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Open Forum – TERF and anti-trans initiatives in Russia:  
is there a connection?

Yana Kirey-Sitnikova

Independent researcher

[yana.kirey.sitnikova@gmail.com](mailto:yana.kirey.sitnikova@gmail.com)

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### **TERF and anti-trans initiatives in Russia: is there a connection?**

Trans-exclusive radical feminism (TERF) was imported onto the Russian soil around 2013, when trans people became more visible and I introduced transfeminism in a number of blog posts, which later were compiled into the first Russian-language book on transfeminism (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2016). In 2016, a large survey of feminists (n = 1364)<sup>1</sup> revealed that 10.2% respondents identified as TERF and 4.4% as transfeminists (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2018). The TERF movement was shown to consist of individuals with higher income and educational level living in big cities, lesbians, and those more involved in feminist activism. Knowing a trans person was not a predictor of trans inclusion, many feminists joined the TERF movement after meeting a trans person supporting patriarchal gender norms (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2016). The most vigorous debates between these groups occurred on the Russian blogging platform “LiveJournal” (LJ)<sup>2</sup> and consisted largely of translations and interpretations of texts by US feminists (Ibid.). As I described elsewhere, self-colonisation in the form of indiscriminate borrowing of terms and concepts from the Anglosphere is a prominent characteristic of all Russian progressive gender movements (Kirey-Sitnikova, 2020). After 2016, I moved on to other topics and did not follow these debates. This small contribution is aimed as an update on TERF from that time till now.

As it appears, after 2016, not only I but other participants became less involved in online trans vs. TERF debates. I see two possible explanations: technological change and growing conservatism of the state.

As to the first explanation, I propose transition of internet users from personal computers to smartphones accompanied by a transition from blogging platforms such as LJ and webforums to social networking platforms such as VKontakte, Facebook, and Telegram. The latter are less suitable for long texts and nuanced discussions. Thus, the exodus from LJ to social networks led to a loss in the depth of debates and their near complete cessation. As a result, many LJ accounts of TERFs (ex. @accion-positiva, @lili-dunker) became defunct between 2017 and 2020. The largest LJ community devoted to feminism in general (@feministki) also lost popularity. A similar trend could be observed when online trans communities moved from webforums to social networks.

Second, throughout this period, the country was moving in a more conservative and authoritarian direction, forcing feminists to switch to more acute problems than trans issues. In 2017, Russian lawmakers decriminalized domestic violence: beating, which used to be a criminal offense, is now punishable by a small fine. In 2019, pro-feminist policy-makers drafted a bill “On prevention of domestic violence,” which caused harsh polemics and failed to be officially introduced in the State Duma. In 2020, a new Russian Constitution was adopted. It became famous for “zeroing out” Vladimir Putin’s previous presidential terms and defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Conservative tendencies intensified following the onset of the Russian “special military operation” (SMO) against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which caused geopolitical tensions with the West. On November 9, 2022, Vladimir Putin signed a decree on “the fundamentals of state policy on preservation and strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values.” Also in November 2022, the State Duma passed a law that extended the 2013 ban on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships” to all age groups.<sup>3</sup> In September 2022 and February

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<sup>1</sup> The study was aimed at uncovering the attitudes of Russian-language feminists and LGBTQI individuals towards feminist language reforms in Russian. The respondents self-recruited to fill an online questionnaire. Their self-identification was asked as part of demographic data collection.

<sup>2</sup> LiveJournal was created in the USA in 1999 and bought by a Russian company in 2007. In the mid-2000s, it became the largest online platform for discussion of social and political issues in Russia. Users could create online communities on specific topics, including various types of feminism. Since the early 2010s, LiveJournal has been losing competition to social networks.

<sup>3</sup> The 2013 version of the law prohibited the propaganda of “non-traditional sexual relationships” (which could be interpreted as sharing any information about LGBTQ) among minors. While only a few individuals were charged an administrative fine, the law’s effect was mostly indirect causing the

2023, lawmakers introduced bills banning propaganda of voluntary childlessness (childfree), although none of these attempts have been successful yet. In April 2023, a bill equating feminism with extremist ideologies was introduced. According to its author, MP Oleg Matveichev, Russian feminists are “agents of the West, their activities go against the presidential decree on support of traditional values.” He also blamed Russian feminists for opposing the SMO (Shcherbakova, 2023). In the latter he was right: many feminists joined initiatives such as “Feminist Anti-War Resistance” or left the country as a gesture of opposing the country’s political course. In this context, Vladimir Putin’s last year’s defense of J. K. Rowling, a British writer famous for promoting TERF agenda (Sauer, 2022), should not be interpreted as a manifestation of support for TERF or any other branch of feminism, but put on par with support of Western right-wing figures such as the French politician Marine Le Pen and former US president Donald Trump.

The extent to which trans issues lost importance in the feminist agenda can be demonstrated on the example of an anti-trans bill, which became law in July 2023 (Federal Law №386 from 24.07.2023). In its final form, the law prohibited gender-affirming medical care and modified a clause permitting legal gender recognition making them accessible only to intersex people. The lawmakers explained the need for such a ban by claiming that the West was trying to undermine Russia’s traditional values and defense capacity, but they also used essentially TERF argumentation that sex is coded in the genome and cannot be modified by changing appearance or genitalia (Parlamentskaya gazeta, 2022). Not only TERFs were not involved in the drafting of the bill but they almost did not comment on it. I specifically checked Vkontakte groups and Telegram channels of Russian TERFs (ex. @viciousterf, @men\_are\_not\_needed) to find out that none published any information on this anti-trans bill. Instead, they preferred to repost and critically interpret news about the advancement of trans rights in the West. In the situation of pressure on all progressive movements, supporting the state’s persecution of trans people was probably assessed as politically unwise even by TERFs. A comment to one of the few posts about the law reflects the general attitude of TERFs:

The law is shit because it is adopted by patriarchal traditionalists and moral deviants who have no idea of our discussions. And gays with lesbians will be next. And then feminists, childfree, and you can continue this list with everyone they do not like (Vorobieva, 2023).

To conclude, in contrast to findings of other essays in this special issue, no direct relationship between the Russian TERF movement and anti-trans initiatives was found. Both the feminist and trans movements are subject to pressure on behalf of the authorities and have more pressing issues to resolve instead of opposing each other.

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atmosphere of hatred. LGBTQ websites had to put a 18+ mark. The 2022 law prohibited the propaganda also among adults. Prohibition on the propaganda of “the change of sex” was also added.

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