allow the revelation of meanings and standards implicit in a particular term (ibid.). This is how the enquiry regarding their perceptions of transnational feminism would evolve, from initially asking open-ended questions like “what kind of interactions and contacts have you had with Western feminism or feminists and how did you experience them?”, to judgment questions later on such as “did you feel treated as inferior during those exchanges?”, “were any of these encounters negative, and if so how?”, and ending with asking whether the idea of unilateral “Western feminist knowledge-transfer” and “Western feminism” at all resonated with them.

In terms of language, I would conduct the interview in Russian or Serbian unless my participants felt very comfortable speaking in English (or in individual instances German and French, which I also speak fluently) and were visibly at ease with it. This made sure they could express themselves freely, which is crucial if the meaning-making process is at the heart of the research, since language is one of the most important tools for creating everyday meaning. With the exception of one participant, all interviewees gave informed consent to be cited with their full name. When I had the impression that the situation had further deteriorated in Russia at the beginning of 2020, and their consent might have changed, I checked back with all participants, who renewed their consent. I have therefore decided to respect their choice and to name them. I have done so also bearing in mind Scheper-Hughes and Guenther’s argument that researchers often use pseudonyms more to protect themselves and to write more recklessly, while interviewees can still be identified (GUENTHER, 2009: 413, SCHEPER-HUGHES, 2000: 128).

With regards to presentation of the primary sources in the empirical chapters, the participants are at times briefly introduced but at others there is only a reference

to their name²⁵. However, a short profile of all participants can be found in Appendix 1: Short summary of interview participants. Furthermore, there are four interviews that were done with more than just one participant. In order to avoid confusion, I nevertheless at all times only quote the one person, who actually said the statement I refer to. Finally, I at times quote entire sentences, but much of the analysis will be drawn from the interviews without citing the exact wording each time.

As for the analysis of the interviews, all of them were transcribed and uploaded to the data analysis software MaxQDA. The most important feature I used in MaxQDA was the possibility to develop codes, attribute them to interview segments and then compare them with each other, both within one interview transcript and across the entire group of interviews for each case study. The two most frequent analytical tools I used were frequencies and co-occurrences between codes. This helped to both establish and visualise which of the coded aspects, concepts or topics were particularly prevalent and how they related with other one another, or not. It goes without saying that in interpretive research, frequencies and co-occurrences of codes are *per se* only useful to show patterns. They are not enough however, to spell out the dynamics linking and explaining occurrences, for example. The actual meaningful explanation only materialises because I embed the discerned patterns between codes in a larger discourse analysis, comprised of a detailed contextualisation and illustrative interview segments (as well as at times additional sources). The MaxQDA tools of frequency and co-occurrence were therefore of an auxiliary, rather than a fundamental nature.

With regards to code developing, I essentially used two approaches. The first was deductive insofar as the codes were derived from the critical theory and directly applied to the interviews where segments matched with what the theory postulates. This was the first step of analysis for each case study and concerns chapter 5 for Russia, and chapter 7 for Serbia. I then moved on to the larger inductive part, where I

²⁵ If they have the same surname, the full name is quoted to facilitate distinction between them. Moreover, there are five interviews, with more than one participant. The interview is quoted with all participants, but in order to distinguish who the quote is from, that participant's name will be added as a prefix to the citation, e.g. (Tereshchenko in: AGAMALOVA, TERESHCHENKO & VASYAKINA, 2017)

developed codes from within the data for each case study to glean what meaning feminists attributed to knowledge-transfer in light of their perception of their current political setting. In what follows, I present the coding scheme for the empirical test. The inductive coding systems are briefly introduced at the beginning of each corresponding chapter, which are chapter 6 for Russia, and chapter 8 for Serbia.

3.5.1 Empirical test

The empirical test pertains to analysing the collected data in order to determine whether respondents echo part of the arguments put forward by the critical theory on knowledge-transfer. The framework was outlined in the introduction and is here schematically summarised with the codes that I developed accordingly. At the heart of it all is the idea of an asymmetrical power relationship between Western and post-communist Europe which both allows and necessitates the exercise of temporal and geographical Othering in order to maintain that unequal relationship between the “knowledgeable” and the “ignorant”. The asymmetry, in other words, is both the start and ending point in a cyclical self-reinforcing process.

Since it is a cyclical rather than a linear process, there is no single correct starting point of analysis. I decided to start with the asymmetrical relationship for the reading of my data. The first code is therefore “asymmetrical relationship”. It only contains binary nodes of “yes” and “no” to the question of whether the respondent articulates a perception overall of an unequal relationship with the West. A “yes” would only be attributed if there was an expression of asymmetry with regards to the relationship to Western feminism or feminists. An absence of such an explicit expression would be enough to be coded with a “no”. Unequal relationships between the West and Russia and Serbia or their regime would not be taken into account in this code, for the purpose is to understand whether there is an imbalance of power among feminists specifically.

I then move onto the code of temporal Othering. The idea is to identify whether there is a perception of Western hegemonic temporality. In other words, whether the West is taken as the referent in order to assess the development of feminism in post-communist Europe as backward. It is argued that temporal Othering is mainly

expressed through two different forms. Either post-communist feminism is said to be at an early stage that the West has already passed; or feminism in post-communist Europe is described as a chaos, where all the different trends and past waves of Western feminism clash together because they emerge all at once, which hinders linear progress. What is crucial is that the Western sequential historical experience is taken as the temporal yardstick. The second main code, temporal Othering, denoting the construction of backwardness, therefore contains two subcodes of “lagging behind” and “chaotic all at once”.

The second main category of codes refers to geographical Othering, the exercise of excluding the semi-periphery from the core through silencing. It is argued that this denial of voice as equal knowledge producers concerns both the past and the present. On the one hand, the historical heritage of feminism, in particular feminism during communism, but also pre-revolutionary feminist movements, are said to be silenced. On the other hand, the current production of knowledge is not taken seriously, which is why it cannot be fed back to the core, and why the feminist at the semi-periphery is reduced to being an informer and providing raw material. The argument is that precisely because of its one-sidedness this dynamic is a transfer and not an exchange of knowledge. Accordingly, the subcodes for this third main code are “silencing of the past” and “silencing of the present”.

Key for this coding scheme are the additional subcodes “internal” and “external”, which are consistently applied as a supplement for both temporal and geographical coding. The idea behind these subcodes is to understand whether the respondents speak from their own (internal) perspective or whether they reflect the Western (external) perspective that is forced onto them. For instance, when an interviewee talks of her feminism in some way “lagging behind”, it is crucial to understand whether it is she who sees it that way (internal perspective) or whether she argues that this is how Western feminists see it (external perspective). I argue that this distinction between internal and external perspective is fundamental if we want to take individuals’ meaning-making process seriously. Critical scholars tend to dismiss internal perspectives that are not critical of knowledge-transfer as *false consciousness*, often referring to self-orientalism. This, I argue, has the double problem of being both

tautological and, more importantly, patronising. In order to avoid this, I hence indicate for each coding in temporal and geographical Othering, whether it is “internal” or “external”. Only if external prevails over internal can we effectively speak of a perception of knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering.

The table below shall help to summarise and illustrate the described coding scheme for the empirical test.

Table 5: Coding scheme for the empirical test

1. Asymmetric relationship	Refers to the notion of an unequal relationship, in which the West is the superior party
Yes	Typical affirmative reference would be mother vs. daughter, teacher vs. pupil but the asymmetry can also be described with other references to power
No	Either rejection of the notion of power asymmetry, or absence of an explicit affirmation of perceived asymmetry
2. Temporal Othering	Denotes whether Western hegemonic temporality is used as a framework to assess the development of post-communist feminism as backward
a. Lagging behind	Is at a developmental stage, the West has already past, ie. what is “present” is cast as “past”
b. Chaotic “all at once”	Many previous developmental stages of the West coincide and create chaos, which hinders progress
3. Geographical Othering	Indicates whether there is a denial of feminist history and knowledge production as a means to silence the semi-periphery and exclude it from the core
a. Silencing of the past	Mostly refers to the silencing of historical feminist experience during communism but also in the pre-revolutionary period
b. Silencing of the present	Concerns the silencing of the current knowledge-production through dismissal, absence of knowledge-exchange, and their reduction to informants and providers of raw material
4. Perspective	Is coupled with 2. and 3. in a coding matrix to indicate the point of view, ie. whether this is self-reflexion or not
a. Internal	Genuine self-perception of backwardness (temporal) and semi-peripheral location (geographical)
b. External	Critique of knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering that casts them as backward and relegates them to the semi-periphery in order to maintain the asymmetry

This empirical test is the first step in both case studies. As shall be seen, it demonstrates that whilst critique of Western knowledge-transfer exists, it is, unlike critical theory would have it, the exception to the rule. The thus unearthed conclusion that absence of critique of knowledge-transfer is the rule, is of more importance. It provides the backbone for articulating a *critique of the critique*. It follows that I dwell

less on the chapters related to the empirical test, in order to accord more space to the empirical chapters that elucidate why feminists reject knowledge-transfer and how they do so.

3.6 Limitations

From a positivist research perspective, there would be an obvious limitation in this thesis with regards to coding. Undoubtedly, we all approach sources differently and bring our own preconceptions, preferences and biases. Positivism aims to control for these biases with replicability. For interpretive research however, there is no possibility of “generating” objective results. The researcher tries to understand things from the very situated perspective of the actors involved. As such, she co-generates data (SCHWARTZ-SHEA & YANOW: 80). If the researcher is not outside of what is under study, the evidence she provides cannot be understood as objectively mirroring or measuring the world (ibid.: 80). While this may be seen as a problem for positivist scholars, this situatedness is precisely the added value of interpretive research. It is a valid way to find explanations that are meaningful of human action.

This is not to say that anything is permissible. As Ostergaard-Moller (2016) said, “there has to be meat on the interpretive skeleton”. In other words, the explanations have to be trustworthy. That trustworthiness entails that the interpretation of the empirics “makes sense” in light of feminists’ utterances, their discursive connections to the political environment and their actions. Trustworthiness also derives from transparency about how I generated the evidence. This will become clear through the consistency with which I developed, applied and analysed the codes in MaxQDA. Transparency, furthermore, means to be reflective about how my positionality as a researcher affected the process. As hinted at in the prologue, this research has been transformative for myself. I entered the field with a clear bias towards the critical framework and merely aimed to provide empirical evidence for a body of literature, whose fundamental claim about power relations in transnational feminism in the

post-communist region seemed unquestionable to me. The unequivocal rejection of that claim and the strong reactions it caused in my respondents came unexpectedly, and indeed caused what social scientists are usually taught makes good research: the encounter of a puzzle. I thus embarked on a long journey, in which I critically reflected upon long-held beliefs and gradually adjusted them thanks to the in-depth insights into their lived reality Russian and Serbian feminists generously gave me. This thesis is thus the product of a conscious effort to overcome preconceived notions based on the empirics found on the ground.

My positionality also affected the access I got to feminists and the trust we could establish during the conversations. If one assumes that there is a power hierarchy between West and East, then one might justifiably argue that the feminist interlocutors were “eager to please” me and not as frank with me because I come from Western Europe. There are, however, several reasons why I argue that this was not the case. First, I made a conscious effort to underline my Greek nationality, which in most cases shifted the perception interviewees had of me. Secondly, I speak both languages fluently, which helped to establish trust and familiarity and also conveyed that I was very interested in their point of view. These two factors led not a few interlocutors to say “you are one of us”. Thirdly, as mentioned, my starting points were often old, established organisations, and when I was recommended by feminists from such organisations that provided a valuable basis of trust. Perhaps most importantly, my experience showed that these women were anything but shy to express their open opinions to me. There were several occasions where there was a very clear rebuttal of what I was suggesting when I echoed the critical theory’s arguments. Lastly, since I remained an outsider, but with important insider information, I argue, they confided in me more than they might have done otherwise. This was particularly so with the younger generations, with whom we had more in common and with whom I also identified more. I was aware of this leaning throughout my work and have made a conscious effort to mitigate it by giving equal weight and space to all generations.

Last but not least, there are limitations in the scope of analysis this thesis can provide. Rather than reducing its validity, I propose that they can be seen as fruitful avenues for future research. The most important among them certainly is the lack of

Methods

systemic analysis between different feminist groups within the separate case studies. More research on the differences between feminist academics and activists, their geographic location and especially their generational experience, might indeed yield further interesting results.

4 Transnational feminist encounters during communism

4.1 Introduction

One central component of the critical framework on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe is the claim that transnational connections only started with the end of communism and that it consisted of Western women testing their theories and policies in the “virgin” territory (CÎRSTOCEA: 8). To counter this vision of the post-communist space as a non-feminist space – the basis to justify the unidirectional knowledge-transfer – a lot has been written about women’s agency during communism and how they furthered equality “nevertheless” (DE HAAN, 2010, NOVIKOVA, 2007, BONFIGLIOLI, 2016, GHODSEE, 2015, CÎRSTOCEA). What often gets overlooked, however, is that there were also many transnational encounters happening during the communist period. To stipulate that transnationalism only ensued with the fall of communism and only entailed knowledge-transfer is thus not only a problematic claim because of the contemporary authoritarian anti-gender discourse, with whose rhetoric it resonates. It is also an ahistorical claim, which this chapter counters by showing that feminists East and West not only met transnationally, but did so based on communist feminists’ own initiative and in the spirit of supportive camaraderie. For Yugoslavia, it focuses in particular on the transnational feminist conference Drug-ca in 1978 and the intellectual production and exchanges that ensued from it. In Soviet Russia, it looks at two different phases: feminist self-publishing and its relation to Western feminism in the 1980s, and repression thereof as well as renewed ties with feminists in the West just before the fall of the Soviet Union, which culminated in the first transnational feminist conference in 1991.

4.2 Yugoslav feminists ask, ‘what is happening to the American woman?’

Yugoslavia was very distinct from the Soviet Union and the larger “Eastern Bloc”. As Dejan Jović has argued, its very identity was actually built upon that distinction, which was based on three pillars: self-management, non-alignment and confederalised federalism (JOVIĆ: 286). These were juxtaposed to Soviet statism and bureaucracy in domestic policy, hegemony in foreign affairs, and centralism and unitarism in nationality policy (ibid.: 286-290). As a result, Yugoslav citizens enjoyed freedom of movement and by 1967 15% of its population had travelled to the West (LENDVAI, 1970: 188). This same freedom also enabled Yugoslav feminists to initiate transnational feminist encounters from the 1970s on.

The story begins in the early 1970s with “new Yugoslav feminists”, composed by a “handful of young women and a few university professors”, who were particularly interested in socialist feminist ideas from the West (LÓRÁND, 2018: 48-58). They drew from New Left feminism, both Marxist and socialist²⁶, to critically reflect their own socialist system and to formulate demands that would result in change and not punishment (ibid.: 48-58). From 1975, their reflections were published in a wide array of journals that were receptive to their new ideas, among them: *Pitanja [Questions]*, *Naše teme [Our topics]*, *Argumenti [Arguments]*, *Ideje [Ideas]*, *Socijalizam u svetu [Socialism in the world]*, *Dometi [Scopes]*, *Republika [Republic]*, *Književnost [Literature]*. Importantly, their ideas were also circulated by the state women’s organisation’s journal *Žena [Woman]*. Referring to feminism in the West was not only inspiring, but also an initial strategy to induce a debate without mentioning domestic problems, as for example Mežnarić did in her article “What is happening to the American woman?” (MEŽNARIĆ, 1972).

²⁶ They discussed Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham and Evelyne Reed, but also French post-structuralist feminists, Kristeva and Irigaray, as well as those radical feminists who, even if they were inspired by Marxism, rather belonged to a new English language line of radical feminism, such as Germaine Greer and Shulamith Firestone (LÓRÁND, 2018: 47).

Backstage of these publications, the small group of feminists organised two crucial events: the Portorož seminar of the Croatian Sociological Society on the topic of the social position of women, and the ‘Women Studies’ [sic] international summer school in Dubrovnik. These two events were the build-up to the 1978 conference *Drug-ca Žena. Žensko Pitanje. Novi Pristup?* [Comrade Woman. The Woman Question: A New Approach?] (BONFIGLIOLI, 2018: 241), held in Belgrade in October 1978 and representing the first international feminist conference in a socialist country. Renowned feminists from Italy, France, the UK and West Germany were invited to it (ibid.: 241). Feminist knowledge production grew throughout the late 1980s, when new feminist groups were created and women’s studies summer schools were organised together with international feminist scholars in Dubrovnik (Ibid.).

Picture 1: The Drug-ca conference in Belgrade in 1978



Source: Archive of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, where the conference was held.

These meetings spurred the literal and political translations of Anglo-American, Italian and French feminist ideas in Yugoslavia. A key result was the pioneering volume of scholarly anthropological feminist texts translated from English into Serbo-

Croatian in 1983 (ibid.). The Zagreb-based anthropologist Lydia Sklevicky (1952–1990) and Belgrade-based sociologist Žarana Papić (1949–2002), who had both played a central role in the organisation of all three encounters, edited the volume. This volume introduced for the first time the terms to distinguish between sex and gender: *(s)pol and rod* (LÓRÁND, 2018). As Litričin, one of my respondents, describes in an interview with the researcher Lóránd: “We were learning a feminist language. At the beginning, I was always rethinking my sentences, asking myself the question: ‘what would this mean in the vocabulary of feminism?’ It was not just words we were translating, it was thoughts” (ibid.: 175).

Thus, Western feminist ideas, in particular radical and socialist frameworks, which engaged critically with Marxism and post-Marxism, circulated in Yugoslavia from the 1970s onward (BONFIGLIOLI, 2018: Ibid.: 247). While Yugoslav feminists saw them as useful tools to reflect on and challenge the local debate on the “resolved” woman question, the crucial aspect of this translation process is that they did not receive them uncritically. The Drug-ca conference is the best testimony to this, as it was characterised by a great deal of initial tension and misunderstanding between the foreign guests and local hosts. One of the main problems – relating to French and Italian feminists in particular – was that those who came from a background where feminist movements’ autonomy from the state was deemed primordial, had the wrong impression that the conference orchestrated an official state discourse. They could not see that the conference was both a dissident endeavour – insofar as it challenged the official position alleging that the woman question was no longer a question – and an effort to open new spaces for feminist analysis and demands within the socialist state (BONFIGLIOLI, 2011: 116).

Neither the state, which enabled the institutionalisation of equality, nor socialism, which promised the full emancipation of all human beings, were the addressees of Yugoslav feminist critique (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2015: 95). Unlike second-wave Western feminists, who directed their demands to their respective local states, Yugoslav feminists did not invent a “patriarchal state of their own” (ibid.: 94). Yugoslav feminists frequently compared their situation to that of women in capitalist societies and emphasised that state socialism provided them with several crucial rights.

They did not want to overthrow their socialist state, but merely point at the discrepancy between official propaganda of gender equality and actual reality. This is why they were very much committed to working with the authorities and why foreign guests were baffled about the “old emancipationist line: work, laws, services, social integration and construction of socialism” (BONFIGLIOLI, 2011: 119, BONFIGLIOLI, 2018: 248).

The Yugoslav hosts’ reactions to this lack of understanding is significant. Zagreb-based philosopher Rada Iveković, for instance, who was one of the main organisers of the conference, intervened at some point, saying: “I only wonder why the colleagues think what they think, why many seem to think that they have to teach us, (...) that we cannot reach these things by ourselves.” (Rada Iveković cited in: BONFIGLIOLI, 2011: 119). The Italian feminist Carla Ravaoli would later describe the incident as a “harsh reaction” that signalled Yugoslav participants did not want to be taught any “lessons” and which made the Western guests wonder why they had been invited at all (Carla Ravaoli cited in: BONFIGLIOLI, 2011: *ibid.*).

While curious of Western feminist ideas, Yugoslav feminists thus demonstrated that their aim was to develop their own situated analysis of sexism, inequality and patriarchy, which Western feminists who visited Yugoslavia had not anticipated²⁷ (BONFIGLIOLI, 2018: 252). This commitment is further apparent in the main result of these encounters: the already mentioned 400-page anthology of feminist anthropological texts published by Sklevicky and Papić in 1983. Bonfiglioli’s research shows that the editors used Western texts as a tool to change local debates, and in order to create a feminist intellectual genealogy in Yugoslavia. So although very open to Western feminism, they approached it critically, always having in mind that the ultimate goal was a broader cultural and political translation that led to an original and “locally meaningful re-contextualisation” (*ibid.*: 241).

²⁷ This is also indicative that the self-awareness of potentially oppressive traits and expectations had not yet been established among Western feminists. This self-awareness is indeed one of critical theory’s biggest achievement.

The eighties brought a shift away from intellectual to more practical exchanges. Yugoslav feminists started to think about how to effectively organise and bring about the changes they wanted. One of the most important ways of organising were the three All-Yugoslav Feminist Gatherings in 1987, 1989, and 1990. These were largely influenced by the new activist group *Žena i društvo [Woman and Society]*, from which some of the most influential feminist organisations, such as the first helplines for victims of domestic violence, would emerge, and which still operate today (DRUŠTVO VITA ACTIVA & CENTAR ZA ŽENE ŽRTVE RATA ROSA, 2009). Violence against women was indeed one of the core topics on which Yugoslav feminists practically collaborated with Western feminists. As Mladenović, one of my respondents, told Lóránd for her research, her conviction to found a first SOS hotline in Belgrade consolidated after attending a workshop organised by the feminist group ISIS in Switzerland (LÓRÁND, 2018: 186). The workshop united women from South Africa, Nicaragua, China, Kenya, Paraguay and Yugoslavia, and later it was through ISIS that they mutually shared new information they had gathered (ibid.: 186-187).

Overall, transnational connections²⁸ were abundant in Yugoslavia. Yugoslav feminists engaged with feminism and feminists from Western countries or experienced them as facilitators for yet wider exchanges. All of this took place out of their own initiative and interest, and with a critical and assertive stance when needed. Even though they drew from Western ideas to make sense of the discrimination and how to overcome it, and even though they realised they had a lot in common with Western colleagues in terms of oppression, they were also adamant to be dissident but not disloyal of their socialist state, whose system they generally endorsed. Yugoslav feminists just before the end of communism were thus not only well acquainted with ideas of Western feminism, but also well versed in its critical appropriation, the

²⁸ This section's exclusive focus on transnational connections between Yugoslav and Western feminists does not denigrate the existence and importance of the contacts and exchanges Yugoslav feminists had with women in the then-called "Third World", especially with feminists from the Non-Aligned Movement. These are simply omitted here because they are not pertinent to the critical argument this thesis engages with, which is concerned with the East/West dimension.

creation of original knowledge and, when necessary, the repudiation of any Western aspiration to “teach”.

4.3 Soviet feminists proclaim, ‘democracy without women is no democracy’

Compared to their Yugoslav contemporaries, Soviet Russian feminists developed in much greater isolation from the West and Western feminism; but there were important contacts nevertheless, both during the feminist dissident movement in the early 1980s and perestroika in the late 1980s.

4.3.1 Feminist dissent and samizdat

A small feminist movement emerged in Soviet Russia in the late 1970s, for which Western practical support would soon prove crucial. It was situated in a larger context of dissidence, which resulted from Khrushchev’s Thaw, which had allowed the formation of informal groups and circles. In this new environment, it was possible to access feminist literature. Though not available to the general public, it circulated in samizdat²⁹ format among small circles of the urban intelligentsia and could be found in closed archives of main libraries (HEMMENT, 2000: 122). This is how some young female scholars, who now had more freedom to write dissertations on the formerly closed topic of women’s issues, would find Western sources for their research.

In this atmosphere, the first feminist samizdat *Zhenshchina i Rossiya [Woman and Russia]* was published in September 1979. It is usually associated with the beginning of an independent women’s movement in Soviet Russia. The editors Natalya Malakhovskaya, Tatyana Goricheva, Tatyana Mamonova and Yuliya Voznesenskaya all had ties to Leningrad’s “second culture” (read: dissident circles) (VOZNESENSKAYA, 1982: 333). The impetus to write a feminist almanac came from their personal experience within those dissident circles (especially the journal “37” and the almanac “Chasi”),

²⁹ Samizdat is an abbreviation of “sam” (Russian: self, by oneself) and “izdatelstvo” (Russian: publishing house) and refers to the hand-to-hand circulation of self-published forbidden manuscripts. These early publications in samizdat form had very limited circulation (JANSEN, 2000).

where they soon felt like “non-conformists within a circle of non-conformists” who could not express themselves (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 1992/1993: 8, MILEWSKA-PINDOR, 2013).

Their first samizdat featured essays about women in prison camps, their experience in birth clinics, in particular during abortion, the horror of shared accommodation, their exploitation in a shortage economy both in the workplace and at home but also touched upon taboo issues such as alcoholism, female crime and prostitution. Although there were only ten copies, one found its way to Paris and was immediately published in *Des Femmes en Mouvements* (FLAITZ, 1983: 116). Most recent research shows that the cultural attaché at the French Consulate in Leningrad most likely brought it to Paris (SIDOREVICH, 2020: 89-90). He approached the Movement for Women’s Liberation (MLF), the most important feminist group in France at the time, and to which the exiled Irina Baskina, a Leningrad dissident, also belonged (ibid.: 89). She was asked to translate the almanac for *Des Femmes en Mouvement*. From there the feminist samizdat quickly spread to the UK, West Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Japan, Brazil and the United States.

Contrary to what the German popular feminist magazine *Emma* was quick to claim at the time in a review of the samizdat (ANONYMOUS, 1980), there was no trace of Western influence. Quite the opposite; French feminists actually received it with rather mixed feelings – especially because of Malakhovskaya’s and Goricheva’s explicit religious feminist stance. Not a few Soviet dissidents founded their arguments in Christianity. However, French feminists did not know the context well enough to be able to interpret it as feminist dissent. To them a religious stance was the antithesis to secularism, which they viewed as the only way for women’s emancipation. This clearly transpired in one of the reader’s letters that was sent in response to the almanac:

The new has to be criticised with the help of something even newer, and not with something old. [...] Goricheva presents as a revelation, what for centuries justified our oppression. [...] Russian women have without a doubt suffered enough about which we need to talk, but who ripped them from their own bodies, from lust and sweet ‘vice’? (SIDOREVICH: 47).

It is precisely in these disputes, and the dissimilarity in terms of topics and agendas that Kozlov sees Russian feminists’ independence vis-à-vis their Western peers (KOZLOV, TALAVER & VASYAKINA, 2020: 46). Kozlov also argues that this may well have

been unconscious, but is nevertheless a clear sign of assertive, independent thought, which is what counts for the argument advanced in this chapter.

In fact, except for Mamonova (VOZNESENSKAYA: 333), none of the authors had direct knowledge of Western feminism, its different ideologies, theoretical frameworks and social movements³⁰ (MILEWSKA-PINDOR: 8, FLAITZ: 118). While Mamonova looked for an exchange with Western interlocutors (HEMMENT: 120), Malakhovskaya recalls: “I did not know what feminism was, I did not know what women’s movement meant” (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 2004). Only years later, when they were already living in exile, would they discover the parallels with other (mostly French) feminists, and get access to “eye-opening” books (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 1992/1993, MALAKHOVSKAYA, 2012). Deprived of precedence, templates and a developed ideology, they decided to use their personal experience not to provide ready-made answers but to raise the difficult question of how a country, which officially proclaimed gender equality, could treat its women so badly (BRIDGER: 124, FLAITZ, 1983: 117-118).

While, as reviews in Western academic journals of the time show (SCOTT, 1982: 128), the almanac was confusing for Western feminist readers because it contained a “curious mixture of articles” that did not combine to “render a homogenous theoretical approach to feminism” (FLAITZ: 117), it was undoubtedly ground-breaking. The editors disrupted not only the long-standing myth of the welfare state. They also shattered the myth of the heroic, courageous and almost almighty Soviet woman (MILEWSKA-PINDOR: 19). Unlike Western feminists at the time, Malakhovskaya explains retrospectively, they did not have in mind the women who fly to space, but the “women-destroyers” of that neat propaganda image (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 1992/1993).

This explains the huge popularity of the almanac within dissident circles (people in Leningrad would read it in one night in order to pass it over quickly) and why the authorities applied such harsh repression³¹. Within less than a year all four funding

³⁰ Though Goricheva says she had already read “the Second Sex” and other classics for some things every now and then found their ways to the Soviet Union, she also emphasises that they knew very little (HEMMENT, 2000: 120).

³¹ They particularly resorted to so-called „anti-motherhood“ terror, incarcerating the dissidents’ children in psychiatric clinics or threatening to do so.

editors were forced into exile³² from where they continued their work with the help of women, who had stayed in Soviet Russia. With the exception of Mamonova, who went on to lead the secular faction and publish another edition of “Woman and Russia”, all other editors continued working with the “Mariya” club. It was created in December 1979 and found its ideology in Orthodox Christianity (YUKINA, 2014a: 8, MARSH, 1996: 286). However, the KGB also repressed this new group. The first issue was confiscated before it could be circulated and three of the editors had to leave the country³³. The fourth editor, Natalya Lazareva, was arrested in March 1982 and sentenced to four years in prison (though she would eventually serve five) (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 1992/1993, VOZNESENSKAYA: 336). This is how the independent women’s movement was effectively destroyed by 1982 (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 1992/1993).

Western feminists, in particular French feminists and the MLF in Paris, again played a key role when it came to supporting Russian feminists in light of state persecution. Malakhovskaya reckons that it was thanks to the letters the MLF wrote to Soviet Embassies that the repression was slightly loosened (MALAKHOVSKAYA, 2004). As H el ene Ch atlain and Armand Gatti, two key figures of the MLF, recall, even though they disagreed with Russian feminists’ religious approach this did not prevent them from helping them (cited in: SIDOREVICH, 2020: 89).

Except for Mamonova, however, Western feminist ideas were not a reference point for the feminist dissidents in Soviet Russia. The parallels, especially to French feminism³⁴, might be apparent with hindsight, but they were not the result of active cross-border fertilisation. An official exchange between feminists, who operated outside the controlled state structures, as it occurred during the Drug-ca conference in

³² Officially this was euphemistically called „voluntary leave“. Mamonova left for the United States, where she still lives today. Malakhovskaya migrated to Vienna and has been living there since. Goricheva first went to West Germany. A year later in 1981 she continued her journey to Paris, where she lived until she was granted to return to the Soviet Union in 1988. Voznesenskaya, too, divided her life in exile between Germany and France, but never returned.

³³ Ksenia Rotmanova and Tatyana Bielyaeva had to leave in 1980, with Elena Shanigyna following in 1981.

³⁴ Mamonova’s essay in the almanac calls for a proper application of Marxism, while Goricheva used Young’s psychoanalysis as a framework, both of which were common at the time among French feminists.

1978 in Yugoslav Serbia³⁵, would have been completely unimaginable at the same time in Soviet Russia. Moreover, although the Russian feminists liked to refer to it as the independent women's movement, Julie Hemment is right to caution whether this really qualified as a movement yet (HEMMENT: 121). In Yugoslavia, Drug-ca and the accompanying events that took place in the 1970s were catalysts for the development of an organised autonomous feminist movement. In the Soviet Union, alternatively, feminist dissidence remained disorganised and sporadic (ibid.: 122). Although repressed at home and feted abroad, it remained a very marginal phenomenon with little contact with the West; yet with a contact that proved crucial both for the distribution of the ideas of feminist dissidents beyond the Iron Curtain, and especially for the support when faced with state repression.

Cross-border encounters similar to the exchanges Yugoslav feminists had had since the 1970s could only happen towards the end of the 1980s in Soviet Russia when feminist voices started to multiply thanks to Perestroika, which made an open feminist discourse possible again (EBERT, 2004: 208). Informally, women started to help victims of domestic and sexual violence in Leningrad and Moscow³⁶, and a new feminist samizdat *Zhenskoe Chtenie [Women's Reading]*, published once again in Leningrad, by Olga Lipovskaya, emerged, this time with no fear of repression. In our interview, Lipovskaya told me how she had been active in dissident circles such as the "Club 81" (LIPOVSKAYA, 2017). Since she was fluent in English and German she started translating Western feminist texts, which her dissident peers, the majority of whom were men, ridiculed. This is why she had been thinking about publishing her own

³⁵ Though it might be worth pointing out that the two main organisers of the Drug-ca conference, Dunja Blažević and Žarana Papić, were possibly able to take more liberties because their fathers were in high positions in the state authorities. However, this did not protect them from the overwhelmingly negative coverage of the conference by state media (LUCHENKO, 2014).

³⁶ These same women would later institutionalise their work in so-called crisis centres, the most renowned of which are the "Women's Crisis Centre" (1993, St. Petersburg), the No to Violence Association "Anna" (1993, Moscow) and "Syostri", which means Sisters (1994, Moscow).

journal for a while, but the trigger really only came when her American friend³⁷, the LGBT activist Julie Dorf, put her in touch with two reporters from the *Washington Times*. When they interviewed her and later printed “black on white that I was going to publish a feminist journal, I had no longer an excuse” (ibid.).

Between 1988 and 1990 Lipovskaya published six issues of *Women’s Reading*, each containing about 80 pages (GESSEN, 1998). It mainly contained translations of prominent Western feminists, such as Adrienne Rich (ESSIG, 1996: 150), as well as prose and poetry by contemporary or long-forgotten Russian women writers (FELDMANN, 1988). Although the samizdat, as usual, had limited circulation, the impact was considerable. Together with the interview in the *Washington Times*, she was soon well known abroad. She featured in Francine Du Plessix Gray’s book *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope* (1989) and was published in a Western academic journal in 1990 (LIPOVSKAYA, 1990). Lipovskaya’s case shows that the contact and involvement with Western feminism had become far more permissible compared to the reaction to the almanac *Woman and Russia* a decade earlier. Lipovskaya stands for the renewed but also last generation of samizdat feminist dissidents, for at the same time other contemporary feminists had begun the institutionalisation of Russian feminism.

4.3.2 Perestroika and feminist democratisation

In 1988 four young Muscovite female academics created the feminist group “Lotus” (League for the Emancipation from Sexual Stereotypes) for informal discussions of feminist issues. The appointment of Natalya Rimashevskaya, a contemporary and friend of Gorbachev, as director of the new institute for demographic studies at the Institute for Socio-Economic Studies of Population in the Academy of Sciences, offered protection for these young feminists (GRÜNELL, 1998: 500). A turning point

³⁷ Lipovskaya also explained that at the time many foreigners, especially students, were already allowed into the Soviet Union, which is how her contacts with the West started to establish. In a different interview (VESELINOVIĆ, 2003), she also tells how she managed to sneak into a conference, where German women delegates gave, among other things, a lecture on women’s condition in Germany. Since she spoke German, she was able to engage some of the delegates, who were delighted about the refreshing change to Soviet etiquette.

arrived when two of them – Anastasia Posadskaya and Natalya Zaharova – together with Rimashevskaya were invited by the Council of Ministers of the USSR to propose ideas for how to change women’s situation. The results were two truly revolutionary articles, *Kak my reshaem zhenskij vopros* [How to solve the woman’s question] (POSADSKAYA, RIMASHEVSKAYA & ZAHAROVA, 1989) and *Zhenskij vopros* [Woman’s question] (VORONINA, 1990). The former was published in *Kommunist*, the theoretical organ of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and for the first time openly criticised the official gender policy, which had declared the woman question as “solved” in the past fifty years. Furthermore, these were the first scholarly papers to argue that the differences between the sexes were not biological but socially constructed.

In order to give their argument more leverage, they referred to UN organisations, such as UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation, which the Soviet Union respected and recognised (SPERLING, FERREE & RISMAN: 1163). This was at least partly a result of the efforts of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WDIF). The WDIF was established in Paris after World War II in order to unite women in communist and non-communist countries. It was the only Western organisation which managed to maintain some links with Russian feminists throughout Soviet times (SAARINEN, EKONEN & USPENSKAYA, 2014: 8). It provided Russian women with access to UN conferences (1975, 1980 and 1985) dedicated to the Decade of Women, which marked the beginning of “global sisterhood”, what is predominantly understood as transnational feminism.

The “Helsinki effect”³⁸ (THOMAS, 2001), together with the “marriage of convenience”, which consisted in inviting the Moscow and St. Petersburg intelligentsia to join reformist elements of the Communist Party under Gorbachev as policy consultants (HEMMENT: 127), also facilitated increasing access to the international stage. The Soviet Union had indeed ratified the UN Convention for the Elimination of

³⁸ The „Helsinki effect“ refers to 1976, when the USSR signed the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which also enunciated as a core principle the “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”. As a result, the Moscow Helsinki Group was established to monitor and report about human rights abuses in the Soviet Union.

all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the early eighties, which is why feminist scholars were all of a sudden in demand. It was this spirit which opened access to UN Women's conferences and allowed the young feminists of the "Lotus" group, under the auspices of Rimashevskaya, to create the Moscow Centre for Gender Studies (MCGS), the first of its kind in the Soviet Union, in 1991.

However, as Jennifer Suchland rightly points out, "global sisterhood" at the time merely denoted an exchange between First and Third World women (SUCHLAND, 2011: 840-841). It is questionable whether the Russian participants at UN Women's conferences could really act as independent agents. Tight restrictions on civil society activism kept them away from the parallel NGO conferences (ibid.: 843). Effectively, they could only enter the "global sisterhood" and the international stage after 1989 (KONSTANTINOVA, 1996: 184). A first international conference on gender studies in Russia was organized by UNESCO and held in Moscow in November 1990 (KHOTKINA, 2002: 7). Although Western scholars could mingle with Russians, this was still within an institutional and controlled setting.

It is in this regard that the First Independent Women's Forum in March 1991 marks a new beginning. The newly established MCGS, together with other feminists, organised this first independent feminist conference in Dubna, a few kilometres north of Moscow, only months before the collapse of the USSR. The Dubna conference was the first time Soviet Russian feminists organised independently. Dubna, this time similar to the Drug-ca conference in Yugoslavia, also spurred the creation of the first more institutionalised organisations such as the crisis centre Anna, which soon afterwards started informally to help victims of domestic and sexual violence in Leningrad and Moscow. The organisers explicitly distanced themselves from the official socialist state women's organisations, the *zhensovet* [women's councils], which Gorbachev had tried to resurrect in 1985 and which were not given special treatment³⁹ (COCKBURN, 1991: 144). But independent organising was still viewed with suspicion and

³⁹ The few spots were attributed on a first-come, first-served basis, and when the representative from the *zhensoviet* missed the deadline to apply, she was not invited. She came nevertheless, but was at all times met with the same treatment everybody else enjoyed.

the organisers faced a lot of official harassment and almost had to shut down the conference (HEMMENT: 136).

The defamation against the conference was also a foretaste of the anti-gender arguments that would become an inherent feature of the authoritarian backlash twenty years later. Two days before the conference was due to begin, the daily *Moskovski Komsomolets*, in an attempt to discredit the conference, spread the false claim that a gay man was on its organising committee, implying that the conference would be about and for the LGBT community (COCKBURN: 145). People in the city of Dubna expressed fear that their “children would be at risk from an influx of deviants” and the Institute of Nuclear Physics, where the conference was supposed to be held, withdrew its permission (ibid.: 154). Only two days of protests and explanations allowed the conference to go ahead (ibid.: 154). It is precisely these reassuring explanations and selective demarcation from LGBT issues that would twenty years later also become a survival strategy for feminists.

Picture 2: The Dubna conference in 1991



Source: COCKBURN (1991, 142)

Given its independent character, the Dubna conference signposts the beginning of contemporary Russian feminism, but also of more abundant transnational feminism. Of the 200 participants, 26 were foreigners, from the US, Canada, England, Sweden, Austria, Germany and France (ORGANISING COMMITTEE OF THE FIRST INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM, 1991). For the first time, Western scholars and activists could enter

into dialogue with Soviet Russian women on Russian soil. This led to numerous collaborations and private exchanges, and to the first offers of financial support to emerging women's organisations, mostly from individuals and small feminist donor organisations (HEMMENT: 138).

There are several things to note of the foreign guests at the conference, however, to highlight Soviet Russian⁴⁰ feminists' independence at that crucial moment. First of all, feminists from Western Europe and North America were very much guests, who had been invited upon local feminists' wishes. Secondly, as the British feminist Cynthia Cockburn, who was one of the invitees, noted in an article she published soon after the conference, they were not asked to teach or guide Soviet women. In fact, the conference lasted for three days, and only on the third day, after having carefully listened to everything the Soviet Russian feminists had said, were they invited to share their impressions, compared to their own situation (COCKBURN: 144). Cockburn also emphasises the evident independent character of these feminists and their aspirations: "Although the women's movement in other countries has been an inspiration to Soviet women, it is important not to overestimate this. They have a clear sense of their own contemporary needs and circumstances" (ibid.: 144). Finally, she was also surprised to see Soviet feminists' strong interest in gaining management and entrepreneurial skills. This is testimony to the different *Zeitgeist* in which the conference took place. Soviet Russian feminists at that moment believed in the dominant model of transitioning, which included reforms towards a liberal market economy. They also anticipated the disproportionately negative effects on women's employment this would have, but could not, and did not want to, attribute it to this definition of democratisation.

⁴⁰ Unlike with feminist dissent and samizdat publications, which can be clearly located in Russian Leningrad, with the Dubna conference the distinction between Soviet and Soviet Russian feminists is blurred. In fact, among the participants were also women from other Soviet republics, including Belarus and Kazakhstan (but notably not from the Northern Caucasus). However, I keep the term Soviet Russian feminists because the organising committee of the conference was exclusively composed by feminists from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. This included members of the MCGS, as well as the Leningrad activist Lipovskaya and Klimenkova, who was at the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

This is the element that crucially sets them apart from the preceding wave of dissidents. Early feminist dissidents had more in common with their Yugoslav contemporaries, who did not want to overthrow socialism as a model of governance per se, but rather make it fulfil its promises of gender equality. The Soviet Russian feminists who entered the scene during perestroika, however, had an unshakable belief in democratisation and the necessity of overcoming the communist past in order for democratisation to be successful. Epitomising this belief, the slogan “democracy without women is no democracy” was chosen at the end of the Dubna conference for their future feminist struggle (ORGANISING COMMITTEE OF THE FIRST INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM, 1991). The overall conclusion of the gathering was that democracy was vital for women's emancipation, despite all the shortcomings of the actual democratisation. While they well considered the current exclusion of women from the democratisation process as “immoral, anti-social and destructive”, they thought it was attributable to a society that had become “politically and humanly backward” due to communism (ibid.).

As a result, the resolutions taken at the conference were aimed at addressing these shortcomings by fighting for women's inclusion in the new democratic institutions. They advocated for parity in all major decision-making bodies and called for the creation of independent political women's organisations, including that of a political party (ibid.). So although they critically examined the process of democratisation, they also genuinely believed in its institutions and their ability to offer something new and better. They had faith that they were finally entering an ideology-free era, where capitalism and liberal democracy would heal society of the perversion it had endured during communism (HEMMENT: 138). The image of the idealised egalitarian West was very much intact and a core signifier for Soviet Russian feminists at the time. They believed that their “Eastern democracy” (male, aggressive, corrupt) was simply a deviation from the true and civilised democracy in the West (ibid.). They did not perceive that transition would not automatically erase all asymmetries by “freeing” them from an unwanted regime. On the contrary, it provided and sanctioned a unique opportunity to re-distribute political power at the expense of women to compensate men, who had been “emasculated” during communism

(WATSON, 2000b: 111-112). Instead of seeing their unequal treatment as an inherent problem of liberal democracy, they thought it was an unfortunate communist legacy that could and had to be overcome.

This resulted in a conscious west-ward gaze, where they actively consulted their Western colleagues, all while being aware of their specific needs and able to communicate them, as aptly demonstrated at the Dubna conference. However, this also led to an ignoring of their socialist feminist heritage for the next two decades, as future generations would painfully discover (HODYREVA, 2020). As Asya Hodyreva, one of my respondents, shows in recent research on the encounter between these two different strands of Soviet feminism, the exiled dissidents returned to Russia as soon as the borders were opened, but the activists and scholars that emerged from the Dubna conference largely ignored them (*ibid.*: 107). Dissident feminists were relics of a socialist past, those that the new democratising feminists wanted to forget and deemed irrelevant.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate that the claim that transnational feminism only started with the end of communism and exclusively entailed a unidirectional knowledge-transfer, is an ahistorical assertion. As shown, both Yugoslav and Soviet Russian feminists experienced transnational encounters with Western peers during communism. And more importantly, these encounters were initiated by them and characterised by their independence and assertiveness in them.

In Yugoslavia, these transnational feminist encounters could happen with more intensity already in the 1970s. They first happened on an intellectual level, with Yugoslav feminists particularly orienting themselves toward Western, leftist feminist thought to formulate a critique of their system, which they embraced, but wanted to improve in terms of gender equality. This interest culminated in the Drug-ca conference and the resulting edited volume, which encompassed a large body of Anglo-American feminist literature. Both bear witness to Yugoslav feminists' independent thought, for there was no passive or uncritical reception, but confident repudiation when they felt talked down to and meaningful re-contextualisation of the

material. In the 1980s a practical level was added to the original intellectual dimension, with Yugoslav feminists now also collaborating with feminists in Western Europe in finding concrete solutions for the problems they had diagnosed. This particularly concerned their coordinated effort to combat violence against women, whereby Western feminists also played a role as facilitators between feminists from different non-Western countries.

Feminists in Soviet Russia were more isolated than their Yugoslav contemporaries, but there were contacts with the West nevertheless. At first, in the early 1980s, the contacts with French feminists proved important for the distribution of the first feminist samizdat and later in order to curb state repression and facilitate feminist dissidents' flights abroad. The history of the first feminist samizdat is exemplary for Soviet Russian's independence in two ways. Unlike in Yugoslavia, it was not inspired by reading Western feminist texts, but written based on their own lived experience. As such, it also included arguments that were based on religion and which triggered judgemental reactions among French feminists. These disputes and deviations from "mainstream" topics and agendas in the West, are a testimony to Soviet Russian feminists' autonomy. However, this history also shows that they were ready to accept help when faced with repression at home, and importantly, that French feminists did not make total accord a pre-condition for their help. It was thus a feminist transnational encounter, based on equality and respect.

At the end of the 1980s, ideas for how to improve gender equality in the Soviet Union were officially solicited, opening up space for feminist action. Here too, contacts with Western feminists proved important. The WDIF had granted Soviet Russian feminists access to UN conferences, which in turn allowed them to learn about important UN bodies and to refer tactically to them to give their demands more leverage. Later on, just before the fall of the Soviet Union, they managed to organise a first transnational independent feminist conference on Soviet soil. Thirteen years on from the Drug-ca conference, it was equally characterised by the local hosts' autonomy. It was Soviet Russian feminists who had initiated the Dubna conference, and it was they who invited foreign guests and told them what they needed from them. Both the Yugoslav Drug-ca conference and the Soviet Dubna conference are

emblematic for communist feminists' agency. They actively sought inspiration for the topics they were concerned with. The difference between the two conferences is that Yugoslav feminists in 1978 were looking for Western socialist ideas of feminism, while Soviet Russian feminists in 1991 believed in the paradigm of democratisation and thus searched for what may be called a more liberal feminism. Unlike Yugoslav feminists they were adamant about leaving socialism, including their own socialist feminist heritage, because they believed genuinely that democratisation held a better future for them and they wanted to be active agents in that transformation.

One could of course also travel further back and look at the important transnational connections at the turn of the 19th century related to Russian feminists' struggle for suffrage. This would, however, be beyond the scope of this research. I do wish to highlight one of my respondents' most recent work though. In her article, the historian Irina Yukina highlights that the connections between Russian and Western women at the time were ample (YUKINA, 2020). More importantly, she shows that Russian suffragists viewed Westerners as their "sisters" and represented themselves as explorers of other movements, who then passed on the gathered knowledge to compatriots in order to enhance the chances of success of their campaign (ibid.: 2). The same optic, I argue, also prevailed almost eighty years later, when both Soviet feminist dissidents and democratisers gladly accepted the support they deemed beneficial and had asked for.

PART II – RUSSIA

5 Critique of knowledge-transfer in Russia

5.1 Introduction

As mentioned, each case study first focuses on the empirical test of the critical framework (as developed in section 3.5.1 of the methods chapter). In this chapter, I present the results of the empirical test brought forward in the Russian case. To recap, the test involves two parts. First, it looks at whether respondents generally mention an asymmetrical relationship with Western feminism/feminists. It then looks in more detail at perceptions of temporal and geographical Othering, all while considering whether these perceptions are internal to the interlocutor, or reporting on how they have felt Othered from the West (this refers to the internal/external perspective subcodes in the coding system). I argue that only if “external” prevails over “internal” can we speak of a genuine perception of transnational feminism as a knowledge-transfer used for Othering. In the reverse case, what we see is that Russian feminists genuinely perceive *themselves* as lagging behind or being at the semi-periphery.

The chapter thus first looks at the binary code on whether or not the feminist in question perceived an asymmetrical relationship between Western and Russian feminism. The results yield that there was a perception of asymmetry among my respondents, but that respondents also exclusively related this asymmetry to the liberal period. The rest of the chapter analyses the interview segments that have been coded with the subcodes defined as part of temporal and geographical Othering (for details see 3.5.1) and, importantly, examines which of them co-occurred with the external perspective. The following tables Table 6 and Table 7 show the co-occurrence between all codes and the code “external” and “internal”.

Table 6: Co-occurrence with code “external”

Code System	Exter...	SUM
Asymmetrical relationship		0
No		1
Yes	●	7
Temporal othering		0
Chaotic 'all at once'		0
Lagging behind	●	4
vis-à-vis West	●	1
Society		0
Geographical othering		0
Silencing of the present	●	11
Silencing of the past	●	2
Perspective		0
External	●	0
Internal		0
Reclaiming agency		0
Call for local knowledge		0
Unique particularities		0
Σ SUM	26	26

Table 7: Co-occurrence with code “internal”

Code System	Internal	SUM
Asymmetrical relationship		0
No		1
Yes		2
Temporal othering		0
Chaotic 'all at once'	●	5
Lagging behind	●	45
vis-à-vis West	●	22
Society	●	12
Geographical othering		0
Silencing of the present	●	3
Silencing of the past		0
Perspective		0
External		0
Internal	●	0
Reclaiming agency		0
Call for local knowledge		0
Unique particularities		0
Σ SUM	90	90

The tables demonstrate two things. First, the interview sequences in which there was discussion of Othering much more often (90 times) correlated with an internal rather than an external (only 26) perspective. This thus indicates that even though impressions of asymmetry are reportedly widespread, actual critique of knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering is marginal. Secondly, solely the code “silencing of the present” showed a significant correlation with the code “external” (11 times). After the initial discussion of the perception of the general asymmetrical relationship and its periodization, the chapter will hence investigate this most prevalent concern regarding Othering among Russian feminists. It will show that this mostly relates to unpleasant personal encounters with Western feminists, in which they at times feel silenced and exoticised. It will however, also demonstrate that the strongest reaction Russian feminists showed with regards to Othering was the allegation from some of their colleagues that they are not critical enough of knowledge-transfer because of their *false* and *colonised consciousness*. This, coupled with the fact that even the most critical utterances were defused - thus ripping them of their force - indicates that critique of knowledge-transfer analogous to the critical framework is not only marginal, but also perceived as risky.

5.2 A paradoxical power asymmetry

As can be seen in the graph below, there were slightly more instances in which an interviewee expressed an experience of asymmetrical relationship with Western feminism or feminists than there were not.

Graph 3: Frequency of “yes” and “no” codes



I have qualified this as a paradoxical asymmetry because what we see is that while the affirmative answer to a perception of an asymmetrical relationship slightly prevails, according to 228 and Table 7, “external” trumps “internal” by far. It would thus seem that the simple existence of an imbalanced relationship is not enough to postulate that Russian feminists also see said relationship as an instance of Western knowledge-transfer with the aim to Other them. One does not necessarily imply the other. Before further delving into this, however, let us take a closer look at the code of “asymmetrical relationship”. What kind of asymmetry do participants invoke? In what period did they experience it and in what kind of knowledge-transfer constellation?

The critical framework postulates that knowledge-transfer both creates and relies on an asymmetry of power whereby Western feminists cast themselves as more “knowledgeable” and thus the rightful teachers of their “ignorant” pupils in post-communist Europe. Five participants⁴¹ indeed chose the attribute “colonial” to qualify their relationship with Western feminism and feminists without me ever using this word. The harshest assessment came from Marianna Muravyeva. As a professor in legal history and criminology at Herzen State Pedagogical University in St. Petersburg

⁴¹ Marianna Muravyeva, Alyona Makarova, Ekatarina Borodina, Asya Hodyreva, anonymous participant.

and more recently at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, she has focused for many years on violence against women. During her time in St. Petersburg she also used her expertise to support NGOs dealing with gender-based violence, in particular *The Crisis Centre*, which forms part of the key NGOs in this thesis.

Muravyeva spoke of feminist knowledge-transfer as a form of “colonised knowledge”, which “doesn’t produce quality but cultural hierarchies” (MURAVYEVA, 2014). She thus explicitly qualified knowledge-transfer as a form of Othering, whereby Western women are situated on a higher scale of said cultural hierarchy, which confers them the right to teach all others. She also echoed critical theory when she said that the underlying purpose of knowledge-transfer is always the notion of modernisation; to make them and Russia as a whole the same as the place where feminist knowledge allegedly came from. Not only was Muravyeva one of very few to actively use key concepts and terms of the critical framework, but unlike most others, she also did not differentiate her answer. While most interviewees who took a critical stance made sure to choose a specific Western addressee to whom the critique was made, Muravyeva explicitly said: “When I criticise Western feminism, I don’t make a difference between liberal, radical etc. For the problem is that once they deal with ‘other’ countries, they all try to impose their own view of liberation” (ibid.).

Alyona Makarova is also among the five participants who characterised knowledge-transfer as “colonial”. As a lecturer in history and cultural studies at the Ivanovo State University of Chemistry and Technology, she specialises in gender policies and the role of gender in nationhood building, and thus used to be affiliated with the ICGS. In July 2018, however, the Faculty of Humanities at which she taught was closed down. At the time of writing I do not know what her employment status is. Back in 2014, when I interviewed her, she equated transnational feminism with knowledge-transfer and said that there was a clear “colonial” aspect to it. She agreed with Muravyeva’s view when she said that knowledge-transfer happened in a very specific historical context “where each culture, each country has its position in a global hierarchy” (MAKAROVA, 2014). However, the two interviewees stand in sharp contrast to each other with regards to the importance they accord to this hierarchy. While Muravyeva got genuinely upset during the conversation and expressed feelings

of hurt and resentment as a result of the perceived asymmetry, Makarova dismissed it as something secondary. And she was not the only one among the critics to do so. How many almost immediately defused their own critical assessment is in fact very telling and will be the object of analysis at the end of this chapter.

Although only five participants gave the perceived power imbalance the quality of a “colonial” relationship, they were not alone in speaking of asymmetry. Five other participants⁴² hinted at experiences of unequal relations of power in knowledge-exchange. The difference between theirs and the previous accounts is that these testimonies were not concerned with the transmission of Western feminist theories as such but with the *savoir faire* of feminist activism. They argued that Western feminists dictate the agenda and priorities. They also suggested that the superiority of the Western counterpart manifested in such a way that they had to learn its specific terms and jargon in order to get attention and support from Western feminists. Knowledge-transfer then also installed a *lingua franca*, where they had to evoke terms such as “human rights”, “civil society” and “gender” even when they had not yet quite understood what such terms meant to them. In particular, the term gender was the subject of some of the liveliest disputes in the 1990s and early 2000s because, as Natasha Pushkareva assesses in her interview: “it was a useful concept to advance one’s career” (PUSHKAREVA, 2014). The insinuation here is that some Russian feminists used gender to garner support from the West, on which they often relied, especially for the establishment of gender studies research centres. However, so the argument goes, this superficial use of the term ultimately ripped it of any political meaning within Russia. This is one of the arguments that has been completely reversed in the meantime, with many, including former critics such as Pushkareva, now arguing that gender has a saturation of political meaning and in fact has become a dangerous category. This is intimately connected to the rise of authoritarianism and will be the subject of analysis in chapter 6. It is, however, relevant here because it stands for a larger trend: the temporal situating of critique to past liberal times.

⁴² Natasha Pushkareva, Alla Mitrofanova, Tatyana Klimenkova, Elena Trofimova, Elena Kochkina.

5.3 The periodization of critique

Out of eleven total interviewees, the majority of those who voiced discontent about the asymmetrical relationship in knowledge-transfer implicitly connected that criticism to a time when democratisation was still the dominant paradigm. Only one assigned her critique to the present. In all the other accounts, the past tense was consistently used. This, together with other temporal references, indicates that they mostly speak of the 1990s and early 2000s. For instance, Natalya Gafizova, one of the co-founders of the Ivanovo Gender Studies Centre and the editor of the last feminist academic journal *Zhenshchina v rossiyskom obshchestve [Women in Russian Society]*, argued that knowledge-transfer happened at a time when “everything Western was thought to be the crest of the wave” (GAFIZOVA, 2014). This periodization also clearly transpired at a certain point in my interview with a younger feminist scholar from St. Petersburg, who has since left the feminist community and is the only one wanting to remain anonymous: “Well here we are, us democrats, and we shall now teach you indigenous lot your rights since you are also people. That was sort of the subtext *at the time* and *perceived* as an intellectual expansion” (ANONYMOUS, 2014 emphasis mine).

The interviewees conveyed that the asymmetry occurred in a context where the general political climate, both internationally and nationally, positioned Western superiority as indisputable. This is why the philosopher Alla Mitrofanova, founder of the Cyber Fem Club (1995) and icon of St. Petersburg feminism, asserted that unquestioned knowledge-transfer was “politically necessary and welcome” (MITROFANOVA, 2017). The anonymous respondent echoed this line of thought. She argued that feminism, and gender studies in particular, were “a tendency that came from the West but the Russian government itself also supported it because it wanted to appear ‘civilised’. The question though is: aren’t both a manifestation of cultural imperialism?” (ANONYMOUS, 2014). To this interviewee, feminism was thus exactly what critical theorists postulate: a way for Russia to assert its progress on the journey to Enlightenment.

Critique of a detrimental asymmetrical relationship is thus not only rare but also largely limited to the past liberal period. The majority of the above-mentioned respondents feel that in that period it was *le bon ton* to know the Western canon in

feminism, and to unquestionably repeat terms and strategies that had been developed in the West. Western feminists were thus, according to these Russian interlocutors, entangled in a larger structure of power relations that was in their favour. Western feminists were more powerful because they had both more resources and a political context that pledged for unilateral transmission of Western knowledge. This is what enabled, in the eyes of the few critics, the imposition of Western feminist *savoir faire* and jargon. It is in this sense that Muravyeva speaks of colonised knowledge, which always boils down to power and resources. However, as already demonstrated in the history chapter, this was in large part also due to many a Russian feminist believing in the possibility of democratic transition. They were hence not just complicit in this knowledge-transfer but, as chapter 6 will further highlight, active, conscious agents in it, who drew energy, support and inspiration from it. Finally, this periodization of critique also sheds light on a generational pattern. In fact, not a single participant from the youngest generation, whose activism is taking place in an increasingly hostile and authoritarian environment, expressed opinions and feelings comparable to the above. This fits with my argument: As the political climate changed, so did Russian feminists' priorities, which is why this type of critique could not resonate among my younger respondents.

5.4 The personal is unequal

Whereas among the older generation there is explicit critique of relations with Western feminism as being unequal and indeed a form of Othering, the only aspect younger feminists mentioned was that of unpleasant personal interactions with Western feminists. As a matter of fact, the code "silencing of the present" is the one that most often co-occurs with the code "external". As the table below shows, "external"

co-occurs 11 out of 26 times⁴³ with the code “silencing of the present”. In other words, in the very few instances where there is reference to knowledge-transfer as an exercise of genuine Othering (captured by the code “external”), such references coincide with an experience of not being taken seriously, listened to and treated as equal bearers of knowledge (captured by the code “silencing of the present”).

Table 8: Co-occurrence of “external” and “silencing of the present”

	External	SUM
Asymmetrical relationship		0
No	1	1
Yes	7	7
Temporal othering		0
Chaotic 'all at once'		0
Lagging behind	4	4
vis-à-vis West	1	1
Society		0
Geographical othering		0
Silencing of the present	11	11
Silencing of the past	2	2
Perspective		0
External		0
Internal		0
Reclaiming agency		0
Call for local knowledge		0
Unique particularities		0
Σ SUM	26	26

One of the most commonly recurring themes with regards to personal interactions with Western feminists is that of perceived exoticising. The power to label entire cultures as Other and exotic is indeed a dimension that is often discussed in critical theory, and post-colonial theory in particular (NEUMANN, 1999: 82). It is argued that “the East” becomes, under Western eyes, an exotic and imaginary realm, the abode of legends; a place that epitomises longing and is thus transformed into a Utopia, which represents at the same time “the past, the future and the Middle Ages” (TODOROVA, 2009: 13).

⁴³ The seven co-occurrences that happened with the codes of the asymmetrical relationship have to be excluded from this equation. The perspective-code was only attributed to the codes of temporal or geographical Othering, never in combination with the asymmetrical relationship code. These co-occurrences only manifest because multiple coding of the same sequence is not excluded. And as it happens, the same sentence or paragraph that conveys the sentiment of an asymmetrical relationship often also gives clues about the type of Othering experienced.

Bella Rapoport, a journalist and internet activist from St. Petersburg, who has become one of the best-known feminists in Russia in the last five years, told me about one such experience of exoticising she had when she participated as a convenor of a workshop in Vienna:

When I talked with the workshop co-ordinator about the topic of my presentation, I said I wanted to speak about the difficulties I as a lesbian encounter when I want to study lesbians. I know from friends who live abroad that they experience similar problems. So this is a structural problem and would be interesting to discuss. But the co-ordinator told me: 'well yes, this is a problem you have, here we don't anymore'. Then we spoke about the order in which we should present and she goes 'let's have Bella first. This is only logical because she represents our past'. And I thought like what the heck?! I don't represent your past. And I still regret that I didn't say anything but I found myself in the position of a colonised subject. They invite me to Vienna, they pay everything, so in that moment I found it very difficult to say something. So yes, these things happen. Then when they introduced me they said this is Bella from Moscow even though I'm from St. Petersburg. And so this is how you feel that you are only present there so that they can feel great about themselves and the world they live in. And this is very annoying. (RAPOPORT, 2017)

If domination is about the ability to name and define the truth about the Other, then Rapoport's account clearly exposes this kind of power relation. The Othering here happened in three steps. In the first instance, her genuine interest in investigating the question of how to go about researching her peers was bluntly dismissed as uninteresting and irrelevant on the basis that this is allegedly a problem already overcome in the West. In the second step, the Western interlocutor had no scruples about casting Rapoport as a subject, whose voice cannot articulate her own subjectivity, opinion and experience, but merely echo and validate what Western feminists have already been through. There could hardly be a better example of *Kulpa* and *Mizielinska's* Western hegemonic temporality (2011: 17). The Western 'present' is discursively cast as former communist Europe's 'future'. Finally, Rapoport's role as the exotic object culminated during the workshop when the organisers did not even care to introduce her properly. From her perspective, the only reason she had been invited was to validate preconceived views about women's conditions in Russia and thus to confirm that the voice of Russian feminists can only ever be heard in the capacity of a Western echo that arrives with some delay. The exoticising had the effect of silencing Rapoport's genuine concerns and subjectivity, thereby reducing her to an object of Western projection.

Other young respondents also talked of experiences of being framed as exotic and fetishised, though to a lesser degree than in Rapoport's case. One of them is Olessia Akimova, an activist of the Left Fem Club in St. Petersburg. Left Fem Club was created in 2014 as a result of many women's disillusion with the Russian Socialist Party. Akimova together with Natalya Rybalko and Mariya Rahmaninova founded the club so that they could freely discuss women's issues without having to explain their relevance vis-à-vis male party members. During the conversation I had with all three feminists, Akimova mentioned her frustration with Western feminists who want to hear the extreme accounts, not the mundane experience of and struggle against inequality (Akimova in: AKIMOVA, RAHMANINOVA & RYBALKO, 2017).

Most recently, she explained, Westerners have become obsessed with the story of Diana Shurygina. 17-year-old Shurygina alleged that Sergey Semyonov raped her in spring 2016. The court found Semyonov guilty, a verdict that remained the same even after his appeal, though his prison sentence was lowered from eight to three years. In reaction to this verdict, Semyonov's parents decided to take the case to national television, to the programme "Let them Speak", which is supposed to give opposing parties the opportunity for a fair debate but very clearly takes sides. In this case, the host Andrey Malahov announced that today's programme would investigate: "why the close relationship with Diana put an end to [Semyonov's] future and why his parents believe that their son fell victim to a greedy, calculating girl" (KRIVTSOVA, 2017). Shurygina participated in the programme to testify, although she knew that both general public opinion and the majority of the audience were against her.

After the airing, which more than nine million people watched on YouTube, Shurygina became the object of national ridicule (SAFONOVA, 2017). Her face was transformed into a meme in accordance with the clothes she was wearing on the programme. Many sites on social media, in particular on VKontakte, the Russian equivalent to Facebook, appeared in support of Semyonov and put the meme as their profile picture. The story went so far that even the multinational fast food company, Burger King, thought it was appropriate to use her face in an advert (see Picture 3 below). The ad said the offer would last "not long at all", which made reference to when the victim testified that she had drunk "not much at all" during the night in

question, using two fingers for illustration. Semyonov, on the other hand, was released earlier in 2018, having completed not even two full years in prison.

Picture 3: Burger King using Shurygina's meme in an advert



Source: <https://medialeaks.ru/1602mms-burger-king-ispolzoval-obraz-nesovershennoletney-shuryiginoy-v-reklame-i-narvalsya-na-kritiku/>

Akimova explained that recently Western researchers and journalists have all wanted to talk about Shurygina's case. She mentioned the example of the BBC producers of the documentary "Russia's War on Women" (MARTIN, 2018), who were fixated on hearing Russian feminists' opinion on the case. "They just wanted to hear that trash story and we were like, 'come, let's try to talk about something more interesting', and switched them off". In the end, however, they did not feature in the documentary. Although this was not an encounter with a Western feminist, for Akimova it stood for a general feeling of being in a state of performance when she meets feminists from the West: "Sometimes I have this very unpleasant impression that we just list our problems and then I catch myself thinking, 'they have come here to see how awful it all is and I am just here to confirm it'. And then I feel offended". Her colleague Rahmaninova agreed that Western feminist interlocutors often seem to caricature their situation: "They want to depict a picture where we only deal with this kind of story: stupid and scandalous".

This quest for the “spectacle of oppression” on behalf of Western feminists is an important incidence of perceived Othering. These feminists feel used both for entertainment and reassurance of a Western audience, by means of shock about the portrayed horrors they have to live with. The exoticising thus leads to a loss of voice and silencing of their concerns. This is what the post-colonial feminist, Chandra Mohanty, means when she speaks of the instrumentalising of ‘Other’ women. These “exotic” and “different” women are framed as authentic truth-tellers of their “own oppression”, but always within the strict frame of hegemonic histories and subjectivities (MOHANTY, 2003a: 77). In the same vein Biljana Kašić, the Croat post-colonial feminist philosopher, argues that feminists in post-communist Europe are treated as “exotic subjects”, who cannot but act as testifiers of already established opinions and theories (KAŠIĆ: 76).

Yet, in the view of Akimova and Rahmaninova, there is also a degree of ambivalence about this kind of dynamic. Although it is unpleasant, they also realise that this is often the only way to get any visibility. In fact, the above-mentioned BBC documentary is still one of the few recent materials on the topic of domestic violence in Russia. Russian feminists were thus very interested in getting access to the film, regardless of some exaggerated stories featuring in it, because it is one of the few sources of information available on a taboo topic. Moreover, the documentary started with the story of a crisis centre (the common name for women’s shelters in Russia) outside Moscow, which is one of the last left and is struggling to survive. The centre’s director, Alyona Eltsova, wrote on Facebook how she was pleasantly surprised and grateful to all those in Great Britain who had seen the documentary and were so appalled that they readily offered help. Some Russian feminists clearly understood that much-needed visibility and solidarity sometimes comes at the price of trading authenticity and the mundane in favour of being complicit in producing the spectacular and horrible.

The code “silencing of the present”, however, also occurs among the older generation of feminists, mostly among feminist academics, who express similar negative experiences in personal encounters. Olga Voronina, the Director of the former MCGS, admitted in her interview that the West sees itself as the teacher of an “exotic and somehow far away and estranged Russia” and that she could feel this

dynamic even in “personal relations with Western colleagues” (VORONINA, 2014). Makarova has similar grievances because in her view, no matter how well she works, she never feels that she is treated on a level playing field by her academic peers in the West: “They assess you from a colonial perspective and don’t consider you as an academic who is worthy of intellectual exchange”. As a result, she argued, Western feminists would dare to judge Russian feminists’ work without having read and properly engaged with it. This speaks directly to the critical theorists’ claim that Western feminist academics can treat work accomplished in the peripheries dismissively only because they are part of the global and hegemonic North (DASKALOVA, 2016: 122). Makarova thus conveyed that she feels denied of her right and ability to speak and think as an equal knowledge-producer.

5.5 A rebuttal against false consciousness

A number of feminists⁴⁴ argue that critique of transnational feminism as a form of knowledge-transfer may also be low due to structural conditions, such as level of education and access to relevant sources. For instance, the cornerstone of post-colonial theory, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, was only published in Russian in 2006. Muravyeva, however, found a different rationale for the striking absence of critique. In her view, it was not as widespread as it should have been during the liberal period because Russian academics were not “qualified enough”. To underline her claim, she referred to one of the most important critics of Russian feminists: Sergey Ushakin. In his book *Pole Pola* he asked: “Aren’t ‘gender studies’ merely a more subtle form of cultural and epistemological imperialism?” because to be successful in the field one had to know English (USHAKIN, 2007: 111). And he wondered whether “the so much hated hegemony of ‘patriarchal’ [...] culture [isn’t] replaced by a hegemony [...] of ‘sistriarchy’ when the place of the Big Brother is occupied by the Older Sister?” (Ibid.). For Muravyeva, Ushakin’s trashing of Russian feminists as suffering from a “colonised”, and thus false, “consciousness” was overdue and necessary.

⁴⁴ Mariya Rahmaninova, Ann Ivanova and Alexandra Talaver

Several of my respondents, among them established feminist scholars such as Voronina and Kochkina, expressed in the interview how much they felt offended and hurt by this kind of assessment of their work. Kochkina, a political scientist who has worked at the MCGS since its foundation and is still active as a senior researcher at the ISEPN at the RAS, even took the time to write a lengthy riposte in the form of a review of Ushakin's book (KOCHKINA, 2008). In the review she firmly rejects the idea that Russian gender studies are conducted "under Western eyes", a reference to the post-colonial book *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (MOHANTY, 1991). Kochkina outlines that, if anyone, it is Ushakin who suffers from a colonial consciousness (KOCHKINA, 2008: 344). She argues that it is apparent from his style of writing that he considers Western authors superior to Russian ones. For he cites the former with full names while he mentions the latter, who are the subject of his criticism, only with their surname or only with links to their work. The importance Ushakin accords to Western feminism is, in her view, further transparent in the fact that it is the only one besides Russian feminism to feature in his argument. Finally, Kochkina asserts that Ushakin seems to be the one to consider Western feminists as the older sisters, since he states in his book that now that the first and second waves are over, Russian feminists should exclusively engage with the theories of the third wave. All of this suggests that Kochkina perceives her compatriot to do both temporal (Western hegemonic temporality) and geographical (silencing and diminishing of their scholarship) Othering of Russian feminists.

No other example spurred such a strong reaction among my respondents⁴⁵ as that of Ushakin arguing they were living in the condition of a *false consciousness*, which I would mention towards the end of the interview in the form of a judgement question to force them to make a clear statement. Perhaps paradoxically then, one of the most heated debates about Othering did not happen in connection with Western feminists but with regards to a Russian feminist, who has moved to the West and uses (Western) critical theory to assess them. Ushakin, it seems, triggered this kind of

⁴⁵ Elena Kochkina reacted most strongly, but Olga Voronina and Valentina Uspenskaya were equally very clear about how offensive they found such criticism.

reaction because he failed to acknowledge that in liberal times, which is very much the period he and Muravyeva refer to, the West as a model in all aspects of life was very much the hegemonic system of meaning, both at home and in the international sphere, and which feminists enthusiastically embraced. They appear equally indifferent to the fact that many Russian feminists genuinely believed in this new promising order. As a result, the Western knowledge-transfer was not something they perceived as an exercise of Othering but as their conscious and active role in the democratisation of their country. This is why the reproach of suffering from false, colonial consciousness was so offensive to them at the time.

The strongest evidence for a critique of knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering, I found, was this debate between Russian feminists themselves, not vis-à-vis Western feminists. They fiercely refused the charge of having uncritically received Western knowledge due to their own incompetence, let alone *false consciousness*. Part of the explanation for this refusal, as shall be discussed in chapter 6, is that many Russian feminists had a self-assigned subjectivity of democracy promoters by means of transmission of Western feminism during the liberal period. More revealing, however, was how strong the reaction against the charge of a knowledge-transfer and its allegedly Othering effects still was at the time when I took the interviews. By then, critical voices such as Ushakin's were no longer present in feminist circles. What had changed however, was the political climate. In the meantime, it had transformed into an authoritarian regime, whose core aim was to Other back against the West. This entailed establishing a new dominant system of meaning, in which gender equality would be used to fix the negative meaning of the West as an imperial actor, who tries to impose democracy and human rights onto Russia. To achieve this, the regime started to emulate very similar arguments and chains of equivalences as can be found in critical theory. This is why former critics changed their stance and why the majority remained silent and did not criticise Western knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering. But, as will be shown, they more often refused the very notion that one could speak of a transfer of knowledge at all. Resistance against this new authoritarian regime and its system of meaning had become their new priority, which is why they

wanted to avoid at all costs their own utterances potentially resonating with the regime's anti-Western and anti-gender discourse.

5.6 A defused critique

Furthermore, the immediate downplaying of critique is indicative of the marginality of critique of knowledge-transfer, and of Russian feminists' awareness of the risk associated with voicing critique. As has been established so far in this chapter, only very few interviewees would occasionally express feelings and perceptions that could be qualified as a critique of knowledge-transfer. Interestingly, however, many of them would also defuse said critique in the same breath.

For instance, when Makarova introduced her argument that knowledge-transfer happens within a "cultural hierarchy", she did so with lively laughter, saying: "Well, what do you think? There is of course a specific colonial aspect to all of this" (MAKAROVA, 2014). The laughter was not of an ironic quality, but genuinely light-hearted. This way, she conveyed that this hierarchy is a matter of fact, which she has become used to and which is not of any great concern. In other words, it is not her primary concern. Muravyeva and the philosopher Tatyana Klimenkova, who was one of MCGS' first members and for a time even its co-director, defused their criticism in a similar manner. Muravyeva spoke of the knowledge-transfer in the 1990s with dismissal but without resentment: "When Western feminists came from the US and the UK, we looked at them like you girls didn't have rights until a couple of years ago so don't tell us what to do" (MURAVYEVA, 2014). In the same vein, Klimenkova argues that these feminists were "American aunties from far-away provinces" who soon "understood what was going on [and] said, it is you, who have to teach us" (KLIMENKOVA, 2014). Rather than patronising, they perceived Western feminists as well intentioned but immature and naïve.

They made it clear that the unequal power relationship, in which Western feminists assigned them the position of pupils, was neither a threat nor something that could really have an Othering effect on them. After all, the Othering effect presupposes that the inferior party accepts and interiorises the subjugated position. But, since they refused to recognise Western feminists' superiority, the perceived

asymmetry was of no psychological consequence for them. This is why it is not enough to only look at the prevalence of the “yes” code with regards to a perception of asymmetry. For an asymmetrical relationship does not automatically translate into a lived experience of Othering.

The phenomenon of a defused critique is, however, not limited to the assessment of knowledge-transfer in the 1990s. As much as younger feminists, such as Rapoport and Akimova, disliked the instances in which they felt exoticised, they also stressed that these are exceptions on a personal level and are very much dependent on the interlocutor. This is how they refused the articulation of a more general systemic critique. Moreover, several follow-up and judgement questions were necessary for them to even speak about these encounters. This indicates that Othering was not a priority, for this was not the first sentiment that they felt when asked about experiences with Western feminism and feminists. Nowhere is this stance as explicit as in Voronina’s statement, who has followed the development of transnational feminism since the early 90s. She immediately adds to the assertion that inequality can be felt even in personal relationships: “I think this isn’t that important for the large majority of feminists. Of much more importance is the internal situation of this country in which we find ourselves in”.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter started with a paradox, namely that there is a prevalent perception that asymmetry exists but that overall there is no critique of knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering. It showed that there are indeed a number of feminists among my respondents who qualified the relationship with Western feminism as a colonial or unequal knowledge-transfer. However, it also became clear that their critique always referred to the liberal period. They stressed that knowledge-transfer served to impose a certain feminist *savoir faire* and lingua franca at a time when the hegemonic system of meaning was that of democratisation, which put everything Western, including its versions and approaches to feminism, on a pedestal. This is also why it was only during the liberal period that a critique of knowledge-transfer emerged among feminist publications and why it is largely absent among the younger generation.

If there is one thing of concern today, the chapter showed, it is that of “silencing of the present”. This was indeed the only code that predominately co-occurred with the code “external” perspective and which was also perceptible in young feminists’ testimonies. It was highlighted that some feminists took issue with personal encounters they had had with Western feminists, during which they felt their concerns were treated dismissively and their voice exclusively cast as a Western echo reverberating from past times. In these occasions, they argued, they felt exoticised and used for the quest of the “spectacle of oppression”, which both entertained and reassured their interlocutors of their superiority and advance, but which was often also inevitable if they wanted to get some visibility.

Paradoxically however, there was nowhere near as strong a reaction and perception of Othering as there was with regards to other Russian colleagues arguing that critique was only marginal due to Russian feminists’ *false consciousness*. My respondents firmly rejected this charge, arguing that it was these critics who were in reality locked under the guise of “Western eyes”. This, they argued, made Russian peers both mimic Westcentrism, by dismissively engaging with Russian work, and become oblivious to the fact that many Russian feminists actually willingly subscribed to the dominant paradigm of democratisation at the time. What is interesting is that this reaction not only persists today, although these critics have disappeared, but has even increased in its tone.

This, I have argued, is an indication of a changed awareness within Russian feminism. With the political context becoming increasing authoritarian, my interviewees realised the risk associated with critique of knowledge-transfer: the hijacking of said critique by the regime as yet more evidence that the transmission of any Western knowledge, including that of gender equality, is alien and the result of oppression. This is why all the interviewees who voiced some sort of criticism immediately defused it. And this is where the solution to the initially stated paradox lies. My respondents did not perceive the small issues of asymmetry and occasional unpleasant personal encounters as important enough in light of the problems they faced at home. If anything, they realised that bringing these issues up would only do further harm, hence the strategy of downplaying them. This explains why a perception

of asymmetry does not automatically translate into a prevalence of the code “external” and thus makes the conclusion of Russian feminists experiencing knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering impossible.

What has not been discussed in this chapter however, is the other side of the equation: Russian feminists’ experience of anti-gender backlash, their awareness of an increasingly authoritarian and repressive political environment, and their conclusion to avoid and indeed discursively counter any critique of knowledge-transfer in an effort to subvert the regime. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

6 Critique in a state of fear of the state in Russia

6.1 Introduction

Having established how actual critique in accordance with the critical framework is marginal in Russia, this chapter shows the central theoretical claim of this thesis: that in times of authoritarianism, Russian feminists' new priority lies in destabilising the notion of Western feminist knowledge-transfer which underpins the discursive structure the authoritarian regime is based on. In the notion of Western knowledge-transfer, two central components of the regime's strategy converge: the idea that the West is equated with domination, which is asserted through general knowledge-transfer; and that feminism is an exclusively Western product which is transferred into Russia as a particularly threatening ideology capable of undermining and endangering the entire nation. Western feminist knowledge-transfer therefore deserves special resistance. This is the "knowledge-transfer as discourse" feminists in Russia aim to subvert.

This chapter starts with an inductive analysis of how Russian feminists' make sense of their political environment. It shows that their primary concern is a system of repression, which follows a zero-tolerance approach towards feminism. Such repression is determined to suffocate even the smallest forms of activism and has conducted a systematic crackdown against gender studies in particular. Subsequently, the chapter highlights the emotional consequences of the political atmosphere for Russian feminists, and reveals that fear is the feeling they predominantly associated with it. It then articulates the three main discursive strategies they resort to in order to antagonise the authoritarian hegemonic regime. The first alternative signifier Russian feminists articulate endorses the concept of knowledge-transfer *per se*, but attaches positive meanings to it. The second strategy entails reframing knowledge-transfer as an exchange between equals instead. That way the idea of unidirectionality and domination are undermined. Moreover, activists stress their own feminist heritage, but not, as critical theory would postulate, in an attempt to counter the silencing their knowledge has been subjected to due to knowledge-transfer. Instead, they utilise reference to their own heritage to push back against the hegemonic

discourse's assertion that there is no feminism within Russia. Finally, the last discursive strategy unsettles the West/East dichotomy, as well as the supposed power relations ensuing from, upon which the hegemonic discourse relies in order to stabilise its chain of equivalence. It does so by revealing that the argument around the transliterated introduction of the term 'gender' as a symbol of Western colonisation is based on purely political motives of discrediting feminism. Instead, Russian feminists show that Western terms have been regularly and uncontroversially introduced into Russian language and academia, shattering not only the image of feminist knowledge-transfer as unique and dangerous, but the entire geographical boundaries associated with it.

Unlike the empirical test, this analysis involved inductive coding. I first coded all segments in the interview that made a direct reference to the present political environment, distinguishing between present and past. Next, I analysed each extract assigned "present", and created new subcode categories that best captured the atmosphere the interviewees described. The usual reiterative process that is characteristic of inductive research then took place. The ultimate aim is to finish with as few overarching codes as possible. To do so, one starts by developing codes for every utterance that appears distinct from the previous ones. There comes a point, however, where the researcher can discern yet another, more superposed, and thus fitting code. In other words, she finds a concept that can capture two things that were until then divided into two separate codes. This entails going back to all previously coded segments to check whether the new label in fact works. At the end of this process I had six subcodes for the present political environment, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 9: Inductive coding scheme for present political environment in Russia

Subcodes for “present”	Explicit reference to
- Targeting	Feminism / gender having been labelled as dangerous; that can be prosecuted and must be despised; that people therefore do not want to be associated with and that makes being a feminist riskier
- Reassertion	The idea of sovereign democracy, in particular the notion of own Russian traditions and values and the incompatibility with Europe/West
- Regression	The notion of re-patriarchalisation, either expressed with illustrations of a return to “natural” roles or with temporal elements that indicate a clear backward development
- Repression	Active repression of activists and foreign donors through intimidation and censorship, but also the oppression of liberal critical thought (where it is not explicitly connected with the notion of backwardness, in which case it goes to regression)
- Obstruction	Legal developments that make their activity more difficult. Usually this refers to either the new law on domestic violence or on the rejections received from applications for Presidential Grants. It is subtler, for it is not a direct repression, which is why it is a category in its own terms.
- Indifference	State institutions or the government not caring about feminism

Following the same principle, I then sifted through the same sample of coded segments to understand how the interviewed feminists felt about those political realities, so the “consequences” the “present” atmosphere had on them. I finished with nine categories of feelings, presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Inductive coding scheme for emotions associated with present political environment in Russia

Subcodes for "consequence"	Refers to
- Determination	The lack of viable alternative and the need for them to do something because no one else will (it is the only positive consequence)
- Internal conflicts	The problem of reduced funding and how this leads to feminist NGOs competing with each other; and once they receive public funding having to demonstrate full loyalty to the state which further exacerbates the tensions
- Fear	Fear of repression and the conscious decision to self-censor
- Self-renunciation	In view of the struggle for survival, NGOs make important compromises but do not frame them as such, recognising them instead as a painful denial of their sense of feminist identity
- Surrender	Stronger than self-renunciation, this refers to giving up activities and withdrawing from activism
- Doom	Expressions of hopelessness
- Humiliation	The degrading strategies some have to choose to avoid repression and the impossible position of having to be grateful for this kind of 'mercy'
- Exhaustion	Phenomenon of burn out among activists because of the draining obstructions and the absence of any real progress despite their tireless efforts
- Isolation	Difficulty of finding allies due to the hostile environment as well as the feeling of not belonging anywhere both at home and abroad

It is important to note that this attributing of sequences to new subcodes that were developed during analysis did not increase the number of originally coded segments. In other words, I started this exercise with ninety coded segments, and after the establishment of the subcodes this number remained the same. To illustrate this the following two screenshots (Image 1) may help. The first is the original segment of a Russian interview with all the code and subcodes. It is followed by an English translation, where the different code and subcodes also have different colours to facilitate the reading of it. It shows that the code "present" captures the entire paragraph, while the subcodes describing the actual present atmosphere in more detail, as well as the consequences this atmosphere was understood to lead to, have been attributed to different parts within this same segment. They are then all subsumed within the parent code "present", which is why the total count of coded segments remains unchanged despite the subsequent adding of these subcodes.

Image 1: Russian coding example with translation

19:26 Сложно. Дело в том, что сейчас все центры, особенно в провинциях, испытывают серьезное давление не только в том плане, что вам не дают денег. Вы просто испытываете давление, потому что вам не дают развиваться. Как Самарский центр прикрыли - Ярской и Смирновой в прошлом году из-за того, что их объявили все таки иностранными агентами. Нас пытались объявить, но кончилось все тем, что как-то удалось нам этой участи избежать. Но с другой стороны нам вынесли предупреждение, где черным по белому написано - если возьмете еще хоть копейку западного фонда, вы будете иностранным агентом. И плюс сейчас здесь идет такая тенденция, что все западное - это плохо. Это тоже позволяет начать определенную кампанию против гендерных исследованиях, не говоря уже о том, что существует закон о пропаганде гомосексуализма, вас могут обвинить за что угодно. Плюс у меня например есть такой проект, Клуб гендерного кино, который существует уже давно - 5ый год наверное. Мы его с Аленой Макаровой ведем. Каждый раз когда мы там что-то ставим, гендерная проблематика - она очень часто включает проблемы сексуальных меньшинств. И замечательные фильмы, типа "Синий - самый теплый цвет" - они посвящены проблемам отношений однополый любви, и каждый раз мы думаем: а может не ставить? Потому что я его показала публично, обсудила, студенты совершенно летние, но прицепиться могут к чему угодно. С этой точки зрения тоже сложно.

It is difficult. The thing is that now all Centres, especially those in the provinces, experience serious pressure not only with regards to lack of funding. You just feel the pressure because they don't allow you to grow. They closed the Samara Centre for Gender Studies down, the year before they did the same with the Centres in Yarskoj and Smirnovoj because they were declared foreign agents. They tried to do the same with us, but we somehow managed to avoid this fate. But they handed us a warning, stating black on white that if you take even just another cent from a Western foundation, you will be declared a foreign agent. Moreover, we now have this tendency that everything Western is bad. This also enables a specific campaign against gender studies. And let's not even mention the law about homosexual propaganda, which can lead to your arrest for whatever. I for example have this project called Gender Cineman, which has been going on for probably about 5 years. We are doing this together with Alyona Makarova. She very often includes films that are concerned with the problems sexual minorities face [...] And every time we think: maybe we shouldn't? Because I showed it publicly, discussed it with adult students, but they can get you for whatever suits them. So from that perspective [our activity] is also difficult.

Extract from interview with Olga Shnyrova

6.1 The scope of repression

Once the coding and refinement was completed, one dominant feature emerged out of the data: the state of fear of the state the interviewees were in. Repression was by far the most cited attribute in relation to the present political context, as can be seen in the table below, listing the frequencies for each code.

Table 11: Frequencies of codes associated with the political context

Code System	Frequency
1. Reference to political context	0
Present atmosphere	90
Repression	48
Reassertion	6
Regression	11
Obstruction	4
Indifference	7
Targeting	27
Consequences	0
Fear	14
Self-renunciation	11
Internal conflicts	10
Isolation	9
Exhaustion	7
Doom	4
Determination	4
Surrender	3
Humiliation	3

Behind all the 48 sequences that refer to repression in one way or another, lies the story of an increased feeling of entrapment because of direct intimidation, and the knowledge that such intimidation is very much connected to their being feminists.

Six out of the 40 Russian feminists I spoke to had been the direct target of repression. The most benign of these six incidents regards Barbara Tereshchenko. Tereshchenko is a young feminist artist based in Moscow. Most of her work focuses on violence against women, based on real life stories, and many of her paintings feature nudity, which is why they can be classified as pornography. When the Rosa Luxemburg foundation organised an exhibition called “Body” in 2016 they declined to show Tereshchenko’s work because of its exhibitionist nature. Due to these restrictions, Tereshchenko and her colleagues try to find alternative spaces where their work can still be shown. Once they hosted an exhibition in an independent art

space, but when a woman with a young child showed up, they became wary that she might be a spy and that, because of the presence of the child, some of them could be accused of spreading pornographic material. They had good reason to be concerned, for it has become customary for “Orthodox activists”, emboldened by the new law criminalising “affronts” to religious feelings, to show up and destroy pieces of art without any legal consequences. Nothing happened that time. However, months later they decided to make a small parade with paintings in order to gain further exposure. As a preventive excuse, Tereshchenko told me, they had agreed to claim they were just transferring art work from one exhibition to another. On that day Tereshchenko was incapacitated with fever, and so unlike her peers did not get arrested. Her painting, however, which on this occasion showed nothing more than a glove covered in blood with the heading “make love”, was seized.

Picture 4: Tereshchenko’s artwork



“Ideal woman”, the painting the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation declined

“Make love”, painting from the art parade, which was seized by the police.

This is not a story that would surprise the young feminist Maria Rakhmaninova. Rakhmaninova is the co-founder of LeftFem. This loose association was established by former members of the Russian socialist party. As they explain to me, they were fed up with having to ask male leaders for permission to discuss “women’s topics” they cared

about. They therefore decided to create their own platform, LeftFem, which identifies as socialist and anarchist and provides a space for women to speak their minds. Together they organise regular reading circles, film screenings and roundtables to spread feminist theory. They have committees in several cities and a wide following online⁴⁶. They are, as a consequence, one of the most visible feminist initiatives in Russia, and their leaders targets of repressive campaigns, both in institutionalised and “spontaneous” forms.

Rakhmaninova is certainly one such figure. In 2014, she and a fellow activist, the well-known feminist artist Leda Garina, were questioned by the police – but not just any police. They were summoned by the infamous Centre E, the Ministry of Interior’s competence centre to fight against extremism. In 2018, during the trial on the centre’s torturous methods, it was said that “from here you either exit beaten up or dead” (CHIZH, 2018). Rakhmaninova and Garina were arrested and questioned by the Centre E because of their extremist campaign to fight for the right to abortion. “Ever since the conservative turn in Putin’s politics from the 2010s on”, Rakhmaninova explains, “a mounting pressure on the right to abortion started”. In reaction, the two activists launched a campaign, consisting of more than 100 videos uploaded onto YouTube under the hashtag #RightToAbortion, many of which had several thousand views.

Orthodox activists first reclaimed the hashtag to promote pro-life arguments and material online, but then filed a complaint against the two women, arguing they were advocating mass murder. During the interrogation Rakhmaninova explained to the officials that the right to abortion was granted by the Russian constitution, which they were shocked to learn, and which proved a powerful argument in defense of their activity. They were released. However, they were pressured to close down the group and the YouTube channel, threatened with accusations of child pornography and potential prison sentences. Another complaint had indeed been made, alleging that some of the material (such as a video with a mother and her naked child) was pornographic, so this was utilised as additional intimidation. Rakhmaninova recalls

⁴⁶ Over 5500 members on their VKontakte website and over 600 subscribers on the Facebook webpage.

that they were frightened, but refused to close down either the group LeftFem or the online channel. If anything, further material has been published since. However, Rakhmaninova has been the subject of “spontaneous” (in the sense of not institutional) repression in the form of hate crime, to the point where she was forced to change flat after the threats had become too intense.

While Rakhmaninova seems to have reacted to the repressive measures with even more determination, a similar incident left quite a profound mark on another couple of activists. Lolita Agamalova and Oksana Vasyakina, two feminist artists from Moscow who specialise in street art and poetry respectively, told me of their experience with the authorities. Only months before we met, their plan to participate in a small feminist camp in Krasnodar, the “Capital of Southern Russia” because of its proximity to the Black Sea, took an unexpected turn. Weeks before the event, the organisers of the camp had been harassed with threats of rape – to “remind them of the traditional values” they were disrespecting – and calls to leave the country. These threats, however, were not without consequences from the official side. On the day the camp was supposed to start, the organisers were detained. And because Agamalova and Vasyakina arrived early at the location, they got caught up in the middle of these efforts to dismantle the camp and were also arrested. After more than twenty hours on the train, they were held at the police station for the entire day. The police confiscated their passports and would only release them against their signing of a document. When Agamalova highlighted that they had no legal basis for their actions, they dismissed her, arguing they could detain her for as long as they wished. This day stayed with Agamalova, for it demonstrated how low the tolerance for any sort of “offline activism” was. It would have been a simple, small camp, comprised of 15 like-minded women, without any public statement or event, and yet it was deemed important enough for such radical measures.

Finally, the most striking form of repression concerns the case of Tatyana Suhareva. Suhareva planned to run as a candidate for “Fair Russia”⁴⁷ in the 2014 elections to the Moscow City Duma, but became the victim of a fabricated arrest on the day she was supposed to receive official confirmation of her electoral registration. On November 9th, 2017, we met in one of the many commercial centres in Moscow. Suhareva was easy to spot in the crowd because she looked exactly like the pictures of her I had seen earlier on the internet: pitch-black hair, cut very short and with a fringe. Her facial expressions did not reveal much, neither at the beginning nor by the end of the encounter, which made her hard to read. And while she was calm, she also seemed to have little time, expressing herself in very prompt answers. She started the conversation, furthermore, by offering me the book she wrote while in prison, and more than once stressed that she and feminists in general were in dire need of financial support and that she would be very grateful for any suggestions from my side. I therefore could not help but feel that she had expected more from our meeting. As a result, I first treated her testimony with some caution, for I was not sure whether I had been manipulated in an attempt to get something in exchange. This caution, however, vanished only weeks after our interview; I had already returned from fieldwork when I learnt that she had again been arrested. This story was definitely odd and made my initial doubts disappear.

Suhareva had tried to run in Moscow’s 2013 municipal elections. To register as an independent candidate she needed to gather 10 signatures, which she collected on her own. But when she submitted her application at the electoral commission it was declined, on the basis that the signatures were allegedly fraudulent. She filed a complaint that was unsuccessful, and backed it up with an appeal that was equally unsuccessful. It does not come as a surprise that in her book she writes: “I was fully

⁴⁷ “Fair Russia” is an opposition party to Putin’s ruling party “United Russia”, and identifies as social-democratic even though it has important differences with socio-democratic parties in Western Europe. It is nevertheless well connected to them via the Socialist International. While it has increasingly drawn nearer Putin’s entourage since the Crimea crisis in 2014, it had clearly distanced itself from the government between 2010 and 2014, comprising the timespan when Suhareva tried to run as its candidate.

aware of the futility of trying to stand as an independent candidate” in the elections to the Moscow City Duma (SUHAREVA, 2015: 6). This is why she had conversations with all existing oppositional parties and decided to stand with “Fair Russia”. A campaign team with headquarters was established and soon after strange visits started. The police came round and fire and tax inspections occurred. (The latter two, in particular, will no doubt be familiar to those working at the EUSPb.) Suhareva’s staff had run through the possibilities of headquarters being closed down, her car being seized because of the electoral advert on it, and even the eventuality of a direct attack. Attacks had indeed already been directed at three independent candidates, all of whom were female. The most severe concerned Tatyana Logatskaya, who was almost run over by a car. Instead, what eventually stopped Suhareva’s campaign was her arrest on the basis of an allegation of fraudulent activities as an insurance broker. She was taken into police custody on 10 July 2014, the very day she was expected to receive the official registration as an electoral candidate, thus putting an irrevocable end to her campaign.

What followed was an ordeal with law enforcement that follows the playbook on intimidating opposition politicians. She was first kept in pre-trial detention for eight months until she was transferred to house arrest and temporarily released in July 2015 under the obligation not to leave the country. When I met her on November 9th 2017, that was still her legal circumstance and that was the experience she was drawing from and describing in her book. Little did we know that less than a month later, on 5 December, she would end up in pre-trial detention again while awaiting her sentence. Shortly after she was sentenced to 5 years in prison, but released in August 2018. With the support of the Centre for Combating the Fabrication of Criminal Cases she has since taken her case to the European Court of Human Rights and is awaiting the verdict.

Suhareva’s case rallied numerous Moscow feminists behind her, among them a number whom I had interviewed. The young feminist artists Agamalova and Vasyakina, for example, who had been questioned because of their intention to attend a harmless feminist camp, supported Suhareva because the handling of her “audacity” to run as an outspoken feminist was an undeniable sign of the zero tolerance

authorities have towards this kind of view. Their concern for Suhareva displaced their otherwise diverging feminist views. Among their activities was a petition to advocate for her immediate release, active observation during the court hearings, followed by detailed reporting on social media as well as protests before the court.

These are the stories I captured under the subcode “repression” to understand how Russian feminists make sense of the current political atmosphere. However, among the total of 48 sequences that I attributed to this category are also statements that refer to a lesser form of repression. What my respondents most often referred to here was the intimidation techniques applied to gender studies centres. When looking at some of the most established gender studies centres in the country and their recent fate, it indeed becomes apparent that a systematic campaign against them has started.

6.1.1 The anti-gender studies backlash

6.1.1.1 The Moscow Gender Studies Centre

During my first fieldtrip to Russia in 2014, I witnessed first-hand how the internationally renowned Moscow Centre for Gender Studies (MCGS) struggled with repression. My realisation of that fate started with an anecdote. I had contacted the MCGS’s director, Olga Voronina, to enquire about a possible affiliation during my stay. She immediately agreed but added that I ought to be aware that they would have no office. I understood the Russian phrase *u nas net ofisa* [*we have no office*] as meaning they would not be able to provide me with my own office space, which I had not even expected, and so I no longer thought about it. Just days before travelling to Russia, this misunderstanding put my collaboration with one of Russia’s best-known scholars in feminist philosophy on shaky starting grounds. I emailed her asking when it would be best for me to come to the Centre and meet its members, to which I received a very upset answer, stating in capital letters that she had already told me there was NO OFFICE. Consequently, she went on, there was neither a physical meeting place nor any real scientific projects going on anymore and I would have to meet interlocutors individually. Only at this point did I realise the scope of the problem. I apologised and explained my misinterpretation, after which Voronina was very honest when she

wrote: “I am sorry I must have written a very harsh email. It is just that this whole story with the MCGS’s dissolution happened over the spring and I am still under a lot of pressure because of this. This is why it was hurtful to be forced to explain this to you again.” After this incident, our relationship turned, and she has since been one of the most reliable allies in my quest for interview participants and material in Russia. My fieldwork began with me paying her a visit at her office at the Philosophy Institute of the RAS, where she works as a senior scientific associate. She welcomed me into a room whose warmth stood in sharp contrast with the old and derelict state of the rest of this branch of the Philosophy Institute. Over tea and the obligatory *konfetki*, small Russian sweets, she told me what had happened.

For almost 20 years, the MCGS had had a non-lucrative contract with the Institute for Socio-Economic Problems of the Population (ISEPN) at RAS (VORONINA, 2014) (see also 4.3.2). Under this contract, the MCGS could use one of ISEPN’s offices and its address for legal registration. This allowed the MCGS to register and function as an independent and charitable research institute under Russian law (VORONINA, 2014). As outlined in the historical chapter, this collaboration was crucially enabled thanks to the goodwill of Natalya Rimashevskaya, the founder of a prestigious school within ISEPN, and who still today in her eighties enjoys much esteem. The MCGS came into being in 1995 because it benefitted of her protective wings and active lobbying within ISEPN. It seems, however, that in 2014 different times had begun and she was either no longer willing or able to protect the MCGS; a question Voronina did not want to delve into further.

ISEPN dissolved the contract with MCGS in spring 2014, effectively making it impossible for the oldest gender studies centre in contemporary Russia to operate. Voronina could not register the centre under her personal address and no other official institution was ready to host it. As I reported at the time, Voronina took painstaking efforts to at least try and find a new publicly accessible location for the stacks of books they had accumulated over the years (BIAS, 2015). But even that proved difficult. Their existence, she admitted, had been reduced to the virtual world, where she and former colleagues and allies maintained the website *gender.ru*. The website allowed them at least for some time to stay in touch and update each other on projects

they were now conducting individually. However, after six years, they gave up this last bastion too and put the domain up for sale in October 2019. Anyone who is still active today is largely doing so in isolation and in the shadows.

6.1.1.2 The Ivanovo Gender Studies Centre

The MCGS disappeared slowly and silently. This discretion was not applied when dismantling another well-established gender studies centre in Ivanovo, a city located north-east of Moscow and a three-and-a-half-hour train journey away. I undertook this journey during my fieldwork and spent over a week in Ivanovo to get an insight in how gender studies are treated in the province. Back in 2014 it was still flourishing, offering an optional course in the history of the suffragette movement as well as supervision for gender-related theses. I vividly remember one of the students, Darya Krupina, defiantly choosing to write her master thesis on the role of official discourses on LGBT in international relations. The anti “gay propaganda” law had just been adopted a year earlier so this topic would likely expose her. Yet it seemed that she felt both safe and encouraged thanks to the Ivanovo Gender Studies Centre (ICGS).

The situation drastically changed a year later in summer 2015. The ICGS, very similar to the MCGS, had been founded and working thanks to an affiliation with an official institution. The Ivanovo State University gave the ICGS both a legal address to register and premises to use. The ICGS in return offered the mentioned educational activities, published several volumes, organised summer schools, and conducted trainings and seminars, including a very successful one to foster women into municipal leadership positions, all of which the university readily took credit for. In 2015, however, the university’s administration decided that it wanted to get rid of the ICGS and its Director Olga Shnyrova in particular. As she wrote in her testimonial on Facebook to garner public support against the centre’s eviction, the administration had long wanted to abolish the ICGS but could not find sufficient legal grounds. As a result, she continues, on the morning of June 4th 2015, the centre’s door was sealed (Picture 5) under the pretext that a “suspicious sour smell” had been emanating from its office. This was also the excuse they gave for moving all the centre’s belongings “elsewhere”. When Shnyrova asked the Dean for an explanation, he made no efforts to

veil his contempt, saying *mne na Vas naplevat*, which literally means “I spit on you” and translates as I could not care less.

Picture 5: ICGS’s sealed door as found on June 4th 2015



Source: Public Facebook post by ICGS’ director, Olga, Shnyrova, 5. June 2015, URL: <https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Folgashnyrova%2Fposts%2F803635076381045&width=500>

This incident was the beginning of a year-long saga initiating ICGS’ decline. Almost a month later, the administration finally returned the centre’s belongings to Shnyrova (Picture 6). In that Facebook post she said that they dragged all their property to ICGS alumni, where it would be temporarily stored, and then proclaimed that from September they would be looking for a new home. “Temporarily”, however, became the new stable, for in the meantime Shnyrova was made redundant from the university on grounds of budgetary cuts. At first her appeal was successful and she was allowed to return, though for less than a year. Throughout this period there were several attempts to sack her and finally, in summer 2016, she was fired for “systematic absence”. This time her appeal failed. It comes as no surprise that in such turbulent times there was little time and energy left to find a new office for the ICGS.

Picture 6: ICGS's Director, Olga Shnyrova after recuperating the centre's belongings on July 2nd 2015



Source: Public Facebook post by ICGS' director, Olga, Shnyrova, 2. July 2015, URL: <https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Folgashnyrova%2Fposts%2F816159908461895&width=500>

However, and this is something Shnyrova was very adamant to stress each time we spoke about this incident, the ICGS is still alive. It has continued organising summer schools with known institutions such as Oxford's Ruskin College or the Portuguese Fernando de Pessoa University. And a new defining feature of its activities is that it has created a network between women's organisations in the post-Soviet region, especially from the Northern Caucasus, whose exchange it facilitates and representatives of which are encouraged to participate in said summer schools. While Shnyrova's defiant attitude is undoubtable and also an important signal for feminists in Ivanovo and beyond, it goes without saying that a gender studies centre that can no longer teach, publish and conduct research is considerably weakened.

6.1.1.3 Gender Studies at the European University of St. Petersburg

This is precisely the fate that the Gender Studies Centre at the European University in St. Petersburg (EUSPb) is also suffering at the time of writing. It is the last incident both chronologically and on an escalation level, for the European University is a private institution, which is why its treatment is particularly alarming. It also means, however, that this incident does not exclusively concern the Gender Studies Centre, but the entire university. Yet, as I shall demonstrate later, 'gender' played a key role.

In 1997 the Programme in Gender Studies was introduced at EUSPb's Faculty of Political Science and Sociology with the core aim to institutionalise gender studies at Master level. Until 2017, it offered an entire postgraduate degree in gender studies. Then, the university's teaching licence was all of a sudden withdrawn. As one of the co-founders of the Programme, Elena Zdravomyslova said in the interview "it has been an eternal circle of accusations and appeals" (ZDRAVOMYSLOVA, 2017), which I am not going to detail here⁴⁸. It all started with a complaint filed by the radical MP Vitaly Milonov, who had also been at the forefront of introducing the anti "gay propaganda" law, accusing the Gender Studies Centre of spreading homosexual propaganda among its students and forcing them to engage with "disgusting" topics. This is why, Ekaterina Borodina, one of the centre's most recently appointed lecturers, argues, it all started with 'gender' (BORODINA, 2017). It thus was a clear anti-gender attack (which will be further discussed in 6.4.2 in this chapter), which with time was covered by no fewer than 11 complaints from official bodies to prompt enquiries (NECHEPURENKO, 2018).

There was the St. Petersburg government, which owned the building the university was in, who filed a complaint alleging that the university was using plastic windows. There was the Emergency Situations Ministry, which initiated an investigation into the university's compliance with fire regulations. And finally, and most importantly, there was the education watchdog, which issues teaching licences. The university was evicted from the building and moved into a brand-new premises across the street, but could not welcome any students for two years. In mid-2018 it was granted a new teaching licence, but it is still waiting for official accreditation in order for its degrees to be recognised across Russia.

Such was the situation when I went on to interview one of the centre's co-founders, Elena Zdravomyslova, a second time in autumn 2017. The perfectly polished and bright hallways of the new building stood in stark contrast to the rather dark and crooked halls and staircases of the 18th century palace they had historically been

⁴⁸ The New York Times provides a detailed write up of the entire story: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/26/world/europe/european-university-st-petersburg-russia.html>

located in. What dominated the entire conversation was her explicit reference to strong feelings of insecurity and uncertainty that had reigned over her scholarly activity for the past year. But similar to Shnyrova from Ivanovo, this was accompanied by defiance: “I am part of the first generation. I have been here since 1996 and I won’t leave the boat until it is on the shore” (ZDRAVOMYSLOVA, 2017). She explained how they circumvented the legal restrictions by declaring their second-year master students as research assistants so that they could still finish their degrees. And most recently, they decided to offer their introductory course in gender studies via the online platform “Arzamas”⁴⁹ and in an intense winter school⁵⁰. Unlike the ICGS and MCGS, the gender studies scholars at the European University for now still have the means to conduct high quality research and to keep their international networks and reach. Yet as long as they cannot meaningfully teach, it is clear that gender studies are put on a low flame with no viable prospect of fostering a new generation of thinkers that will critically examine Russia’s gender regime.

From the discreet decline of the MCGS, to the open evictions and accusations against key gender scholars and centres, gender studies have been systematically targeted in Russia. While the clampdown varies in form, it always comes in the veil of administrative procedures and requirements. This is crucial because it allows authorities to hide that their real issue is gender and feminism per se, though feminists, as shall be seen, are well aware these are no benign coincidences. The only case where this became obvious is the EUSPGS. Even though all subsequent official complaints exclusively related to existing regulations and concerned all of the university, it was evident that these complaints were all connected to the initial accusations that the university’s Gender Studies Centre promoted gay propaganda. This targeting is illustrative for the new hostile environment Russian feminists find themselves in. The pressure no longer stops at even years-long allies, who still enjoy much prestige, as with the case of the former patron of the MCGS.

⁴⁹ <https://arzamas.academy/courses/68>

⁵⁰ <https://eusp.org/projects/gender-likbez>

6.1.2 *The reassertion-regression nexus*

Both the targeting of gender studies as well as the zero tolerance to even the slightest feminist activism, make Russian feminists speak of a political environment that fundamentally shrinks their space through repressive measures. The coding system further showed that the atmosphere of repression is accompanied by what I have classified as “obstruction”, “reassertion” and “regression”. With regards to obstruction, Nadezhda Zamotaeva, the director of the oldest SOS hotline for victims of sexual violence the centre *Syostri*, told me how every year new requirements appear that make it impossible for genuinely independent NGOs to successfully apply for the Presidential Grants. These grants were established at the time when the foreign agent debate started and foreign foundations were driven out of the country. The Presidential Grants were supposed to replace these funding opportunities, but they have been very careful in selecting and supporting only those organisations that do not fundamentally question Russian society and therefore current government policy. But of course, not questioning, for example, the “slap bill” – the euphemistic designation for the bill that decriminalised domestic violence – would be anathema to an NGO like *Syostri*. And hence, so Zamotaeva told me, it was preferable to not even try to apply and waste precious resources in the process.

Both repression and obstruction are placed within a larger context that I have characterised based on my interview partners’ testimonials as a time of “reassertion” and “regression”. With the subcode “reassertion” I codified all instances where my interlocutors mentioned the official policy of returning to supposedly quintessentially Russian values. This is best illustrated with a quote from the interview with Voronina:

There is now factually talk of sovereign democracy, of a return to Russia’s uniqueness, to its deep-rooted values, which do not include Western values like democracy, human rights because we are so exceptional aren’t we? We have Orthodoxy, collectivism. We subordinate ourselves to those in power because the powerful embody the principle of caring about the people and they know better than anyone else and will tell us how to live, how to eat and, why not, even how to dress. (VORONINA, 2014)

Shnyrova, the Director of the former ICGS who was evicted from the university premises, concludes that this kind of official policy leads to a tendency where anything Western is equated with evil. The project of Russian reassertion, the wish to re-acquire

superpower status, is implemented not with a vision but with a retrospective. It is encapsulated in the appeal to “return” to supposedly Russian values as a means of also returning to old positions of power. This was perfectly summarised in the title of Masha Gessen’s recent book about Russia’s transition from communism to authoritarianism: “the Future is History” (GESSEN, 2018). It also explains why in the interviews there were references not only to ambitions of reassertion, but to clear feelings of societal regression, since power in this constellation presupposes the latter.

Several interview partners mentioned the reversion to old traditions and, most prominently, the concentration on the family as the entity to be safeguarded for the sake of the nation’s survival and progress, as a clear form of degeneration. Of biggest concern was the shrinking of reproductive rights because of its immediate effect on women’s livelihood, thus making the shrinking space really tangible. One respondent, for instance, referenced posters that have appeared in gynaecological surgeries all over the country since the early 2010s, warning of the negative side effects of abortion and inducing guilt in women seeking an abortion. Apahonchich, a young feminist in St. Petersburg, who produces short videos discussing feminist topics in an accessible way together with seven other activists for their YouTube channel *Feministki poyasnyayut* [*Feminists explain*], compares the situation with a sliding back to *Domostroy*. A comparison also used by Tatyana Klimenkova, a political philosopher who was highly involved in the early years of the MCGS, *Domostroy* translates as “domestic order” and refers to a series of manuscripts from the 16th century. These offered, euphemistically, “advice” to men on how to run a “good household”, to ensure female spousal obedience, and to administer necessary beatings.

How feminists see the effect of this reassertion via regression, is again well captured with Voronina’s conclusion. She argues that Russian society has been led into “a state of fundamentalism” with “archaic values” that ensures mass “intellectual hibernation” (VORONINA, 2014). Or put differently: it was made sure that critical thought, the precondition for popular dissent, would become virtually impossible. This overall assessment of the current political environment as being of a regressive and reassertive nature by my interview partners, was either introduced or followed up with a clear time reference, thus underlining that it was their impression of *current*

affairs and that they contrasted with a different past. As illustrated below, these temporal markers would either take the form of referring to a specific year and/or indicating simultaneity with another political development:

- In 2011 the hard anti-gender conservative politics started (Asya Hodyreva)
- This is connected with the right-wing turn in the 2000s when Putin came to power (Natalya Pushkareva)
- This happened simultaneously with Putin's accession to power, when the conservative turn happened (Katerina Bakhrenkova)
- At the same time as new government structures for supporting families and children were introduced in 2012, the idea that we have to bear more children started (Asya Hodyreva)

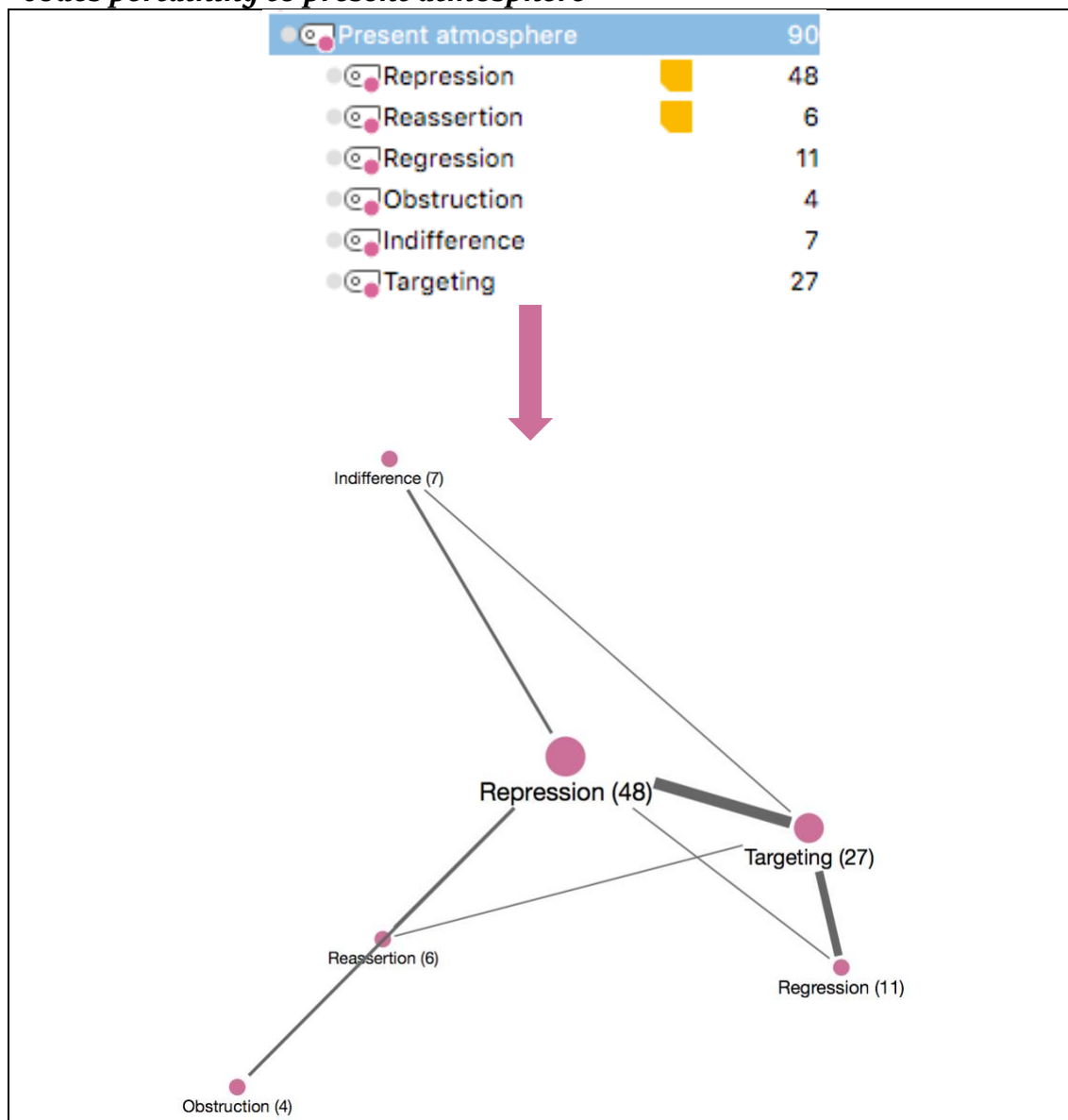
6.2 Living targets

So far it can be said that my respondents judge the political environment in which they are acting as one where reassertion as a great power is underpinned with a regressive "vision", and operationalised through repressive measures. Experiences of repression are, as mentioned, overwhelmingly the chief concern of feminists. What is even more telling for this research, however, is their acute awareness that they are being targeted as feminists. They could also relate the repressive instances they have witnessed to a generally authoritarian regime. Instead they are intimately connecting it with their being feminists, and with the new hegemonic discourse ascribing to feminists dangerous qualities that must be held in check.

To analyse the relationship between analytical categories within all the interviews, there is the option of code clouds. In the graph below, I analysed the proximity between all the codes that I had created for the 90 interview segments that referred to the different qualities of the current political situation in Russia: "repression", "reassertion", "regression", "obstruction", "indifference" and "targeting". In the graph, the codes co-occur within a maximum distance of one paragraph. This is to ensure that what was said was indeed intimately related to one another, which would be less clear if the occurrence were allowed to be captured even if two codes laid five paragraphs apart. The closer two dots of codes are, the closer these topics

would also be treated within the interviews. The width of the connecting lines illustrates the frequency with which two topics co-occur.

Graph 4: Code cloud to show relations in terms of co-occurrence between codes pertaining to present atmosphere



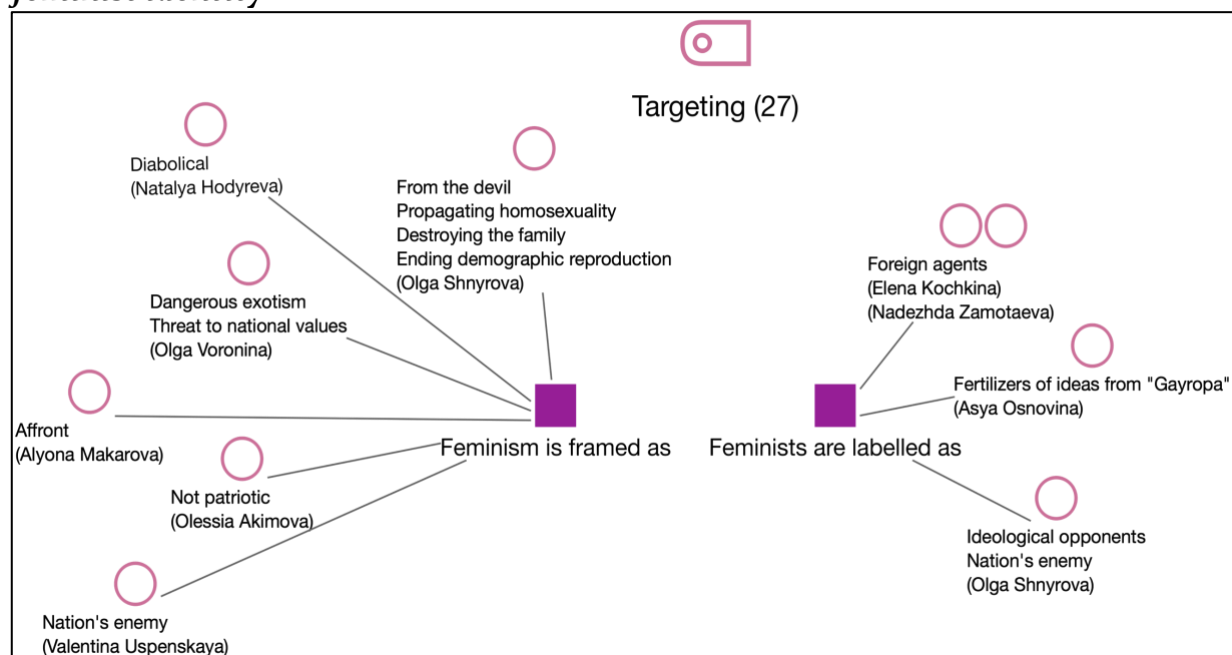
Reading example: Within the database of Russian interviews there are 48 segments in which feminists referred to instances of repression. This is the most frequent code of all and is therefore at the centre of the code cloud because it is more prone to co-occurrence with the other codes. The codes “obstruction” and “indifference” are very far from the central code and connected with a thin line, which indicates a weak co-occurrence. “Targeting”, however, is both closest to and connected with the thickest line to the central code of “repression”. This demonstrates a strong co-occurrence both in terms of proximity and frequency.

Given both the proximity and the thickness of the connection between “repression” and “targeting” in the code cloud, we can infer that over the entire dataset

of transcribed Russian interviews, they co-occurred in close proximity to each other and did so more frequently than any of the remaining codes.

But what exactly is this co-occurrence based on? The analysis of the interviews shows that Russian feminists relate their experience of repression to the anti-gender discourse, which attaches negative attributes to their subject-positioning as feminists and consequently turns them into targets. The code “targeting” then also consists of two dimensions that make sense of this two-stage process. First feminists have to be made into viable targets, by being demonised. This takes the form of framing the cause they identify with – feminism – as a potential threat, and labelling them as the living carriers of it. How my interlocutors vocalised this external ascription of deviance to their identity in the interviews is illustrated in the graph below. It also lists the character attributions they mentioned for each time an interview part was coded accordingly.

Graph 5: First dimension: Being made into a target via negative attributions to feminist identity



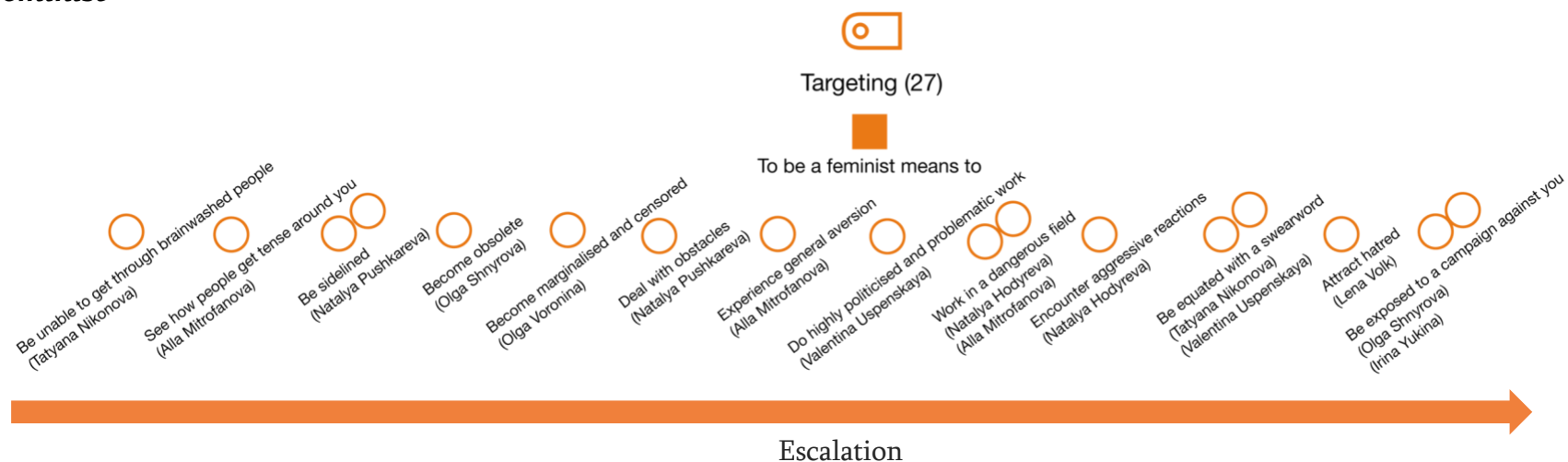
Reading example: Each circle equals one interview segment that was coded with “targeting”. There are ten circles. Out of 27 coded segments, ten refer to the first dimension of being made into a target. Natalya Hodyreva, for instance, mentioned that feminism is framed as “diabolical”. Voronina mentioned two character attributions that are used to frame feminism: “dangerous exotism” and a “threat to national values”. And both Elena Kochkina and Nadezhda Zamotaeva referred to feminists being labelled as “foreign agents” as part of the negative identity-construction.

What is striking in this endeavour to demonise feminism and feminists as its messengers, is how it is attributed total foreignness. Feminism is said to be exotic and feminists are deemed to pursue an agenda on behalf of others. They are indeed referred to as “fertilisers of ideas from ‘Gayropa’”. It is, however, not only alien to Russia, but also condemned for being intrinsically dangerous to the point that it threatens to destroy the country’s very life subsistence: the family. This is why it is framed as “not patriotic” and declared the “nation’s enemy”. Through the first dimension of targeting, then, feminism is labelled as something completely alien to Russia, that threatens its very existence and must not be tolerated.

Once the demonization of feminists has occurred, they become targets as the living embodiment of what has been framed as dangerous and treacherous. In the second stage, being a feminist bears new consequences because of the ways in which their identity has been externally changed in order to connote negativity. If the first phase of targeting is about how to be made into a target, this phase is about what it means to navigate Russian society as the corporeal representative of that discursive target. The consequence of identifying as a feminist is connected with all the negative frames that have been attached to this identification, and means experiencing a range of hostility. The graph below shows how feminists become self-conscious of being singled out as a landing point for the crafted hostility purely by identifying as feminists.

Crucially, the range of reactions is not just diverse, but escalating. It starts with having difficulties in “getting through” to audiences that have been brainwashed and “get tense around you”. In the middle stage are instances of being “sidelined” and “marginalized”. It then gradually evolves to “encountering aggressive reactions”, “being equated with a swearword”, “attracting hatred” and finally becoming the object of a “campaign”. It comes as no surprise, then, that Russian feminists are aware they are doing “highly politicised” work and traverse a “dangerous field”. As Valentina Uspenskaya, the Director of the Gender Studies Centre in the small city Tver, told me: “What we didn’t manage to do, has finally been achieved: to make gender political and lift the debate onto a new level”. This, though, was not quite the course of political development feminists would have wanted it to take.

Graph 6: Second dimension: Experience targeting via hostile reactions that follow from identifying as a feminist



Reading example: At the lower end of the list are the more benign forms of reactions feminists experience, while at the top are the more hostile expressions. Each circle equals one interview segment that was coded with “targeting”. There are 17 circles. Out of 27 coded segments, 17 refer to the second dimension of actually experiencing the targeting as a living embodiment of the target. That being a feminist means to “be sidelined” was mentioned twice by Natalya Pushkareva, hence why there are two circles. “Being equated to a swearword” was also mentioned twice but by two different interlocutors, who are listed in brackets.

Having shown that my interview partners have a heightened self-consciousness of being a target, it makes sense that they draw a direct correlation to the repression they have witnessed. To them it is not a coincidental negative side-effect of an authoritarian country, but very much a deliberate strategy against them that is inherent to an authoritarian regime whose stability relies on an anti-Western and anti-gender discourse. This is why the two codes “repression” and “targeting” were so intimately linked in the dataset.

6.2.1 The feelings hostility evokes

In what follows I look at the felt emotional consequences my interlocutors associated with the above-described political environment, characterised by repression and hostility against them. The three most frequent categories of feelings I discerned in the dataset were fear, self-renunciation and internal conflicts (Table 12).

Fear, with fourteen coded segments, is the most frequent consequence of the current political climate for feminists. In the interviews, my interlocutors convey two key aspects related to their fear. First, the repression against feminists takes arbitrary forms, so there is no clear way of pre-empting it. Hodyreva, for instance, expressed this when she said: “There is no clear indication of what is forbidden. But even if there were, they will anyway find a way to come after you” (HODYREVA, 2017). Or as Rapoport put it: „You can be arrested for whatever” (RAPOPORT, 2017). And second, precisely because of the impossibility to control the form and level of repression their activism is going to provoke, they become anxious. Many of them told me how they have become acutely alert and constantly weigh the odds against doing or saying something. There is Shnyrova, who worries whether she can still conduct a queer film cinema during her summer schools. There is Bella Rapoport, who thinks twice whether she should talk to teenagers about queer themes. And there are Volk and Apahonchich, who consider the risks thoroughly before they record one of their YouTube videos that involves a religious character. Hence there is a continuous inner risk assessment, which in their view more often than not leads to precipitous self-censorship.

Table 12: Frequencies of emotive codes associated with the present political context

Code System		849
1. Reference to political context		0
Present atmosphere		90
Repression		48
Reassertion		6
Regression		11
Obstruction		4
Indifference		7
Targeting		27
Consequences		0
Fear		14
Self-renunciation		11
Internal conflicts		10
Isolation		9
Exhaustion		7
Doom		4
Determination		4
Surrender		3
Humiliation		3

This is also what leads to what I have coded as self-renunciation. This mainly involves not openly identifying as a feminist and avoiding speaking about LGBT themes in order to avoid more repression (and potentially achieving further margin for manoeuvring). Examples here include the SOS centre *Syostri*. Since *Syostri* provides fundamental help for victims of abuse, feminists rate their ability to continue working as more important than actively labelling their NGO as feminist. Similarly, Tatyana Nikonova, one of Russia's most famous bloggers on female desire and reproductive health, recently signed a book contract to write a book on sexual education for teenagers. But in order to make sure that the book would be sold in mainstream bookshops, she consciously decided to keep a heteronormative line even if she would have liked to touch upon LGBT issues. When my interview respondents mentioned consciously “staying at feminism Vol. 1.0” as Nikonova put it, they always framed it as a “necessary evil”, a pragmatic step.

However, other respondents, who have witnessed feminists “self-renouncing”, display quite a different assessment: to them this can lead to a dangerous complicity with the official strategy of defaming and targeting feminism. Some of the interviewees reacted very strongly to those fellow feminists, who have consciously

adopted the official line to bring themselves out of line, and consequently fed the hegemonic discourse. This is what I captured under the code of “internal conflict” within the movement. A good illustration of this dynamic is the Crisis Centre in St. Petersburg. In this case a further restraining element comes into play. Repression also happens on a material level to the degree that foreign funding has been aggressively curbed (the FSB forcefully entered the building of the Open Society Foundation in Moscow). Simultaneously, the so-called Presidential Grants were created, supposedly to fill the gap these foreign foundations were leaving behind. In reality, however, it has meant further cornering feminist organisations, which are now struggling against each other for the last crumbs. As a result, regime loyalty becomes an important survival strategy.

This is what Asya Hodyreva witnessed first-hand at the Crisis Centre. Having worked there for several years, she tells me how she palpably saw the tension mount over time. She saw pre-emptive obedience to the regime’s discourse taking hold within the NGO and feminist circles more generally. Hodyreva describes how this manifested in feminists rushing to reassure that their activity had nothing to do with “radical feminism” or “LGBT ideology”. This repeating of precisely the terms the government was using against the community created a rift within the feminist movement itself. And it was what ultimately pushed Hodyreva to leave her former employer and the country altogether only a few months after our interview in autumn 2017.

Overall, the preceding analysis shows that Russian feminists are in a state of fear of the state – a fear that is characterised by a heightened experience of repression that is not coincidental to, but rather the result of, feminists being specifically targeted. This fear leads to anxiety and deliberate self-censorship, which in turn can take extreme forms of actually adopting the “party line” to guarantee one’s survival, causing important frictions among feminists themselves. There is therefore not only fear, but also an awareness of the risk of falling into the government’s hegemonic discourse that works against them. This is why critique of knowledge-transfer is a major concern for Russian feminists, just not in the way critical scholars would have expected. The main preoccupation is how to avoid that critique. For, arguing that transnational feminism

is nothing but a unidirectional and oppressive import of Western knowledge would discursively feed the government's strategy of targeting and repressing feminism.

The remainder of the chapter looks at how the respondents try to subvert the hegemonic discourse by avoiding precisely this kind of resonance with it. It first looks at a discursive strategy that still endorses knowledge-transfer as a concept, but attaches new, positive meaning to it. In a next step, it analyses a strategy that entails reframing knowledge-transfer as an exchange instead, and which also relies on highlighting the important heritage of Russian feminism. It concludes by showing how a number of Russian feminists push back against the assertion that the transliterated introduction of 'gender' is an example of a colonising Western feminist knowledge-transfer. By arguing that these linguistic introductions are mundane and regular in several other spheres of Russian language and research, but are only politicised when it comes to feminism, they reveal the political strategy behind the assertion and rip the geographical boundaries commonly erected to make knowledge-transfer as a discourse work, of their significance and force.

6.3 Transforming oneself through knowledge-transfer

The state of fear explicated above stands in sharp contrast to their assessment of what the past political circumstances were like. Whenever feminists refer to the past, and more specifically the 1990s, their evaluation is centred around four positive qualifiers: hope, vitality, development, and benignity. That the time was not captivated by fear as it is today, but instead a climate of benign peace where they could develop and think freely, stands in relationship to their positive assessment of knowledge-transfer. This, I argue, is one of the three pillars of their strategy to subvert the hegemonic discourse: to qualify knowledge-transfer as a positive process that enlightened and enriched them instead.

As mentioned above, in the 1990s Russian feminists felt like democratisers who consciously looked west-ward and in so doing perceived themselves as making an invaluable contribution to the country's progress. This identification and ambition transpires most clearly in the interviews with older feminist academics, who were at the forefront of the then-emerging gender studies centres. In those interviews, I could

observe how their exhilaration and enthusiasm at the thought of that past time escaped their eyes and voices as soon as they compared it with present-day politics. Klimenkova, who was one of the first members of the MCGS, for instance, has very fond memories of the UN World Conference on Women in 1995:

I was at the World Conference on Women in Beijing. We lived in Beijing's outskirts and we were 35,000 women. It lasted for more than two weeks and it was such a unifying experience with so much happiness and so much support for one another. This was a new kind of power. (KLIMENKOVA, 2014)

This new power emerged because she discovered that there were thousands of like-minded women, ready to stand up for each other. All of a sudden there was a realisation of the existence of a whole supportive bedrock behind every single feminist, which is why the pervasive feeling associated with the conference is that of happiness and empowerment. And more important still for the subject of discussion, Klimenkova explains that she formulated a new worldview. It is this element of transnational feminism being a source of new analytical tools that is most often mentioned as a means of defending knowledge-transfer.

Shnyrova alludes to this when she speaks of the 1990s as a period of “deficit of the most basic knowledge on gender”, which is why the sudden availability of translations of what she terms feminist “classics” was nothing less than a “revelation”. Similar to Klimenkova, she compares this to a discovery of a way of thinking: “this was a completely new perspective from which to look at the world, which we had been excluded from until then”. The famous women's historian Pushkareva had not been at the Beijing conference, but for her the summer schools, which the MCGS first organised in 1996, were the place where she found new inspiration.

At these summer schools, professors and lecturers would meet, especially those who were acquainted with Western concepts. It was precisely [there] that the most intense intellectual exchange of opinions would take place. And not just between sociologists, but also psychologists, historians. It was an absolute entanglement. They were connected with each other like this [interlinks the fingers of her hands]. People of various humanitarian disciplines were discussing what they could teach their students. And I for the first time learnt about publications in sociology, about gendered linguistics and gender literary analysis and I came back from this school, went straight to the library to collect all the material I had heard about. This is how this influenced me, by motivating me to show that gender concepts could be used as analytical lenses to understand our empirical material. (PUSHKAREVA, 2014)

Even though Pushkareva chooses more academic terms, by referring to an “analytical lens to understand our empirical material”, she too speaks of a discovery of a new tool to make sense of their reality, even if in her case that reality was more concerned with the history of Russian women.

To them transnational feminism indeed entailed unilateral knowledge-transfer that took various proliferating forms. They do not, however, qualify it as an instance of negative power relations, but of empowerment. They actively gathered the knowledge in books that suddenly became available, but also at transnational gatherings such as the UN conference in Beijing. In turn, Russian feminists themselves became proliferators through the summer schools they started conducting and which inspired yet another layer of Russian academics. In their understanding, this was nowhere near an oppressive or patronising experience as critical literature would suggest. On the contrary, their accounts purvey at least three expressions of agency: the agency to seek knowledge, to transmit it, and to produce new knowledge themselves. What prevails in these testimonies is the feeling of having gained a new form of power because feminists understood their realities better and had a whole supportive network to act upon those conclusions.

Furthermore, those interviews convey not only agency, but crucially also a lust to know more and pride in achieving it. Mitrofanova, the feminist philosopher from the older generation in St. Petersburg, communicates this element when she describes a time of awakening, in which they wanted to play a key role:

It was the time when the old-world system disintegrated and the old way of life was replaced with something new. [...] To us it was very important that the Iron Curtain was lifted, that borders were opened and various new theoretical approaches could be studied. The building of bridges and relations were a crucial part and even an obligation in this foundation of a new globality. And we had to both practice and transmit it to others in order to demonstrate that this new way of life was really worth living. (MITROFANOVA, 2017)

The entire world was changing and they were in the middle of it. As Mitrofanova describes, this offered a unique opportunity for Russian feminists: to not only study the world from different perspectives, but to actively use these new approaches to influence the direction the new system was going to take. It was to this end that they created relationships with the previously-outside world, for this was a gate to new and

sought-after knowledge. Knowledge-transfer was, then, something they consciously enacted as part of the obligation they felt as citizens of a new society. And importantly, knowledge-transfer was not perceived as ending with them. They were not simple receivers of knowledge, but crafters in the middle of a “supply-chain”, who then further transformed and transferred it.

This is a recurring theme in the interviews. Most often the interviewees exemplified this role of knowledge-crafters and catalysers when mentioning their activity of publishing. Voronina for instance refers to the MCGS publishing translations and own journals as well as books on gender, which would not have been published otherwise, and which were then distributed free of charge. And Uspenskaya concludes from this that they contributed to the formation of a “conscious civil society”, thus further confirming the important part they played in the 1990s thanks to knowledge-transfer.

Last but not least, my interlocutors emphasised the ways in which the pure practical support they received as a result of knowledge-transfer bolstered their valuation of it. The centre *Syostrri* offers a great example of this perspective. Both Bakhrenkova, who has worked at the centre since 2014, and Zamotaeva, who has been there since it was founded in 1994, emphasise how crucial it was to get external help both for funding and operating purposes. Zamotaeva vividly remembers how the young American woman Martina Vandenberg was a driving force in setting up the centre. She first came to the USSR in 1985 to write her dissertation on the Soviet army. Having had previous experience with crisis centres abroad and seeing that no such institution existed in Moscow, she started uniting women who were ready to change this. In 1993, Vandenberg applied successfully for a big grant. This provided the group of women with the necessary starting capital to set up the centre *Syostrri*, which to this day helps women surviving sexual violence. Besides this fundamental financial support, the Russian feminists involved in the project also drew from Vandenberg’s existing practical experience with crisis centres in the US, Canada and the UK. Bakhrenkova believes that it was thanks to this possibility of reflecting upon the experiences made elsewhere, that *Syostrri* managed to establish very good working principles and processes.

From the aforementioned analysis, a clear picture emerges with many Russian feminists associating knowledge-transfer with a past time, where they were pioneers in discovering and proliferating new analytical tools. There is no rejection of the notion of knowledge-transfer and its unidirectionality as such. Instead, what is averted is its negative connotation with regards to power relations. To do so feminists stress their sense of agency inasmuch as they deliberately sought the knowledge-transfer and gained from it new insights, intellectual instruments, and connections that provided practical experience, support and a sense of belonging. This is why, in their reading, the only power associated with knowledge-transfer is of positive nature because it *empowered* them on a whole range of levels.

6.4 Rebounding the boundaries ‘knowledge-transfer’ creates

6.4.1 From transfer to exchange

Others still undermine the very notion of Western knowledge-transfer being a one-way street. They highlight that the encounter with Western feminists was not an instance of unidirectional transfer of knowledge, but rather an exchange between equals. That way they strip knowledge-transfer of its conceptual possibility and make a new and more balanced transnational feminist community thinkable.

To illustrate this, I use interview excerpts from Lipovskaya, who is one of the most vocal advocates of this stance, and combine them with passages of Ann Snitow’s memoirs, which have only recently been published. Lipovskaya belongs to the older generation of feminists in Russia. As mentioned previously, she was part of dissident circles in Leningrad and published the feminist samizdat *Zhenskoe Chtenie [Women’s Reading]* during Perestroika. In 1993, she co-founded the St. Petersburg Centre of Gender Problems with feminist psychologist Natalya Hodyreva. Later on, the historian Irina Yukina also joined them. The centre was financed in large part by German foundations such as the Baumann and Heinrich Böll Stiftung. The centre was part of the Network East-West Women, which is where Ann Snitow comes in.

Snitow was an American activist and scholar who dedicated her life to feminism. In 1991, she co-founded the Network East-West Women (NEWW), where she worked for almost three decades. From 2006 to 2012 she was a professor of literature and the

director of gender studies at The New School. In the years and months before she died in August 2019, she devoted her energy to writing her memories of the political work she did in post-communist Europe via the NEWW. The following analysis draws from these memoirs (SNITOW, 2020), which were published in early 2020.

Both Lipovskaya and Snitow refer to the same imaginary of role distribution: the Americans were rather facilitators, not shapers of the debate, and deliberately so. In Lipovskaya's account this is conveyed between the lines. Over the several passages that talk of the three NEWW conferences she had attended throughout the 1990s, she almost exclusively speaks of her colleagues from other former communist countries across Europe: how they exchanged their "becoming" of feminists, what they had in common due to their Slavic culture and communist past, how they discussed the most effective strategies of shaping the public debate, and how they inspired each other with approaches to activism. She has particularly vivid memories of the Yugoslav feminists, though this could be because she knew I was also researching Serbia. At any rate, she for instance remembers how she met Slavenka Drakulić at a NEWW conference in London and how she discovered one of her most famous books, "How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed". In it Lipovskaya found many useful parallels with the ways in which the communist experience in the Soviet Union had formed women's lives.

What she deemed an even more powerful result of the mutual influence that happened through the NEWW, however, was how she and fellow activists were inspired by Women in Black from Serbia. When the first Chechen war broke out at the end of 1994, Russian feminists also chose to stage silent marches in Moscow, all dressed in black to signal their opposition to war. For Lipovskaya, what stayed from the NEWW was first and foremost a "mutual exchange and influence of people and perspectives" from countries who had until recently also been communist. The Westerners stay in the background and are only mentioned as enablers: "Americans and Englishwomen attended the conferences. They knew how to do the fundraising and to organise a space where Eastern Europeans could meet". This is the only passage where Lipovskaya mentions Western feminists. And when looking at Snitow's memoirs this was exactly the intention. Throughout her account it is very clear that

she and her peers were acutely aware of the potentially imperialistic nature of their action. At the founding meeting of the NEWW this was openly discussed. Slavenka Drakulić opened the first plenary and soon into her speech mentioned the following:

Ann was very worried [and insisted] I had to mention [her fears] about imperialism. You know how Americans are very sensitive: “Are we going to be imperialistic, because we are going to give you money?” [The group laughs.] Not necessarily. Are men not helping each other? Men are helping each other! — in a different name — they call it “politics.” [More laughter.] (ibid.: 150, brackets from original quote)

The concern of imperialism was not at the forefront for women from post-communist Europe. Drakulić instead outlined that their priority was to strengthen their ties and collective identity. She had noted the huge lack of information women in the region had about each other but also feminism elsewhere. Why were women in the Global South connecting, but not in the so-called “Second World”, she asked the plenary, calling for a cosmopolitan feminism (ibid.: 150).

For Snitow and her American colleagues, however, the potential for being oppressive because of a financial power asymmetry was a constant consideration. Accordingly, they made a conscious effort to stay in the back: “Back in New York, we Americans had been very clear that we didn’t want—or know how—to choose the meeting’s themes” (ibid.: 148). Based on their experience from consciousness-raising groups they decided that the best format would be to break into small mixed groups in order to get to know each other and learn about one another’s interests (ibid.: 148). As outsiders, Snitow argues, they lacked important cultural knowledge and indeed had not fully considered the implications of bringing such a diverse group of women together. She writes that her colleagues from post-communist Europe somewhat forgave the Americans’ their “social ignorance” and “lack of regional angst” because they also enabled them to meet feminists who were otherwise not destined to cross paths (ibid.: 147). Yet there were also open pushbacks against questions that were deemed inappropriate and voyeuristic. Snitow remembers being relieved at seeing this contention because that indicated there was “no passive, quiet resistance”. And it further confirmed her initial determination, that, as outsiders, they “were not here to give shape to events”, but to listen to one another (ibid.: 149). This is what led Snitow to call her memoirs “All Were Rebels”, because:

All of the women at the meeting were renegades in one way or another [and] were not going to line up with uncritical enthusiasm for a new world order either. [...] From many standpoints, they were sceptics. In being self-proclaimed feminists, they were idealists, yes, but ironic idealists. (ibid.: 146)

Snitow herself did not naïvely believe in “bland sisterhood” either. Instead she argues that she wanted to be part of a political movement that would rethink the political altogether in the middle of both violent breakdown in Yugoslavia (the first meeting was in Dubrovnik and the last to be held in the International University Centre before bombardments started two weeks later) but also of previously established political meanings (ibid.: 154). In this sense, the women gathered in the framework of the NEWW were far from the same and nor did they have to be, but what they shared was the “integrity of intent”, as bell hooks famously called it, to provide a counter-narrative (ibid.: 148).

What transpires from these accounts is that the NEWW, as one of the largest transnational feminist networks at the time, was not characterised by an asymmetrical transfer of knowledge. But it retained an acute awareness of that possibility, which is why it was a space that allowed for mutual exchange and co-creation of ideas in terms of its setup and intention. It is this context that Lipovskaya refers to as “golden years”. In our conversation, she conveys that these years were golden because there was freedom like never before and after. Through the NEWW she received funding from the MacArthur Foundation to attend various international gatherings, from Iceland to Australia, and thus “to see the world”. The same spirit reigned regarding the German donors of the Gender Studies Centre she had co-founded. For ten years, she explains, they did not have to worry about their financial situation, and that in the middle of the biggest recession and precarity in Russia. And while they had to account for how they had used the money, there was never any intrusion or steering of their activities. When Lipovskaya reminisces about this time, her eyes shine and she speaks very light-heartedly. One of the events she particularly likes to think back to is the summer school the Heinrich Böll Foundation organized for all its grantees in 1995: “Over two hundred women, including their kids, came together in Slovenia, not far from Ljubljana, and over the course of three weeks we taught each other all various kinds of things” (LIPOVSKAYA, 2017). In this line of accounts, the “West” does not figure as a

teacher and controller of a unidirectional knowledge-transfer. Instead it was an enabler that met them at eye-level, taking a genuine interest in their experiences and needs to then use its financial privilege to create and strengthen networks, both within the region and with the West.

This kind of equal and respectful partnership is not something that is reported exclusively with regards to the 1990s. In fact, both Bakhrenkova and Zamotaeva, who work at the *Syostri* centre in Moscow are still in regular contact with similar organisations in the West, mostly from the US. And both emphasise that these transnational encounters are not a form of imposing “Western” practices or ideas, but helpful lessons to learn from existing experience with victim-centred approaches. Bakhrenkova illustrates this very well. At first she admits that, generally speaking, “the West” behaves towards Russia as something “exotic”, not exactly like in usual Orientalism, but definitely like it is an older brother to it. She is in fact one of the very few interviewees who makes references to post-colonial concepts, which indicates that she is sensitized to the issue. But, tellingly, she assesses their relationship with Western feminists through that lens only to say that, with the feminists they work with, there is no power asymmetry, but a genuine exchange thanks to a post-colonial awareness on Westerners’ behalf. This is why, she argues, their collaboration takes the shape not of transferring knowledge in a forceful way, but rather offering the available and tested tools, from which they then decide what to choose and how to adapt it:

Those who attend the meetings say ‘what you want to do, we do this way. We can help you. And you then develop in your own way’. [...] We don’t take ready-made instruments. Though to be fair the analysis and practice of working with survivors of violence is better in the West. We can’t make up for this within twenty years. And we see how our principles overlap with those of many organisations in the West. And I can’t say this is part of an imposition, that they sort of came and told us what to do, but it has simply been trialled for years and works. (BAKHRENKOVA, 2017)

When Bakhrenkova speaks of “developmental discrepancy” in their work vis-à-vis their Western interlocutors, she does not derive from this a sense of inferiority, but an opportunity to benefit from available expertise. The absence of perceived inferiority is not only due to Western feminists only offering rather than advising, but crucially, because Bakhrenkova very much still feels in charge. This refers back to the agency discussed earlier. Just because Russian feminists look westwards does not mean they

do so uncritically. In fact, she underlines that nothing is transposed in a “ready-made” fashion. They decide what to adopt and how. For instance, a new common practice in the US sees survivors of violence go on a tour and raise awareness for the problem by talking about their own experiences. Upon reflection however, Bakhrenkova and her colleagues decided that this tactic would not fit their environment:

We have a toxic society and very few organisations that provide services for victims. And even if a woman approached us because she wants to go public, we will most likely tell her that we are a team of five, we'll provide the support we have. But that's not the support to raise a tide [of attention], to protect your safety, to guarantee how the police will react and with whom they're going to side. (BAKHRENKOVA, 2017)

Both the experiences at *Syostri* and the NEWW show that there was quite some self-awareness on behalf of the Western counterparts of the potential power asymmetries and that the framework and tone for the encounters was adapted accordingly. As a result, the impression is not that of a Western knowledge-transfer, but of respectful exchange. It also shows that the criticism against so-called Western feminist hegemony was needed and had important reverberations, for otherwise that self-awareness would not have been reached. And it seems that it spans from an institutionalised network like the NEWW in the 1990s, to peer-to-peer training as with the crisis centre *Syostri* today, and to completely informal meetings the young youtuber Lena Volk had experienced. In her view, all her European acquaintances who identify as feminists are not only extremely friendly, but exhibit genuine interest and respect, which are key for avoiding negative stereotypes that are the source for exercises of Othering (Volk in: АПАХОНЧИК & VOLK, 2017).

6.4.1.1 In defence of an own feminist heritage

The dominant critique of transnational feminism boiling down to a unidirectional knowledge-transfer reproduces the West/East dichotomy which the Russian official discourse also relies on. As has been explored so far, Russian feminists use different methods to deflect from this critique: from agreeing with the concept of Western knowledge-transfer but stressing their agency in it and its empowering aspect, to changing the meaning from transfer to exchange. For the latter's success, a further aspect is needed: to underline that there is indeed an own heritage of Russian

feminism that can enter the conversation. That way the boundaries of the discourse on knowledge-transfer are not changed per se. The dichotomy is still well intact, but both West and East are filled with feminist content. This makes balance and indeed exchange imaginable, and thus provides a counter-imaginary to the one promoted by the hegemonic official discourse, which also underlies the established critique of transnational feminism.

An emphasis on the 'own heritage' appeared in almost every interview. One might suspect this to be indicative of an endorsement with the dominant critique. However, the respondents would not refer to it in order to embolden the critique's assertion that Western knowledge-transfer silenced Russian feminism, but to undermine exactly this claim – because nothing is more dangerous than to align with a narrative that suggests feminism came from without, and in an oppressive manner. Instead, especially the young generation of Russian feminists finds the culprit for the forgetting of their heritage in their foremothers, who as part of the democratising generation did not see any value in preserving and transmitting the heritage of socialist feminism. It is then an act of critical self-reflection rather than a critique of knowledge-transfer as an exercise of Othering.

Across all generations, the references to the own feminist heritage are overwhelmingly related to communism. The interviewees praise the women's movement at the turn of the 19th century as a major driving force leading up to the February and October revolutions in 1917. It was only thanks to the continued pressure from both bourgeois and socialist women that Russia was one of the first European countries to introduce women's suffrage in 1917. Moreover, they achieved milestone rights, in particular the right to divorce, to co-habit outside of marriage as well as the right to abortion. None of the respondents romanticizes these achievements, being well aware that many of the reforms were later reversed by Stalin and that the equality on paper did not eradicate the inequality between the sexes throughout the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, to many these are struggles they are very proud of and consider part of their Russian heritage. Many, however, are also acutely aware of the historical revisionism their heritage has experienced. They were not told about this Russian legacy of feminism, but instead had to find out by themselves. This was indeed one of

the major topics feminist historians like Yukina, Shnyrova and Gafizova researched in the early 2000s. Crucially, they raised awareness, and continue to do so today, of the historical fact that women were not “given” rights by generous, progressive Bolsheviks, but actively fought for them against much resistance.

One of the most prominent voices here is Mitrofanova. She argues that Russian feminists’ difficulty of being seen as feminist agents both in historical and present times, is mostly due to the huge ruptures they experienced, first through the Bolshevik revolution and later through the collapse of the USSR. In both instances, she argues, they experienced a re-writing of history that erased women’s fundamental part in it. And even though it would be easy to blame the West for this, this was mostly done by compatriots. With regards to the revolution, Mitrofanova highlights the concerted effort to revise the narration in order to hide women’s role in it:

The February revolution started with a women’s protest, where they vindicated the claims that women’s parties had been developing between 1905 and 1917. But most people don’t know about it. And this is due to a long hypocritical political effort to change the terms of history. The Bolsheviks had to erase this preceding feminist history because of the civil war, for part of the feminist parties supported the temporary government, and not the Bolsheviks. But in order to nevertheless promote the rights they had advocated for, they had to erase their part in it. This is why many consider they lost their feminist history. But in fact, it lives on even in today’s laws, except that people aren’t aware it is thanks to feminists. (MITROFANOVA, 2017)

Bolshevik revisionism is therefore to be blamed for the widespread ignorance of Russian feminists’ struggle at the beginning of the 20th century. The difficulty of Russian feminists to uphold their collective memory is a concern almost all younger feminists mentioned. Not only is it not transferred to the next generations via institutional means of memory politics in schools or monuments, but, in addition, because of the cycles of repression after the revolution, during the Soviet Union and again since the 2010s, feminists in Russia have difficulty building a cohesive memory. One rupture follows after another and few are the personalities that have been associated with feminism over decades and are also ready to actively pass it on to the younger feminists. In St. Petersburg, the young feminists from the LeftFem Club consider Mitrofanova and Lipovskaya exceptional figures in this regard because they make conscious efforts to preserve part of the collective memory. During my fieldwork in St. Petersburg in autumn 2017, Lipovskaya hosted a film night with Soviet films on

women at one of the most important meeting points for young feminists called “Eve’s Rib”. Mitrofanova not only organised the feminist section on the centenary of the revolution, but she is also one of the two people who run the “philosophical café” in the Sound Museum at the *Ligovsky Prospekt*. The café regularly discusses socialist feminist texts, and that way, Mitrofanova argues, “they understand we were founded on these texts”.

It comes with little surprise that young feminists from the LeftFem Club would be interested in this socialist heritage. However, this is not a trait that emerges only in interviews with feminists that identify as socialist. It happens across the board, including the youtubers Volk and Apakhonchich and the sex blogger Nikonova. Nikonova, for instance, argues that she was raised in a communist family where books on the socialist liberation of women were readily accessible. She remembers reading Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* at the age of 12 and that it had an important impression on her. However, she had not heard about the socialist feminist Aleksandra Kollontai or about independent women’s groups during the Soviet Union. Her feminist consciousness, she says, was gradually developed and is intersectional because, as a member of the “Komi”, an ethnic minority, she experienced a lot of discrimination based not just on her sex but also her ethnicity. While the socialist heritage was an important first impetus in her development to being a feminist, she emphasizes that she found the subsequent inputs in US mass media, which she regularly followed as a former journalist. She mentions in particular how, through that exposure, she discovered the book *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf, which represents a watershed moment for her feminist awareness. This not only shows the importance of socialist feminism as a heritage, but also that it co-exists with other strands of feminism and how Russian feminists weave them together according to their individual needs. This, too, is an aspect of exchange rather than transfer.

This is also exemplified in Lipovskaya’s intellectual trajectory. She too started with the available socialist literature. But unlike Nikonova she also read Kollontai. Of further interest, too, is how she got interested in this part of her Russian heritage. In our conversation, she tells me that an important awakening was when she started having relationships with Western men, who behaved very differently. In her curiosity

to understand where that difference stemmed from, she came across Kollontai, who had written a lot about the role of sexuality in women's liberation. Moreover, a British socialist friend offered her the book *Sweet Freedom: The Struggle for Women's Liberation*, by Coote and Campbell. The book traces the leftist women's movement in the UK, in particular the campaign against sexual harassment. It was so inspiring to her that she wanted to translate it "so that others could see [the difference] too". There is, then, not an emphasis on the "own" heritage at the expense of anything Western, but rather to indicate a place of departure, an origin, to which they both want to reconnect and enrich with additional material after multiple ruptures.

This wish also underlies Oksana Vasyakina's statement. The young feminist artist and poet from Moscow, who focuses on violence against women, identifies as a radical feminist in the sense of refusing sexual rapport with men as for instance second wave feminist Andrea Dworkin advocated for. However, when it comes to the sense of origin, she clearly communicates that she views herself in a line with the Mariya Club, the Orthodox women, who published the first feminist samizdat in the late 1970s and some of whom were forced into exile (see section 4.3.1 in the history chapter). One of her most important activist projects was the publication of her own samizdat *Veter Yarosti [Wind of Rage]*, which she self-printed and started circulating in 2016. It is a collection of poems dedicated to survivors of violence. By the time we met in autumn 2017, the samizdat, in keeping with the Soviet dissident tradition, had reached far away Russian cities like Novosibirsk and Khabarovsk, but also former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan and had travelled west to Finland and the US. Of course, Vasyakina argues, part of her decision to self-publish was also the impossibility to find an editor. But her story runs deeper than that. To her the women of the Mariya Club are her direct foremothers.

For me [their samizdat] is the bridge between me and Kollontai. It is still topical today. I am re-reading it at the moment and realise nothing really changed in the maternity hospitals [they had heavily criticised]. They will soon celebrate forty years since the publication of their first and last samizdat 'Women and Russia' and together with friends I want to create an exhibition to honour their work. (Vasyakina in: AGAMALOVA, TERESHCHENKO & VASYAKINA, 2017)

It is through the Mariya Club that she is able to see a red thread from early Soviet revolutionary feminists like Aleksandra Kollontai to contemporary Russia. Moreover,

what attracts Vasyakina to the Mariya Club is their explicit connection to Slavic culture. Malakhovskaya, one of the key editors of the samizdat, wrote that Baba Yaga is the origin of feminism. In Slavic folklore, Baba Yaga is depicted as supernatural, similar to the witch in Western European tales, and being composed by three sisters of the same name. According to Malakhovskaya, these three sisters form the qualities of Baba Yaga: she is at the same time frightening, kind, and experienced. Vasyakina considers these very inspiring bases to think about Russian feminism: “In that sense I find here a lot of resources to look and think about things. And that is why I do not feel like an orphan. I have Natalya Malakhovskaya and Baba Yaga” (Vasyakina in: AGAMALOVA, TERESHCHENKO & VASYAKINA, 2017).

However, Vasyakina also considers this precious heritage endangered, because the feminist dissidents have been forgotten and silenced. In part, she believes this is because some of the Mariya Club members based their thoughts on Orthodoxy, which is not a trait today’s feminists are willing to acknowledge as part of their story. Another important part of this story, however, is that the liberal generation of the 1990s consciously turned them back because feminist dissidents reminded them of a past they wanted to cast off. As Mitrofanova sadly remembers of her peers of the time:

At the time in order to re-invent ourselves, they let go of everything socialist and embraced this vulgar liberalism. [All discrimination] was traced back to the USSR, which meant that we were declared as locked in a patriarchal society with no history, no language. And we as Russian feminists became inscribed as particularly oppressed. So in their attempt to fight oppression [the Russian feminists who willingly let go of their own history] actually made us look more oppressed than we were. And that was the new Russian feminist academics saying this, the ones who were going to educate the next generation of students. This is how our history got lost. (MITROFANOVA, 2017)

Importantly, Mitrofanova does not connect this to a supposedly dominant Western knowledge-transfer, but instead acknowledges the agency her Russian colleagues had at the time and their genuine belief that the only answers would be found in the West. With agency, however, also comes responsibility, and Mitrofanova is not the only one to criticise the older liberal generation for having silenced and forgotten an important heritage because of their naïve hope in democratisation. This frustration and disappointment in the 90s generation is particularly prevalent among young Russian feminists.

The best indication for this is the recent books several of my respondents, together with other feminists, edited on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the first feminist samizdat (KOZLOV, TALAVER & VASYAKINA, 2020). Among the contributors are Vasyakina, Asya Hodyreva, and Alexandra Talaver. In Vasyakina's contribution, her anger towards her foremothers, who failed to cultivate and pass on this part of their heritage, is as palpable as her frustration that young feminists now have to rediscover this history on their own (VASYAKINA, 2020: 8). Asya Hodyreva's chapter sheds light on why it is that the young generation of feminists in Russia has since 2016 found renewed interest in the feminist dissidents and their samizdat publications (HODYREVA, 2020: 108). More important still, Asya Hodyreva argues that this part of their feminist history resonates more with them than the work of the feminists of the 1990s, because both the feminist dissidents and the young feminists share an important feature: having to conduct activism in an authoritarian environment (ibid.: 112).

From the old dissident Mitrofanova to the young feminists, who are now keen to unearth and acknowledge the heritage of feminist samizdat activism, what unites them is an effort to keep this an internal problem nevertheless. Their anger and frustration is primarily directed toward those Russian feminists who dared to believe at the time, and not to a Western knowledge-transfer. Moreover, in doing so the interlocutors strengthened the imaginary of two equal halves in an exchange. While speaking of an own Russian feminism meant that they upheld the notion of the West/East dichotomy, they crucially did so all while stressing that these boundaries are permeable. One can be ignited by socialist thinkers and later on nourish one's conviction with British literature on the women's movement or a book on beauty as a controlling tool by an American activist. As such, they challenge the regime's hegemonic discourse in two ways. First, they counter the idea that feminism is alien to Russia by highlighting the existence of their own heritage, situating themselves in a direct line with this origin and indeed making efforts to preserve and pass on that collective history. Secondly, in showing the porous nature of the West/East dichotomy they challenge the idea of knowledge boundaries being mutually exclusive. Feminism is neither exclusively Western nor Russian. It is very much both and grows thanks to

the exchange between the two loci. That is how they subvert the claim that the Russian nation needs to protect itself from Western knowledge-transfer transfer by making geographical boundaries into defensive walls. Because to engage with the West is not to import treacherous knowledge, but to bolster what is already there. And finally, in framing the forgetting of part of their heritage as a purely domestic problem, they convey that this is an articulation of critical self-reflection rather than a critique of knowledge-transfer as Othering.

6.4.2 *'Gender' is no symbol of oppression*

If all the subversive strategies so far replicate one way or another part of the discourse on knowledge-transfer, either because they endorse the notion of knowledge-transfer as such or still adhere to its underlying dichotomy, this is abandoned with this last discursive effort. In this strategy, centred around the concept of 'gender', the idea of knowledge-transfer and the boundaries it evokes is rejected altogether. The debate around the transliterated (instead of translated) introduction of the English term 'gender' into Russian language and academia in particular is the symbolic culmination of feminists' struggle to fence off the accusation of Western knowledge-transfer. Because they introduced a foreign term into Russian language, it is used to exemplify the allegation of Russia's subordinate position in a unidirectional transfer of Western feminism. As a result, this discussion triggers the most upset and unwavering answers from my academic respondents. To contextualise their reactions, this section starts by outlining the different meanings respondents argue have been ascribed to 'gender' in Russia and then moves on to analyse the corresponding interview segments.

Broadly speaking, from Russian feminists' point of view, 'gender' has experienced a development from being considered harmless between the mid 1990s up to around 2010, and thereafter becoming dangerously politicised. When the interviewees speak of harmlessness they do not mean, in a dismissive way, that it was not an intellectually powerful concept. Instead they convey that, as a purely linguistic term, it was less likely to provoke and attract attention. Several respondents relay how they consciously thought about which word to use, which shows their widespread awareness from day one that they might face a backlash. The historian Shnyrova refers to 'gender' as a

“neutral term”, which was neither “too much” as with the word ‘feminism’ nor considered “unacademic” like with women’s studies. Her disciplinary colleague, Yukina, equally argues that ‘gender’ was deemed neutral and that many scholars thought they were using it to “camouflage” feminism in the 1990s. However, in her view, they were not thinking about hiding at the time because there was no control. In that regard Yukina is the only one evoking this feeling of safety, while the others present their memories of the time in ways that suggest they were always preparing for a potential repression. Uspenskaya sums this up.

Gender’ in the 1990s clearly came from the feminist movement. But I have the impression that later the idea surfaced that we should perhaps not use feminism because it is a dangerous term, and replace it with ‘gender’. This replacement became convenient for many because that way you got a ‘roof of harmlessness’. That’s how feminism was forgotten and ‘gender’ suited everyone at the time. (USPENSKAYA, 2014)

In the 1990s the Russian feminist academics I spoke to, many of whom were heavily involved in founding gender studies either within existing institutions or by establishing gender studies centres, made a conscious decision to associate their work with ‘gender’, not feminism, in order to have a shield of harmlessness. From Pushkareva’s account it also turns out that these preoccupations were also widespread when deliberating the introduction of ‘feminology’ to denote women’s studies (and history in particular). She believes that ‘feminology’ was also chosen as a term because it would not be connected to feminism, but only to the “study of women’s experiences”. And yet, she further explains, when they mentioned women’s history they met no frowning, but even the seemingly more harmless word ‘feminology’ made the officials tense already back then because it was associated with the West.

However, this strategy of positioning themselves as harmless thanks to ‘gender’ only worked for a short while. The respondents also agree that ‘gender’ has since become highly politicised in the broader discourse. As Uspenskaya explains, while ‘gender’ could be used as a shield for a while, politicians eventually made the connection to feminism, especially against the background of the Pussy Riot trial: “At that point ‘gender’ became a political category not just for us, who study it, but for everyone” (USPENSKAYA, 2014). Yukina concurs, arguing that no matter what they called it, it would eventually surface that they were fundamentally questioning the

existing system of power. This is how, in Uspenskaya's words, they ended up going after 'gender' and gender studies too.

An evident illustration of this is how the discourse around the withdrawal of the teaching license of the European University in Saint Petersburg (EUSPb) unfolded. As explained earlier, this was part of the general effort to close independent gender studies centres, one of the most prestigious ones being at EUSPb. And even though at the surface the ultimate investigation affected the entire university, at a closer look it becomes clear that the key target was its gender studies centre (EUSPGS). The official complaints focused on missing fire extinguishers, plastic windows and an inadequate sports hall, but this stands in contrast to how the controversy started and to the rationale the first complainant, MP Vitaly Milonov, provided in the media. When submitting the request for a first enquiry into whether EUSPb fulfilled the standards of a higher education institution, he argued that the impetus came from EUSPb students themselves: "I received a written statement from university students complaining that they were forced to write papers on topics that are not typical for Russians: protection of LGBT rights, gender issues and other nasty things" (MEDUZA, 2016). When asked again in a live interview with the TV station Telekanal about the motivation for the complaint, he repeated the same references to the content that was taught at the EUSPGS and said that his reaction of outrage was the only normal reaction in Russia, for how could they tolerate students being forced to write about sexual minorities (TAMANTSEV, 2016)? It is important to note here that Milonov was also a driving force behind the anti-gay propaganda law, so he purposefully established a direct link between gender and LGBT to highlight their supposed danger.

Temkina, the co-founder and co-director of the EUSPGS, summarised this anti-gender strategy in a Facebook post under the title: "how 'gender' was transformed into a sports hall or how we move from ideology to bureaucracy". In an interview in the academic journal *Crossroads [Perekryestki]* a couple of months after the incident, Temkina further clarified that she identifies Milonov's strategy as using 'gender' as a "useful trigger" to garner public attention (MINCHENIYA, 2017). In it Temkina argued that the conservative turn, which proposes a traditionalist vision of the Russian nation, uses homosexuality and gender studies by extension "as markers of Westernisation

and liberalism”, which thus function as the perfect public enemy to bolster the traditionalist vision (ibid.: 207). This is exactly what Kováts and Põim mean when they speak of “gender as symbolic glue” for conservative, nationalist politics across Europe (KOVÁTS & PÕIM). A year later, Temkina delivered an even more emphatic conclusion on the meaning ‘gender’ has come to bear in Russian politics. In an online article published in 2018, she outlined that the “fight against gender” is nothing less than a fight “to preserve the status quo of power relations, so that the categories of family, sex, state and ultimately the nation remain inviolably heterosexual and patriarchal” (TEMKINA, 2018). ‘Gender’, she argued, is ascribed such brute force that, if left unchecked, it could oust the government in one swift move (TEMKINA, 2018). In contemporary Russian politics ‘gender’ is hence equated with a threat, comparable to a military strike, which violates national borders by contributing to a Western cultural imperialism (TEMKINA, 2018).

And yet, despite this acute awareness of how ‘gender’ is a crucial link in the chain of equivalence of the hegemonic project, it is telling how research at the EUSPGS has changed since. A foretaste of this development was the immediate reaction of the university’s rector on Telekanal, right after Milonov publicly spoke about the reasons for his complaint. His impulse was not to defend the legitimate place of queer topics under the subject of gender studies. Instead he emphasised that gender studies encompassed many topics, among them the study of care and the elderly, both of which would sound much more reassuring to the public (TAMANTSEV, 2016). Soon this would not stop at reassuring words, but actually steering research in a different direction. As Shnyrova said, in Russia the direction of research changes according to the changes in circumstances (SHNYROVA, 2014). At the EUSPGS this has meant that the co-directors Temkina and Zdravomyslova have increasingly focused on reproductive health and rights. Symbolic of this change is also the newest appointment, Ekaterina Borodina, who specialises in the midwifery profession. Garstenauer derives that this recent change of trajectory at the EUSPGS is no coincidence, but most likely in direct connection with contemporary tendencies (GARSTENAUER, 2017: 133). Borodina herself conveys a dilemma in the interview, between on the one hand counting as too soft a gender scholar even though pro-life

arguments have always been a cornerstone of feminist research and activism, and on the other hand seeing her work being appropriated by pro-natalist commentators (BORODINA, 2017).

Such is the conflicted and highly politicised atmosphere surrounding the term ‘gender’, which therefore serves as the background against which the answers to the interview questions on ‘gender’ being a potential symbol for unidirectional knowledge-transfer have to be interpreted. In order to probe the respondents’ reactions, I introduced the question usually referencing the aforementioned Russian scholar Sergey Ushakin, who, as illustrated in chapter 5, used to be one of the most vocal critics of feminist Western knowledge-transfer as a form of imperialism around the turn of the millennium. One of Ushakin’s core arguments relating to ‘gender’ posits that it was introduced at the expense of existing Russian terms such as *pol* [sex], *rod* [gender], *muzhestvennost* [masculinity], and *zhenstvennost* [femininity] because Russian feminists suffered from “colonial consciousness” (USHAKIN, 2001: 155). The import of an existing Western standard was, according to him, preferred in order to carry out a theoretical *evroremont* (ibid.: 155). *Evroremont* is normally used to describe a renovation of one’s flat, which lives up to European standards or uses European materials. It thus conveys the image of Russian feminists’ supposed inferiority. Writing around the same time, Natalya Blokhina expressed her wish that one day “we can go back to the term *pol*, leaving the term ‘gender’ in the past” (BLOKHINA, 2004: 47).

No single other point of the interview was as contentious as when I asked what interlocutors thought of the above-mentioned views. Reactions ranged from angry outburst, to a completely dismissive attitude, to calm explanations of why these propositions were unacceptable. In almost all of the conversations, however, the atmosphere became tense around this subject. Some of the most vivid memories include Rymashevskaya’s and Temkina’s strong rebuttals. Rymashevskaya, the renowned sociologist who had helped establish the MCGS but failed to support it when it came under pressure in 2014, did not really want to speak to me in the first place. I only got access thanks to Kochkina, who works with her at the RAS. Mentioning Ushakin’s thoughts, however, definitively undermined any goodwill there might have been for a conversation. Rymashevskaya almost burst:

How can he even suggest it is forbidden to import a term? What kind of arch-conservative is this? This is crazy! How can he think that this is even questionable? This is new knowledge after all, that needs to be thoroughly understood and researched. You can't just take half of it, and throw away the other half. That's not how you do it. And that's why I don't know a certain Ushakin. I have heard his name, but he's not important. (RYMASHEVSKAYA, 2014)

For Rymashevskaya it was clear that if they wanted to apply the entire theoretical framework of gender theory, they also had to use the term 'gender', and that to suggest this was an expression of subordinate consciousness was nothing but proof of the author's conservatism. In order to round off her contempt and underline the lack of value this line of enquiry had for her, she said she did not know him and that he was not important, thus diminishing with him his propositions.

While in the interview with Rymashevskaya the situation was tense from the beginning, the conversation with the co-directors of the gender studies centre at EUSPb gradually grew uncomfortable. When I first probed, they even admitted that they remembered these conversations of whether to use the term 'gender' at the end of the 1990s. They also argued that, as Ushakin suggests, alternative terms, in particular *rod*, which is the linguistic equivalent, were available. However, they felt they were inadequate and too tainted already for the intellectual turn they aspired to. And importantly, they were adamant about highlighting that both the same debates and the same outcomes happened for instance in Germany and in Nordic countries, which also used 'gender'. In this regard, France is indeed one of the exceptions⁵¹. From today's vantage point it is evident they wanted to resist the underlying message: that Russia was the only country that had suffered from Western hegemony through feminist knowledge-transfer, epitomised in the transliterated import of 'gender'.

Towards the end of the conversation, however, I deliberately asked again, "so you do not mind where a concept comes from?", and Zdravomyslova stressed "it does not matter where it came from, but that it is useful". To this I questioned whether they saw any problem in the fact that concepts tended to travel from West to East, thus hinting at the unidirectional dimension critics of knowledge-transfer refer to.

⁵¹ In French 'gender' was introduced in a translated fashion with the French word *genre*.

Temkina's ironic repost gave a very clear assessment of the situation Russian feminists' find themselves in:

And how could it be different? The alternative: refuse all Western concepts and use the Soviet ones. We will soon be doing this. The entire traditional community will be happy to see that we now use their concepts and only refer to the Russian Orthodox Church for guidance. This will fit perfectly with our state policies. And then finally no one will exploit us anymore, except for our own government. I am not sure this is better. (Temkina in: TEMKINA & ZDRAVOMYSLOVA, 2014b)

Temkina starts the statement by agreeing that 'gender' is a Western term. She then continues to argue that, if they were to reject 'gender' because it is Western, it would mean to refuse all Western concepts and what would be left is only paradigms of the past. 'Gender' is, then, like Gapova said, a way to break free, to emancipate from those old schemes of thinking. Temkina goes further, however, by hinting that a rejection of 'gender' because it is Western and stands for the end of "exploitation", means to align oneself with the official hegemonic discourse. For feminists to do so would thus be exactly in the government's interests and pave the way for their endorsement of the conservative turn. This is why such criticism must be resisted if feminists do not want to be complicit in a project that targets them and the values they stand for.

They resist chiefly by highlighting that 'gender' is no exceptional case. From Temkina, to the psychologist Hodyreva, the cultural anthropologist Makarova, to the historian Yukina, all of them stress that Russian sciences are full of Western terms, but 'gender' is a politically-constructed problem. This is nowhere as well captured as in this segment from the interview with Voronina:

All academic terms, all military terms, they don't hurt the regime, but gender somehow does. Why do we perceive some Western terms as useful, and others as – oh, that's not normal! President is fine as a term, parliament for the time being, too, but perhaps tomorrow it will also be declared as hurtful. They'll say we no longer need 'parliament', in Russia the Tsar always decided. (VORONINA, 2014)

Voronina clearly conveys in that very last part that the re-interpretation and hostility to a Western term and field of knowledge only depends on the political situation. As such she synthesizes what others said in different moments in the interview. They would first outline how 'gender' had become politicized, how it had lost its protective function to later on build on this and show why 'gender' could, and indeed ought, not be understood as disproportionately more Western unless one agreed with the government.

The notion of Western feminist knowledge-transfer thus loses its relevance and force because the political rationale and structure behind it is exposed, and with it its alleged exceptionalism. When it becomes clear that 'gender' has been specifically politicized, and when it is further revealed that the claim that it is only the result of a unilateral, oppressive knowledge-transfer is part of this strategy, and that said knowledge-transfer happens in all other areas and disciplines but is not labelled as such, then knowledge-transfer as a discourse no longer functions to denigrate Western domination. The boundaries that upheld the idea, and associated practices, lose their significance if the same kind of transmission and uptake of Western terms happens at the same time in a myriad of other aspects and fields. That way Russian feminists effectively unsettle a pillar that stabilizes the hegemonic discourse: that transfer of feminist knowledge is a particularly hideous one. Instead they demonstrate that this allegation is part of a political strategy to undermine feminist voices and forces in order to push the conservative turn.

And importantly, they even reversed the entire argument, arguing that the real colonisation is not that of their minds by Western knowledge-transfer, but the re-appropriation of 'gender' by so-called *fake gender studies*. Seven feminist academics asserted that, at the same time as 'gender' was increasingly politicised, it became apolitical in universities in Russia's provinces. By apolitical they refer to scholars using 'gender' to describe their work even if it is of the most biodeterministic and heteronormative nature. This is what Shnyrova referred to when she argued that in the provinces everything goes by the term 'gender', even "combining a bulldog with a rhino" (SHNYROVA, 2014). Alyona Makarova, who like Shnyrova spent many years researching in the provincial city Ivanovo, agreed that there is a problem with what she called "home-grown feminism" (MAKAROVA, 2014).

Elena Gapova, a renowned feminist scholar who migrated to the US and is now a Professor of Sociology at the Western Michigan University, offered the most poignant analysis of this problem, which she termed "fake gender studies" in Russia (GAPOVA, 2010: 77). 'Gender' came to Russia at a time when all the knowledge that had been produced during Soviet times was delegitimised (ibid.: 70). In this context of collapse and in a post-Soviet society, where people had learnt to accumulate social capital to

survive, 'gender', among many other Western terms and products, became a part of the new social capital academics wanted to acquire in order to guarantee their careers (ibid.: 70). In existing public academic institutions Gapova argues that acquisition entailed using the new fashionable term in order to promote the old cognitive paradigms but without questioning, let alone attempt to replace them (ibid.: 78).

This is a conclusion that Yukina also shares with regards to the discipline of women's studies in Russia, where she finds that "many have yet to acknowledge the extent to which they are still in thrall to Soviet academic categories" (YUKINA, 2014b: 22). The problem is that doing so would endanger their position, not least because these institutions are based on "academic inbreeding" (HORTA & YUDKEVICH, 2016), the promotion of their own graduates and their work promulgated through in-house publications (GARSTENAUER, 2018: 66), which presupposes their allegiance to the dominant paradigm. This is why Shnyrova stipulates that in certain provincial universities 'gender' studies became a refuge for people to easily get a degree and a position, but who take no interest in the analytical potential of gender as such.

Gapova, however, goes further in that she not only sees "fake gender studies" as a benign phenomenon that allowed a number of scholars to survive, but as the real domination Russian feminists have experienced. She argues that in the 1990s 'gender' gave their experiences a name, it allowed them to find answers to what was happening to them and their society and for which the old scientific paradigms had no words (GAPOVA: 72). 'Gender', she concedes, would not exist without the West; not because there was a transfer that was imposed on them, but because at the time it was thanks to its Western allure that they had the necessary "social capital" to print their texts, to establish courses and entire research centres (ibid.: 76). The real colonization, Gapova highlights, happened later: when the term was appropriated by established institutions and scholars to advance old *propos* (ibid.: 78). That is why she deems this an "inversed colonization", because the concept was ripped of its original purpose (ibid.: 78). It was supposed to be a tool for critical investigation, deconstruction and change of Russian society. Instead it was perverted into a means of legitimizing existing power relations (ibid.: 78). So, then, should domination be evoked in connection with feminist knowledge-transfer and 'gender' in particular, only to

highlight how the emancipatory tool they searched and forged was ultimately turned against them.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to show the central claim this thesis makes: that Russian feminists' priorities fundamentally shift in authoritarian times. It was shown that the majority of my respondents view their current political climate as characterised by repression against even the smallest and most insignificant feminist activities as well as a systematic clampdown against gender studies. They also made sense of their experienced repression as being not a coincidence, but rather the direct result of the official anti-gender discourse that has demonized feminism and, by extension, made feminists into living targets. This has caused them great fear, for repression is arbitrary, but it has also led to pre-emptive self-censorship. This has in turn caused internal conflicts because, in their attempt to survive, a number of feminists resort to providing reassurances that echo the hegemonic discourse. This is particularly striking when they distinguish themselves from LGBT issues. Aware of the hegemonic discourse and the consequences it has for their activism, Russian feminists' priorities change. Not only does it become paramount to be silent, in that they do not emulate critical utterances regarding knowledge-transfer that would be reminiscent of the dominant discourse; more importantly, they set out to employ discursive strategies that actually challenge that dominant discourse.

They propose alternative signifiers of knowledge-transfer to antagonise the entire authoritarian regime. These strategies range from endorsing knowledge-transfer as such, but attaching positive meaning to it; to reframing it altogether as an exchange instead, thereby also emphasizing the existence of Russian feminist heritage and thus rebuking the idea of feminism being alien to Russia; to finally rattling the discourse's underlying West/East dichotomy. This final strategy demonstrates that terms travel all the time, which unmakes 'gender' as the exception and symbol of an oppressive knowledge-transfer it is manipulated for, and instead becomes the site of an internal colonisation on behalf of "fake gender studies".

The chapter showed that one first strategy pertains to Russian feminists endorsing the idea of unilateral knowledge-transfer but highlighting the agency they had in it and the feeling of empowerment they gained from it. They communicate that they were in control of actively seeking new knowledge and further transmitting it, but also produced new knowledge based on this endeavour. They felt like proliferators of knowledge and active citizens, who wanted to contribute to the monumental change their society was undergoing. Knowledge-transfer, then, was something consciously enacted and that also gave them a feeling of support because they gained access to new networks and practical assistance.

The remainder of the chapter discussed ways to undermine the very idea of knowledge-transfer itself. The first such strategy entails speaking of an exchange instead. Drawing from the example of the NEWW and the centre *Syostrri*, I showed that the West is not imagined as a teacher and controller, but remembered as self-aware feminist actors, who were mindful not to reproduce inequalities, to listen and learn about the genuine needs to then use their relative privilege to act as enablers. To underline the idea of a transnational exchange, and important in countering the allegation of feminism being alien to Russia, many respondents also emphasized their own feminist heritage. Not to advocate for a feminism *à la russe*; on the contrary, they filled both geographical spaces evoked by knowledge-transfer with feminist knowledge to stress that these boundaries were not fenced off from each other, but rather permeable and the pre-condition for the growth of feminist knowledge. Importantly, the emphasis on the own heritage was also not framed as their counter-reaction against a silencing of knowledge-transfer, but rather a critical self-reflection directed at their foremothers who willingly forgot a part of their history.

Lastly, the chapter discussed 'gender' as one of the most important "battlegrounds" in Russian feminists' resistance. Because it concerns a tangible import of a Western term, it is often used to symbolize the alleged subordinate position of Russian feminists in the unilateral and oppressive knowledge-transfer. This section first sketched the trajectory 'gender' has made in Russia. It emerged that Russian feminists were from the beginning wary and mindful about finding a palatable term and for some time thought to have found refuge in 'gender' that was deemed more

harmless. At the same time ‘gender’ also became highly politicised. It became increasingly evoked as “markers of Westernisation and liberalism”, as happened with the attack on the EUSPGS, to stir public outrage and bolster the hegemonic project. Against this background, many Russian feminist academics strongly rejected the idea that the introduction of ‘gender’ epitomized their inferior position of passive receivers in Western knowledge-transfer. They tied their rejection, sometimes explicitly, sometimes less so, to the political environment to make clear what the absence of this rejection would mean otherwise: namely to embolden the hegemonic project they try to oppose. They further adamantly argued that ‘gender’ was not the only Western term in Russian academia and language, and again traced this allegation’s direct connection to the larger conservative turn. By exposing this allegation for the political strategy it was, and by showing that transliterated introductions were nowhere near exceptional, they strove to undermine both the dynamics and boundaries associated with feminist knowledge-transfer as discourse. If ‘gender’ is just one of many foreign terms that have been introduced, it can no longer represent the alleged imposition of Western values. Instead it is revealed that claiming precisely this is part of a larger political strategy. Finally, a number of my respondents also argued that, if anything, ‘gender’ represented not a colonisation on behalf of Western knowledge-transfer but on behalf of Russian academics, who use the term to propagate old paradigms, thus re-appropriating an originally emancipatory concept.

These are the different means by which Russian feminists try to react to the repression they face: by destabilising knowledge-transfer as one of the signifiers that carry the hegemonic project, both by reinterpreting it and by undermining it altogether.

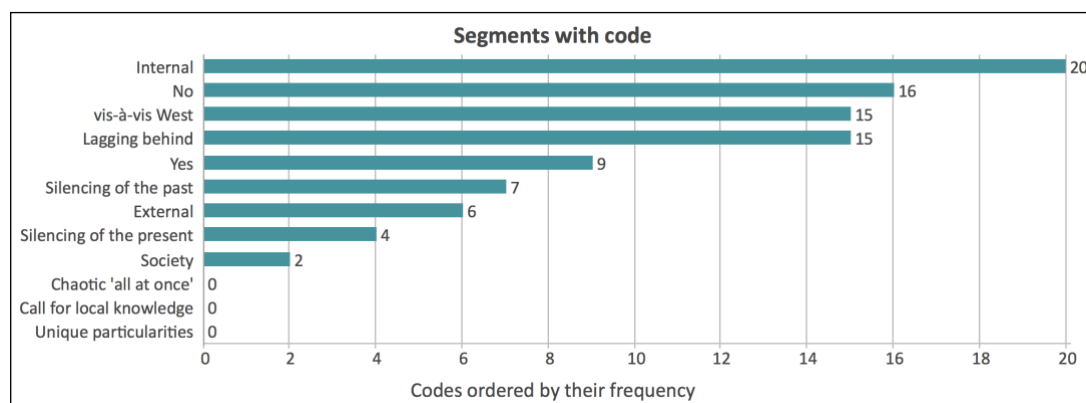
PART III – SERBIA

7 Critique of knowledge-transfer in Serbia

7.1 Introduction

In keeping with the same logic that was followed for the analysis of the Russian case study, the analysis of Serbian feminists' discourse also starts with the application of the empirical test as devised in the method section (see 3.5.1). The empirical test was applied to the 33 interviews conducted in Serbia to see whether the respondents viewed transnational feminism as a form of Othering through knowledge-transfer. As will be seen, the results show that expressions which correspond to the frames derived from the critical theory's framework are very rare. Overall, I discerned three tendencies, which will be presented in the following order. First, as with the Russian case study the empirical analysis started by taking a closer look at the perceptions of a general asymmetrical relationship with Western feminism and feminists. As shall be shown, at first glance a problematic power asymmetry is seemingly absent. This is already evident in the graph below, which shows the frequency of all codes.

Graph 7: Occurrence of all Serbian codes ordered by their frequency



As argued in the method chapter, I consider that we can only speak of an overall perception of transnational feminism as an exercise of Othering through knowledge-transfer if both the codes “yes” (in relation to a perception of power asymmetry) and “external” (which captures whether the respondent reflects the outsider Western perspective that is projected onto her) prevail. Given that both “yes” and “external” are less frequent than the codes “no” and “internal”, this indicates that an actual critique of knowledge-transfer (as critical theory would expect it) is marginal in the Serbian

case study. Similar to the Russian respondents, Serbian feminists merely mentioned singular unpleasant personal encounters, which I will briefly enumerate.

However, there was also a second and seemingly more important topic referred to when talking about power imbalance, namely that of foreign donors' push for gender mainstreaming as a policy. This went beyond the empirical test, which was possible because of the scarce results it yielded. I deemed it justifiable to do so because this topic is intimately connected to power relations with Western actors regarding feminism. An important part of the chapter is thus dedicated to showing that Serbian feminists find gender mainstreaming is co-opted by the regime and far-right groups and therefore view Western donors' insistence on the policy as highly problematic.

Finally, I return to the originally designated codes of the empirical test, in particular that of "silencing". I show that there is one prominent incident of a respondent feeling Western feminists denied her ability to self-identify as an anti-nationalist in the 1990s, which was a particularly hurtful experience in a time of feeling already isolated and guilty. I equally demonstrate that three additional respondents expressed feelings of their intellectual ability as feminist researchers not being taken seriously enough, which critical theory also theorises as a way of "silencing". Importantly, similar to the Russian case study, I also reveal that throughout those isolated instances of critique, there is a clear tendency to immediately defuse those critical utterances. I use this as a springboard for the next chapter that will look into how Serbian feminists' actual priority lies in avoiding resonance with knowledge-transfer as a discourse propagated by their authoritarian regime, and instead seek ways for how to discursively subvert it.

7.2 An unequivocal absence of power asymmetry?

To gauge whether respondents felt there was a power hierarchy at play in the transnational encounters they had had with Western feminists and feminism, the table below gives a first impression. It shows the frequency of the binary code "yes"/"no" to the question of whether there were asymmetrical power relations involved. It not only shows that "no" is more frequent but also that in all but two

occurrences the “yes” was weighed up with a “no” in the same interview, thus indicating a strategy of defusing as pursued by Russian feminists too.

Table 13: Frequency of “yes” and “no” codes

Code	Frequency
No	24
Yes	7
SUM	31

Similar to Russia one of the topics that is related to an impression of power asymmetry are personal encounters. The activist from Kruševac, Jelena Memet, for instance described that she and her peers would sometimes feel that their Western feminist partners would assume a teacher position (MEMET, 2016), a feeling two Belgrade-based feminists echo when they paint some of these partners as talking “from above” and playing a “big sister, small sister” game (NETKOVIĆ, 2016, BOBIĆ, 2016). This critique of personal encounters is not only prevalent among the younger generation. Slavica Stojanović, who became active during the wartime period and later founded the single most important Serbian feminist foundation RZF, also recalls how for instance Swedish feminists would come in the early transition period with the claim to teach them about employment, oblivious to the fact that their knowledge “recipients” already had significant, and potentially more, historical experience of employment (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016).

However, and in this regard the Serbian responses display a trait already discerned among the Russian data, all these instances of expressing negative views on personal encounters are also very much defused. A look at how exactly Memet phrased her impression is telling:

Let's say, sometimes we get this impression that erm, you know... sometimes, I like... there is this kind of you know, this 'okay, I know everything and you, you know, I came to teach you' (laugh), you know this kind of attitude. But it's not always like that, it's... And it's not always with all women. I have really always had really good cooperation. (MEMET, 2016)

It really cost her much effort to finally make the statement. It was not due to uneasiness with English, as she had no problem speaking smoothly during the rest of the interview. Memet’s statement further loses poignancy because she defuses it by

laughing it off and by immediately following it up with an emphasis on how unimportant it is to her when compared to the majority of positive experiences.

Apart from these singular incidences, there is a seemingly unequivocal absence of perceived power asymmetry in the Serbian dataset. However, there is a second topic Serbian feminists mention in the instances of confirming that there are unequal power relationships with Western actors related to feminism: the power of foreign donors and their insistence on gender mainstreaming and how this puts my interviewees into a lived dilemma.

7.3 The power of donors and gender mainstreaming

With regards to asymmetrical power relationships Serbian feminists were more likely to mention the power of foreign donors and how they use it to advocate a policy they believe is devastating: that of gender mainstreaming. In and of itself this is not surprising, as the role of donors driving the NGOisation of previously autonomous feminist initiatives has been widely criticised from various angles (HENDERSON, 2000, SPERLING, 1999, NAGAR & WRITERS, 2006, VUKOV, 2013, BLAGOJEVIĆ, 2010). What is important for this discussion however, is that it is argued to de-radicalise feminism (ALVAREZ, 2009: 178). Symptomatic for this de-radicalisation is the increased, if not exclusive focus on mainstreaming women's issues in all national and international bodies. The aim is no longer to overcome the status quo but to meet women's special needs within it in order to just avoid patriarchy's worst offenses.

In *Feminism by Design* Ghodsee argued that donor-driven NGOisation in post-communist Europe was a "feminism by design" and as such built the pendant to the "army of consultants" that helped to implement "capitalism-by-design" in CEE after 1989 (GHODSEE, 2004). Donors indeed contributed to the NGOisation of former feminist grassroots organisations in Serbia. This is how the four most important feminist initiatives - the Women's Studies Centre (WSC), the Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC), the SOS Hotline, and Women in Black (WiB) - all of which are part of this study, gradually transformed into NGOs in the early 2000s when foundations entered the country after a decade of violent disintegration. When analysing the interviews, it quickly crystallised, that Serbian feminists were most concerned about

how the power asymmetry vis-à-vis donors has de-radicalised their claims, most of all because of their insistence on gender mainstreaming⁵². In its 1999 report, the Council of Europe explicitly stated that since CEE countries were undergoing a transformation “that is beyond their institutional capacities” and since gender mainstreaming was deemed “extremely necessary in setting up new democracies” it should be built into all support programmes for the region, and “transfer and development of gender expertise should be encouraged” (VERLOO, 1999: 18).

When popular unrest and a broad coalition led to the ousting of Milošević at the end of 2000 and Serbia entered its “second transition”, it did not take long until “Gender Action Plans” and governmental bodies to administer them were put in place. In 2004 the Gender Equality Council was the first official institution for gender equality to be established at the central level of the Serbian government. Four years later it was succeeded by the Gender Equality Directorate that was created within the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. This body drafted the National Action Plan of the Strategy (NAP). The Directorate was finally also dissolved in 2014 and replaced by the Coordination Body for Gender Equality of the Government of Serbia (CBGE), which is to date still responsible for coordinating the work of the public administration in relation to gender equality (MIHAJLOVIĆ, 2014).

Many scholars uphold that gender mainstreaming and NGOisation are two sides of the same coin of institutionalised feminism, which rips feminism of its critical and revolutionary potential and tames it to the point that it actually ends up tacitly endorsing the patriarchal structures within the state administration and structures (SQUIRES, 2007, MEIER & CELIS, 2011, SAINSBURY & BERGQVIST, 2009). A number of scholars assert that the theoretical potential of gender mainstreaming only rarely

⁵² Gender mainstreaming first appeared as a policy strategy at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing. Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands were among the European countries that spearheaded gender mainstreaming as their official policy to reach gender equality (VERLOO, 1999: 7). However the majority of international and regional organisations also adopted the new strategy (ANTONIJEVIĆ, 2018, HAFNER-BURTON & POLLACK, 2002, TRUE & MINTROM, 2001, DALY, 2005). It is defined as the promotion of “an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes, so that, before a decision is taken, an analysis is made on the effects on women and men, respectively” (UNITED NATIONS, 1996: 27).

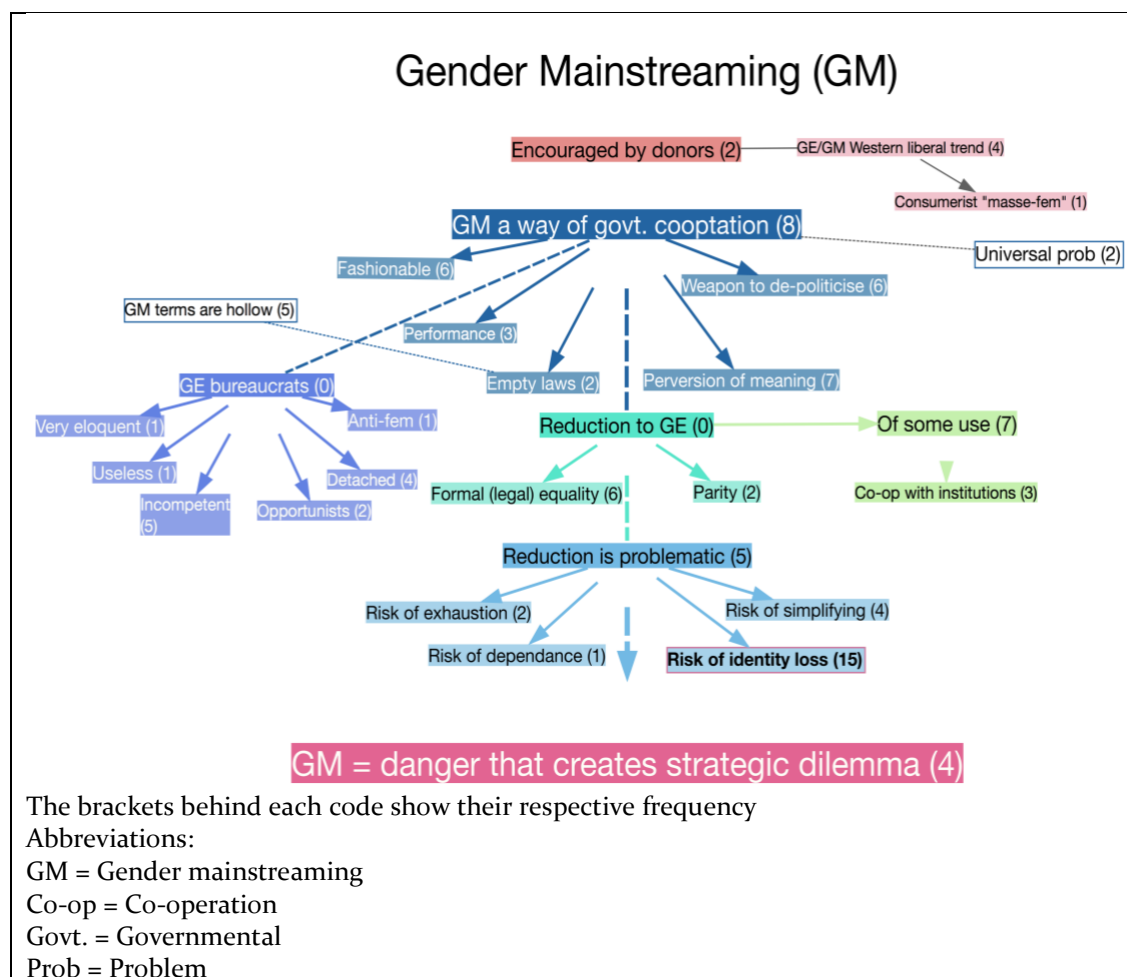
translates itself into tangible change because of the big gap between the declarative adherence to gender mainstreaming and its actual implementation (WALBY, 2011, DALY, 2005, SQUIRES). A particularly bad implementation is the so-called “integrationist” version of gender mainstreaming because gender equality is only assessed with regards to its utility for other policy priorities (especially economic growth) and therefore remains a strategy of simple inclusion rather than challenge to the status quo (SQUIRES: 150, VERLOO: 361). As Bacchi and Eveline put it: “The best intentions of feminist reformers will be thwarted so long as gender analysis is positioned as an *ex post* commentary on proposed or existing policies (BACCHI & EVELINE, 2004: 99 emphasis mine). In Serbia it is argued that the usual “productive tensions between theory and practice” in gender mainstreaming (WALBY, 2005) are further aggravated. Čičkarić contends that we are dealing with an integrationist approach that neither challenges the mainstream nor questions existing policies that are gender neutral and potentially detrimental to women (ČIČKARIĆ, 2016: 116). As shall be seen in the following, Serbian feminists do not have strong issues with donors per se, nor necessarily with the NGOisation of their activism that they have brought about, but with their insistence on gender mainstreaming in a context where not just gender mainstreaming as such but the very notion of gender equality is watered down and manipulated for other goals. This dilution is seen as an inherent part of the country’s double discourse.

7.3.1 Co-optation of gender mainstreaming

Since gender mainstreaming as such did not feature in the original coding scheme that was derived from the critical framework but seemed to be important because it is related to Serbian feminists’ overall reflection on power asymmetries with Western interlocutors, I decided to recur to the option of “creative coding” within Maxqda. Creative coding allows the researcher to look at the data without a pre-existing coding system. Instead codes are first established as one reads through the material and later abstracted into more overarching themes and categories. First of all, I ran a lexical search with the word “mainstreaming”. This worked for interviews that had been conducted in English and Serbian because even though there is a Serbian term for

gender mainstreaming (urodnjavanje) it was never used among my participants, all of whom preferred the English term. This search produced 37 hits in 11 different interviews. Hits where the respondent mentioned this term twice within the same sentence or where I as the interviewer picked it up again in a question were not counted.

In a next step, I went through each of these search results and coded them sentence-by-sentence. In the first round, I mainly paraphrased the essential meaning of each sentence, which is how the codes were kept close to the data. In the second round these initial codes were all loosely spread on a map and then put into an analytical order. I did so by merging those that were similar into one common category by establishing, whenever appropriate, a related parent-category. This is how for instance the initial descriptive codes of “incompatible with our mission”, “lose our subversive character”, “want to be dangerous” were merged into the category of “risk of identity loss”. This in turn turned out to be one of several concerns feminists expressed in relation to the process of feminism being equated to gender mainstreaming and thus became one of the branches of the parent-category “reduction is problematic”. In a final step, I discerned the connections and hierarchies between the new abstract categories, which resulted in the graph below.

Graph 8: Analytical map of codes related to gender mainstreaming

Overall, the graph visualises the following dynamic: at the top of it all is a Western impetus, created by foreign donors, for gender mainstreaming. This becomes wider as it goes through Serbian bureaucracy and is ultimately distilled at the bottom in the form of a danger of “identity loss” and dilemma. How exactly this dynamic works shall be unpacked in the following.

As can be seen in the graph, it all starts at the top with foreign donors. It is, however, not them in isolation that are problematic for Serbian feminists. Rather it is their dynamic interplay with gender mainstreaming, as the director of WiB, Staša Zajović, vividly expressed: “this is the triangle of death for the feminist movement: donors, the government and NGOs. I mean not NGOs like ours but those that engage in gender mainstreaming” (ZAJOVIĆ, 2016). In this combination, local NGOs only serve as channels in the transaction. Feminist NGOs can thus fall prey to this kind of exploitation, which, as shall be seen, is one of the major concerns in relation to gender

mainstreaming. The key element for Serbian feminists' reaction to gender mainstreaming is, however, the middle link of this chain: the government. This is also visible in the graph: While at the top there is external Western influence and at the bottom what gender mainstreaming ultimately represents for Serbian feminists, the entire centre is occupied by categories that are either directly or indirectly related to the government. Overarching it all is the opinion that the government uses gender mainstreaming as a "strategy of co-optation". This is the one element from which all other concerns emanate.

The four subcategories reveal in more detail how this co-optation manifests itself. The most important indication of co-optation for feminists is that gender mainstreaming has become fashionable. Because it has only become popular in the form of a nice "performance". It is this hollow performance that inevitably leads to "empty laws", laws that remain "dead letters on paper". And to empty laws also belong empty "gender equality bureaucrats", who sit in the numerous local commissions for gender equality that have been put in place in recent years⁵³ and are designated as "incompetent" and "useless". As Slavica Stojanović put it: "Among the experts you can find anything you like and that is quite shocking" (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016). Finally, the critique of "gender equality bureaucrats" culminates in the perception that they not only do not identify with or know anything about feminism, but also pursue proper anti-feminist goals. The very Director of the Coordination Body for Gender Equality, Zorana Mihajlović, for instance publicly asserted that "gender equality has nothing to do with feminism or sexism" (N.V., 2017) thus openly discrediting feminist civil society. This is what leads Zajović to say:

We are dealing with a process of co-optation of the feminist agenda. Formally there is an adoption of feminist concepts that are then completely re-interpreted, falsified, how to say... well kidnapped and in the end transformed into their opposite. This is how gender mainstreaming ultimately leads to the co-optation of both people and topics. (ZAJOVIĆ, 2016)

⁵³ 48 municipalities/cities have signed the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). 129 have some sort of official mechanism, either in the form of a co-ordinating body or a representative, in charge of implementing gender equality. (STALNA KONFERENCIJA GRADOVA I OPŠTINA)

It is precisely this latter concern over co-optation of topics that emerges as a central preoccupation for Serbian feminists. On the graph, this is captured by the code “perversion of meaning”. It refers to their fear that within the realm of gender mainstreaming far-right parties have managed to introduce their patriarchal agenda in the discussion under a nice-looking mantle. This not only transpires in the interviews. It is also the topic in a recent short film “Reading the Far Right through a Gender-sensitive Lens and Feminist Answers”⁵⁴ (BEFEM, 2018) as well as in a documentary by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia on “What Do Right-Wing Women Want” (PAKOVIĆ, 2015). Among others three of my respondents, Nađa Duhaček, Jelena Višnjic and Staša Zajović feature in these.

In the documentary, four female representatives of right-wing (The Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS) and far right parties (Dveri and Pledgers) as well as from the far-right organisation The Serbian People’s Movement (SNP) 1389 are portrayed. In it Sanda Rašković Ilić from DSS and Dragana Kukrić from Dveri posture as emancipated women, who come from egalitarian households (to the extent that both parents used to work), who denounce the gender pay gap, believe in quotas (but only in occupations where women are prone to work, so not in physical jobs) and stand for a party where women can make a career. What preoccupies Serbian feminists is that they all stress the importance of their party’s women’s agenda but at a closer look it is clear that “they synthesise the language of gender equality with traditionally patriarchal values” (ibid.), to quote Sekulić’s analysis in the documentary. Their women’s agendas prescribe very clear traditional roles for both sexes, with an emphasis on women’s real vocation being in the private sphere and more particularly in motherhood.

Nowhere is this as explicit as with the party Dveri, which officially proclaims in its manifesto in capital letters that “women do not need more rights but mothers’

⁵⁴ The film was part of a larger project on “Peace building and gender equality: Deconstructing the role of women on the Right” that was a collaboration between the Women’s Studies Centre and BeFem. It features both recordings of the conference “The Right on Women and Women on the Right” they hosted in the context of the project and interviews with its participants.

privileges” (DVERI, 2015: 2) because they are the ones that will “save Serbia” (DVERI, 2018a) and therefore deserve the state’s special protection. Invoking the gender pay gap and how mothers are discriminated against in the labour market and not acknowledged for their unpaid care work, they promise that they would press for social benefits for mothers with four children or more that would be equal to the average wage and that the time they spend at home would be counted towards their years of professional activity (DVERI, 2015: 2). This, Dveri professes, would also solve the country’s “white plague”, which is used to refer to the problem of a decreasing population. In the newest party manifesto “saving Serbia” is presented as a benign effort to halt the population loss. However, whoever knows the party’s history will be able to read between the lines and if need be, can look up the real motivations behind this policy in their original programme from back in 2004, where they stated: “Where there is a population mass, there will also be a settlement. And where there is a settlement, there will also be victorious battles and Serbia will once again arrive in Prizren” (STANIMIROVIĆ & VUJADINOVIĆ, 2017: 199). Mentioning Prizren, a town in Kosovo, as Serbia’s ambition and ethnic settlements as a precondition for this recapture is an unmistakable nationalist reference. Women’s wombs are thus once more used as the gates for the nation’s grandeur just as they were during the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. The subtext is therefore key here. For no feminist would per se be in discord with fighting mothers’ discrimination. Yet when the underlying aim is not women’s equal treatment based on moral desirability, but their (bodily) exploitation for the sake of a nationalist project, it is clear that feminists will oppose it.

The on-going dispute around the Law on Gender Equality best illustrates Serbian feminists’ dilemma with gender mainstreaming. The law was ready to be voted on in February 2016 but revoked for further consultations. It was first renamed to take gender out of its title and later gender was also removed from almost all of the bill’s paragraphs because it is allegedly a notion which, according to Dveri, does not even exist in the Serbian constitution (DVERI, 2018b). Prime Minister Brnabić said in early 2018 that the law would be passed by the end of the year. However, at the time of writing four years later, the law has still not been adopted. The entire debate on the law demonstrates that in Serbia gender mainstreaming is not just problematic because

it is subjected to an integrationist implementation. Rather, the very *law* on gender equality that ought to provide the basis for gender mainstreaming is subject to co-optation and dilution (ANTONIJEVIĆ, 2018: 306).

The example of the Law on Gender Equality shows that right-wing and far right parties not only identify with feminist concepts such as quotas, gender pay gap, workplace discrimination and reconciliation of career and family. They re-interpret equality under a nationalist and profoundly patriarchal agenda. It is this equality-coated patriarchal project that frightens feminists because “everything has been erased, everything has been mixed into this mud and everything is possible” (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016). As Sanja Pavlović assesses: “More and more money can be obtained from donors for equality projects. But it is all so beautifully wrapped that it is entirely possible to present completely fascist ideas under that label [of equality]. And that really frightens me” (PAVLOVIĆ, 2016).

Gender mainstreaming then is problematic for feminists because it is seen as a strategy by which the government tries to co-opt and de-politicise feminism because it allows the creation of “mud”, that is the perversion of equality to the point where nationalist and anti-feminist ideas can be presented in its name. From the analytical map it becomes further clear that the government seems to allow, if not to actively facilitate, this perversion because of its own efforts to de-radicalise feminism by reducing it to a bland aspiration to equality in the form of parity or formal (legal) equality. It is this reduction of feminism to a much more harmless and palatable gender equality that is in fact most central in the interviews.

7.3.2 Gender mainstreaming as a threat to feminist identity

Most importantly, respondents associated giving in to the reduction of feminism to this type of harmless gender equality that has been set as the baseline for mainstreaming policies with the “risk of identity loss”. With fifteen counts this is by far the most pervasive concern Serbian feminists raised in relation to gender mainstreaming. By using catchwords of their quotes, I demonstrate in the table below how they make sense of gender mainstreaming and implicitly of themselves and why

the two are seen as incompatible. Each utterance that is listed in *italics* is the implicit contrary meaning derived from their assertion.

Table 14: How gender mainstreaming is constructed as a threat to feminist identity

Definition of gender mainstreaming	Definition of feminist identity	
Implicit perception of gender mainstreaming	Direct reference to feminist identity ⁵⁵	Characteristics
<i>It is de-politicised (2x)</i> <i>It is harmless</i>	We are political (2x) We are dangerous	
Direct reference to gender mainstreaming	Implicit perception of feminist identity	
It is not radical (2x) It is not subversive It does not challenge the patriarchy	<i>We are radical (2x)</i> <i>We are subversive</i> <i>We challenge the patriarchy</i>	Ambitions
It is distracting It inhibits evolving with the times It is not grassroots It is elitist and detached from ordinary women It does not allow us to act as watchdogs	<i>We need to stay focused</i> <i>We need to evolve with the times</i> <i>We are grassroots</i> <i>We are grounded and need to represent ordinary women</i> <i>We need to make sure to be watchdogs</i>	
It is the act of killing feminist activism It is not us (2x)	<i>We need to avoid that killing</i> <i>We cannot endorse it (2x)</i>	Rejection is vital

I divided the table into three different groups of references. The first group is composed by both direct references to their identity and the indirectly derived perception of it from remarks on gender mainstreaming. This group alludes to their characteristics as feminists. They think of themselves and want to be seen as political, dangerous, subversive, radical, and challenging. The second group of references indicates more concrete organising principles and ambitions they set for their

⁵⁵ To clarify, the two direct references to feminist identity were not picked from a random place within the interview. In that case there would have been many more references to their perceived or aspired identity. These quotes stem directly from the codes that were originally attributed during the creative coding and were then classified into the subcategory of “risk of losing identity”. The statements “we are political” and “we are dangerous” were thus uttered in close proximity to another sentence that related to gender mainstreaming.

feminism. This includes the need to focus and not to be “chewed up” by the technocratic gender machinery as Miražić qualified it above, because otherwise there is the danger of losing their ability to evolve with the times, to re-invent themselves and thus ultimately to become obsolete. This is what leads to the last group, which is not only a clash with their identification but the expression of a deep-felt peril to perish if they endorsed gender mainstreaming: gender mainstreaming is equated with an act of killing feminism and is therefore the absolute opposite of themselves. This is why they have to oppose it if they do not wish to become complicit in their own demise.

Overall then, feminists see that the only acceptable form of fighting for equality has become a very soft, palatable feminism, one that is not threatening and even rejects the label of being “feminist”. This is what the meaning of equality, and by extension feminism, has been reduced to since the inception of institutionalised gender mainstreaming in Serbia. To make matters worse, this co-optation has led to a situation where equality has been misinterpreted to the point that far-right parties can use it to their advantage. This is why gender mainstreaming is seen as a means for the government to co-opt feminism. It not only enables the government to tame the feminist project but also encourages the emergence of outright anti-feminist re-interpretations of equality, in light of which their proposed version of equality almost becomes the lesser evil. This is why the government is not seen as a partner but a conspirator and gender mainstreaming in sum understood as a highly dangerous and delicate affaire.

This discussion on gender mainstreaming ties back to the core argument around Western knowledge-transfer in several ways. This chapter set out first showing the seemingly unequivocal absence of power asymmetry, and while this still holds true to a large degree, it has also been shown that there is one key issue that Serbian feminists do struggle with: the power of foreign donors, by whom they feel cornered and forced to collaborate in some way or another with a government they deeply oppose and which co-opts the donor-driven gender mainstreaming to the point where its endorsement would actually put feminists’ identity at risk. This is where the feelings of helplessness, inferiority but also frustration stem from. They are upset by the

donors' lack of sensitivity and awareness for the distinctly different political environment they operate in. Biljana Branković, a wartime generation activist, who later also became a researcher and consultant for international organisations, summarises this concern perfectly:

Well gender mainstreaming is a particularly bad example of what happens when experiences from Nordic countries are imposed in some other context. What it entails is generally a good idea, but that cannot work equally well in states with high level of corruption, where you don't have independent MPs and a ruling political party that *eats* all topics. [...] And that's why I'm very sensitive to even just the term of good practice examples. Because what can work as good practice in one country cannot work equally well in Serbia. And that's a very simply truth but somehow donors are always imposing such practices. And gender mainstreaming is definitely such a case. (BRANKOVIĆ, 2016: emphasis mine)

So even though the main problem is the government itself and not the donors, donors are judged for the way in which they exercise their important power. The analytical graph very clearly represents this relationship. Western knowledge-transfer in the form of donors feeds the process of gender mainstreaming from the top, which then gets co-opted by the government, and, once at the bottom, represents a genuine danger and strategic dilemma for feminists on the ground. Donors thus give impulse to and further fuel the co-optation feminists struggle with because they are either too naïve or unwilling to discern the double discourse the Serbian government is following.

This thus explains the occurrence of “yes” codes to the question of “power asymmetry” in an otherwise seemingly very equal relationship within Western knowledge-transfer. Two caveats need to be added here though. First of all, even though it is indisputable that gender mainstreaming is a serious concern, it has to be acknowledged that this was only the case for 11 out of 33 respondents, so exactly a third. This still leaves us with two thirds of interviewees, who did not mention any serious grievances vis-à-vis Western knowledge-transfer. And secondly, one might even ask whether foreign donors' role can be subsumed under the umbrella term of transnational feminism.

Clearly, as stated at the beginning of this discussion it is plausible that donors and the gender mainstreaming they promote are a part of Western knowledge-transfer that is defined as the “transmission of particular Western gender equality theories,

policies and ways of organising”. However, what is revealing is how Serbian feminists would refuse to affirm that. They draw a very clear distinction between donors and other Western counterparts who are “real” feminists, and thus exclude donors from their implicit definition of who is a legitimate actor involved in transnational feminism. I argue that Serbian feminists’ effort to avoid lumping the donors they criticise together with other “real” and good feminists mainly originates in their intention to avoid any negative framing. From the moment Western knowledge-transfer would be framed negatively, no matter how and why, it could end up providing a target for those illiberal forces they actually try to oppose. Similar to the Russian case we therefore witness an effort to de-escalate the critique that is being uttered. Other than that however, the two cases are rather distinct so far. There is nowhere near as harsh criticism as there was in the Russian data (which only referred to the liberal period though), nor are there generational differences. Criticism of donors who directly and indirectly support the problematic concept of gender mainstreaming was voiced by representatives of all generations. This in turn was a dimension that was much less prevalent among my conversations with Russian feminists. Since there are only very few donors left, they are in fact rather inclined to refrain from any criticism, which bears problems in itself for it bars any kind of critical reflection.

7.4 On silences and outcries

Having concentrated on the codes related to asymmetrical relationship, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the codes within geographical Othering, and in particular on their co-occurrence with the code “external”, because only the external perspective is considered indicative for a genuine perception of Othering. The following Table 15 helps to illustrate the co-occurrence of “external” and “internal” perspective together with the two different forms of Othering: temporal and geographical.

Table 15: Co-occurrence with codes “external” and “internal”

Code System	Perspective	External	Internal	SUM
▼ Temporal othering				0
Chaotic 'all at once'				0
Lagging behind		●	●●●	17
▼ Geographical othering				0
Silencing of the present		●●●	●●	12
Silencing of the past		●	●●●●	16
Σ SUM	0	13	32	45

This section only looks at geographical Othering in terms of “silencing of the present” and “silencing of the past” because within the categories of temporal Othering there was not a single sequence that qualified for the code “chaotic all at once” and for the code “lagging behind” the “internal” perspective actually prevailed (16:1) over the “external” one.

7.4.1 Silencing of anti-nationalist self-description

The central topic within the category of “silencing of the present” that was classified as an “external” perspective was the issue of wartime rape and how Western feminists associated their Serbian peers with the perpetrators. This was key in the interview with the old feminist Vera Litričin. Litričin is a trained doctor and became actively involved in the feminist movement at the end of the 1980s as a volunteer for the SOS Hotline, where she worked in close collaboration with Lepa Mladenović and Nadežda Radović. Our conversation almost exclusively evolved around the early 1990s and she became very upset and emotional when she remembered how she and her colleagues were viewed at the beginning of the war.

First, she recalled the Women’s Peace Meeting in Oberhausen, Germany, that took place in November 1992, during which she felt compelled to correct the account of the war propagated by the organiser, a renowned German feminist, Ellen Diederich, according to which every Serb and only Serbs were rapists.

I really didn’t feel comfortable. It just felt very personal, as if my father was a rapist. I didn’t want to speak, I would have preferred to go out for a walk but I knew I had to answer to that. And so I just said what we did as part of Women in Black, I told them about Staša [the leader of WiB] who sent telegrams to feminists in Zagreb to tell them we are with them et cetera et cetera and about the SOS Hotline, about how many times we went to Zagreb and Ljubljana. I mean we questioned Milošević

so much and were out on the streets and I don't know what else we did to help, so you cannot blame me and my father that we are all rapists. (LITRIČIN, 2016)

Litričin's affliction at the insinuation that she and other Serbian feminists were complicit in the war crimes that were being committed both in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to be read against the background of self-declared anti-nationalism that she and her colleagues took at the time⁵⁶. Litričin was part of WiB which together with the Women's Party ŽEST⁵⁷, took a very clear anti-nationalist stance as early as 1990 (MLADJENović & LITRIČIN, 1993: 115). It was a time of heightened tension among Belgrade feminists, for not all could identify with a non-nationalist position (RADOVIĆ, 2016, DUHAČEK, 2016a, DRLJEVIĆ, 2016). This led to many painful *non-dits* within different feminist organisations, including the SOS Hotline and the Women's Studies Centre, though these internal disputes would not transpire in their external appearances (MIŠKOVSKA KAJEVSKA, 2017: 47; 120).

It was also a time when many anti-nationalists felt guilt vis-à-vis their former countrywomen, who were now experiencing war while they were safe in Belgrade and under a regime that was committing these crimes in their name (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016: 118, MLADJENović & LITRIČIN, 1993). This is why it was so hurtful for Litričin to be accused and bracketed together with the regime and the perpetrators. It is no coincidence that the article regarding tensions in the inner feminist circles cited above, was published by Litričin herself together with her colleague Mladenović. It was published in 1993 right after Litričin's experience at the Women's Peace Meeting in Germany and thus a further effort to clarify their stand to the outside world in the hope to alleviate the (self-)blame and guilt they already deeply felt.

⁵⁶ As MIŠKOVSKA KAJEVSKA (2017) meticulously demonstrates in her seminal work *Feminist Activism at War* this does not mean there were no conflicts between feminists. She traces in detail how the positionings of self-declared anti-nationalist and so-called nationalist feminist clusters both within Belgrade and between Belgrade and Zagreb led to fierce and hurtful tensions.

⁵⁷ The Women's Party with the acronym ŽEST, standing for Women (Žene), Ethics (Etika), Solidarity (Solidarnost) and Tolerance (Tolerancija), was created and officially registered in October 1990, just before the first multiparty elections in Serbia and froze its activities in late 1991 (MIŠKOVSKA KAJEVSKA, 2017: 51) because many ŽEST members found that it was impossible at that time to enter the arena of party politics.

This is why Litričin felt somehow vindicated at said meeting in Germany, when suddenly in the middle of all the indignation her speech had caused, a woman shouted, “I want to listen to this woman”. It turned out to be Vivian Stromberg, the executive director of MADRE, a New York-based women’s human rights NGO, who, as a reaction invited Litričin and other representatives of anti-nationalist feminist organisations from Belgrade and Zagreb to a speakers tour in the US in spring 1993 (MIŠKOVSKA KAJEVSKA, 2017: 109). More tours followed in the next three years. They allowed her and her colleagues to spread the word about their anti-war activism and to demonstrate that they conceived wartime rape as a strict gender-based problem that is independent of ethnicity, which led some feminists to deny Serb militias’ main responsibility for the crimes (ibid.: 69). These internal frays are however, beyond the subject at play here. What matters instead is how this positioning influenced their encounter with Western feminists.

Litričin recollects how during the MADRE speakers tour she would always feel like a “giraffe, someone, who comes from a totally different planet” because people drew the frontier in Zagreb and everything beyond it was terrible. She felt treated like an exotic subject and vividly remembers how she was once welcomed with “we are so happy to know someone from behind the curtain”. Within two years, in their minds, Serbia had retreated behind the Iron Curtain while all of former communist Eastern Europe, Slovenia and Croatia were in front of it. Similarly to what young Russian feminists express about contemporary reporting on their situation, Litričin felt that the visibility and audience they were given came at the price of painful exoticisation. This was painful because they had once belonged to a country with open borders that always prided itself as part of the non-alignment movement only to now find themselves in an obscure place “behind the curtain”.

Moreover, the platform they were given did not prevent their further judgment. Only a few months after the MADRE tour, the UN World Conference on Human Rights took place in Vienna in June 1993 and was the scene for another difficult confrontation with a famous Western feminist. The US feminist legal scholar, Catharine MacKinnon, had already vehemently protested against the invitation of feminists from Serbia to the MADRE tour (ibid.: 109-110) and used the opportunity in

Vienna to read them the riot act. Litričin together with Radović decided they could not leave this unchallenged and told her about their activism, to which she retaliated in anger “you are not speaking the truth, it is totally different [...]”, and most hurtfully to them she added, “if you really were against Milošević, you would already be dead” (LITRIČIN, 2016).

Finally, and for Litričin most painfully, her story was literally erased in 1999 when she attended the World March of Women’s preparatory conference in New York, USA. The organisers presented a map of the world to discuss future actions since the World March of Women is an international feminist movement that encourages grassroots organisations across the world to stage marches in their country. The map represented Europe as a homogenous unity, while America, Africa and Asia were divided into different zones, thereby ignoring that many of the European women had experienced communism. But when she expressed her disagreement, the organisers showed no empathy. This was so devastating for her that she burst into tears and spent the rest of her stay on painkillers to return home and never engage with the organisation again. To the date of our meeting this is an episode that provokes a strong reaction in her because: “I was among women who fight for women’s rights and if they don’t understand me then who will? By the way, I rarely cry but at the time it happened due to a felt powerlessness and huge disappointment” (LITRIČIN, 2016). The moment she refused to identify with their account, her perspective was declared void. It was not deemed worthy of distinction, not even as “add and stir” to the Euro-centred experiences as Mohanty argues often happens when feminism is allegedly “internationalised” and “decolonised” (MOHANTY, 2003a: 239). Instead it got submerged into the Western European (master) narrative and literally eradicated from the European map.

What was difficult at the time was not simply the lack of knowledge about the events, their situation and political positioning, which led to wrongful insinuations that particularly hurt in the context of guilt, shame and helplessness. More problematic was that even when they articulated their view, notably with the help of Western feminists, others would still not want to listen and claim to own their truth. It is in this sense felt as an instance of “external” “silencing of the present” for the

incredulousness they encountered ripped them of their very power to self-identify (as anti-nationalists) and to know and tell their history and situation, both now privileges of outsider Western feminists. They could no longer make truth claims. Instead they were reduced to objects of projection for these outsiders, who would not solicit their own perspective and, if brought forward unsolicited, dismiss it. And even in those instances where they were encouraged to speak up, there was a feeling of being a “giraffe” in an exhibition, of playing the role of the exotic and fascinating that could provide a window into all the horrors that were imagined “behind the curtain”. Unlike with the Russian case, where Western feminists framed young Russian feminists as “their past” thus conducting temporal Othering, what is at play here is geographical Othering in the guise of “silencing of the present”.

In light of the above, it is understandable that Litričin still gets emotional almost twenty years later. Yet it is important to emphasise that during the interview she constantly oscillates between critique of and appreciation for her Western colleagues at the time. She makes it clear that ultimately, the experience of transnational feminist encounters depends on the people involved and is keen to stress that many encounters were not only positive but in fact crucial. The vast majority of the wartime generation strongly confirms this impression, on which more light shall be thrown in the next chapter. This is ultimately why Litričin told the two young feminists, who approached her at the UN conference in Vienna, to ask whether they could do anything for them or visit, that it was enough for her that they “knew that Belgrade exists” (LITRIČIN, 2016). So once more the account of knowledge-transfer is nuanced and even when critique is made it is at the same time contrasted with positive aspects.

7.4.2 Silencing of feminist intellectual capacity

One could gain the impression that the only grievances related to “external” “silencing of the present” are situated in the past or that Litričin is the only one uttering these kind of reflections. However, two more interviewees, Nađa Duhaček and Biljana Dojcinović, bring up the issue of being silenced in relation to a lack of emission power in feminist research (DUHAČEK, 2016b, DOJCINOVIĆ, 2016). Both explicitly refer to Blagojević’s (2009) definition of Serbia being at the semi-periphery. This geographical

imaginary helps them articulate that they experience a unidirectional flux of knowledge from core to semi-periphery that is so overwhelming and overpowering they cannot afford to ignore it. To quote the established feminist academic Dojcinović:

You don't have the emission power. You just receive [...]. [F]rom our standpoint it's always just like with all other marginal groups. You have to know the language of the centre [...]. [Y]ou have to know the core. You have to know what the centre is working on. (DOJCINOVIĆ, 2016)

What is bothering them is not so much that the centre sets the tone, but that it is the *only* tone. Learning the core's language well means that it always remains a foreign language and therefore foreign territory, where they can never be full and equal participants but only extras. If they are the ones that can "just receive", then Western feminists are those who emit and for whom the knowledge at the semi-periphery is at best nice to have, at worst disposable.

Dojcinović and Nađa Duhaček thus speak of Western knowledge-transfer and its unidirectional character as a problem. For them it is incredibly difficult to get Western feminists' attention. In order to do so they argue they first need to master their trends and terms and even then Nađa Duhaček notices, their work is often considered "not good enough" and, as Dojcinović adds, faced with much harsher assessment. Pointing out the very constellation in which we were having our conversation, Nađa Duhaček, further explained that they mostly find themselves in the position of research assistants. They are either treated as data collectors or as data points themselves for the real sculptors of thought. She told me about a workshop she attended in Novi Sad, Serbia at which a Western presenter, whom she presumed to be from a Nordic country, put up a map (note again the explicit geographical trait) with the dates when women got the right to vote. While Slovenia and Croatia were said to have had universal suffrage since 1946, Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina had a question mark. Nađa Duhaček was enraged because it was a mistake that could have easily been avoided, had the person taken more interest in the country about which she was speaking. And it was a *faux pas* that she herself would not have been allowed to make.

Even though the incident might appear anecdotal, it stands for an indifference towards their past struggles that is aggravated by the audacity of the actor in question not even feeling compelled to hide her lack of interest when she was invited to Serbia.

It thus also reveals a quiet assumption of acceptability, that ignoring these facts would not mean transgressing generally considered important lines. This, together with the other testimonials of perceived ignorance and dismissal regarding their experience, history and knowledge, resembles the problematic definition of transnational feminism painted as Western knowledge-transfer by critical scholars. The point of geographical Othering through silencing (of the present and the past) is to reinforce the asymmetrical dynamic between a Western core that beholds all universal wisdom and a semi-periphery that needs to succumb and accept that wisdom without ever being granted a level playing field. In order to do so the semi-periphery needs to appear deficient in terms of knowledge. Hence why Serbian feminists must not be conceived of as thought-agents who can articulate let alone generate feminist knowledge. This is what post-colonial scholars term “asymmetrical ignorance” (CHAKRABARTY, 2000: 28). The subaltern subject from the (semi-) peripheries constantly has to refer to work that originated in the West, and indeed is often offered instruments to formulate critique, but their Western counterparts are under no such obligation (DO MAR CASTRO VARELA & DHAWAN, 2009: 15).

Daša Duhaček corroborates this in spite of strong hesitation. After a lengthy introduction, explaining why she does not identify with the terms of Western and Eastern feminism, she does eventually concede that there is a certain stereotype abound that facilitates this asymmetrical ignorance:

Having said that, and if we really want to attempt going into the dangerous field of generalising, I would say that there is a stereotype that we must be aware of, that is that Western feminism was at the forefront of the struggle for women's rights, and even more so in the development of feminist theory. But just because we don't know and because there hasn't been enough research about the specificities within other cultures and so on, does not necessarily mean that only Western feminism or so-called Western feminism was at the forefront. (DUHAČEK, 2016a)

She thus provides the necessary background explanation for the unmasked lack of interest in their feminist history that Nađa Duhaček experienced. Since a certain stereotype of Western feminism still prevails, there is a fortiori also a received idea that all other feminisms are not historical champions and can therefore be ignored.

Yet even though there is expression of frustration with the perceived silencing of their experience, history, knowledge and indeed knowledgeability, there is also what

we have seen time and time again: defusing strategy. Daša Duhaček openly communicates that she feels she is navigating a dangerous terrain of generalisations and Litričin constantly oscillated between praise and critique, yet most interestingly was Dojcinović's strategy. Towards the end of our conversation she talked of knowledge-transfer's one-way property matter-of-factly, "you can't do it vice versa, from semi periphery or periphery to the core", and most importantly added: "But the important thing, and the other thing we should talk about, is that I also don't think it's important" (DOJCINOVIĆ, 2016). Having previously naturalised the unilateral dimension of knowledge-transfer by acknowledging and identifying the power imbalance between the core and her semi-periphery, she went a step further. Instead of remaining in the state of self-victimisation experienced at the hand of the more dominant Western knowledge-emitters, she turned the table. Not only did she argue that it is of no importance to her, signalling that she remains unscathed, but that she actually saw her position and that of all fellow feminists at the semi-periphery as a powerful and privileged one. In her view, they have the benefit of being at a distance and from that distance they are much more capable of critically engaging with what is produced at the core. They are in a richer and more enriching position because they have the advantage of knowing both their situation and what is being discussed at the core. And as a result, they can use this smelting furnace to forge the intellectual tools that work best for them. Hence why the lasting impression is not one of exclusive suffering from "silencing of the present". Knowledge transmission is mostly unidirectional and their capacity to think not acknowledged. Yet from that underestimation also comes freedom, for at the end of the day knowledge can only be transferred, not imposed. Serbian feminists may well not have the luxury of ignoring Western feminists' work as Westerners do with theirs, but they still have the power to decide what to do with it and to assess it on their own terms.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that at first glance it seems that there is no sense of power asymmetry in relation to Western feminism and feminists. The few occurrences only related to personal encounters that were at times felt to be patronising but did

not have much importance. However, a closer look into the “yes” codes revealed that foreign donors and more importantly their insistence on gender mainstreaming were their primary concern in relation to unequal power structures. In their critique donors did not feature in their own right but mainly because of their naïve push for a “good practice” that gets perverted within the domestic political system of Serbia. Serbian feminists feel that the government uses gender mainstreaming as a way to de-radicalise them, by diluting the very meaning of equality. This ultimately not only erases the very baseline for gender mainstreaming but more importantly provides far-right parties and organisations with a way to further co-opt equality under a nationalist and patriarchal cover, that they find most unsettling. This is why gender mainstreaming is perceived as a dangerous policy that ought to be rejected to save their feminist identity. And this is why they are concerned with Western donors insisting on this “good practice” and fail to see the reality of the policy’s co-optation for anti-feminist goals.

The chapter then went on to look into more detail at the codes related to geographical Othering, in particular silencing of the past and present. The overall conclusion is that there are a few respondents who describe different versions of “asymmetrical ignorance” be it towards their history, their lived experience, knowledge-production and even know-ability. However, we only have 4 respondents that usher this kind of critique regarding silencing of the present or the past. And even though the database is richer with regards to gender mainstreaming (11 out of 33 interviews), we are still far from a deluge of critique of Western knowledge-transfer as critical theory would have it. All told, it remains a marginal phenomenon also in Serbia, and one that is similar to Russia constantly exposed to self-defusing strategies, which further undermine its magnitude. The rejection of self-victimisation as well as the refutation to include foreign donors within the definition of Western knowledge-transfer are the two most interesting approaches to de-escalation. They provide further proof that the marginal feminist critique of knowledge-transfer needs to be contextualised with the authoritarian moment during which I spoke to interviewees and which will be the focus of the next chapter.

8 Critique from an anti-statist perspective in Serbia

8.1 Introduction

Having established in the previous chapter that critique of knowledge-transfer as critical theory would expect is marginal among Serbian feminists, this chapter – following the same logic as the Russian case study – now turns to the inductive analysis of how feminists in Serbia make sense of their political environment and what conclusions they draw from this for their activism. It shows that they too are primarily concerned with rejecting knowledge-transfer as a discourse in an attempt to subvert the authoritarian regime. But before turning to the actual discursive strategies they employ, the chapter first highlights how authoritarianism took hold in Serbia, with particular attention to how Vučić consolidated his power and how the anti-gender discourse was instrumental for this power grab. While the anti-gender discourse is necessarily subtler in the Serbian context due to the EU accession process, it is no less worrying for feminists in the country. In fact, as the chapter will show, the government may not actively promote anti-gender discourse itself. However, it purposefully lets it thrive under the banner of “gender ideology”, which asserts that gender is an alien EU-driven idea, to feed off it in its tactical Europeanisation. In other words, Vučić’s government professes adherence to progressive values and reforms, all while using anti-gender tendencies in the country to justify why said reforms cannot be implemented. In return, it offers the EU occasional and seemingly obvious progress as a mode of reassurance. Worryingly for Serbian feminists however, this double discourse not only serves to justify lack of real progress regarding gender equality: feminists have the impression that the government actually uses it as a shield to hide conscious efforts on behalf of the government to sabotage their work. This chapter will furthermore show that Serbian feminists interpret this disingenuity as a dangerous strategy that has enabled old nationalists to climb (back) to power and pose as pro-EU reformers.

Disingenuity and regression to nationalist politics are the two central concerns for Serbian feminists, who feel disillusioned and in a dilemma. This disillusionment stems from the fact that, after a brief interlude at the turn of the millennium, they

genuinely believed their country could become democratic; but this same disingenuous government still enjoys the EU's external legitimacy, which makes them feel let down by a key ally. Nevertheless, as the following analysis will show, criticism of the EU accession process is unfathomable for the majority of Serbian feminists. Doing so could be read as their alignment with the authoritarian discourse, which insinuates that gender is an alien concept, that gender equality reforms are imposed by the EU, and is ultimately used to attack feminists. It would also mean to leave the public debate to either fake or outright anti-EU political forces. As a result, I argue, their primary concern becomes resisting even the slightest possible resonance with the hegemonic discourse.

The second part of the chapter is therefore concerned with analysing each of the three discursive strategies Serbian feminists employ in an attempt to subvert the authoritarian regime. Similar to the Russian case study, a first strategy endorses knowledge-transfer as a concept still, but reframes it as a positive experience, in which they had agency and which was an important source of practical, intellectual and emotional support. Equally similar to Russian feminists, feminists in Serbia also use a second strategy, whereby they reject the idea of knowledge-transfer as such and replace it with the imaginary of an exchange between equals instead. Part of this discursive strategy is also to emphasise their own feminist heritage: to demonstrate that feminism is not *without* Serbia, that there is knowledge they can carry into the transnational conversation, and importantly, to deflect responsibility. For, as I will show, the emphasis on their own heritage is not presented as a reaction against a knowledge-transfer that silenced them. Instead, Serbian feminists are careful to stage the forgetting of their socialist heritage as an internal and inter-generational problem, thus making responsibility attribution to a Western knowledge-transfer impossible. The chapter concludes by revealing the key difference between the two case studies. While in Russia too, feminists resort to challenging the West/East dichotomy underlying the hegemonic discourse, this discursive strategy takes a greater extent among the Serbian respondents, both in terms of frequency and force by which it is asserted.

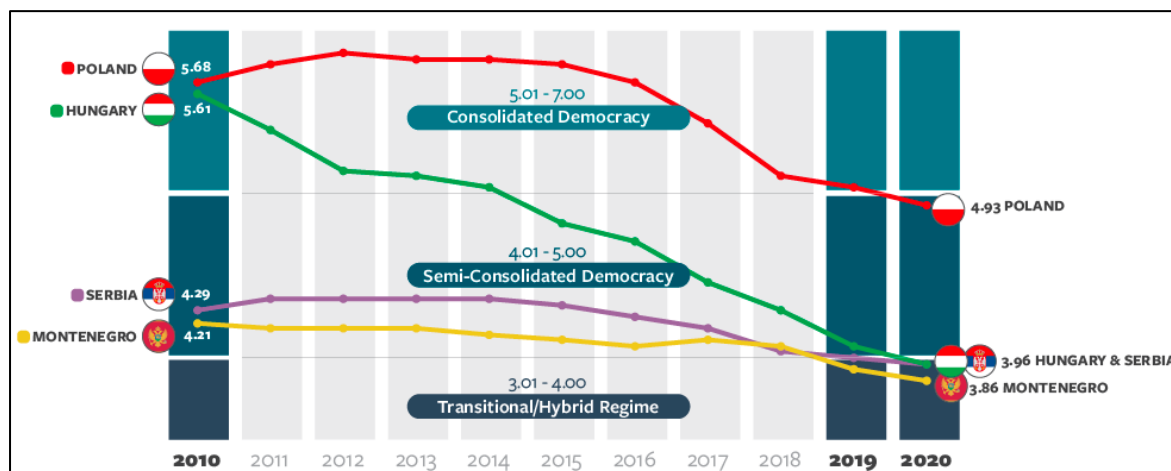
8.2 The authoritarian and anti-gender nexus

The previous chapter explored one important aspect of the political environment Serbian feminists act in: the co-optation of gender mainstreaming through far-right groups and political parties, which has entered the highest echelons of politics. As a result, cooperating with state institutions for the sake of gender mainstreaming is equated with feminist suicide by many, for it runs completely counter to their identity. This aspect was investigated as part of the empirical test of the extent of critique of knowledge-transfer. This chapter is concerned with analysing the reasons why said critique is so marginal. To this end, it is important to first outline additional features of Serbian illiberal democracy and how the anti-gender backlash is interwoven with it in order to better understand the absence of critique, and recognise it as Serbian feminists' opposition to knowledge-transfer as a discourse that bolsters the semi-authoritarian regime. The chapter therefore begins with examining the mechanism by which semi-authoritarianism was consolidated in the past years, the role anti-Western rhetoric played in it, and how it is intimately related with a fight against "gender ideology".

8.2.1 *Mechanisms of authoritarianism*

2020 marked a watershed moment for Serbia. For the first time Freedom House classified Serbia as a hybrid regime. In other words, the state of its institutions and civic freedoms have deteriorated to such a degree that the country as a whole tipped over the edge for the first time since 2003 and can no longer be considered to be developing towards a democracy, but towards authoritarianism. Rather than one decisive moment, the report finds that this development is the result of a yearlong degradation under Vučić (CSAKY, 2020).

Graph 9: Serbia officially declared a hybrid regime



Situation in Poland, Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro, shown by Freedom House, for the period 2010-2020. Source: (CSAKY, 2020)

Within a few years Vučić transformed the Serbian political landscape into a de-facto one-party system. To consolidate power of his party, the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka, SNS), he twice called early elections, in 2014 and 2016. While in 2014 a pro-EU consensus still prevailed among all parties, in 2016, SNS and its coalition partner the Socialist Party of Serbia⁵⁸ (Socijalistička partija Srbije, SPS) lost seats to the extreme nationalist Serb Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka, SRS), which, notably, had also been Vučić's previous party. The previously mentioned far-right movement Dveri as well as the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) also entered parliament together. The difference between the outcome of this snap election in contrast to 2014 was that two parliamentary groups were virulent nationalists and anti-European. The openly pro-European opposition did not even score 18 percent (BIEBER, 2020: 130). This reshuffle was beneficial for Vučić because the SNS was now the dominant party of the centre and could be presented to the outside world as a pragmatic and stabilising political force.

⁵⁸ SPS was the party of Milošević and dominated throughout the 1990s. It suffered from international isolation but was ultimately only excluded from power between 2001 and 2004.

In 2017 Vučić decided to run for the presidency. At first sight this might seem puzzling because Serbia has a parliamentary system, in which the PM's office has more constitutional power. However, Vučić used the presidency not only to merge control over the ruling party, but also to appoint a PM, Ana Brnabić, who is essentially a puppet. Given that he won the direct election with 55 percent, a result only Milošević last achieved in 1992, this move considerably bolstered his symbolic power. We can therefore speak of informal presidentialism. Having established control over the party, Vučić made sure his party in turn captured the legislative. SNS MPs regularly "flood the debate" (BIEBER: 265) on the floor with numerous amendments in order to make any meaningful challenge to government policies by the opposition impossible. As a result, many opposition groups started to boycott parliament in early 2019 (DAMNJANOVIĆ, 2020), as well as the elections in spring 2020.

Beyond the institutional dimension, Vučić has consolidated his position of strongmen by purposefully creating a constant state of crisis; crises, which are entirely self-made and thanks to which he can stage himself as a de-escalator and stabilizer (BIEBER: 227). Sometimes a crisis is fabricated by pure rumours, spread via loyal media outlets, as it happened with the announcement of an alleged coup in Serbia during a breakfast TV show in 2015 (RADOVANOVIĆ, 2015). In other instances, there is more planning behind the fictional crisis. In 2017, for example, Serbia resumed the train service between Belgrade and Mitrovica, a city in the north of Kosovo that has an ethnic Serbian majority. The train bore the slogan "Kosovo is Serbia" and was sent towards Mitrovica without the consent of Kosovo authorities. Kosovo expressed dismay and opposition to the train entering its territory, but did not undertake any action. It was stopped by Vučić himself, yet he accused Kosovo special forces of intervening and even wanting to blow up the train connection (BIEBER: 228). This is one of many examples of how Vučić regularly plays to his nationalist and aggressive constituents, all while allowing himself to appear as the cold-headed de-escalator to outside observers.

One of the most powerful tools Vučić has employed to create an obedient popular base is through employment. Given the precarious job market in Serbia and high unemployment rate, a job in the secure and prestigious public sector is what

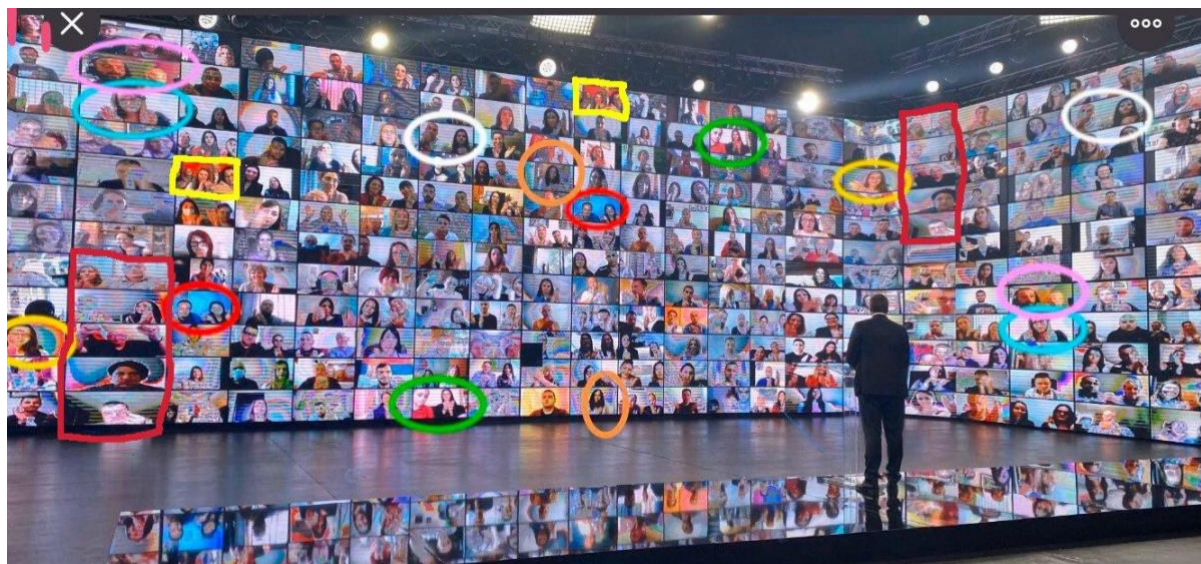
most people aspire to. This is why, by 2015, the SNS had around half a million party members. This is more than the large German parties: in the same year, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats could only claim 450'000 members each (NIEDERMAYER, 2017), in a country whose population is ten times as big as that of Serbia. The fact that more than one in ten adults in Serbia is a member of the SNS is less a sign of their politicization or allegiance to the party's program, but rather a viable option to secure a job (RADELJIĆ, 2019). This strong patronage has allowed the ruling party to have direct influence on those public institutions as well as on the private sector, which often relies on state permission for projects (ibid.: 164). As a result, influence and power are not related to institutions but based in a number of individuals in politics and business close to Vučić (BIEPAG, 2017).

Lastly, Vučić has conducted a concerted effort to install loyal media and to use them, among other things, to attack civil society and the opposition. This is intimately related to Vučić's past. In 1998, during Milošević's time, he was appointed Minister of Information, though one can argue that he was rather in charge of propaganda, for the media played a key role in boosting the nationalist discourse. Importantly, he led a clampdown against the media (JOVANOVIĆ, 2019). Under a new law on public information, introduced soon afterwards, media outlets were sued for a total of roughly 160'000\$ within less than a year (ibid.: 71). Vučić was therefore aware of the power of the media and the importance to control them from the beginning. Similar to other authoritarian legacies from the 1990s, he updated them to the new context of Europeanisation and chose a more discreet *modus operandi*. The new approach is however, clear enough for all journalists to understand the consequences of disobedience (RADELJIĆ: 171).

The media landscape in Serbia remains fairly diverse and there are still critical media outlets like *Vreme*, *NIN*, *Novi Magazin* and the daily *Danas*. However, this pluralism, coupled with the economic pressures media are facing across the world because of declining advertising revenues, has proved harmful. This context of competition for scarce resources can make even those independent media outlets vulnerable to governmental pressure, especially because it is a major advertiser (BIEBER: 301). In addition, despite this pluralism, the reach of critical media outlets

remains limited to urban centres. Those media with broader reach, such as the numerous tabloids, radio and television, have tended to support Vučić's actions since 2012 (RADELJIĆ: 171). Across the main TV stations, from the public broadcaster RTS to the private stations *Pink* and *Happy*, Vučić receives more attention than any other political figure, both within and beyond his party. Most strikingly, in the parliamentary elections in spring 2020, which were not even related to his position, he held a virtual debate, in which the screen was manipulated (SRPSKA NAPREDNA STRANKA, 2017). Pictures of supporters were multiplied to amplify the impression of Vučić's popularity⁵⁹ (Picture 7). Though this was done by the SNS media centre, both stations RTS and *Pink* had no scruple sharing the video.

Picture 7: Manipulated screen during Vučić's TV debate with supporters



Source: Tweet by Mladen Mirilović <https://twitter.com/mirilovic/status/1264985596319215625>

Loyal media outlets not only disproportionately and uncritically report on Vučić, they are also used to attack civil society and the West (BIEBER: 304). *Informer*, *Sprski Telegraf*, *Alo* and from time to time *Kurir* are among the most prominent tabloids whose overall line is anti-Western, coupled with a consistently positive portrayal of

⁵⁹ This kind of manipulation was last seen under Milošević. In 2000 pictures of his rallies were systematically forged by copy-pasting attendants in order to inflate his popularity.

Serbo-Russian relationships (ibid.: 305). Vučić has himself used this loyalty to directly attack critical media as Western conspirators. The most indicative case is the defamation campaign against the Balkan Investigative Reporters' Network in 2014. During the yearlong campaign, he argued several times that the critical network was paid by Brussels to undermine the Serbian state (NIKOLIĆ, 2015). The same tactic is also used against civil society, branding them as enemies and foreign puppets, which many of my interlocutors experienced first-hand. Serbian civil society has generally become very weak. This weakness is not only due to the authoritarian mechanisms per se. A huge factor is that Vučić enjoys external legitimacy, especially from the EU. This legitimacy, together with the use of more subtle authoritarian methods than those employed in the 1990s, has made it difficult to mobilise against the regime (BIEBER: 280).

All of the above mechanisms – from capturing key institutions, creating a system of widespread patronage, installing loyal media and harassing independent outlets, to weakening civil society via intermittent attacks – have put in place an electoral authoritarian regime, in which elections can only be characterised as democratic façade (GORDY, 2017).

8.2.2 Engendering Genderism in Serbia

As discussed in the previous chapter, a key factor concerning Serbian feminists is the co-optation of feminist frames like the pay gap and quotas, and in particular, gender mainstreaming by Vučić's party and far-right parties like DSS and Dveri that seek to advance a conservative and nationalist policy. In addition, the anti-gender backlash is characterised by a strategic dismissal of any effort to problematize and overcome gendered discrimination by attributing it to an imagined "gender ideology" (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2019). This anti-gender discourse has become a key strategy in far-right and nationalist parties and has entered mainstream Serbian political debate (VIŠNJIĆ, 2017).

Zaharijević argues that until recently feminists were never criticised through the prism of feminism. Right-wingers branded them as "witches" and "anti-Serbians" (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2018b: 93). They did not focus on their feminist but anti-nationalist

character. Gender ideology as such was not a part of the attack. In recent years however, “gender ideology” has been connected with colonialism in the form of an alleged Western – and EU-driven – imperialism that is imposed on the “autochthone people” through reforms (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2019: 33). Ever since far-right groups entered parliament in 2016 the “witch hunt” has changed frame. If feminists were once targeted for their “unpatriotic” character, now they are attacked as traitors that are part of a “gender extremist” agenda that is alien to Serbia (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2019). Unlike in neighbouring Croatia, however, and even though there are religious groups involved, this has happened without the Serbian Orthodox Church taking a leading role (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2019: 39). This is not to say that Serbia has been by any means more progressive. On the contrary, Zaharijević argues that it actually had a precursor to “gender ideology”, namely “homosexual ideology”. “Concerns around “Homosexual ideology” were expressed on a regular basis: every year the Pride March was supposed to take place (for details see 1.3.3.2), and on which the new gender frame could be built.

In 2017 the anti-gender forces came to the fore for the first time when a new sexual education package was proposed. In November 2016, the internationally recognized NGO Incest Trauma Centre Beograd (ITC) and the Ministry of Education jointly presented an educational package aimed at preventing various types of sexual violence against children and adolescents. It had been meticulously prepared since 2014, in close cooperation with the Women’s Parliamentary Network. Half a year later, Slobodan Antonić, a conservative sociology professor, vehemently accused the package of opening the doors to early and perverted sexualisation of minors. In an article he published in a marginal Russo-Serbian website, he exclaimed that after being taught about consensual sex: “Will our children soon also learn about SM, sex with animals, necrophilia, group sex, swinging and other kinds of ‘normal sexual activities’ which are perfectly fine if they are, according to our Ministry, a matter of ‘consent between persons making love’?” (ANTONIĆ, 2017).

Antonić concluded that the education package was nothing but a Trojan horse for homosexual propaganda. To prove his allegation, he referred to an illustration in the package that also showed a homosexual couple kissing – and which would in the

coming days preface all articles on the topic with misleading captions – but also the fact that the two representatives of ITC were lesbians (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2018a). A couple of days later, another academic echoed Antonić's views in an op-ed for the prestigious daily *Politik* (ĐURKOVIĆ, 2017). He went beyond the sexualisation argument, adding that this was an attack on an already waning nation because it destabilized already vulnerable families. The final twist was provided by the Serbian Sputnik News agency (KANKARAŠ TRKLA, 2017). These two isolated interventions were presented as “a number of public intellectuals” who warn that under the pretext of prevention “gender ideology” is used as a war against the family (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2018b: 95). The Ministry in charge was branded as manipulated by foreign Western lobbies in order to tear down the fabric of society, by brainwashing children to become utterly alien to Serbia's own cultural and national identity (ibid.: 95).

During this time, several reactions in defence of the package and gender were published, but remained completely side-lined. It was clear who represented “the public”. Most crucial, however, was the Serbian government's lack of outward support for the package (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, 2019). It is representative of the strategy already discussed in relation to gender mainstreaming: leaving the co-optation and the controversial debates to parties and groups right of Vučić, and to then use this as an excuse for inaction, since doing otherwise would be against popular will. This strategy is the backbone of Serbia's double discourse towards the EU and domestic audiences. This is why on April 21 the new Minister of Education “confessed” that Europe was demanding sexual education and promised adjustments in order to appease public outrage (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2018a). There has since been no news about rearticulating the package.

The defamation of “gender ideology” as a direct threat to the family, and by extension the nation, was also used to shut down the gender equality law (the very law that was supposed to serve as a basis for gender mainstreaming as mentioned in the preceding chapter). The name of the law changed from “Law on Gender Equality” to “Equality between Women and Men” and the term “gender” was removed from almost all articles. When parliament was finally set to vote on the bill, it was revoked at the last minute for further consultation. 12 out of 19 Ministers have opposed the bill since.

During the public consultation, the far-right party Dveri argued it was “for the equality between sexes, but not for the introduction of imposed terms” (read: gender) (DVERI, 2018b). Dveri’s Radmila Vasić established that her party refuses the current draft, starting with its very title, which evokes a term that not even the Serbian constitution defines (ibid.). The constitution, she contended, only recognises equality between the sexes, that is between women and men, but not gender or gender identity”. The present draft would thus violate parents’ right to ensure their children enjoy a religious and moral upbringing. Her colleague and MP, Marija Janjušević, further concluded that accepting the law in its current guise would go too far and risk the introduction of “gender ideology”, which ultimately aims at spreading homosexuality and destroying the family, through the “back door” (ibid.).

This kind of anti-gender discourse, sugar-coated in a supposed care for protecting families, has made it acceptable to conduct an openly natalist policy at the expense of women’s reproductive rights. The Strategy for Encouraging Births, adopted in 2018, is one of the most recent striking policies in that direction. In order to promote the policy, the Ministry of Information, which was listed in the National Action Plan on promoting gender equality as a key institution, announced a call for the best slogans to promote childbirth. Pecuniary awards were given to misogynist slogans like *Rađaj, ne odgađaj* [Give birth, don’t delay] and *Dosta reči, nek zakmeči* [Enough words, let us hear the baby’s cry] (DANAS ONLINE, 2018). Such slogans not only reduce Serbian women’s place in society to their reproductive capacity, but also annihilates the notion that she has any autonomy over her body. Vučić himself dismissed concerned critics (TANJUG, 2018), contending that no one’s rights were put in danger. He added that he was only raising attention to an issue so important that “if we do not start acting on it, we are done as a nation”. He finished the endorsement of the strategy with disparagingly saying “go ahead, write statements, deal with feminists and this and that movement”.

Similar to Russia, the term ‘gender’ itself is mobilised to exemplify that the entire ideology is imported from abroad. It is important to clarify that – unlike in Russia – Serbian academia predominantly uses the equivalent Serbian term *rod* when speaking of gender. It is thus a translation of the concept, and not a transliteration. Zaharijević

reveals that Yugoslav theoretical work in the late 1970s had already started discussing the difference between gender and sex (in Serbian between *rod* and *pol*). One of my respondents, Biljana Dojcinović, recalls how she was one of the first to suggest *rod* as a translation for the concept of “gender” in her Master thesis, when she first joined the WSC in the early 1990s (DOJCINOVIĆ, 2016). And while there were debates on the translation at the time, they stayed within feminist circles. This changed in recent years with a new spelling. Instead of using *rod*, critics of “gender ideology” have not only started transliterating gender, but they have also been adamant about spelling it with *dž*, thus making it into “*džender*” (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2019: 34). Zaharijević contends that this derogatory letter is used to signal that everything ‘gender’ stands for is so alien to Serbia that it cannot even be transliterated properly into its “own” language (ibid.: 34).

All of this has been couched in an effective double discourse, which the EU has quietly accepted. Vučić’s government has regularly boosted his credibility to the outside world by “pinkwashing” his politics. The appointment of Ana Brnabić as PM, the first openly female gay prime minister in the region, was one such performance. Sloomaeckers called this choice as part of Vučić’s “tactical Europeanisation” and warned against the ecstatic reaction the appointment received in Western media, heralding the decision as a clear sign of progress in a country where Pride marches were marred only a few years ago (SLOOTMAECKERS, 2017b). Instead, he argued that Serbia used this move in the context of EU accessions as a “homonationalist” strategy, by which it demonstrates Europeaness without engaging with the lived experiences of the LGBT community in Serbia or considerably improving their conditions (ibid.).

This impression could further be corroborated because Brnabić brought neither political affiliation nor experience and would thus have very little effective power (which gave her the nickname “*ficus*” to illustrate that she would be as irrelevant to Serbian politics as this plant is for many offices) (BIEBER: 285). Brnabić and Vučić were also very keen to communicate to the Serbian public from the outset that they viewed her sexual orientation as a completely personal matter, something that stays within her “four walls”. They anticipated her future inaction regarding LGBT rights. During her ongoing term, she indeed was the first lesbian to have a child with her partner, but

she has not endorsed or advocated for legislation that would guarantee this right for the rest of the country's LGBT population.

Similar with the Pride march then, the appointment of a lesbian PM was solely for tactical reasons vis-à-vis the EU. The Pride Marches in Serbia have rightly been called "Ghost Prides" by Sloommaeckers. In most instances, they are heavily protected by security forces and thus completely decoupled from the larger population, which does not allow for the mingling and broader celebration of the community as it is supposed to do. Nor does this disproportionate securitization of the event really instill a sense of security in the participants. As one of the interviewees said about her experience during Pride in 2014: "There were more police than actual people. So yes, he [Vučić] gives you the right to assemble and speak freely but only under the auspices of the police. That does not give you the sense of freedom Pride is supposed to give. Nor do you feel safe, absolutely not" (TODOROVIĆ, 2016).

Yet for the government this approach comes handy because it allows them to signal to the EU that they take LGBT issues seriously, especially since Pride marches have become "litmus tests" of Europeanisation (SLOOTMAECKERS, 2017a). Only when one takes a closer look, does it become apparent that tangible advances have been made for the LGBT community. Sloommaeckers has shown that the institutions responsible for anti-discrimination (the ombudsman and the commissioner for the protection of equality) often face indirect political pressure to speak publicly on the topic, but not to actually pursue politically sensitive cases (ibid.).

During my field research in Belgrade in 2016, I witnessed this "ghosting" of feminist civil society activities akin to the "Ghost Pride" first hand when I participated in a protest organised by WiB. Police escorted us, around 25 people, from the headquarters near Savamala to the central Republic square, where the protests are usually held. At no point did the police talk to us, except for the WiB director Staša Zajović. The protest entailed raising awareness of the prevalence of rape as a tool of warfare worldwide. It had two elements. All 25 of us gathered in a semi-circle (all dressed in black). Each of us held a banner with the number of victims of sexual violence in conflict in a specific country. In front of us was a huge map of the world made out of paper. We first all stood silently and then each one of us slowly walked

onto the map and the country their banner referred to, to lay it down until all were just in bleak black and the map full of banners. All of this took about 45 minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

Throughout the protest, we were being visibly harassed and intimidated. The group of onlookers was small but nevertheless extremely effective. A man dressed in grey military attire kept staring at us and communicating to ominous others through a radio phone. Around him were not more than 5 people, but sadly they were the only constant spectators. Almost no one else stopped to watch. This was not least due to the heavy police presence: The semicircle was surrounded by police personnel, which, similar to what Todorović explained about police presence during Pride, had a deterrent effect. The picture below helps to illustrate the setup of a semi-circle of protesters completed with another semi-circle of policemen. It does not depict the protest action described here, of which there are no pictures on WiB's website. But it was taken only five months after the incident described here. The small group's threatening demeanour however, went beyond militaristic clothing and communication tools. One man stepped as closely as he could and took a photo of every single protester without the police interfering except to tell him to keep a certain distance. Finally, the only woman from that group laid down a flower bouquet with the message "May you all rest in peace". Given that the protest was not about women who had been killed, this was a clear message of threat directed at us. And since the police did not stop her when she overstepped the threshold they had physically created, to lay down the flowers at the bottom of the map, we did not feel neither reassured nor protected.

Picture 8: WiB protests are regularly fenced off by police as shown here



Protest action “Anti-fascism is my choice”, taken by: Srdjan Veljović, 9th November 2016, <http://zeneucrnom.org/sr/foto-galerija/fotografije/517-antifaszam-je-moj-izbor-9-novembar-2016>.

I vividly remember how shaken and frightened I was, how I felt trapped and did not know where to go after the protest, fearing I might be followed (the protest was held on a Friday evening around 6pm so it was getting darker). As a result, I judged it best to walk back with everyone to the headquarters since we would again be flanked by police and hoped that after a while I could sneak out. As we walked, a big SUV with dark tinted windows followed us slowly and once more, the police did not react. At the headquarters, I asked fellow protesters how they felt about the intimidation and it transpired that those who came out regularly with WiB were already very accustomed to it and tended to ignore it. All of them, however, also stressed that they found the police’s behaviour completely inadequate, and felt the heavy escorting made the larger population shy away because it attached almost an “extremist” flair to the protests. More importantly, police presence was all for good images but did not translate into actual protection for protestors when it was needed. Thus, they all agreed that they were dealing with yet another public performance of the government’s disingenuous but tactical respect of civil liberties.

An authoritarian regime that conducts its anti-gender backlash through the means of decrying a threatening “gender ideology” and using tactical Europeanisation in its double discourse, is thus the context to bear in mind to understand Serbian feminists’ absence of critique of knowledge-transfer. In the next section, this chapter

will analyse what Serbian feminists' biggest concerns and priorities are in this climate, and then highlight in three different sections the kind of discursive strategies through which they challenge the dominant notion of knowledge-transfer.

8.3 Feminists' priorities

Following the same procedure as in the equivalent chapter on absence of critique in Russia (chapter 5), I coded all Serbian interviews inductively. This entailed first discerning all interview segments that referred to the contemporary political context, and after several iterative rounds, finding the most adequate overarching categories. In the following, I repeated the same process, this time only analysing the already coded segments to discern what feelings the interlocutors associated and expressed with the political environment they described. At the end of this, I had six subcodes for the "present" political atmosphere and another seven subcodes for the emotive "consequences" this had on Serbian feminists. Both coding schemes are illustrated in the two tables, Table 16 and Table 17, below and are presented in order of frequency, from most used to least used codes.

Table 16: Inductive coding scheme for present political environment in Serbia

Subcodes for "present"	Explicit reference to
- Disingenuity	Serbian government using double discourse in order to either pretend it acts on gender equality when in reality it does nothing or, worse still, to sugar-coat its active undermining and co-optation of any efforts in that direction. But importantly, this also includes segments that refer to the EU's permissive stance towards this double discourse.
- Regression	Either the 1990s or any other temporal element that is used to indicate that society has returned to and which is associated with a form of degradation
- Defamation	Feminists being branded negatively, and in particular as enemies of the state and Western puppets
- Repression	Active repression of activists through intimidation
- Continuity	War criminals from the 1990s being in government and thus the notion that nothing substantially changed in the political environment
- Reticence	State officials nowadays refraining from explicitly hateful comments and methods and resorting to a subtler approach

Table 17: Inductive coding scheme for emotions associated with present political environment in Serbia

Subcodes for “consequences”	Refers to
- Disillusion	The feeling that nothing has changed or that there is no longer hope for substantial change and/or that the EU is partly responsible for this hopeless situation. This also often refers to a state of exhaustion due to the lack of hope-instilling moments.
- Dilemma	The choice between co-operating with state institutions when they judge the state to be disingenuous in its commitment, all while recognising that it is nevertheless a useful entry point for advocacy, especially in the accession process. This is also often directly linked to EU pressure to work with the state.
- Determination	Expressions of continuing their work against all odds because it is a duty and the only way to potentially avoid a worse course
- Concern	Feeling concerned about nationalists still being in government and/or how the pressure to collaborate with them may push certain feminists out of activism
- Fear	Feminists feeling actively intimidated and afraid of their security
- Mistrust	Lack of trust in the state and its institutions
- Anger	The exploitation of their work by the state not to advance the cause but to actually undermine and sabotage it, causing anger in some participants

As in the Russian chapter, the attribution of these subcodes of feelings as “consequences” of the current political climate, did not increase the total count of originally coded segments (77). These were solely added within the original segments which referred to the present political environment to further refine the content. The following interview extract (Image 2) shall help to illustrate this composition between the parent code “present” political atmosphere and the subcodes presented above. Each segment that was attributed the code “present” then received at least one further subcode to capture its content and/or the emotional consequence the described present situation had.

It should equally be noted that there could be coded segments, where the content only referred to a felt consequence without the part of the interview, explaining where the feeling was derived from being adjacent. In other words, an interlocutor could have explained to me early on in the conversation that she perceived the state’s attitude towards gender equality as disingenuous and only later expressed the impact this had on her. Finally, it could also happen that an interview participant would make the same statement twice within the same coded segment but

in a “staggered” fashion. More precisely, one could start a sequence speaking of fear then explain where it comes from, referring to incidents of repression, and finishing it again re-stating the fear. I coded every single occurrence because it is telling if an interlocutor emphasises the same claim more than once. For orientation purposes this is illustrated image 3 below.

Image 2: Serbian Coding example with translation

..Fear

..Disillusion

.Present atmospt

..Regression

..Disingenuity

43

58:21 I onda sam ja odustala od toga. I sad se vozim tamo gde ima, znači... jer ne mogu, nemam živaca, prosto gubim energiju na stvari koje je teško ispraviti. Ali se nekako trudim kad god mogu u tom privatnom životu da to... (Ali baš je... like, it makes you tired? It's tiring?) Jeste, jeste. Jer misliš da su to stvari koje prosto su trebale odavno da budu... (Trebalo bi, ali... nisu.) Rešene, prevaziđene, kako god. Ali nisu. I uvek se iznova vraćaju. To je kao pitanje abortusa u zemljama koje su... mislim ovde još uvek se ne vraća, mada i naša crkva isto s vremena na vreme iskoristi svaku poslanicu, Božić i Uskrs, kad šalje poslanicu da podseti da nas malo ima, da izumiremo, da bela kuga... da nema rađanja, da nacija nestaje i tako dalje, i da nekako nateraju žene da više rađaju, šta je znam. Još uvek se ne usuđuju da pokrenu pitanje abortusa, zabrane abortusa, ali ima stalno to prebacivanje da su žene krive zato što nema... što se nacija ne obnavlja i što je nacija stara, a pritom su porezi na dečju garderobu na primer ogromni, znači to nije istinska briga za decu, ovde ne postoji istinska briga za decu, ne postoji briga za stare, ne postoji briga za osobe sa invaliditetom, briga za... stvarno su ljudi koji su višestruko diskriminirani u ovakvim društvima kao što je naše, mislim u Srbiji, stvarno u teškoj situaciji...

2

And so I got out of the car, he was sort of insulting me and it wasn't comfortable. He was my neighbor, he screamed and told me loads of things I don't even remember what exactly. I didn't want to listen, right in front of my house...And so this is how this kind of fear emerges, will someone at night come to my house, I mean how would I know... Probably not, but...

3

And so I stopped doing that. And nowadays I only go there where there is, that means...Because I can't, I don't have the nerves and all I do is loose energy for things that are hard to fix. But I tried as best as I can in my private life to...(me asking: so it makes you tired?) Yes, yes. Because you think these are things that should have long ago been sorted. But they aren't and they always come back. It's like the question on abortion, I mean here the question hasn't come back yet, but our Church also uses any celebration, Christmas and Easter and so on, to somehow make pressure on women to give birth to more children. They aren't yet trying to make abortion illegal, but there is this constant reminder that women are guilty that our nation isn't reproducing and that the nation is old. But at the same time the VAT on children's clothes are huge. That means there is no genuine care for children, there's no care about the elderly, or about people with disabilities. Seriously, people with several discriminations face a very hard situation in Serbia.

Extract from the interview with Snežana Jakovljević

Image 3: Coding example with code repetition within same segment

..Fear ☞

..Repression ○

..Present atmosphere ○

..Fear ☞

..Determination ○

29 37:42 And there were people from Storm front, it's the nationalistic forum, and they were taking pictures of us (Yeah, they did this yesterday...) And people are afraid... And I found, few days ago, some guy brought... block post about me, about my name, where I work, I have Twitter and that I... he said that I blow dicks of Roma people, something like that, for 20 dinars, yeah... And I was like I'm not so famous, I'm not into some public speech... he found me anyway, and he made it blogging word-press from some other feminist Asja Bakić, she's from Bosnia, originally, but now she works in Croatia, I was like come on some crazy guy can just make it... it happened earlier on the Facebook, you know, people are threatening with rape, with all kinds of stuff but there are few of us, you know, so we can manage those crazy guys, report them, sometimes Facebook don't notice, but you don't feel comfortable, you're talking only about, you know, women rights, you're not talking something controversial...

30 39:10 And you have some other struggles within the movement, I know that some girls stopped with their activism because all of that, but I don't think it's the way... I really know that it is important to have your own time, but we should be more

Extract from the interview with Jovana Netković shows how “fear” was mentioned twice within the same coding segment.

The table below shows which codes I used most frequently for the Serbian dataset. This comparison reveals crucial differences to the Russian case. First and foremost, unlike in Russia, the major concern of Serbian feminists is not repression nor the targeting of feminists. While interviewees reported both instances of repression and the defamation of their work, what worried them most is a disingenuous government and the EU's complicity in it, as well as a tangible regression to a traumatic nationalist past. These perceived phenomena in turn trigger two predominant consequences: widespread disillusion and a feeling of impasse, coded as "dilemma". While fear dominated the perceived consequences in the Russian case, this is comparatively less reported by Serbian feminists. It is also notable that I could, in addition to fear, discern the less strong feeling of concern, which further indicates that the situation is still less directly threatening.

Table 18: Frequencies of codes associated with the political context

Code System	Frequency
1. Reference to political c...	0
Present atmosphere	77
Disingenuity	49
Regression	22
Defamation	8
Repression	4
Continuity	3
Reticence	2
Consequences	0
Disillusion	29
Dilemma	20
Determination	11
Fear	7
Concern	6
Mistrust	4
Anger	3

This is not to say that there are not alarming incidents. The intimidation I myself experienced when protesting with WiB belongs to them, and was cited by two respondents as a reason why they do not regularly participate in WiB's rallies, even though they identify with the topics. Memet explains that it is uncomfortable to know that they use the photos they take at each protest to create a certain database for their targeted harassment (MEMET, 2016). The young feminist Jovana Netković also reports

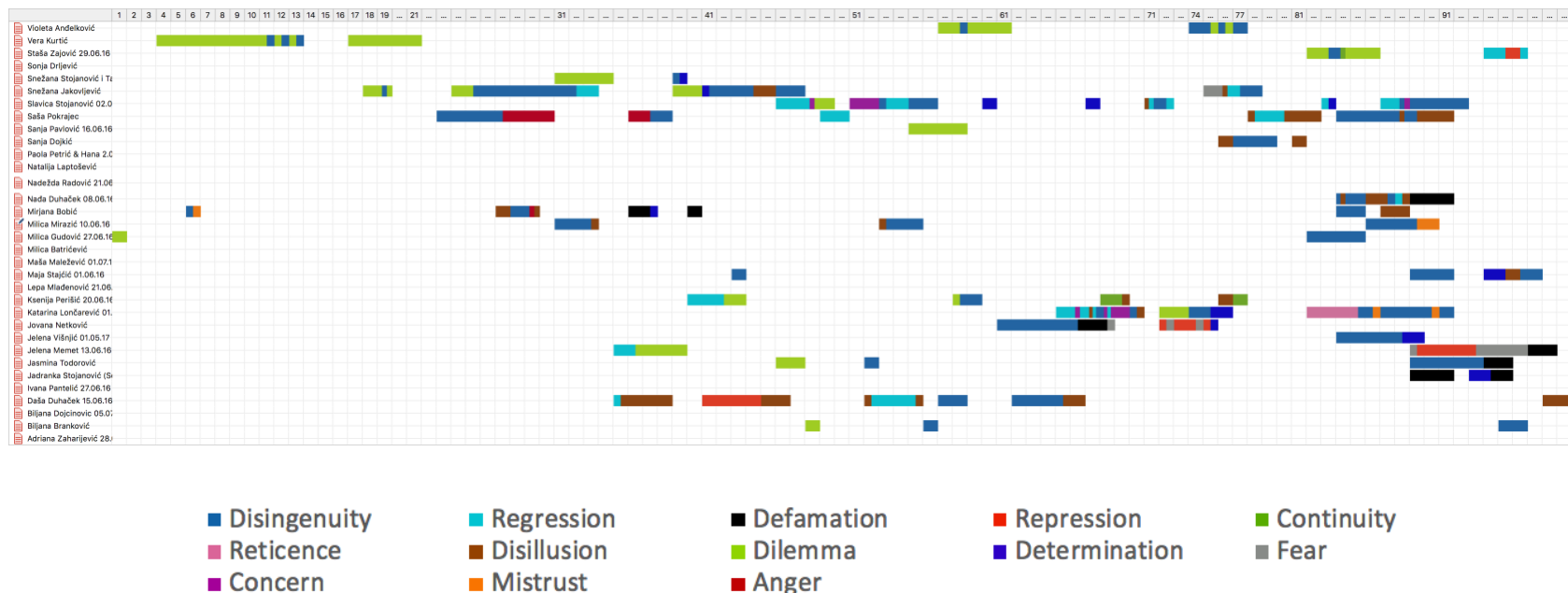
of having received rape threats and experienced sexualised verbal abuse on Facebook and Twitter, despite being “just a regular small activist” and not a leading figure in the movement (NETKOVIĆ, 2016). It should also be noted that repression takes more overt forms outside of the capital. Only a few weeks before the protest I participated in, WiB also organised a small march in Leskovac, a city 200km further South from Belgrade. The march had the theme “Everything for peace, health and education, nothing for militarisation”. The small group of protesters was met with verbal aggression from several men, who eventually also threw eggs at them. This not only illustrates that the aggressive demeanour is higher outside Belgrade, but also that the police’s inaction is even more striking. While in the capital they intervene occasionally (even if, as demonstrated earlier, nowhere near sufficiently enough), in the incident in Leskovac, police reportedly just observed the abuse without trying to protect the protesters (JUGPRESS LESKOVAC, 2016).

Memet, a third-generation activist who has founded her own NGO in Kruševac, a city between Leskovac and Belgrade, also referred to an intimidating action against her in the interview (MEMET, 2016). Having previously worked at Sandglass, an organisation specialising in aiding victims of domestic abuse, she decided to found her own organisation that specifically works to raise young women’s awareness of their human rights. One day she was summoned to the police for an informal conversation because there had been an anonymous claim filed against her NGO, accusing the organisation of trafficking young women. She told me how she had ambivalent feelings during and after the conversation at the police station. Deep down, she says, she knew nothing would happen because her organisation maintains good relationships with law enforcement, at times even providing training for violence prevention. Yet she also argues that the experience of being treated like a criminal was very disturbing and marked her. She realised that the most precious social capital for an organisation that works with youth and schools – her reputation – could be destroyed in one blow.

Nevertheless, repression did not emerge as the dominant preoccupation of Serbian feminists. This is a key difference from the Russian case study, where it was amply demonstrated that feminists are in fear of the state, they feel like living targets

and at times resort to self-censorship, which in turn fractures the community. This does not mean, however, that Serbian feminists are not deeply worried about how the political situation in their country is evolving and what this means for them. Their overwhelming characterisation of the political context as disingenuous and regressive, causing them to feel disillusioned and conflicted, is no less concerning.

Image 4: Comparison chart of all Serbian interviews and the codes related to present political atmosphere and the consequences it has



Reading example: The first interview with Violeta Anđelković generally did not yield many results regarding the question of the present political context. It only contains two types of codes. Blue for “disingenuity” and green for the “dilemma” that results from it (for code definitions see tables Table 16 and Table 17 above). She first mentioned the dilemma shortly after the first half of the interview and a few paragraphs later also gave more detail on why she qualified the current state of politics as disingenuous.

8.3.1 *Disingenuity and regression*

The interview passages I coded with disingenuity comprised several aspects. The starting point is the interviewees' claim that the government's commitments to gender equality were used strategically in its double discourse to the EU and home audiences. More important still, they argued that this lip service was used as a shield to hide the active efforts the government is making to hinder feminist initiatives. Lastly, interlocutors also emphasized that the biggest concern was the EU's tacit endorsement of all of the above. This section will look at these three aspects in turn. It will then further analyse why the current political atmosphere is also widely perceived as a dangerous regression to nationalist politics.

Two feminists, belonging to the younger generation, highlight what all other respondents, with the exception of Sonja Drljević, expressed in different forms: the government perverts the narrative of gender policies whenever it addresses the Serbian population, and not EU officials. Netković, whom I earlier referred to as having experienced online abuse, qualifies the general political discourse as such: "I cannot see anything feminist in it. They are always like 'the EU forced us to sign or do something'" (NETKOVIĆ). This echoes precisely with what has been argued regarding Pride marches, the Law on Gender Equality, and the sexual education package that virtually finished with a "confession" of EU involvement. Milica Mirazić, who has worked for many years in the Swedish Kvinna till Kvinna (KtK), one of the most important feminist foundations in Serbia, adds to this assessment. To her, the official political discourse frames every commitment concerning gender equality in relation to the EU: the government's commitments are the result of unequal power play with the EU, and Vučić's hands are basically tied. Importantly, Mirazić also argues that the double discourse intelligibly conveys to the Serbian population that the status quo is nevertheless not in peril: "We have to co-operate and do our duties towards the EU because joining it promises economic prosperity. But we know where our heart lies. We know that ideologically, historically and culturally we absolutely align

with Russia” (MIRAŽIĆ, 2016). This is how the Serbian government communicates at home: nothing will change beyond these declaratory statements and superficial performances of Europeanisation. At times, officials do not even make a secret of their lack of genuine interest in improving gender equality. Saša Pokrajac, who worked for many years with AWC as a councillor, remembers how the newly appointed official for combatting sexual violence made a disparaging comment at a public conference. In response to a question, he said he was restricted by his “tor”. While at first this may seem as a legitimate reference to the terms of reference for his job, in Serbian this is also a wordplay. “Tor” also means a cage, which is why in Pokrajac’s view, he was communicating how little value he attributed to the issue and his responsibility in solving it, since he equated it with confinement.

Many respondents demonstrated that the problem far exceeds a lack of interest in gender equality and an attempt to preserve the status quo. Rather, the government actually uses the double discourse strategy to deflect from the obstacles it purposely puts in feminists’ way. They report about a situation that goes beyond the permissive atmosphere that was analysed with regards to gender mainstreaming. It appears that for many Serbian feminists their concern relates not only about an incumbent that co-opts feminism because it allows far-right groups to thrive and re-interpret feminist concepts of equality. Instead, it is about a government that itself takes measures to undermine their efforts. In this sense, my findings also go beyond the dominant claims regarding Serbia’s Europeanisation, which tend to frame the double discourse as a means to maintain the status quo or justify inaction (SLOOTMAECKERS, 2017a, SUBOTIĆ, 2010, STAHL, 2011, NOUTCHEVA, 2009), but not to obfuscate active counter-measures.

These measures include establishing GONGOs (governmental NGOs) that compete with the existing feminist NGOs over money (and often prevail in tender calls) in order to further reduce the available resources. Indeed, this is one of the most cited illustrations of the government’s disingenuous attitude. Feminist civil society is not only weakened through this instated

competition, its expertise is also systematically dismissed. A number of respondents mention how betrayed they have felt when the government has proclaimed in its periodic reviews on international frameworks (for CEDAW or UNSCR 1325 for instance) that it consulted civil society and even co-drafted the report with civil society representatives. In reality, their shadow reports were not even read, let alone were they invited to participate in such reviews. Lončarević provides an example of how this kind of collaboration tends to unfold.

They actually do not care about your opinion, your expertise. They do not invite you. And if they do, they do so a day before the meeting so you have no time to prepare. And they do not send you the necessary material to inform you about their plans. And they always schedule these consultations for July and August, when women's organisations go on collective holidays. (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016)

Officials thus do everything to impede feminist civil society's meaningful contribution and thus hinder them in effectively exercising their crucial watchdog role.

The government's attitude to SOS hotlines is perhaps the most striking example of how Serbian authorities not only actively hinder feminists' participation in developing and implementing policies, but also feminists' work itself. Maja Stajčić, KtK's co-ordinator for Serbia and the Western Balkans, mentioned how the government has been showcasing the SOS hotlines, especially since it ratified the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. However, there is not a single SOS hotline that receives public funding.

It is all for the scenery. For example, they signed an agreement with Sandglass, an organisation in Kruševac that has been running an SOS hotline for over ten years. Both the local and national authorities committed to fund them from 2012. But they did not receive anything until 2014. For two years they did not get a single dinar. And to get to the money they had to sue them, complain to the ombudsman. But hey, it made really good scenery for the EU. This is what happens, especially if you are critical of the government. I mean what means critical? They were just honest in their shadow report to the CEDAW committee. (STAJČIĆ, 2016)

Behind the good PR for Brussels is hence more than inaction: there is purposeful obstruction against feminist civil society to coerce them into

uncritical submission, thus seriously hampering their role of being an independent watchdog of government action.

As part of my field research, I also visited an SOS hotline in Kruševac, operated by the women's association Peščanik. The director, Snežana Jakovljević, relayed to me how they struggled for three years to get permission to use a room in the local assembly for an event. She stressed that it is a small and seemingly banal example, yet indicative of how the authorities work: they would never openly reject any request, because this would reveal their true nature and thus perhaps also be more intelligible from Brussels. Instead, they play with “fine means”, as Jakovljević put it. Her NGO asked for the space six times in three years and every time they would receive a very kind message, saying that the room was already occupied. In her view, this can occur a couple of times before it seems systematic. It exemplifies “how they will not directly do anything against you, but they will in many different discreet ways obstruct everything you do” (JAKOVLJEVIĆ, 2016). State-controlled media play also a crucial part in this dynamic, she argued. The difference from Belgrade is that at the regional level - where Peščanik operates - there are no independent media outlets left and journalists have openly told Jakovljević that they cannot give her a platform because they are financed through the local budget. This is how, the director of a leading local organisation combatting violence against women, concludes: “So yes, there's a lot of declarative commitments to the EU, but our space is getting tighter and tighter” (JAKOVLJEVIĆ, 2016).

Crucially, many of the segments I coded with “disingenuity” not only referred to the Serbian government, but also the EU, which tacitly endorses Vučić in a cynical bet for what Bieber called “stabilitocracy” (BIEBER: 242). Vučić was - from the start of his transformation from Milošević ally to European reformer - successful in branding himself as the only politician who could guarantee stability in the region. Two key elements were instrumental in this: Vučić stressed he was ready to seek dialogue with Kosovo, and he was the first Serbian politician to travel to Srebrenica to apologise. Such

performances helped to make him appear as a true reformer. The EU, on the other hand, was all too ready to believe these glossy images.

Radeljić's research shows how the EU has been complicit with authoritarian leaders throughout the 1990s (RADELJIĆ: 159). In 1992, the elected PM Milan Panić openly called for Western support for the emerging democratic forces in order to overthrow Milošević and prevent further escalation of violence (ibid.: 159). The EU decided to ignore his calls (ibid.: 159). In 1996, EU representatives also decided not to recognise the Zajedno alliance's victory in municipal elections, and instead agreed with Milošević that the results had to be nullified (ibid.: 159). This was done in the firm belief that Milošević was the key player, who had to remain at the negotiation table at all costs (SPOERRI, 2015: 46-47). The EU'S endorsement had the detrimental effect of increasing Milošević's legitimacy and significantly weakening that of the opposition forces. Only in 1999, once the situation in Kosovo deteriorated and NATO decided to intervene, did the EU start to promote a narrative that suggested Milošević should be ousted (RADELJIĆ: 159). Radeljić thus concludes that throughout the 1990s the EU was much more concerned with assisting Milošević, and assessing the gains it could get from such assistance, than it was with his regime's destructive domestic policies (ibid.: 160).

This tendency has continued with bargains such as "EU accession exchange for the Hague" in the early 2000s, which was replaced with "EU accession in exchange for non-aggression against Kosovo" when the country declared independence in 2008 (SUBOTIĆ, 2010). Additional shocks in recent years, such as the Eurozone crisis, the migration "crisis", and Brexit, have made the EU direct its attention to dynamics within the existing union, thus further solidifying the self-serving approach to Serbia (BIEBER: 251). The EU prioritises stability in the Kosovo question and is ready to turn a blind eye as long as Vučić securitises the "Western Balkan Route" and co-operates in the fight against radicalisation and the emergence of foreign fighters in the Balkans (ibid.: 252). All of this has come at the expense of the EU's normative engagement in the promotion of rule of law and civic liberties.

This self-interested, or perhaps cynical, stance of the EU, is what respondents referred to in the interview passages I attributed the code “disingenuity”. Lončarević, for instance, charges the EU with a very superficial interest for the respect of human rights when she says:

What the EU actually wants it that we adapt some law. But everything else is not really important. [But] it is not enough to have Pride. What counts is that those people are not discriminated by their neighbours and that they are safe, but their life is in danger on a daily basis. But we have an excellent law against discrimination. (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016)

In her view, the EU acts at a superficial level, where Pride and EU-conforming legal provisions suffice for the “litmus test” of Europeanisation as Sloomaeckers (SLOOTMAECKERS, 2017a) coined it. What the EU crucially lacks is the drive to investigate beyond this façade and to examine the actual implementation of these “excellent laws”.

The Director of WSC in Belgrade, Daša Duhaček, who throughout the interview was calm and very thoughtful, is also unmistakably disappointed in the EU’s behaviour towards Vučić’s government. She considers it as disinterested in the actual lived reality of Serbian citizens because all the EU is concerned with is that Serbia does not violate its geographic boundaries. To her this is evident in that every time there is a statement on Kosovo, a representative from the EU finds time to comment on it. But there is no reaction regarding pressing domestic issues, even though “it should be fairly obvious what is going on in Serbian politics” (DUHAČEK, 2016a). Duhaček infers from this tacit endorsement of Vučić that the EU simply does not care very much about them. This is particularly disheartening as feminist civil society, according to Duhaček, once firmly believed in the EU as a transforming actor and strategic ally: “This is really devastating for us. Say fifteen years ago when the Milošević regime was toppled, our goal was Europe. We had no illusions about the European Union, but it was a strategic point” (DUHAČEK, 2016a). Duhaček emphasized the conjunction “but” to underline that their hope was not naïve but based on what they thought were realistic assumptions.

Instead, the EU supports a regime that not only fails to comply with its declarative statements, but still more worrying for Serbian feminists, is inherently nationalistic and thus revives their biggest fears. As has been previously mentioned, Serbian feminists went through an evolution, starting off as dissidents in socialist times, and becoming firm “disloyal citizens” of the new ethnic nation-state (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2015). The fact that WiB have maintained “always disloyal” as a main credo for their organisation to this date is not a coincidence. This commitment stems from an ongoing concern within feminist circles that nationalist politics never really disappeared in Serbia. While I have shown elsewhere that the younger generation takes interest in expanding the feminist agenda, for instance to talking about sex work or menstruation, the anti-nationalist stance is not questioned and well-anchored across generations (BIAS, 2019: 6). They are united in their concern that nationalists went underground for a little while only to resurface in the mid 2000s in the shape of supposedly transformed pro-EU reformers and consolidate their power under Vučić.

This is why the young feminist Nađa Duhaček argues that - on top of everything women already deal with - they are also faced with an EU that openly supports a right-wing government. Slavica Stojanović, the former director of RZF and long-time activist with WiB is also incredulous about the EU’s blindness towards Serbian political realities since the authoritarian turn under Vučić.

They say he is European, he is reliable. He stands for economic stability and that Serbia is on the right course, that there is a chance to finish the debate on Kosovo with him. They feed the narrative that Vučić and his elite are the crucial stabilizers of the Balkans. But (she laughs) we know where we live. We know that he is killing everything from the inside and instigates nationalist clashes. And with the state being the biggest employer, he is blackmailing everyone. (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016)

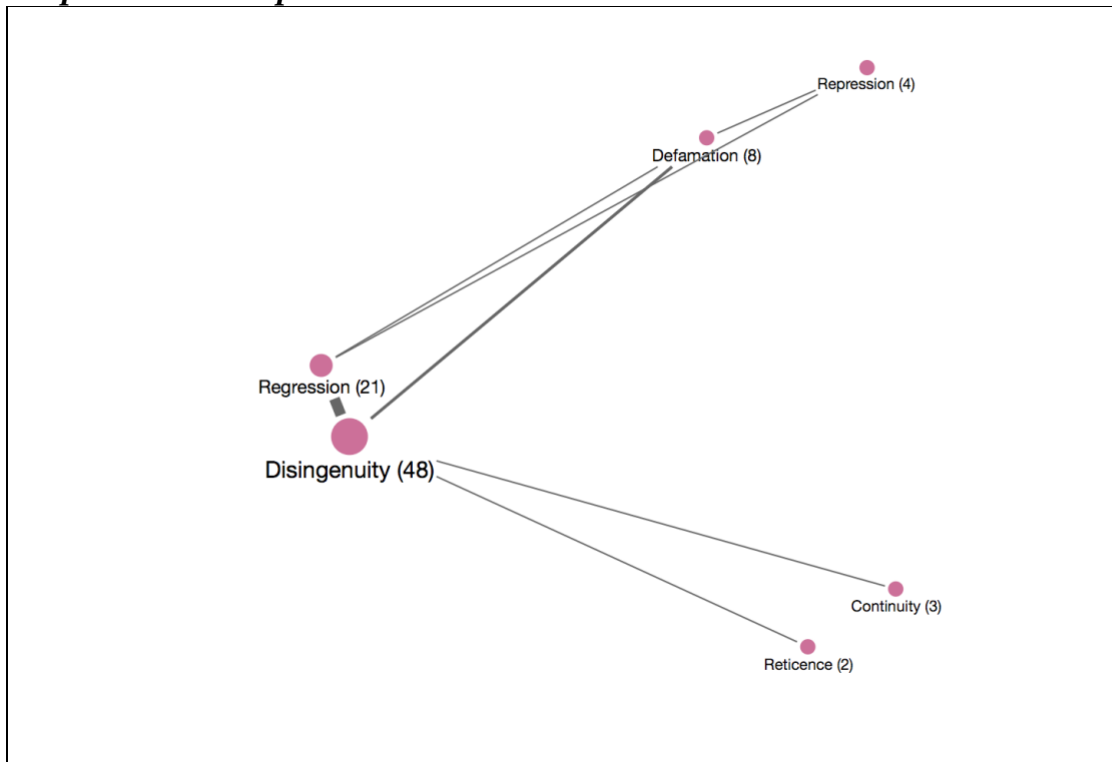
Lončarević goes further and clearly expresses what so many of her peers think: that Vučić and his close allies are nationalists, who just learnt to adopt a more palatable behaviour and language, but are still equally dangerous.

Although they are full of EU, human rights, if you listen and if you look at them carefully, you will see that they didn't change at all. It's only that cosmetic change and that kind of, ‘well, I'm going to say in public what

they want to hear'. But basically, it's very violent politics, very nationalist politics, and very dangerous politics as well. (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016)

It is precisely the EU's failure, and indeed its unwillingness, to "look and listen carefully", that is disenchanting for Serbian feminists. Right at the time when the country is sliding back into nationalism, they feel abandoned by an actor who still enjoys huge influence and in whom they once believed. This loss of hope in the EU as an agent of progress is bound up with feelings of fear of deterioration and a return to a traumatic past. Indeed, "disingenuity" is intimately connected to statements that were coded with "regression". This connection between elements of "disingenuity" and "regression" also comes to the fore when one does a co-occurrence analysis as illustrated in the graph below. These were the two codes that most frequently occurred within close proximity of each other in the interviews.

Graph 9: Code cloud displaying co-occurrence between codes pertaining to present atmosphere



Reading example: Co-occurrence refers to two codes appearing next to each other within a maximum distance of two paragraphs. The bigger the circle, the more frequent they appear in the database. The frequency is stipulated in brackets. For instance, disingenuity is the most frequent with 48 coded segments. Being the most frequent makes it per definition prone to co-occur close to one of the other codes. However, the co-occurrence is not equally strong. The thicker the line and the closer two circles are, the more significant is the co-occurrence. While disingenuity appears with continuity only twice, it appears next to regression 24 times. Hence why, the two circles are so close and connected through a thick line.

Two elements stood out in the 22 interview sequences that I attributed to the code “regression”. First, the respondents often shared the opinion that the country is backsliding after a brief interlude of hope and recharging between Milošević’s ousting in 2000 and the assassination of then new PM Zoran Đinđić in 2003. As Pokrajac remembers “in that period there was hope, because the Democratic party was in power and some good things were happening. It was this space in between, like okay, now things will get better” (PROKRAJAC, 2016). Secondly, in these segments Serbian feminists explicitly referred to the return of politicians from the warring 1990s and with them a revival of nationalism. They speak of a government composed of “all the guys, who were close to Milošević” (PROKRAJAC, 2016), of “people, who were on the part of the nationalist side” (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016) and of “war criminals, who

will face no more trials” (DUHAČEK, 2016b). As a result, Slavica (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016) argues they have entered a time of “final rehabilitation of every war criminal”, whose guiding light is Vučić, the personified ex-criminal.

Snežana Stojanović, like many other feminist colleagues, is well aware of his criminal past as Milošević’s Minister of Information. They know that in this position he coerced independent media into pre-emptive subservience via huge financial pressure. Moreover, he also was “the hatchet man for the media, who defended the vast ethnic cleansing by paramilitary police of more than 60% of the 90%-majority Albanians living in the Serbian province of Kosovo” (POND, 2013: 7). This was not a marginal governmental position. On the contrary, Garton Ash has argued that the state-controlled media (and television in particular), which belonged to Vučić’s realm, were “[t]he single most important pillar of [the Milošević] regime [...], which he used to sustain a nationalist siege mentality” (GARTON ASH, 2009: 6-7; 16).

When Serbian feminists see the “same faces, the same rhetoric” (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016) back in power, the democratic façade definitively crumbles:

We think that [the former criminals] only changed clothes. They put on clean clothes, polished their faces and put on a smile to advocate for EU accession. They have made this the centre of their politics even though they are against it, but they took it from the democratic parties, which are now left without any topic. (JAKOVLJEVIĆ, 2016)

The pro-EU commitment is interpreted as a strategy to rid political opponents of their competitive agenda and to hide nationalist ideology and policies. Serbian feminists therefore profoundly distrust their government and at times even express feelings of being overwhelmed with the situation. Pokrajac, for instance, said she does not even know how to describe the situation of seeing former criminals at the top of the state. Vučić was never a moderate or in favour of European reforms. He was a very strong opponent of Đinđić, who got assassinated precisely because of his reformist stance (RADELJIĆ, 2019: 164). In 2007, four years after the assassination, Vučić posted a fake street plaque with the name of war crimes fugitive Ratko Mladić, whom Đinđić had committed to extradite to The Hague, on a Belgrade boulevard

named after the reformist (RADELJIĆ: 164). In an interview shortly before being elected PM for the first time, he even admitted feeling flattered to be compared to the war criminal (B92, 2013). He has since tried to convey that he has changed his position and that he had developed “wrong ideas” because he had misinterpreted the post-Cold War trends (RADELJIĆ: 164). When he came to realise that a new positioning was more politically viable, Vučić started praising Đinđić’s pro-EU stance and vision of Serbia’s future (ibid.: 164).

And yet, Brussels authorities have readily bought that narrative and granted him external legitimacy ever since he was first elected. Then-Commissioner Barroso congratulated Vučić, stipulating he was “confident that under [Vučić’s] determined guidance, Serbia will succeed in addressing the key challenges ahead” (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2014). Soon after, the negotiation for EU accession was opened, giving Vučić more potential for manoeuvring at home (RADELJIĆ: 166). The fact that the EU does not condemn this government is a key reason why the situation of “disingenuity” and “regression” makes Serbian feminists feel both disillusioned and in a dilemma.

8.3.2 Disillusion and dilemmas

Nothing quite so well illustrates the state among Serbian feminists that I coded as a sign of “disillusion”, as Maša Maležević’s assessment of contemporary politics. The feminist anthropologist argues that “the only good thing is that there is no war. The rest stayed the same” (MALEŽEVIĆ, 2016). The absence of an imminent outbreak of armed conflict is the benchmark against which the political environment in Serbia is judged. A key distinction to the Russian case is that the interlude of hope was both shorter and more recent, hence why the disillusion is more prominent. It of course also plays a role that the scale of repression is not as high as in Russia yet, which also explains the prevalence of disillusion over fear, expressions of which could be found much more infrequently in the Serbian dataset.

An important illustration of how hope has been replaced by disillusion is the story of the WSC. The director, Daša Duhaček, welcomed me in one of the centre’s two main rooms. The WSC is situated on the top floor of the

Faculty of Political Science at the University of Belgrade. The building is grey and with concrete, the halls at the time of my visit were empty. But as I crossed the threshold to the WSC, it was like entering a new space. It is colourful with books and magazines stacked everywhere. Over tea and biscuits Duhaček tells me about how - right after Milošević was toppled - it felt like everything was possible and that the position of Serbian feminists changed overnight. Institutionalising women's studies had been a key aim since the centre was established in 1992. However, as disloyal dissidents, Duhaček and her colleagues had refused to integrate women's studies (as they were then still called) into university structures, seeking to avoid any affiliation with public institutions. And then, after Milošević's ousting, everything related to institutionalising women's studies suddenly succeeded within no time, from the accreditation to receiving an actual premise. It thus comes as little surprise that they felt optimistic, "too optimistic", Duhaček says today, because there is a notable backlash.

You slowly start to recognise certain barriers. Things like 'this person is not acceptable, this thesis topic is not acceptable, this course cannot be conducted as you conceptualised it' and they go on cutting off some of the main points. And then you also realise that there are unarticulated instances of homophobia. They are not open but clear enough that you understand what is acceptable. And then of course it gets harder and harder to work. (DUHAČEK, 2016a)

There have been no overt attacks against gender studies centres in Serbia, that are comparable to what has been unfolding in Russia, where 'gender' is purposely reduced to LGBT issues to trigger and making it into "markers of national borders" (MINCHENIYA, 2017: 207). Nevertheless, Duhaček describes how their leeway has been gradually curtailed, rendering their activities more and more tedious for they have to constantly weigh their actions and language to pre-empt further constraints.

This deterioration is exhausting as well as disheartening, because Serbian feminists are not only experiencing a seeming lack of progress but important setbacks. "My generation is tired. We would very much have liked to see some results of what we worked on our entire life. But there are not just poor results, we feel there is a backlash" (DUHAČEK, 2016a). There are

numerous other activists who worked just as relentlessly. Mirjana Bobić, who used to work with RZF, specifically mentions the AWC, which conducted training for authorities in order to better prevent violence against women. “They served them everything on a plate. But actually, there is no political will to work on this so that is a big disappointment” (BOBIĆ, 2016). As a result, “there is not this thing that gives wind to your wings” and Pokrajac concludes that “only the really strong ones stayed in this fight” (PROKRAJAC, 2016). In her experience as someone who left activism a few years ago, the constant disappointments made feminists question their effectiveness, and the very justifications for their engagement. Their work seemed so futile.

More difficult still was losing hope in the EU, which they thought could be an ally. As Nađa Duhaček recalls, they believed the EU would be an actor that would intervene, put pressure for reforms, and bring positive change. Instead, it has consistently avoided taking a firmer stance against any government policies that are against so-called Western values (RADELJIĆ: 166). As a result, the majority of respondents echoed Lončarević’s feeling that “the EU does not care”, and do “not expect much from the EU” (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016). This disillusion is the consequence of what Radiljević has described as the EU’s “revealed hypocrisy” towards its core principles and values: the rule of law and respect of human rights (RADELJIĆ: 174). However, this leads to an important dilemma for feminists. The disenchantment with the EU has meant that there are few genuinely democratic forces underpinning the pro-EU agenda, leaving the public platform almost unchallenged to either fake Europeanisation, as propagated by Vučić, or anti-EU discourses. Being openly critical of the EU is thus something Serbian feminists cannot afford, because they could involuntarily bolster the nationalist camps. While many feminists cannot wholeheartedly endorse EU reforms in the knowledge that the process is both superficial and co-opted by the government, most nevertheless accept alignment with the EU as a necessary strategy and lesser evil.

Many respondents explicitly call their situation a dilemma. In doing so, they largely refer to the way the EU has exerted pressure on feminist organisations to collaborate with state institutions and officials since

Milošević's ousting, which they consider inherently untrustworthy. This also leads to important internal frictions among feminists, some of whom are ready to cooperate, and some of whom decidedly refuse to do so. Two young feminists, Memet and Pavlović, serve as illustrative examples. Memet relies on co-operating with public institutions if she wants her mission to be accomplished (even partially). Given that she works to raise awareness around gender equality and violence among the youth, she relies on working with schools and on conducting workshops with local administrations. Yet she also realizes that all the people in those positions and even at schools are implicated with the ruling party. As a result, she often asks herself "where do I draw the limit?", and where is the border between cooperating and being complicit with them (MEMET, 2016)?

Sanja Pavlović works with AWC, which also depends on public institutions' receptiveness to effectively prevent violence against women. She and her colleagues faced a dilemma similar to Memet in deciding where to "draw the limit". They refused to attend a panel on gender equality where openly nationalist female politicians were going to speak. "Because if we start speaking with them today we blur the boundary to fascism and next thing we know, we will be working with fascists" (PAVLOVIĆ, 2016). This is the crossroads, as Pavlović calls it, that Serbian feminism finds itself at because the EU expects them to work with state representatives. That is the kind of notion of civic involvement that prevails in Brussels, but that does not work with feminists in Serbia, to whom the state is very much still a dangerous one, and with which relations are always problematic and contentious. In some cases, Perišić argues, this dilemma can feel like a cynical working environment and thus lead to the de-politicization and disillusionment of activists.

Nevertheless, many who have experience working in advocacy have concluded that using the EU accession process is the best available option they have. Stajčić, the regional co-ordinator of the only explicitly feminist donor, KtK, is convinced that any other channel of advocacy will fail:

If you really want to take political influence we are not talking about the movements anymore. Sure, you can organize and take to the streets, you will always find some foreign donor to support you. But after twenty years of activism, I assure you that if you want to influence the government it is through the EU. This story of the stick and carrot, that is it, because they depend on European money and that is the only channel you can influence them. (STAJČIĆ, 2016)

Staša, the director of WiB, and Biljana Branković, a long-time advocate who has most recently been involved in lobbying for the Istanbul Convention, both agree with Stajčić. They argue that the accession process is the most precious time for effective advocacy. This is the time window, in which they can write shadow reports and indicate to what international frameworks Serbia has officially committed, but is falling short in terms of implementation. Kurtić from Niš, and Jakovljević and Todorović from Kruševac, find that this window of opportunity is all the more valuable for smaller NGOs in the regions. It is only thanks to the EU accession process – and feminist donors like KtK – that they can gather and send representatives to Brussels. Otherwise, they would never have this kind of visibility and thus leverage on the government. Many thus still see value in the EU as an actor, even if they have been disappointed in it and are well aware of its shortcomings as a defender of civil liberties and even though the EU forces them to work with a state they profoundly mistrust and consider dangerous, it is the preferred way.

Turning their back to the EU would leave Vučić's pro-EU façade unchallenged and indirectly support the rise of nationalism that takes places behind the scenery. This is why, by extension, the notion of criticizing knowledge-transfer becomes unimaginable for Serbian feminists, and must indeed be actively averted. They are living in a time when the only credible competitors to Vučić are not democratic forces, but even more extremist parties. They are the only ones to have managed to increase their vote share in recent elections. The incumbent himself both curbs hatred by creating nationalist crises and promulgating hate speech in the loyal media outlets. These far-right tendencies are then effectively connected with an artificially enhanced "gender ideology" discourse to argue vis-à-vis Brussels that the

country is not ready for certain changes, all while keeping his credibility through pinkwashing and other elements of tactical Europeanisation. This is how the status quo is not only preserved, but feminist efforts purposefully undermined.

In a new hegemonic regime, with the advent of "gender ideology", feminists are no longer attacked for their anti-nationalism but for their feminism. Feminism is branded as treason because it is complicit with an EU-driven imperialism that purportedly perverts the nation. Given these hostilities, Serbian feminists cannot afford critique. Even though they are perfectly aware of, and disenchanted with, the EU granting Vučić external legitimacy, they have to support the idea of EU accession and with it that of Western knowledge-transfer. A relationship with the EU provides a practical window of opportunity for advocacy, but perhaps more importantly, for feminists to renounce this relationship is to risk being co-opted into a hegemonic discourse they despise and work to resist. This discourse, propagated by nationalists, brands everything related to gender equality as foreign and, in particular, EU-imposed.

The authoritarian Othering back through anti-Western and anti-gender discourse may take different shapes in Russia and Serbia. In the former it culminates in their demonization as "foreign agents" of alien ideology and leads to feminists being targeted. In the latter case, the hegemonic discourse is much subtler. Vučić resorts to a double discourse whereby he declares commitment to gender equality towards Brussels but actively thwarts it through domestic policies and frames it as an agenda forced upon Serbia by the EU. While in Russia the resulting consequences are fear and self-censorship, in Serbia it is disillusion and dilemma. Despite these differences there is a common denominator, namely that feminism is ultimately an alien and externally imposed idea that both nations have to defend themselves against, albeit more openly in the case of Russia. Both cases thus also have in common that feminists develop an awareness for the detrimental discourse surrounding them and seek ways to subvert it. The silence expressed through avoidance of critique of Western knowledge-transfer, and indeed attempts to

re-interpret and reject the notion of knowledge borders and the possibility of transferring knowledge as a form of domination, are a crucial part of feminists' subversion of their respective authoritarian regimes.

8.4 Revoking the notions knowledge-transfer evokes

The countering mechanisms related to Western knowledge-transfer as a discourse also bear similarities with the Russian case. There are in particular two similar trends that shall first be analysed in the following chapter section. On the one hand, they emphasise their agency and the enriching aspect of knowledge-transfer. This is the discursive strategy that does not change the imaginaries behind knowledge-transfer as such for it still upholds the notion that there are knowledge boundaries. Instead it endorses them and underlines how Serbian feminists actively sought this kind of knowledge transfer and how helpful it was to them, thus changing the association with knowledge-transfer into a positive one. On the other hand, they, similar to the Russian context, try to shift the imaginary by arguing that they experienced it as an exchange between equals, rather than an asymmetrical and unilateral transfer of knowledge. This also entails highlighting the existence of their own heritage with which they enter this exchange between equals. That way they convey both that feminism is not alien and important and that the forgetting of said heritage is not a consequence of an allegedly silencing Western knowledge-transfer, but that of their foremothers, who saw no value in it. Compared to Russia, this inward diversion of blame is even more explicit and conscious. Finally, there is a crucial difference to Russia. Russian feminists reject knowledge-transfer altogether in that they stipulate that 'gender' has no origin thus effacing the very idea of compartmentalised knowledge spaces. In Serbia, as shall be seen, this aspect of transcending the boundaries conjured by knowledge-transfer goes further and is also more prevalent than in Russia.

8.4.1 A source sought and found

The first element of how Serbian feminists subvert the dominant discourse on Western knowledge-transfer is to stress their agency in it and how supportive they have found it. Similar to Russia, this aspect is often related to the past, especially to the 1990s. Older feminists and leading personalities in the development of the three organisations that to this day are at the forefront of feminism in Serbia – WiB, AWC and WSC – recounted how they actively sought inspiration and practical help, and how the transnational feminist solidarity they received in return was absolutely crucial at the time. It was both a source of inspiration as to how to implement the aspirations they had, and a source of crucial emotional support at a time when they felt hopeless and isolated.

Zajović still remembers exactly how they founded WiB Serbia. When the war broke out, she recounted to me, she immediately started thinking that they had to create a peaceful, feminist, anti-militarist group. They started looking for role models and met with Women in Black from Italy in May 1991. As war unfolded in Croatia over the summer of that same year, they decided together that a big pacifist caravan of Women in Black Italy was going to travel around Yugoslavia in September. “During that time, we grew very close. We travelled together to Sarajevo. And it was after that experience that I decided for myself ‘let’s organise here a group of women in black. Let’s see how people will react’” (ZAJOVIĆ, 2016). That is how the first WiB protest emerged in September 1991. The Italian feminists were crucial in this endeavour as role models, which Zajović and her peers had actively consulted. Together with other feminists from Western Europe, Italian feminists were also key because they helped them install a trans-Yugoslav communication network. The Internet was in its early stages and feminists across Yugoslavia all of a sudden found themselves behind new ethno-national borders, separated from each other. It was thanks to email and faxes that they were able to communicate with Spanish and Italian feminists, who would pass on messages to their former compatriots, and allowed feminists to stay in touch. Zajović thus argues that “Western feminists helped on all levels”.

Slavica Stojanović and Lepa Mlađenović, who were with WiB from the start, concur with this assessment, particularly stressing the emotional support they received. Both describe that one of the harshest elements during wartime was the complete isolation because of the international embargo against Serbia. “When you are completely neglected like you do not exist, it is like being a ghost”, Stojanović explained. In that atmosphere, having Western feminists visit a country that, as Mlađenović put it, “everybody hated at the time”, and show that they cared, was so valuable that she believes WiB could not have existed without them: “We were so isolated you know in the street. Each Wednesday we would protest and be exposed to the attack and abuse of fascists and nobody cared. And then all of a sudden a bunch of women from Switzerland came to see if they could help in any way” (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016).

What can be traced throughout those three accounts by Stojanović, Zajović and Mlađenović is that while foreigners came proactively, this could not have been farther from an imposition. Instead, there was lived “feminist listening” that made the women feel seen, heard and validated, which was of enormous value for them in a seemingly hopeless and hostile time. Moreover, the readiness of Western feminists to enquire about their needs, and then offer targeted support, allowed WiB to fulfil what *they* aspired to. This can also be seen in the establishment of the AWC and WSC.

Biljana Branković and Mlađenović, who were both involved in the SOS Hotline, from which the AWC later emerged, remember how Western feminists readily sent them material and organised training sessions in order to professionalise the support they intended to give to women suffering domestic and sexual (war-related) abuse. Their first manual was based on experiences of Women’s Aid, a UK-based NGO. Mlađenović clearly traced how she and her colleagues first diagnosed the problem they were facing and then actively looked where they could find the best support.

First we realised we had violence but we did not know how to solve it. We read Andrea Dworkin and then decided to go to Women’s Aid because it was the best place. We collected material to make up for the gaps in our knowledge. We knew we needed to learn more because there was nothing here. We collected and translated material and that way trained our own

volunteers. We were extremely happy we didn't have to discover 'cold water'. (MLADENOVIĆ, 2016)

This is also the dynamic experienced by the co-founder and director of WSC, Dasa Duhaček. Together, Yugoslav feminists concluded at the Third Yugoslav Feminist Gathering in 1991 that one priority would be to introduce women's studies in universities' curricula because the mainstream studies would ignore or undervalue both women's knowledge production and experience (TREĆI JUGOSLOVENSKI SKUP [THE THIRD YUGOSLAV FEMINIST GATHERING], 2009). The original plan, pursued by feminists in the Serbian republic, to start the first courses in autumn 1991 was interrupted by the beginning of the war, and hence they shifted to alternative forms of education, outside institutionalised structures. In order to pursue their aims without the support of a public institution, it proved fundamental that Western feminists readily shared their syllabi and material.

When we started our first courses in Women studies, it was with the help from abroad. Alison Jaggar sent me her syllabus, Nancy Fraser sent me her syllabus. I was in touch with Drucilla Cornell, Sheyla Benhabib, and so on. I had met most of them [in the Inter-University Centre] in Dubrovnik; And I realized I really had access to the most prominent feminists. I wrote to them and I said 'we are attempting to make this, it is not acknowledged, but', and they sent us books, literature, texts and so on. (DUHAČEK, 2016a)

Tellingly, Daša Duhaček concluded this part of the interview, saying that they relied on the help of what "might be called Western feminists today". That way she conveyed that they were not reading them first and foremost through a geographical lens. And more importantly still, she emphasized, they did not feel like they played a secondary role compared to them: "We were the authors of our programmes" (DUHAČEK, 2016a). In a next step, they dedicated their time to translating the knowledge they had gathered from Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill, and Carole Pateman. Dojcinović, who played an important part in this phase of the WSC, clearly remembers this and not only naturalises the need to look elsewhere, but stressed that they were not passive recipients. Rather, like their Russian counterparts, they had agency. They actively looked for new knowledge, "created [their] own tools out of it" (DOJCINOVIĆ, 2016), and transmitted it to new audiences in order to

shape the new society that was being created. After all, from its very inception, the WSC was thought to “serve as an alternative to patriarchy, violence, and all other forms of exclusion, at a time when it was painfully obvious that our foe and opponents were mad, ferocious and growing every more powerful by the day” (DUHAČEK, 2012: 15).

At the same time, as news of rape as an instrument of war started circulating out of Bosnia and Herzegovina, other feminists also decided that, in addition to an SOS hotline for victims of domestic abuse, they wanted to help survivors of war-related sexual violence. This is where the “bunch of women from Switzerland” (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016) got involved. A fax arrived in the Student Cultural Centre, where Mladenović together with other feminists from the Women and Society group would gather in autumn 1992. Margareta Hehl, the gynaecologist Theres Blöchlinger, and 14 other women - none of whom were familiar to the Serbian feminists - announced they would travel to Belgrade in order to help setting up a centre for rape victims. In December 1992, they came for three days and visited the refugee camp, the Centre for Anti-War Action (the forerunner of WiB), the SOS Hotline, and doctors who had treated traumatised women. At the end of their trip, they promised they would raise the necessary funds in order to establish a centre (MACANOVIĆ et al., 2003: 3). Upon their return to Switzerland, they funded the “Association for the dignity of women and children and against the war in former Yugoslavia” (*Verein für die Würde von Frauen und Kindern und gegen den Krieg in Ex-Jugoslawien*), and managed to raise sufficient funds to buy an apartment for the future organisation and provide other fundamental financial assistance (GOSTELI-STIFTUNG, 2016). In the meantime, Serbian feminists were invited to come to Switzerland for two weeks. In Mladenović’s memory, this was an “endless story of exchange”. They were able to visit relevant associations, but also had the space to cry about the situation back home: “This totally changed the world. I would not be who I am today if it had not been for this. Some came back and opened shelters, others founded youth organisations”. Mladenović herself returned and started operating a centre

dedicated to victims of sexual violence in conflict, which a few months prior, had only been an idea.

Overall, Serbian feminists at the time were looking for ways to help and feel “less hopeless” in their “cosy apartments” in Belgrade as a war was going on (MLADENOVIĆ, 2016). They were also seeking role models to voice their protest against a nationalist regime and provide an alternative. These were all aspirations and needs from within. What Western feminists did was care about these needs and aspirations and offer practical, financial and emotional support. This emphasis on Western feminists being supportive extras in a play they were fashioning is thus one important narrative among Serbian feminists that serves to counter the discourse of knowledge-transfer as a unidirectional and asymmetrical dynamic. It is also a narrative not limited to the older generation.

Feminists who entered activism later, equally underlined that their experiences with counterparts from the West have been positive: they stressed that these counterparts put a lot of conscious value on attentive listening, treat them as equals, and they view their exchanges as very beneficial. The only difference from the earlier period is that feminist activity is diffused across several smaller co-operations and not three flagships like the AWC, WiB and WSC, hence making it more difficult to exemplify. A key new element in Serbian feminism for the younger generation is the grassroots feminist festival BeFem. It was founded in 2009 by Jelena Visnić and the Swedish feminist Christina Wassholm. It is the only festival of its kind in Serbia and together with four other similar festivals across the region, representative of a new form of feminist organising (SIROČIĆ, 2018: 73).

Feminists from across Europe, and in particular Sweden, are invited to the annual festival to contribute to what the young activists and co-organiser of BeFem, Milica Batričević, describes as an inspiring space: “It gave me a space where I am not just passively being lectured, but where I get exposed to a huge range of perspectives. It is the only place where the movement becomes a real network of all kinds of women [...]” (BATRIČEVIĆ, 2016). Jovana Netković, who co-organises the festival with Batričević, also argues that the

event's appeal owes much to these international dynamics and the possibility to engage with feminists from abroad. It was thanks to this encounter, for instance, that she heard of the initiative Equalister, a database of women experts to counter the prevalence of all-male panels. As a result, she initiated a similar platform for Serbia.

Another important element in the contemporary landscape of Serbian feminism is the Swedish foundation KtK. Across the spectrum, it is mentioned by many interlocutors as an exemplary Western actor that replicates what worked in the 1990s: it listens to the needs of feminist organisations, ensures long-term support as opposed to the punctual interventions often pursued by other donors, and importantly, analogous to the trans-Yugoslav network, it provides the space and funding for feminists from former Yugoslavia to meet. This is why Jakovljević views the relationship she has had with Western feminists through KtK as a true sisterhood: “they have always behaved towards us with understanding and respect [...] because that is a kind of feminist principle they live by” (JAKOVLJEVIĆ, 2016). Memet’s assessment that - generally speaking - the foreign feminists with whom she works are keen to learn and “sense and experience women’s lives here”, and do not to pretend they know everything, is representative of the beliefs the majority of the interviewees held.

This is what Nađa Duhaček also experienced when she met Ann Snitow, the co-founder of NEWW, who was introduced in the last empirical chapter on Russia (chapter 6). Nađa Duhaček met her in a summer school in Poland, and remembered how Snitow was a very privileged New York feminist and committed to making a difference in former communist Europe. Snitow made such impact by encouraging the participants to question everything, and by showing how “wonderful it can be to exit your comfort zone, go to other places and listen to people with different experiences”.

Besides knowledge-transfer being lauded for its capacity to deliver important financial, practical and emotional support they actively sought, it is thus also described as a process characterised by mutual respect. This is expressed through highlighting Western counterparts’ commitment to

listening to understand intrinsic needs and Serbian feminists' strong appreciation of this.

8.4.2 Sharing instead of transferring

There are, however, also other discursive strategies Serbian feminists introduce to re-define the notion of knowledge-transfer in order to antagonise the hegemonic discourse. As in the Russian case, an important trope here is the idea of exchange instead of a unidirectional West-East transfer. As Mladenović described her experience in Switzerland in the preceding section, it was an “endless exchange” of views. Like in the Russian dataset, this line of argument also features the NEWW. From the young feminist Nađa Duhaček, who met Snitow only a few years ago, to Mladenović, who attended the network's meetings throughout the nineties, the NEWW stands for a transnational feminism that is the opposite of what both critical theory and hegemonic discourse in the illiberal regime stipulate: a site of fruitful exchange between equals. Here too, as in the Russian case, the element of Western feminists as enablers, rather than teachers, is present. “The network was crucial, not because we had to learn from so-called Westerners, but to connect between each other in Eastern Europe because we were separated. So for us it was a joy to meet thanks to them. It was a product of sisterhood”, said (MLAĐENOVIĆ, 2016). Branković stressed that they were simultaneously learning and teaching at the same time. They were particularly sought after for their expertise of maintaining cross-border communication with former compatriots because it is an issue many feminists and civil society actors in general face in conflict-affected areas.

New networks in addition to the NEWW have been created since in the early 2000s, which were used in some of the interviews as illustrations for the idea of an exchange as opposed to knowledge-transfer. Pokrajac referred to the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) network as a transformative experience. She argues that attending WAVE's conferences in the years when she worked at the AWC contributed to her becoming a feminist. Coming from a background where she was the first feminist in her family and felt

rather insecure, finding herself all of a sudden at a young age in Vienna surrounded by like-minded and experienced women was very empowering.

I realised that there are so many women around Europe, who are working on the same issues and with the same methods. That was really important to share experience. And it gave me strength, it gave me more grounding, it gave me more meaning to whatever I was doing, because it was not just something that we do in Serbia. (PROKRAJAC, 2016)

The idea of exchange, then, not only connotes the mutual sharing of experiences, it can also connote a shared vision. Similar to Russian feminists' experiences with the UN Women Conference in Beijing, knowing that activists are implicated in a common mission and struggle that does not stop at national boundaries is an important source of strength and courage. As Pokrajac said, the communication with women from other countries gave her power and energy because "then you are connected to a wider picture". This allows activists to see beyond the boundaries of their national context, which is crucial because "if you are just here and face this Serbian reality it is very depressing" (PROKRAJAC, 2016). In that sense, Pokrajac also argues that the numerous foreign visitors they had throughout her time at the AWC nourished the feeling of a shared vocation. They were living in solidarity. From young students who wanted to volunteer, to experts who conducted workshops and lectures, there was always someone there.

Višnjić, the co-founder of the BeFem festival, where feminists from Western Europe are most likely to be found nowadays in Belgrade, also rejects the idea that these transnational encounters represent an instance of a one-way knowledge-transfer, framing them as a form of exchange instead.

I am often asked what we learnt from [the Swedish feminists who attend BeFem]. But I would not speak of hierarchies of knowledge. We are all in the same process of building a fairer society. Feminist practice does not follow a predefined matrix, but is done in a specific political context and is composed of various ways of resistance to existing power structures that cause inequality. These women are engaged in different spheres in Sweden: theory, activism, art. And so I have the impression we rather learn from each other because we translate our respective realities to one another. (VIŠNJIĆ, 2017)

Višnjić frames the interaction with Western feminists as a meeting on equal terms, by disputing the possibility of grading different forms of knowledge

and the existence of a blueprint of how to be a feminist. Importantly, she follows up on her rejection of the notion of transfer with an alternative: a struggle they have in common despite its local particularities, and which therefore entails the sharing of “translations” of these particularities in order to cross-fertilize their struggle.

Last but not least, in order to underline that such exchanges are characterised as processes of sharing rather than transferring knowledge, Serbian feminists, comparable to their Russian peers, also refer to their own feminist heritage. Discursively, this achieves three things. Firstly, it helps to stress that feminism is not alien to Serbia. Secondly, it further reifies the imaginary of an exchange between equals, for there is know-ability on either side. Finally, and crucially, this is a trope that helps to shift responsibility and to claim that if their local heritage has gone unacknowledged, it is not due to Western feminists but indeed to the older generation that was itself West-oriented and thus “threw socialist feminism out together with socialism” (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017a).

8.4.2.1 On own heritage and own struggles

References to socialist feminism played a dominant role in this discursive strategy. Unlike in Russia, however, the conversation around feminism in the socialist period is more complex. Interlocutors took pride in two strands of feminism that existed during socialism. On the one hand, there is widespread awareness of the importance of the Drug-ca conference. Drug-ca is narrated as innovative and ground-breaking because “the personal became political” (STOJANOVIĆ, 2016, LONČAREVIĆ, 2016) for the first time, because it was revolutionary to have a conference with the word “feminist” in its title in a socialist country at that time (LONČAREVIĆ, 2016, PANTELIĆ, 2016) and because connections with foreigners were created (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2016). Most of all, Drug-ca is known for catalysing a women’s movement outside of the Communist party (DRLJEVIĆ, 2016, STOJANOVIĆ, 2016, LONČAREVIĆ, 2016, VIŠNJIĆ, 2017), from which years later organisations like AWC, WiB and WSC would spring and take the lead in the struggle against the ethno-nationalist regime

in the 1990s. This is a key reference point for feminists across the board, and one they are very proud of.

On the other hand, many feminists, especially among the two younger generations, also agree with Dojcinović when she says that Drug-ca was not *the* beginning of feminism, but *a* beginning, because they also had “something called socialist state feminism” (DOJCINOVIĆ, 2016). Ever since the financial crisis in 2008, Zaharijević argues, there has been a reinvigorated interest among young feminists in socialist feminism that did not belong to the strand of Drug-ca. Of particular interest to them are the women’s partisan movement in the Second World War, the Anti-Fascist Women’s Front (AFZ), and important female figures within Communist Parties, such as Vida Tomšič in Yugoslavia, as well as Alexandra Kollontai, Rosa Luxembour and Silvia Federici. This renewed interest is accompanied by a partial reproach towards the nineties generation, who could not see the potential value of these feminist thinkers and activists, and therefore did not preserve that heritage as a background framework when they entered an era of a democratic plurality of frameworks. This realisation has become particularly acute since 2008, which has shown the limits and devastating effects of neoliberal market policies, the consequences of which weigh most heavily on the younger generation who hence seek alternative models. Arguably, the fact that the leftist Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has been active in Serbia since 2010 has not played an insignificant role in this development. But Daša Duhaček concedes that there is an undeniable and intrinsic wish among younger women to rediscover this part of their feminist tradition.

When the feminist historian Pantelić states that the older feminists “forgot about themselves, no one else did it”, it becomes clear that the younger generation is disappointed. They feel that a part of their history was withheld because, for their forerunners, the West - and in particular the EU with its socio-democratic principles - was the only space they were aspiring to belong to (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017c: 205-206). Their gaze was exclusively directed west-ward because looking inward would have been equated with backwardness. Pantelić’s statement then also conveys that the responsibility

for forgetting lies within Serbian feminism and not with a supposedly silencing knowledge-transfer from the West⁶⁰. Many young feminists report that they had to discover Yugoslav feminism by themselves and that it was not part of the memory that was directly passed on by the older generations. Zaharijević, for instance, argues that in fifteen years of studying feminist theory at the WSC she had not come across the great thinker Nada Ler Sofronić (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2016).

This neglect is illustrated in the leading feminist academic journal *Genero*⁶¹, published by the WSC since 1995, which for a long time did not focus on feminism in the region, be it past or contemporary. As one would expect based on Daša Duhaček and Dojcinović's accounts, the first issues between 1995 and 2003 were mainly concerned with translations of Western feminists' work. Then, in 2004, a special interview with Gayatri Spivak on the "politics of translation" indicated that older Serbian feminist academics were becoming increasingly aware that their translations were indeed a political issue that needed reflection. In the interview, Daša Duhaček concluded that feminist theoreticians must now start looking back and examine the relationship between the so-called mainstream feminism and their regional, local feminism and feminists (DUHAČEK, 2004).

This "looking back" has since taken place in several different ways, whether with the younger generation re-discovering socialist heritage, or with Dojcinović going even further back in time. She conducted a four-year long research project, which compiled a digital database of women writers and intellectuals of the *fin de siècle*. Moreover, in a recent paper on "what Eastern feminism stands for", Zaharijević investigated how diverse Western Yugoslav feminism was and shows that there was abundant theory and activity before

⁶⁰ This is why, as shown in chapter 7, the hits for the codes "external" "silencing of the past", ie. interview segments that would confirm that Serbian feminists find that their knowledge has been marginalised because of Western knowledge-transfer, were so few compared to "internal" ones.

⁶¹ Between 1995 and 2001 it was called *Ženske Studije [Women's Studies]*.

the Drug-ca conference (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017b). This is used not to undermine the importance of Drug-ca, but to counter the popular idea that feminism began when transnational contacts with Westerners intensified. With each such intervention, the scales between West and East become more balanced, and an exchange between the two is more imaginable.

Indeed, none of these efforts to unearth their feminist heritage are framed as a contestation against a presumed asymmetrical Western knowledge-transfer. Zaharijević, who at the time of the Spivak interview was still a student at the WSC and transcribed the conversation, remembers that Spivak was received as a post-modern, rather than a post-colonial, scholar (ZAHARIJEVIĆ, 2017a). While a critical reflection of the power relations in translations took place, it did not draw from the language and tools of subaltern studies. Even though Serbian feminists were exposed to feminists in the region, who published work in *Genero* that very much referenced post-colonial work. In 2011, Kolozova from Macedonia wrote about Eurocentrism and its effects in the Balkans (KOLOZOVA, 2011). Four years later, the feminist Slapšak, who is originally from Belgrade but has been working in Ljubljana since 1986 and is hence more regarded by Serbian feminists as Slovenian, openly accused the West of employing colonial strategies towards the Balkans particularly with respect to its “feminist/women/gender”, arguing that it led to “empty spaces in knowledge production” (SLAPŠAK, 2015). In the same issue, the Croatian scholars Kašić and Prlenda claim that this feminist knowledge was stolen from them because the post-communist East was silenced during the last two decades in order to clean Europe’s semi-periphery of socialism and create Europe anew (KAŠIĆ & PRLENDA, 2015). In all those instances, the responsibility is located externally and with Western knowledge-transfer in particular.

Yet none of this was echoed by Belgrade-based feminists, neither in the interviews nor in their publications in *Genero* because of their awareness of the hegemonic discourse propagated by their authoritarian regime and because of their acute anti-nationalist DNA. As “always disloyals” they effectively had no – to borrow from Virginia Woolf – national “room of their

own” that they felt the need to liberate from a supposedly colonizing West. On the contrary, the above-mentioned arguments did not resonate with Serbian feminists, for they rang too similar to a devastating nationalist identity politics they had lived through and which is once again on the rise. Instead, they avoided any potential alignment with the hegemonic discourse by placing blame within their own movement for “forgetting about themselves” and their long and varied feminist heritage.

Overall, with this shifting of responsibility for the silencing, together with the renewed visibility they gave their own tradition, Serbian feminists provided an alternative to the critique of knowledge-transfer, and solidified the imaginary of exchange and the possibility of feminism “from within”.

8.4.3 Transcending boundaries

Serbian feminists not only struggle with national(ist) connotations in post-colonial arguments, they also strive to subvert the discourse of Western knowledge-transfer by rejecting its core notion of knowledge boundaries altogether.

So far, we have seen two forms of resistance to the discourse of knowledge-transfer, both of which upheld the geographical boundaries it suggests. One approach of Serbian feminists’ subversion of the hegemonic discourse is to redefine the connotations of knowledge-transfer. They concur that knowledge-transfer took place, but emphasise that it was solicited in order to counter the idea that they were passive receivers. In addition, they stress how they experienced it as empowering on a practical, financial and emotional level. A second approach is to question the very concept of knowledge-transfer, asserting that it was rather an exchange between equals. An important element of this strategy is that young feminists reclaim the socialist heritage that exists within Serbia and the larger region. That way they convey that they have ample feminist knowledge to share, and thus countering the hegemonic claim that feminism is alien to Serbia. Indeed, this discursive strategy becomes the space where they clearly demarcate themselves from the hegemonic discourse. Aware of the potential resonance

post-colonial arguments have with nationalist discourse, and in particular the assertion that their local knowledge has been silenced by a colonising Eurocentrism, they reject this line of thought. Instead, they make clear that the conversation about a forgotten local heritage is an intra-generational struggle within Serbia, and cannot be attributed to Western knowledge-transfer.

Neither of these two strategies, however, challenges the underlying geographical imaginaries of knowledge-transfer. This changes with the last subversive approach, which rejects the possibility of separate spaces of feminist knowledge in the West and in post-communist Europe altogether. In the Russian case, feminists show that the transliterated introduction of "gender" was not exceptional, making the geographical boundaries erected specifically for feminist knowledge-transfer crumble. This rejection of East-West divisions is even more significant in the Serbian dataset. An important first indication for this difference in extent is that in twenty out of the 32 interviews there were segments in which interlocutors rejected the idea of a Western and Eastern/post-communist feminism. This rejection was communicated in different forms and across all generational cohorts and triggered some of the strongest reactions in the respondents.

Interlocutors who had milder reactions to these categories suggested they were completely new to them, and they had neither thought in those terms nor heard their peers using them. As Bobić articulated it: "I really can't remember that I've ever heard someone around me talking about this" (BOBIĆ, 2016). This is reported to have always been the case. Both Daša Duhaček and Mladenović highlighted that the categories of Western versus Eastern feminism did not circulate when they started becoming active in socialist times. A part of the explanation lies in Yugoslavia's leading role in the non-aligned movement. This entailed a conscious effort not to side with either side. This stance of neutrality leaves room - theoretically, at least - to approach the categories similarly, and outwardly identify with neither. The respondents, however, went further, stipulating that they not only do not feel they belong to either label, but refute the labels *tout court*. Mladenović

encapsulated this: “For me it didn’t matter where they were from. We didn’t call them Western, the regime did” (MLAĐENović, 2016). She succinctly conveyed that geographical separation is a tool the hegemonic discourse used to establish and maintain the anti-Western chain of equivalence. The discursive consequence is that transnational feminist solidarity is inhibited, akin to the “divide and rule” strategy. Many interviewees thus rejected the dichotomy not only because they considered it baseless, but because they deemed it deeply problematic.

The young feminist Batričević phrased it as follows: “this is a problem in my backyard, and this problem belongs to your backyard” (BATRIČEVIĆ, 2016). Todorović reacted even more resolutely.

Generally, all separations within feminism are absolutely unacceptable to me. Feminism is one to me and every feminist simply lives it her way. [...] As with any division it leads to alienation. We stop listening to each other, we stop to critically reflect and instead oppress one another. So this general support of one or another feminism, from this or from that territory [...] only leads to this oppression and to quarrels and divisions within the same movement. (TODOROVIĆ, 2016)

The idea of a Western and Eastern feminism thus undermines the potential for solidarity across nations because feminists, as Batričević put it, do not feel concerned by problems beyond the borders of “their” feminism. In Todorović’s view, this distinction further harms solidarity because it invites struggles over predominance and thus weakens a movement that ought to be singular.

Todorović is not alone with her strong reaction. Bobić resorted to cursing to communicate her aversion: “I’m so pissed off with this kind of global divisions. I don’t like it all. I really don’t like it at all” (BOBIĆ, 2016). The categories and the separation they imply, is also unacceptable to Zajović. In her explanation, however, it clearly transpired that the problem extends beyond a hindrance to solidarity.

That [division is] stupid. That’s like saying there are human rights and Serbian human rights. I generally think that there are some universal values and universal feminist points even if there are of course contextual specificities. But I much more believe in our associations and communication based on some values that we share: freedom, autonomy, equality and so on. [...] Our aspirations are the same. I don’t like this

separation between colonial or neo-colonial or what have you. [...] I negate the notion of a Muslim feminism. Muslim women networks helped us most of all to analyse the war and the manipulation of religion in it. We can speak of feminism in Arab countries, but not of Arab feminism, you see? I really don't like this capitalist, or whatever it is, fragmentation. I neither believe nor do I want a national feminism. I have more in common with a feminist in Nepal than with some women in my backyard. (ZAJOVIĆ, 2016)

In her view, the imaginary of a Western and an Eastern feminism erodes the idea that certain basic rights and aspirations are valid and claimed in all contexts. This is exactly what nationalist tendencies can exploit for their claims that feminism is an alien “ideology” and to submit in exchange their co-opted versions of gender equality. Hence why Zajović repeatedly expressed her opposition.

For these reasons, Serbian feminists reject such geographical distinctions within feminism. Many respondents told me the only difference they could see between themselves and Western feminists was in terms of financial and material capacities for their activities. Largely, though, they shifted the discourse away from the dichotomy altogether, focusing on a feminist space where commonalities prevail. The problems women faced were largely similar: from violence against women, to discrimination in the labour market, to increased pressure on reproductive rights, they felt they had an important common ground, with which they could identify independently of national or regional contexts. Snežana Jakovljević, for instance, described how each time she attended an international gathering, she was amazed at how similar they and their experiences all were, despite their different origins. She argued that she instinctively knew what women from England or the Netherlands talk about when they speak of discrimination:

These are stories about discrimination and no matter about what level of discrimination we speak, or who is being discriminated against, all these stories are somehow at their core the same and that makes it possible for us to recognise what she talks about, to understand each other. (JAKOVLJEVIĆ, 2016)

The emphasis feminists place on their similarities also reflects an increased awareness that the anti-gender backlash as a cover for authoritarian and nationalist politics is not a phenomenon limited to their county or post-

communist Europe, but is on the rise across liberal democracies too. As the feminist scholar and BeFem co-founder, Višnjić, argued, “Europe is suffering from a rising fascization of society, which we’ve been living in since the 1990s” (VIŠNJIĆ, 2017). Feminists need a “global sisterhood” in confronting this increasing violence, militarization, and what Višnjić deems a nationalist, conservative and patriarchal discourse. “As long as capitalism, patriarchy and all other systems of oppression work in connection, we also have to connect, without hierarchies of knowledge” (VIŠNJIĆ, 2017).

Refuting the underlying categories of knowledge-transfer that too easily resonate with nationalist arguments, and instead speaking of a trans-national community, is a feminist subversion of the hegemonic discourse in Serbia. Nowhere is this clearer than in Mladenović’s statement: “The feminist space is my space, not Serbia” (MLAĐENOVIĆ, 2016). It is more articulate in Serbia than in Russia because of their historic experience of opposing a nationalist regime, whereby they rejected the new ethno-national identity and made feminism their only self-identification. This, as per Miražić’s analysis in our conversation, has made feminists in Serbia particularly attuned to the dominant oppressing discourse and its anti-Western features, and adamant to resist it. It is the crucial lesson they learnt from what Daša Duhaček described as their biggest mistake in the nineties. At the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the WSC, she reflected that.

[We] paid a price for dividing ourselves into those who were ‘orthodox’ and those who were not. We attempted to be on the ‘good’ and the ‘right’ side within a system which had never even known such a side; the system created by egomaniacal glory hounds that are the rowdy Serbian patres familias. (DUHAČEK, 2012: 15)

Thus the lesson is that the only strength and chance the feminist movement has is in unconditional unity that rejects any form of essentialism, including that of supposed Western and Eastern feminisms. Or as Milica Gudović expressed it: “I don’t believe in this thing that there are feminisms as there are feminists. I believe that feminism is one struggle” (GUDOVIĆ, 2016). It is a common struggle that perhaps should not be thought of in terms of

trans-national solidarity, but rather, as Višnjić suggested, as a trans-patriarchal community.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter started by sketching how electoral authoritarianism has taken hold in Serbia through different mechanisms: from Vučić's party capturing key institutions like the legislative, and creating a system of clientelism through state employment, to controlling the media and harassing civil society. It then showed how anti-gender backlash plays an intrinsic role in this authoritarian system. It particularly showed how the backlash is couched in an anti-Western discourse, which is subtler than in Russia because it is conducted through a double discourse and tactical Europeanisation, but is highly problematic nevertheless. This became apparent in the section that highlighted Serbian feminists' key priorities. It turned out that disingenuity, understood as the government's double discourse, is most concerning for feminists in Serbia. In their view, this strategy is not only used to keep the status quo, but to hide official efforts to undermine existing achievements and initiatives for gender equality. An important part of their concerns around disingenuity related to the EU's unwillingness to see beyond this tactical façade, which was particularly disheartening for feminists because the EU was once seen as an ally. This realisation of their government's disingenuous approach to gender equality, was interconnected with Serbian feminists' heightened concern about a regression to nationalism. They saw this regression foremost in old nationalists re-climbing to power and dominating the pro-EU camp with fake Europeanisation, with Vučić as the primary example.

As a result, they on the one hand feel disillusioned and exhausted. On the other hand, they report an important dilemma. Despite being disenchanted with the EU and indeed aware of its cynical approach to civil liberties within Serbia, many feel that endorsing EU accession and reforms is

the lesser evil. The alternative would mean leaving the public discourse to Vučić's destructive pseudo-Europeanisation and the explicit anti-Western conservative and nationalist forces, which have grown in recent years. In a political environment where they are no longer attacked because of their anti-nationalism, but because of their feminism, and where they are branded as traitors because they bring the foreign, detrimental "gender ideology" to the country, their positionality is crucially altered. They cannot afford critique of the EU because it would mean giving wings to the hegemonic anti-Western and anti-gender discourse they want to oppose. Instead, they propose alternative signifiers which either change the meaning of knowledge-transfer or challenge the entire hegemonic discursive regime as a way to subvert authoritarianism. As shown in this chapter, they employ three discursive strategies that are similar to the Russian case, but have sometimes different characteristics.

A first subversive element Serbian feminists use is to challenge the dominant discourse that alleges that feminism only came to the country through an imposed Western knowledge-transfer. Instead, they stress the agency they had in the process and the emotional, financial and practical support they drew from it throughout the 1990s, in a time when they had felt particularly isolated and hopeless. This is articulated especially strongly by the wartime generation and by the founders of the three NGOs (WiB, AWC and WSC) that were established at the time thanks to important support from Western feminists. Younger generations would equally underline this trait of the process and quote the grassroots festival BeFem as an illustration. Throughout all generations, particular reference was made to their Western counterparts' active listening and interest in their genuine needs, to highlight that they felt supported and met as equals. In addition, they, like their Russian peers, framed Westerners as empowering enablers, who facilitated important exchange between feminists from post-communist Europe, similarly citing the NEWW as a formative example of such an exchange.

The second discursive strategy entails advocating for knowledge-exchange instead of transfer, to counter the idea of unidirectionality

propagated in the hegemonic discourse. This idea of exchange not only relates to the mutual sharing of experiences, but also the sharing of a vision, and thus the empowering feeling of being part of a larger struggle. An important element here was also the reference to their own feminist heritage. This is done to stipulate that they had something to share in the transnational feminist encounter, thus tilting the balance and making an exchange more imaginable. Equally, asserting their feminist heritage subverted the assertion that feminism cannot stem from within Serbia. These subversive aims also explain why they refused to frame the reinvigorated interest in their socialist past as an emancipatory move related to Western knowledge-transfer. While often employed by feminist colleagues in other former Yugoslav republics, Serbian feminists viewed post-colonial arguments and knowledge-transfer tropes as too similar to Serbian nationalist discourses. As such, they resolutely refused to provide anything that could resonate with it. Instead, they fashioned their “looking back” to their socialist heritage as a generational struggle, thus positioning the responsibility for “forgetting” part of their feminist history among themselves and not with knowledge-transfer.

Finally, as in Russia, Serbian feminists also resorted to rejecting the underlying imaginary of knowledge-transfer altogether: the idea of boundaries of feminist knowledge that can be labelled as Western versus Eastern/post-communist. However, compared to Russia, this subversive strategy is much more widespread in Serbia, both in terms of how many interlocutors used it and the discursive elements used for it. While in Russia this was mainly done by academics and only in connection with the concept of ‘gender’, in Serbia it was a dominant feature across the dataset and extended well beyond just one concept, stipulating that all feminist knowledge was universal, or “without an origin” as Russians put it. Serbian feminists refuted the geographical West/East categories associated with knowledge-transfer, thereby rejecting the fundamental dichotomy the hegemonic discourse relies on, arguing that the geographical distinctions were pointless, not used in their communities, but importantly, also detrimental to feminist solidarity. They communicated that they see these

categories directly connected to the hegemonic discourse, which attempts to divide and rule them; an experience they had already had during the 1990s. Thus, their historical lesson was that strength resides within unconditional feminist unity. That is why they reject those geographical terms and instead advocate for thinking beyond the dichotomy and to see feminist community as universal and trans-patriarchal. This should all the more be imperative in times when anti-gender backlash has become a generalised phenomenon.

This is where the key difference to the Russian case lies. Both cases share a common cause and effect, though they manifest slightly differently. In both instances, feminists are aware of their authoritarian environment and the discourse it produces. While in Russia the key worries are related to repression and fear, in Serbia they are about a disingenuous and regressive government, but both have clear anti-gender and anti-Western characteristics that feminists must navigate. As a result, critique of knowledge-transfer becomes unimaginable and risky for feminists in Russia and in Serbia, because it begs too many discursive similarities with the narrative their authoritarian regimes propagate. In both cases, feminists refuse to criticise knowledge-transfer, rendering actual critique analogous to critical theory marginal. Instead, they introduce alternative signifiers in order to subvert knowledge-transfer as a discourse, and with it, the entire authoritarian regime.

PART IV

9 Conclusion

9.1 Key findings and contributions

This thesis formulated a *critique of the critique* on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe, which postulates that transnational feminism is but one among many exercises of Othering the West has employed vis-à-vis its Semi-Other since the fall of communism to reify asymmetrical power hierarchies. On an empirical level, I first showed that critical theory's argument was ahistorical. Transnational feminist encounters took place in Yugoslavia and Soviet Russia and, far from an asymmetrical knowledge-transfer, they were both solicited and supportive.

From the early 1970s, there were intense exchanges between Yugoslav and Western feminists, which was possible thanks to Yugoslavia's open borders as part of the non-alignment movement. Yugoslav feminists actively looked for inspiration in New Left feminist work in the West to make sense of their discrimination in a country that officially proclaimed gender equality, and formulated acceptable demands that would improve their situation within the socialist system. Their engagement with this work and with Western feminists in general was however at no point uncritical, as the 1978 Drug-ca conference showed in particular. Instead, Yugoslav feminists were assertive and determined to re-contextualise Western socialist feminism to their specific experience of discrimination and formulate an adequate analysis thereof. In the 1980s, as Yugoslav feminists wanted to institutionalise their activism, Western feminists transformed from an intellectual to a practical source. This particularly manifested in Western feminists providing counsel and training with regards to combating violence against women to their Yugoslav peers.

In Soviet Russia, feminists were more isolated than their Yugoslav contemporaries, but had important contacts with a number of feminists in the West nevertheless. The first dissidents in the late 1970s, early 1980s did not rely on outside sources for their samizdat publications. On the contrary,

their ideas (especially their foundation of emancipation in religious argument) were met with suspicion in the West, which begs testimony to their intellectual independence. The support they received from French feminists, however, proved crucial in disseminating their work and more importantly, in helping them against state repression. WDIF in turn had facilitated Soviet Russian feminists' access to UN Women Conferences and thus paved the way to the articles Soviet Russia feminists wrote in the late 1980s, in which they referred to UN frameworks to give their ground-breaking argument that the "women's question" was far from "resolved" more leverage. Finally, in 1991 Soviet Russian feminists organised the first independent feminist conference with Western guests in Dubna. Unlike their dissident forerunners, these feminists were genuine believers in the democratisation paradigm and unlike Yugoslav feminists at the occasion of their first transnational feminist conference, did no longer want to improve the socialist system from within. They firmly wanted to leave it behind and consciously looked west-ward for a model of democratisation. Nevertheless, the Western guests at the Dubna conference were only invited to speak after having carefully listened to the Soviet perspective, thus demonstrating Soviet Russian feminists' agency in this encounter. They were the initiators of the conference, and they set the terms for it. Both cases thus testify to transnational feminist encounters taking well place during communism already and being characterised by Yugoslav and Soviet Russian feminists' independence and assertiveness in them.

Through the means of applying an empirical test derived from the critical framework, I further demonstrated that there is little empirical evidence for the critical theory's assertion. Critique against a unidirectional, asymmetrical knowledge-transfer that leads to temporal and geographical Othering as critical theory supposes it among feminists on the ground, was at best marginal in both case studies.

In Russia, I discerned a slim majority of utterances, in which feminists had indeed qualified transnational feminism as asymmetrical, and in some instances even as colonial. This related in particular to Russian feminists

Conclusion

having to acquire a certain feminist *lingua franca* in order to be taken seriously by Western colleagues. However, this critique was only voiced by a number of members of the older liberal generation and also consistently referred to the liberal period. The liberal period was crucially a time when democratisation, and with it a positive hegemonic discourse, were intact at the official, state level. It was unquestionable that Russia had to transition to the West and that a knowledge-transfer on all levels, including feminism, were a necessary means to achieving this goal. In today's authoritarian Russia, ushering such a critique would indirectly play into official discourse's hand, which is why I argue that no feminists of the younger generation emulated similar arguments. The only type of critique younger Russian feminists formulated regarded singular personal encounters with Western feminists. They reported about feeling exoticised for the Western spectators, their knowledge-ability not taken seriously and their experience cast as a shadow of Western past, all of which are elements critical theory categorizes as forms of Othering.

However, every single respondent, who made statements that fit the critical framework, also immediately defused them, by shrugging them off and playing down their importance, especially with regards to the real problems they faced at home. I used these as indications for the overarching argument that in authoritarian times, feminists' chief concern lies with avoiding critique of knowledge-transfer as a way to avoid aligning themselves with their regime's propagated discourse. I argued that this was part of why they particularly strongly rebuked the allegation of not being critical enough of transnational feminism because of their incompetence and *false colonised consciousness*. An important proponent of this allegation is Sergey Ushakin, who has since retreated from this debate. However, my mentioning of this allegation in the interviews triggered strong responses, not only because they experience it as a denial of their intellectual capacities and their agency, but also, because this line of argumentation – of Russian feminists' suffering a colonial mind-set – is exactly what resonates with the authoritarian discourse they are adamant to counter. Because of this strong rebuttal against the

argument of *false consciousness* and because overall, they consistently defused every critical comment they made, critique of transnational feminism as an Othering knowledge-transfer is a largely marginal and insignificant phenomenon among contemporary Russian feminists.

The empirical test yielded very similar results in the Serbian case study with critique of knowledge-transfer being even more marginal. An element of critique that was present equally related to unpleasant personal encounters, in which two Serbian feminists said they felt an asymmetry of power in the sense of being talked down to. Like her Russian counterparts, one Serbian feminist also reported of incidents of silencing in the form of exoticisation and in their experience and ability to make sense of their own story being denied. The difference to Russian feminists was that this concerned the Serbian feminist's self-ascribed anti-nationalism in the 1990s, which several Western interlocutors dismissed, ripping her of her power to know and tell their own experience. The two cases were further similar in that three Serbian feminists lamented that they had to know the debates at the Western core and replicate its terms in order to have a chance of being seen by Western colleagues. This echoed Russian feminists' critique vis-à-vis a dominant *lingua franca* in the 1990s, though in the Serbian case it is relevant to this day. Serbian feminists also spoke of "asymmetrical ignorance" to illustrate the lesser emission power they had compared to the West.

The key difference between the Serbian and the Russian case study with regards to the empirical test, lied with the issue of donors and their push for gender mainstreaming. Given that donors have largely retreated from Russia, this was not a topic and if at all, Russian feminists were transparent that given the scarcity of resources, they would rather not engage in criticising donors. Serbian feminists, it turned out, largely had an issue with Western donors' insistence on gender mainstreaming being adopted in Serbia as a best practice, ignoring that the Serbian government actually uses gender mainstreaming for co-optation. They saw that far-right parties and groups had manipulated the language of gender equality, including key concepts such as equal pay and reconciliation family and career, to advance nationalist

Conclusion

and pro-natalist policies and that the government had diluted the idea of gender equality to a depoliticised version of legal equality and formal parity. As a result, the problem for Serbian feminists was not even gender mainstreaming per se, but that the very concept of gender equality, on which it would have to be based, had been bent and co-opted. As a result, they perceived their endorsement with gender mainstreaming as a best practice so anathema to their identity that it would equal an annihilation of theirs. This is why they expressed powerlessness vis-à-vis Western donors, who were not susceptible to their lived reality and sensitivities.

However, this as well as all other rather isolated elements of critique of knowledge-transfer were once more analogous to the Russian case, subject to de-escalation. With regards to Western donors, they were not part of the original empirical test, but could justifiably be subsumed under the idea of Western knowledge-transfer, meaning the transmission of Western gender equality theories, policies and ways of organising. Interestingly, however, Serbian feminists made an effort to distinguish general donors from feminist foundations, such as KtK in an attempt to exclude this phenomenon from what they defined as transnational feminism. All other critical utterances were immediately laughed off or their secondary importance underlined. In the case of the problem of unequal emission power, Dojcinović even reversed the terms, arguing that ultimately their position at the semi-periphery was a privileged one for they had the necessary critical distance to evaluate the content of the core.

These are the first empirical contributions this thesis made, and based on which it advanced its core theoretical contribution to the debate on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe. Given the marginality of critique that corresponds to the critical framework, and given the prevalence to defuse the few critical arguments, I proposed that the Russian and Serbian feminists' seeming absence of critique stood for the presence of an inherently political act. This absence, I argued, in fact represents their strategy not only to avoid critique that risks being hijacked by the very regime they oppose, but

also to express alternative meanings of knowledge-transfer in an effort to subvert it altogether.

Based on the Essex school of post-Marxist discourse analysis, I argued that rather than seeing knowledge-transfer exclusively as a conceptual lens, through which feminists make sense of transnational feminism, we should view it as a discourse in its own right. To treat knowledge-transfer as discourse means to acknowledge that it is productive of meaning and embedded in power structures. As a producer of meaning, knowledge-transfer as proposed by critical theory, first and foremost encounters the problem of resonance with the superposed hegemonic discursive regime of the authoritarian regime in question. In fact, both authoritarian regimes conduct what I called Othering back. This entails framing gender equality as an exclusively Western idea and especially a perverted one, whereby authoritarian regimes appear morally superior and in dire need of protecting themselves from this malicious Western influence. Dialogically, this serves as the ideal justification for their authoritarian mode of governance and as a pretext for the attacks on civil liberties. The crucial connection between this anti-Western and anti-gender discourse and the critical argument on transnational feminism as knowledge-transfer is that both are based on the notion of a Western domination. Both discourses start with a negative signifier for the West as an oppressor, who chiefly asserts itself via an imposed, unidirectional knowledge-transfer of feminism and against whom resistance / defence are consequently primordial. While in critical theory that assertion is assumed in terms of the West fixing its superior position vis-à-vis the Semi-Other, in the authoritarian hegemonic discourse Western assertion is fantasised as the devious undermining of the Semi-Other through the transmission of feminism, which culminates in the nation's implosion. Both discursive logics thus presuppose resistance as a reaction: feminist resistance from the critical perspective and national defence of traditional values against a devastating feminism in the authoritarian discourse.

This discursive resonance is the key issue, I contended, that critical theory overlooks. With its exclusive focus on transnational power dynamics,

Conclusion

it fails to capture how its own propositions suddenly ring acutely similar to the authoritarian anti-Western and anti-gender discourse. Dangerously resonating with a line of argumentation they deeply oppose, is what knowledge-transfer as a discourse *does* from Russian and Serbian feminists' point of view from within an authoritarian system. Importantly, knowledge-transfer as a discourse also changes feminists' subject-positioning. In the context of authoritarian Othering back, they are no longer the necessary democratisers contributing to their country's transition to the Western model. On the contrary, they are now ascribed a position of traitors and transmitters of the devious Western knowledge. This considerably reduces their space as civil society actors. To intervene in the discursive arena is one of the remaining spaces of feminist intervention. Moreover, it is a particularly important one because it is by means of non-insertion into the authoritarian discourse that feminists assert their opposition to the regime in power. This, I argued, is *why* Russian and Serbian feminists' priority lies with rejecting the critique of knowledge-transfer and in finding strategies for *how* to articulate alternative signifiers of knowledge-transfer in order to subvert the hegemonic regime.

As such, this thesis is also the first work to apply the Essex school of discourse analysis to an authoritarian context and it makes an important contribution to the literature on Othering. The critical argument on transnational feminism in post-communist Europe relies on what I termed the notions of temporal and geographical Othering. The former denotes an Othering exercise whereby the Other is always assessed against a Western hegemonic temporality, and thus either cast as lagging behind or chaotic in its feminist waves. The latter refers to an Othering process, whereby the Other's intellectual production and indeed know-ability be it in historical or present terms is silenced in order to reify the structure between the core and a semi-periphery between which knowledge can only flow unidirectionally. This thesis however, showed that in authoritarian times there is a crucial new form of Othering we ought to take into account to fully understand existing power structures and how they influence feminists' activism: that of

authoritarian Othering back through an anti-Western and anti-gender discourse.

In fact, I demonstrated that in both cases, feminists interpret their political environment as one where anti-gender discourse is prevalent and has direct consequence on them. As such, the two case studies are united in a common cause and effect, which vary to some extent in their actual manifestation. In Russia, feminists' core concern lies with a political reality that has become increasingly repressive with a zero tolerance towards feminism. This is particularly evident in the systematic crackdown against gender studies centres, as well as the most fringe feminist activists. Furthermore, Russian feminists also express awareness of a political climate that strives for reassertion against the West through regression to old patriarchal values. Importantly, Russian feminists explicitly connect these political realities to their lived experience of being targeted. They see that the hegemonic discourse of Othering back assertively with anti-gender frames demonizes feminism and makes them into targets by virtue of being the living embodiment of the vilified ideology. The direct results of this political environment for Russian feminists are fear, but also self-censorship, expressed through explicit distancing from radical feminism and LGBT topics, which in turn can lead to internal conflicts because for others, such a demarcation only gives wings to the hegemonic discourse. Overall, Russian feminists' priority lies with subverting this hegemonic discourse, which I argued is done in three essential ways. While the first discursive strategy still endorses the concept of knowledge-transfer and merely strives to re-define it, the other two strategies reject it *tout court*.

The first discursive strategy Russian feminists employed is that of re-framing knowledge-transfer as a positive experience, in which they were agents. This stance is particularly prominent among the old generations with living memories of the liberal 1990s. This was the generation of self-identified democratisers, who consciously looked for inspiration in the West. As such, knowledge-transfer was a way to gain new insights and intellectual tools to analyse their reality, but also support both on an emotional level, by feeling

Conclusion

part of a wider, like-minded community, and on a very practical level. Contra the idea of passive reception of an alien knowledge, Russian feminists emphasise that they were pioneers, who actively searched for new knowledge and shaped and transferred it further.

Russian feminists also resorted to change the concept of knowledge-transfer altogether and replace it with an imaginary of feminist exchange instead. Western feminists are not depicted as a dominating actor, but as a crucial facilitator for meetings between feminists from the post-communist region and as self-reflexive respectful interlocutors, aware of potential power hierarchies and privileges. As a result, an exchange between equals becomes imaginable in place of a unidirectional knowledge-transfer. An important part of this discursive strategy is also to refer to their own feminist heritage. Each generation unearths a separate layer of the historical treasure. While in the 1990s, Russian feminists were particularly interested in understanding the suffragist movement, the young generation is especially drawn to the texts and strategies of feminist dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s. Crucially, this endeavour to re-discover their heritage is not framed as a counter-reaction to a knowledge-transfer that silenced their past, but as an internal dispute, fought primarily on generational lines. In fact, there are lingering feelings of disappointment and frustration among younger feminists vis-à-vis their foremothers of the nineties, who were so west-ward focused, so overly optimistic in the possibility of democratisation, that they discarded what there was only few years before them. In an authoritarian context, these young feminists now realise that the thoughts and tools of the feminist dissident movement appear much more relevant to their realities, and wish this lineage of memory had been drawn for them. Moreover, across the different feminist generations, there was an emphasis on building knowledge thanks to cross-fertilizing between Russian and Western sources.

By highlighting and preserving their own heritage and by showing that feminism does not grow behind defensive Russian and Western boundaries, but thanks to an exchange between the two; by demonstrating that part of their history was not forgotten due to a domination of Western feminism, but

because of the purposeful forgetting of the older generation, which did not deem socialism as a useful source, they subvert the hegemonic discourse. If feminism stems from *within* Russia and is enhanced thanks to an exchange between equals, then it can no longer be demonised as a dangerous foreign knowledge that is imported into Russia via an asymmetrical knowledge-transfer. Instead, feminism is well rooted within Russia and the contact with the West only serves to strengthen what is already there.

While the second strategy rejects the concept of knowledge-transfer, the last antagonistic meaning Russian feminists introduce rattles the entire hegemonic edifice because it challenges the very West/East dichotomy that underlies it. The transliterated introduction of the term 'gender' into Russian language and academia in particular, is fashioned by critics as the ultimate culmination of the unidirectional knowledge-transfer that was supposedly so strong that Russian feminists declined to use their "indigenous" vocabulary instead. This is the critical argument Russian feminists most vehemently pushed back against. In tracing how the term was first harmless for a long time until it was associated with a danger in recent years and served as an excuse to crackdown against feminists and gender studies in particular, they first highlight that they see this kind of argument as resonating with the larger political strategy that tries to depict feminism as inherently foreign. This is why they deem it crucial to resist this line of thought. As a counter reaction, they uphold that 'gender' is just one of many transliterated terms in Russia. By showing how mundane those linguistic introductions are, they shake the strict geographical boundaries that have only been erected with regards to 'gender'. In addition, they claim that if anything could be interpreted as a form of domination, it would be that 'gender' has been perverted by state feminism. A term that was supposed to be used for emancipatory research and claims has been re-appropriated by a large part of state-supported academia to advance old patriarchal paradigms in its name. This is how Russian feminists both challenge and in fact reverse the power relations conjured upon with knowledge-transfer: in feminism, there is no (or at the very least not more) transfer of knowledge from West to East than in

Conclusion

any other area of life of scholarly, discipline and the only colonisation that happened was an inversed one, whereby “fake gender studies” ripped them of a revolutionary term and a tool they had painstakingly forged during the 1990s to advance anti-gender apropos against them.

The Serbian case study yielded very similar results. An important difference is that anti-gender discourse in Serbia takes a subtler form than in Russia because the country is still in the EU accession process. Rather than openly propagating anti-gender discourse the Serbian government lets it grow at the fringes of society to then use it for its double discourse. In the double discourse, the government reassures Brussels in its commitment with gender equality, offering occasional seeming progress such as the appointment of a lesbian PM, all while telling the domestic audience that any efforts it undertakes regarding gender equality are done because it is essentially an EU-driven agenda. This disingenuous approach to gender equality is then the key concern for Serbian feminists. They see that the government not only uses this tactical Europeanisation to co-opt ideas of gender equality (including gender mainstreaming) and to justify lack of progress but worse still, to hide its active anti-feminist efforts. While there is no open backlash against gender studies like in Russia, the backlash manifests itself especially in the systematic obstruction of feminists’ work causing at times pre-emptive obedience. The second biggest concern from Serbian feminists’ point of view is a clear regression to nationalist politics, exemplified in the return to power and rehabilitation of war criminals, Vučić being the personification thereof.

This interpretation of their political reality leads the majority of Serbian feminists to feel disillusioned but also in an important dilemma. Disillusion trumps fear because unlike in Russia the extent of repression is still at a lower level, but they crucially also enjoyed a much shorter interlude of hope. Contrary to their Russian peers, the 1990s were not a period of liberalism but of violent anti-nationalism. This is why the disillusion is particularly accentuated because in the early 2000s they could finally breath, gather strength and genuinely hoped the situation would improve. Now only a few years later they find themselves confronted with very similar problems again.

What makes this all the more disenchanting is that the EU continues to legitimise and support precisely this government they see conducting anti-gender and nationalist politics. Being let down by a once-thought strong ally is particularly hurtful for Serbian feminists. However, this also causes a crucial dilemma because rejecting the EU and the accession process on the basis of having revealed the EU's hypocrisy would essentially mean to leave the public discourse on the EU to either fake EU reformers as Vučić and his dominating party or openly nationalist anti-EU forces that are the only political forces to have grown in the recent years. Serbian feminists thus decide to avoid critique against the EU, not only because many of them who have worked in advocacy indeed also still believe the EU accession process is the only meaningful leverage they have left; but importantly, because of their deeply engraved anti-statist stance in their feminist identity. This anti-statist stance forbids them to align themselves with the nationalist discourse even in the slightest. This is why, like their Russian colleagues but despite a subtler anti-gender environment, Serbian feminists' top priority too is to subvert the authoritarian hegemonic discourse. And they do so through three similar discursive means.

Like the liberal generation in Russia, the generation among the Serbian feminists, who were active in the 1990s, are particularly prone to frame knowledge-transfer positively. They do not reject the idea of knowledge-transfer in itself. Rather, they stress that knowledge-transfer was solicited and empowering because it gave them inspiration and practical tools to implement the aspirations they had and provided them with important emotional support in a time of felt helplessness and isolation during the war. This discursive element is also present among the younger generation with a particular focus on Western feminists' commitment to attentive listening and understanding their needs before offering targeted support.

Similar to the Russian case study, both older and younger generations of feminists also redefine knowledge-transfer altogether, making sense of transnational feminist community as a place of exchange instead. While members of the wartime generation remember Westerners as helpful

Conclusion

enablers for exchange and meetings between feminists from all over post-communist Europe, the younger generation highlights that feminist knowledge grows through conversation among equals who share “translation” of their realities in order to cross-fertilise their struggles. Indeed, the sense of belonging to the same community, in which all share the same vision, from which they draw strength and courage is an important element in this discursive strategy. A crucial part in this strategy is also to highlight their own socialist feminist heritage. Like their Russian peers, the younger generation of Serbian feminists is particularly interested in re-discovering a part of their history their foremothers did not pass on to them. In the case of Serbia, this is the “state socialist feminism” that was not part of the Drug-ca conference. Yet there is a key difference to the Russian case study. Serbian feminists insist that if anything this heritage was temporarily forgotten because their forerunners were at the time west-ward oriented. At no point do they blame this on unequal power relations within transnational feminism even though this is very much a line taken by feminists in neighbouring countries and which has been propagated in the most important Serbian feminist academic journal. I argued that because of Serbian feminists’ deep-rooted anti-statists stance, the arguments of their history haven fallen victim to a dominating Western episteme only does one thing: sound dangerously similar to the identity politics of the 1990s. They have made feminism their citizenship and therefore, unlike their neighbours, have no “feminism of their own” they want to defend against oppression.

The powerful radiance of the anti-statist and anti-nationalist identity even two decades after the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia ended is indeed the most surprising finding this thesis made. I started off thinking that rejection of critique of knowledge-transfer would likely be more or less the same in both case studies, even though the anti-gender discourse is not as accentuated in Serbia yet, already foreseeing that the anti-nationalist experience of the 1990s would probably account for it. I did not expect, however, rejection to be much more pronounced in Serbia because of it. The big difference to Russia is indeed that Serbian feminists to a large degree not

only frame knowledge-transfer as a positive experience or try to re-define it as an exchange, rather the majority of them vehemently refuses the very dichotomy underlying the hegemonic discursive edifice: the idea that there is a Western and a post-communist feminism. They see this assertion as an exclusively political strategy to divide feminists and undermine their solidarity even though there are plenty of similarities feminists from different geographical parts can identify and connect with, not least nowadays that the anti-gender backlash is a phenomenon that no longer halts at the borders of liberal democracies. Given their painful recent experience of being divided because of an ethno-nationalist discourse and regime, they are desperate to reject the very idea of a West/East dichotomy because the only strength they experienced in desolate times was that of unconditional unity. This is why they advocate for a trans-patriarchal feminist community in an attempt to discursively subvert the entire hegemonic regime.

In showing that in times of authoritarianism feminists' key concern is with subverting that regime and that critical theory's originally emancipatory claims are actually dangerously similar, even if involuntarily so, with the authoritarian regime's hegemonic discourse, I contributed to making critical theory "come full circle". When it acknowledges and takes into account the salience of domestic power relations in authoritarian times and the effect they have on feminists, it moves beyond a devastating West/East dichotomy that undermines feminists' struggle on the ground and opens space for renewed and yet better transnational feminist solidarity.

As such, it does not reject critical theory wholeheartedly. On the contrary, it pays tribute to the relevance of a commitment to analysing prevailing power relations. The novel difference it brings to the debate is that today the power relations we need to look at in order to fully understand feminists' needs and formulate an adequate critique are no longer (or perhaps momentarily, that rests to be seen) primarily those between the West and post-communist East, but those between an authoritarian regime and its feminist citizens, academics and activists. The rise of authoritarianism and its appropriation of critical discursive feminist tropes has fundamentally altered

Conclusion

the field and rendered arguments, as put forward by critical theory, inherently dangerous for feminists on the ground. It is against this light that the relevance of previously published critical work on transnational feminist in post-communist Europe has to be reassessed and it should be the insight that informs future critical scholarship. As Mohanty put it in the revisiting of her critical essay “Under Western Eyes”, it is time to move explicitly from critique to reconstruction, to identify the urgent issues facing feminists at the beginning of the twenty-first century (MOHANTY, 2003b: 221-222). She also clarifies that she always had “a vision of feminist solidarity across borders, even though this remained invisible to many readers”. Walby was one of the few who interpreted Mohanty’s ambition right already at the time; an ambition that was never only about particularities, but about “mutuality and coimplication” (MOHANTY, 2003b: 242):

“Mohanty and other postcolonial feminists are often interpreted as arguing only for situated knowledges in popularisations of their work. In fact, Mohanty is claiming, via a complex and subtle argument, that she is right and that (much) white Western feminism is not merely different, but wrong. In doing this she assumes a common question, a common set of concepts and, ultimately the possibility of, a common political project with white feminism.” (WALBY, 2000: 199)

This thesis does not argue for a refusal of critical scholarship, but a readjustment: to re-focus the gaze to common struggles and experiences of exploitation. And it posits that an undeniable central and unifying experience for this common political feminist project is the authoritarian backlash.

9.2 Avenues for future research

The central question this thesis raises for future research with regards to feminism in post-communist Europe is two-fold. On the one hand, it remains open whether we would discern similar tendencies of feminist critique of knowledge-transfer and indeed their outright rejection thereof in former communist countries that have developed into consolidated democracies, such as Slovakia for example. On the other hand, I also only touched upon the seeming difference between feminists in Serbia and those in other former Yugoslav republics. More research is needed to settle the question of whether

the legacy of anti-nationalist feminism really impacted Serbian feminists more in rejecting the argument of being silenced on behalf of Western feminism than their peers in Croatia or Kosovo for instance.

Another particularly important avenue for future investigations is to make sense of how exactly this new imaginary trans-patriarchal community avoids the pendulum swinging back completely, ie. for universalism to suddenly appear as completely unproblematic. Is this an imaginary of feminist community that we could make sense of using Valdez' definition of transnational cosmopolitanism (VALDEZ, 2019)? In her recent book, she finds a way to triangulate the circle of starting from the local and yet to speak of the transnational. She proposes a definition of the universal that is open and can be reopened to expand the realm of justice and to reduce forms of repressions on whichever form of place they occur. Or would Butler's notion of vulnerable, interdependent bodies united in resistance (BUTLER, 2016) be more appropriate, not least in light of a generalised anti-gender backlash that particularly targets women's reproductive rights? These are questions for future research to answer.

This research's focus on anti-gender backlash propagated in the name of defensive anti-Western imperialism can furthermore speak to other social movements' difficulties with other forms of co-optation both in authoritarian regimes but also in democracies that witness the rise of a strong far-right. In their attack against multiculturalism and liberal values, they not only manipulate the originally emancipatory frames of anti-imperialism and resistance against Othering. The far-right has for instance also made it part of its strategy to re-appropriate subversive tactics and forms of aesthetics in an attempt to trigger resonance in youth subcultures. Bempeza has shown that artists are therefore faced with a similar question that was raised in this thesis: can they still draw from the same subversive practices to convey their societal critique if they have been co-opted by those they oppose (BEMPEZA, 2020)?

Finally, particularly interesting and worth further investigation, which did not have space in this thesis, are also the different fault lines within

Conclusion

Russian and Serbian feminism that I discerned. One aspect that went beyond the scope of this thesis was that 'gender' among Russian academics is at times also used to install a hierarchy between themselves. In other words, there are traces of some Russian feminist scholars, most notably those who were affiliated to the urban, more prestigious research centres, wanting to distinguish themselves from "lesser" feminists in the regions. To do so they would refer to 'gender' and argue that some of their colleagues simply had not fully understood the concept and theory behind it because they had not had the chance to properly engage with Western texts. This would be particularly used in reference to those feminists, who preferred to conduct 'feminology' an alternative Russian term to women's studies. This indicates that sometimes Russian scholars not only insist that Western knowledge-transfer was positive and useful, but they indeed also use this notion to conduct Othering vis-à-vis domestic colleagues. Given that feminist researchers in the provinces notoriously suffer inferiority complexes and are in even more precarious job situations (GARSTENAUER, 2018: 73-74), it could well be that they are also more receptive to the resentful discourse propagated by the regime in an attempt to secure their position.

Even more promising, however, seems to be the generational struggle within each case study surrounding the question of which heritage is worth preserving at what time and based on what criteria. This would also entail looking at what younger generations of feminists expect from foremothers in terms of collective memory and how much they are ready to empathise with older generations' different priorities in light of a different political environment. Finally, it is also worth researching how the renewed attention to socialist feminism in both countries will influence not only feminist thought, but also activism in the future. For continue it will – ideally with respectful and informed transnational solidarity.

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Appendix 1: Short summary of interview participants

Russia

Olga Voronina (Moscow)

Voronina was part of one of the first Soviet feminist groups, called “Lotos”, which crucially contributed to the creation of the Moscow Centre for Gender Studies (MCGS) in 1990. In 1995 she became the executive director of the MCGS and continued working at the same time as a leading scientist at the Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). Voronina was part of the presidential Commission for Family and Demography under Yeltsin’s rule.

Natalya Pushkareva (Moscow)

Since 1987 Pushkareva has been working at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, which is a constituent of the History branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her doctoral thesis “Women’s situation in family and society in the Old Rus, X-XIII centuries”, which she defended at the same institute in 1985, is considered to mark the beginning of women’s studies in the Soviet Union. Having by now written over 400 publications she is viewed as one of the most influential feminists. She founded and still presides the Russian Association of Researchers in Women’s History.

Tatyana Klimenkova (Moscow)

Klimenkova was among the first members of the MCGS. For some period she served as its co-director together with Olga Voronina. She was part of the Club “Preobrazhenie”, which published the first official feminist journal of the same name. Klimenkova was also a member of the 1994 founded Information Centre of the Independent Women’s Forum. Most importantly, however, Klimenkova was among the first Russian feminists who used critical theory.

Elena Trofimova (Moscow)

Trofimova was among the founding members of the feminist Club “Preobrazhenie”, which was created in 1989. She also acted as an editor of the first feminist journal, which the Club established in 1993 and gave it the same name. The journal “Preobrazhenie” was published between 1993 and 1998 and had an important influence in feminist discourse.

Natalya Rimashevskaya (Moscow)

The very first to break with the taboo that the women’s question was solved in the 1980s, Rimashevskaya is one of the oldest feminists still alive today in Russia. She was crucial for the establishment of the Moscow Centre for Gender Studies. Her status as a senior researcher at the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies of the Population at the Russian Academy of Sciences in the early 1990s allowed her to lean in for the then young feminists Posadskaya,

Voronina and Zaharova and their endeavour to establish the first gender studies centre in the country.

Elena Kochkina (Moscow)

Kochkina was among the youngest when she joined the Moscow Centre for Gender Studies in 1994 when she was barely 30 years old. She has remained a member ever since and has also become a senior researcher at the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies of the Population at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Nadezhda Zamotaeva (Moscow)

In 1994, she co-funded the first organisation in Moscow whose aim was to fight against violence against women. She has been working at “Syostri” ever since and became its director in 2017 when the former director died of illness.

Katerina Bakhrenkova (Moscow)

Bakhrenkova joined “Syostri” in 2014. She first worked as a volunteer to raise the NGO’s visibility on social media channels in order to encourage Russian citizens to donate to the organisation, who had lost all its foreign funding. Since 2016 she is officially employed as a fundraiser.

Tatyana Suhareva (Moscow)

Suhareva is an openly feminist politician, who tried to run as a candidate for “Fair Russia” in the 2014 elections to the Moscow City Duma, but became the victim of a fabricated arrest. She since intermittently spent time in prison and under house arrest.

Tatyana Nikonova (Moscow)

Nikonova is a writer and journalist. Having worked for many years for the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Culture to design and moderate their website, she decided in 2012 to create her own website. Her blog “Sam Jone’s Diary” focuses on female sexuality and has a very large audience. She also very regularly publishes on this and other feminist issues in magazines and newspapers. In 2017 she furthermore did a highly successfully crowdfunding campaign to publish a textbook on sexuality for teenagers.

Ann Ivanova (Moscow)

Ivanova is a young feminist, who is part of the Moscow branch of the Left-Fem group.

Lolita Agamalova, Barbara Tereshchenko, Oksana Vasyakina (Moscow)

All three young feminists are artists. Agamalova decorates Moscow’s walls with graffiti of feminist content during the night. Tereshchenko is a painter, who mainly focuses on violence against women in her art. Vasyakina writes poetry and has published her work in the form of a samizdat like in old Soviet times.

Alexandra Talaver (Moscow)

Talaver is the founder of Urban Feminism, which focuses on gender problems in urban spaces, organises reading groups and publishes small magazines at the end of their discussion rounds in order to diffuse feminism among the young urban population.

Anna Temkina & Elena Zdravomyslova (St. Petersburg)

Temkina and Zdravomyslova together coordinate the Programme for Gender Studies at the European University in St. Petersburg, which is particularly known for its independent and critical research. After Pushkareva, Temkina and Zdravomyslova are those, who mostly published in the journal *Gendernye issledovaniya*.

Marianna Muravyeva (St. Petersburg)

Muravyeva joined Oxford Brookes University in 2013 after having worked as a fellow at the University of Helsinki for three years. She did her Diploma at the University of Lund in Sweden and was a visiting Professor at the University of Fairfield in the US. In addition, she worked for the United Nations Development Programme in Uzbekistan. Muravyeva not only criticised western feminism already during her PhD, which she defended in 1998 at the Saint Petersburg Pedagogical University, but also has a lot of experience as a scholar abroad, which makes her perspective a valuable one for this research.

Irina Yukina (St. Petersburg)

Yukina co-funded the St. Petersburg Centre for Gender Problems in 1993. The Centre was dissolved in 2004. Today she is an associate professor for Sociology and Chair of the Department of Gender Studies at the Nevsky Institute of Languages and Culture in St. Petersburg. She specialises in gender history and the history of Russian feminism. She is a board member of the National Russian Committee of the International Federation for Research in Women's History.

Alla Mitrofanova (St. Petersburg)

Mitrofanova was part of underground culture in Soviet times. In 1995 she co-funded the Cyber Fem-Club to introduce women into the new technology. The Club would also make the websites for the first women organisations and thus allow them to both increase their visibility and connect them with other organisations within and outside of Russia. Today the Club is no longer active, but she still has her Philosophical Café, which has a large feminist library and where small lectures and seminars are regularly held.

Olga Lipovskaya (St. Petersburg)

Lipovskaya was part of the dissident group Club-81 in the Soviet Union. She published the samizdat *Zhenskoe Chtenie (Women's Reading)* between 1988 and 1990. She later co-funded the St. Petersburg Centre for Gender Problems together Yukina and Hodyreva. Since the dissolution of the Centre in 1994 she has largely withdrawn from activism, but occasionally still holds lectures for

example in the feminist centre Eve's Ribs in order to tell younger feminists about her experience.

Natalya Hodyreva (St. Petersburg)

The trained psychologist co-funded the St. Petersburg for Gender Problems together with Yukina and Lipovskaya. She is also a funding member of the first Crisis Centre in St. Petersburg, which combats violence against women and which she directed until 2016.

Asya Hodyreva (St. Petersburg)

She is the daughter of Natalya Hodyreva and worked at the same Crisis Centre for many years: first as a volunteer and between 2006 and 2016 officially as a project manager. Her mother and herself left the Centre as a reaction to what they felt were intrusive and undemocratic interventions by foreign Swedish donors.

Lena Volk & Daria Apahonchich (St. Petersburg)

The two young feminists formed the YouTube Channel "Feminists Clarify" in May 2017. Together with six other feminists they regularly record short educational and awareness raising videos in order to make feminism more accessible and to fight its demonization.

Natalya Rybalko, Mariya Rahmaninova, Olessia Akimova (St. Petersburg)

All three young feminists were originally members of the Russian Socialist Party but were exacerbated by the fact that male leaders would always direct the agenda and silence their concerns as women's issues and thus secondary issues. As a reaction they created the platform Left-Fem, which gives a platform to feminists with a socialist or anarchist leaning. They organise small lectures and reading groups and try to make seminal books of feminist theory accessible by photocopying them and circulating them in their networks.

Bella Rapoport (St. Petersburg)

Rapoport is a very well known young feminist journalist. She gained notoriety after her article discussing the problem of using the word "tyolochka" (small calf) to refer to women, was read by over 300,000 people, which exposed her to much online abuse. She has since retreated (also because she has started a Masters degree in Anthropology at the European University of St. Petersburg) and mainly publishes her thoughts on her public Facebook page.

Ekatarina Borodina (St. Petersburg)

Borodina is a newly appointed lecturer at the Gender Studies Centre of the European University of St. Petersburg, who was trained by Temkina and Zdravomyslova. Her research focuses on the gender dimension of health care provision, in particular maternity.

Olga Shnyrova (Ivanovo)

Since 1996 Shnyrova is the executive director of the prestigious Ivanovo Centre for Gender Studies (ICGS). She was also part of the cross-regional civil organisation “Women leadership and partnership” and she is a board member of the National Russian Committee of the International Federation for Research in Women’s History.

Olga Khasbulatova (Ivanovo)

Khasbulatova was the first to receive state funding from the Ministry of Education for a cross-university programme called “Women’s of Russia” in 1994. She also founded the influential journal *Zhenshhina v rossijskom obshhestve* in 1994 and still acts as its main editor. She is part of the ruling party “United Russia” and was the First Deputy Chairman of the Ivanovo Oblast Government between 2003 and 2014.

Natalya Gafizova (Ivanovo)

Gafizova was a co-founder of the ICGS and still acts as an active member. More importantly, she is the co-editor of the journal *Zhenshhina v rossijskom obshhestve*.

Alyona Makarova (Ivanovo)

Makarova is a professor in History and Culturology at the Ivanovo State University. Having finished her PhD in 2007 she represents the younger generation of Russian feminist academics. Makarova is an active member of the ICGS.

Valentina Uspenskaya (Tver)

Uspenskaya did her PhD in Philosophy at the Yaroslavl State University. Since 1999 she is the executive Director of the Centre for Women’s History and Gender Studies at the Tver State University. Moreover, she co-organised the First Summer School for Women’s and Gender Studies in 1996, which was an important event for the institutionalisation and dispersion of feminism in contemporary Russia.

Serbia

Sonja Drljević (Belgrade)

She is one of the founding members of the first Yugoslav feminist organisation “Women and Society”, which was created as a result of the Three Yugoslav Gatherings that were held in 1987, 1989 and 1990. “Women and Society” was later at the root of the establishment of the first SOS Hotline for victims of domestic abuse for which she worked for many years. Drljević also co-funded the Women’s Studies Centre in 1991. She is largely considered as an icon of Yugoslav feminism, who left very big shoes to fill when she passed away in 2017.

Daša Duhaček (Belgrade)

Duhaček co-funded the Women's Studies Centre and acts as its Director of since 1999. It was thanks to her efforts that the Centre, which was originally only an NGO, got incorporated into the Faculty of Political Science in 2001 and that students can today officially graduate in Gender Studies.

Lepa Mladenović (Belgrade)

Mladenović was very young when she attended the Drug-ca Conference in 1978. It was the impetus for her future, tireless feminist activism. She was the funder of the Autonomous Women's Centre (against Sexual Violence), which she created she heard that war rape was systematically used in the Bosnian war. She directed the Centre until 2017 when she retired. Throughout her life she was also a regular activist with Women in Black.

Staša Zajović (Belgrade)

Another very highly acclaimed feminists: the founder of Women in Black and who has since its foundation not left a month without conducting protests on Belgrade's main square. She was first a member of the Anti-War Coalition but soon felt that women's concerns were not taken seriously, which is why she created an explicitly feminist pendant.

Slavica Stojanović (Belgrade)

Stojanović is also part of the wartime generation, who originally joined Women in Black and is still today a regular protester. Her long-time experience at the Soros foundation furthermore helped her to form the form the Reconstruction Women's Fund in 2004, which she did in order to facilitate the Serbian feminist movement's sustainable development.

Vera Litričin (Belgrade)

The trained gynaecologist joined the Autonomous Women's Centre when she heard about the war rapes in Bosnia.

Maša Maležević (Belgrade)

Maležević is trained ethnographer and writer and had participated at the Drug-ca conference and was an activist with WiB. She has since published on topics like deforestation, menstruation, weddings to see how patriarchy manifests in everyday life.

Nadežda Radović (Belgrade)

Was an analyst at the Central Party Committee during the Communist period and later at the Institute for Social Research. In the 1990s she joined as a volunteer for the first SOS hotline in Belgrade and was involved with the women's party ŽEST.

Biljana Branković (Belgrade)

Branković was one of the first to join the SOS Hotline as a volunteer. She later went on to work as an independent researcher and consultant specialising in

violence against women, in particular the advocacy of the Istanbul Convention.

Biljana Dojcinović (Belgrade)

She is a professor of Serbian literature, specialising in women's and feminist writing. Besides her activity at the Belgrade State University she also regularly taught at the Women's Studies Centre between the mid 1990s to the mid 2010s. Most importantly, she is the one that translated "gender" into the Serbian word "rod".

Adriana Zaharijević (Belgrade)

Zaharijević is the best-known feminist theorist in and outside of Serbia. She was trained at the Women's Studies Centre where she worked for a while as a researcher before getting becoming a research associate of the prestigious Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in 2013.

Katarina Lončarević (Belgrade)

She studied together with Zaharijević at the Women's Studies Centre, where she has stayed since as a researcher and lecturer.

Ivana Pantelić (Belgrade)

Pantelić also studies together with Zaharijević and Lončarević but later went on to doing a PhD in History, focusing on women's history, in particular female partisan fighters in Yugoslavia. She works to date as a researcher at the Institute of Contemporary History.

Maja Stajčić (Belgrade)

She is the director of one of the most influential donors in Serbia, the Swedish organisation Kvinna till Kvinna, since 2008.

Milica Mirazić (Belgrade)

Mirazić both works as a programme office at Kvinna till Kvinna Serbia and as a PhD candidate at the Women's Studies Centre. She was previously a member of the lesbian network LABRIS.

Milica Gudović (Belgrade)

Gudović founded her own grassroots organisation "Women at Work" in 1996, which had to be closed down in 2012 due to insufficient funding. She has since been at the margins of activism but works as a communications manager for the small organisation ATINA.

Violeta Anđelković (Belgrade)

She is a long-time and regular activist with Women in Black. In addition, she had funded her own small organisation "Women's Indok Centre", whose aim was to keep track of the Yugoslav and later Serbian feminist movement, by preserving valuable primary sources, in particular media coverage of the movement. Due to lack of space and time, she had to dissolve the

organisation and donated all major documents to the Women's Studies Centre for a future history of the movement to be written.

Saša Pokrajac (Belgrade)

Pokrajac worked as a counsellor, trainer and co-ordinator at the Autonomous Women's Centre between 2003 and 2010. She has since self-excluded from feminist activism.

Ksenija Perišić (Belgrade)

Similar to Pokrajac she worked at the Autonomous Women's Centre for a long time for almost ten years before opening her own psychotherapy cabinet. She still occasionally participates in protests organised by Women in Black.

Mirjana Bobić (Belgrade)

A trained journalist, Bobić got involved in feminist activism when the Reconstruction Women Fund was about to be created in 2004 and still had an open position. When Slavica Stojanović retired in 2017, Bobić took over as director.

Jelena Višnjić (Belgrade)

Višnjić holds a PhD in Gender Studies from Novi Sad University. After finishing her studies she moved to Belgrade, where she works as a lecturer at the Women's Studies Centre. Most important however, she created the grassroots feminist festival BeFem, which hosts every year tens of talks, lectures, performances and generally makes feminism more accessible and less hierarchical.

Milica Batrićević (Belgrade)

The young feminist has been a regular volunteer for organising the BeFem festival since 2011. At the time of research she was finishing her Masters degree in Sociology. She also

Jovana Netković (Belgrade)

Netković, a trained journalist, regularly helps organising BeFem. She first participated at the same time as Batrićević, in 2011. She also undertook a one-year course in "Alternative gender studies" at the Women's Studies Centre, which the centre offers as a course outside of the university's official curricula and which is also available for those, who are not currently enrolled.

Sanja Dojkić (Belgrade)

Together with Netković and Batrićević this young feminist and journalist has been co-ordinating BeFem festivals between 2011 and 2017. She was also enrolled in the "Alternative gender studies" course at the Women's Studies Centre in order to increase her knowledge of feminist theory.

Nađa Duhaček (Belgrade)

She is the daughter of Daša Duhaček, the director of the Women's Studies Centre, where she has been working as a co-ordinator since 2016. She has also founded her own small organisation "Science is of female gender", which promotes female scientists' visibility both in the past and present.

Sanja Pavlović (Belgrade)

This young feminist has worked for several years as a volunteer at the Autonomous Women's Centre and regularly participates at Women in Black protests. In 2017 together with Miloš Urošić, she published a book with translations of the work of the most influential (Western) radical feminists.

Natalja Laptošević (Belgrade)

She was an active volunteer at the Autonomous Women's Centre in 2016 before embarking on an MA degree at the Central European University in Budapest. She also participated in the Feminist Caravan, a project that unites young feminists from all over Europe, who then travel for several weeks together across the continent to participate at feminist themed events and festivals.

Jelena Memet (Kruševac)

Memet founded her own feminist organisation, the Alternative Girl's Centre in 2013, after working for more than five years as a counsellor for the SOS hotline in Kruševac. She also did the "Alternative gender studies" course at the Women's Studies Centre.

Senžana Jakovljević (Kruševac)

Senžana Jakovljević is the founder and director of the Peščanika, which has been helping marginalised women, in particular Roma, lesbians and victims of abuse since 2003.

Jasmina Todorović (Kruševac)

This young feminist, who is herself of Roma origin, has been working at Peščanika since 2009.

Vera Kurtić (Niš)

Kurtić is also of Roma origin and established her own feminist NGO, "Women's Space" in 1998. She also regularly works as a consultant on Roma women issues for the EU.

Snezana Stojanović & Mitić, Tamara (Niš)

Both Stojanović and Mitić are long-time employee at "Women's Space".