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Russian 'De/Fault' Feminism, or the Phenomenon of Post-Soviet Post-Feminism

GALINA MIAZHEVICH

Abstract

Russian feminism remains undertheorised and overlooked by international scholarship, partially reflecting the (post-)colonial hierarchies of knowledge production. This article introduces the notion of post-Soviet post-feminism (PSPF), highlighting its dimensions and unpicking points of tension and ambivalence. By employing a distinct socio-cultural approach, including Lotman's model of inter-cultural dialogue, the article reflects on the uniqueness of the Soviet emancipatory project and the complexity of Russian contemporary feminism(s). Engaging longitudinal media data, the study exposes PSPF's overarching manifestation unified by a partial 'discursive erasure' of the Soviet past and (un)productive and, at times, simplistic applications of Western approaches.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET feminism focuses on either the late Soviet period (Ruthchild 1983; Zdravomyslova 2014; Solovei 2021) or 1990–2000s Western feminist theorising of the Russian context (Kay 2002; Hemment 2007; Johnson 2009) targeting gender-based violence and relevant Western-funded NGOs in Russia. The post-2010 feminist movement is predominantly understood as activism akin to Pussy Riot's performativity (Gapova 2015; Turbine 2015) and/or feminism built around the opposition to an increasingly conservative reactionary regime (Sperling 2015; Kondakov 2017; Solovei 2021; Perheentupa 2022; Surman & Rossman 2022). Still, these historic area studies and social movement-informed approaches do not do justice to the complexity of contemporary feminisms in Russia.

This article addresses the gap by employing media and cultural studies frameworks and reflecting on how the Soviet 'emancipation' project has informed the contemporary phenomenon of what I call post-Soviet post-feminism (PSPF).[1] An interrelated underlying

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[1]Despite the author's self-reflexive positionality, this analysis might still represent simplifications and, at times, generalisations to make its argument more clear-cut.

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goal is to contribute to the debate on non-Western feminism as both 'highly local and deeply transnational in the current landscape of neoliberalism' (Dosekun *et al*. 2023).

Categorising feminism along geographic lines is not new. Other typologies are based on types of feminism, such as radical, liberal or post-feminist. Here I propose to productively combine the two frameworks. The contested notion of post-feminism combines feminism and anti-feminism within the mediated neoliberal framework of self-improvement, individual agency and equal rights taken at face value and instrumentalised for individual success. It frequently discounts previous collectivist political struggles for equal rights and generates claims that feminism has already been achieved, thereby making further iterations of the movement obsolete.[2]

The post-Soviet element pertains to society still dealing with socialist cultural trauma (Brandtstadler 2007; Suverina 2022) coupled with a 'profound ambiguity' regarding the Soviet past (Dobrenko & Shcherbenok 2011), including the Soviet emancipatory project, which is marked by diverging and, at times, contradictory views (Sasunkevich 2021). Thus, the notion of PSPF highlights the complexity of feminism across the former Soviet Union (FSU), without simplifying or homogenising it. It is an umbrella notion that does not align with existing typologies but elucidates the socio-cultural specificity of the post-Soviet feminisms.

Here PSPF is a mainstream mediated discursive phenomenon: a set of prevailing narratives circulating in the mass media and popular culture, such as cinema and videoblogs (vlogs). Whilst activist and grassroot feminisms have a highly contested visibility, mainstream popular feminisms are more adept at exploiting 'Russian media as a space of appearance' (Edenborg 2017, p. 48). Thus, the article's focus on the mainstream discourses of feminism visible in the public sphere determines its particular focus and dataset, which is of a more hybrid, neoliberal nature. The 'digitally mediated' feminist sources and personalities are identified *via* extensive longitudinal Russian media monitoring.

The multisite data include the 'supercultural' sphere of the creative industries and mass media (Hesford 2005) covering five years (2017–2022) of digitally mediated feminism (YouTube, Telegram, Instagram), relevant media events (scandals) and personalities. The key figures range from talent-based celebrities, such as the journalist Ksenia Sobchak, the Eurovision performer Manizha and the artist Regina Todorenko, to so-called influencers, including 'older' generation vloggers such as Nadezhda Strelez and younger ones such as Tatiana Mingalimova and Zalina Marshekulova.

By applying Lotman's model of inter-cultural dialogue (1990) to multisite data, this article unpicks the features and prominent issues of PSPF, highlights points of tension or ambivalence, and spells out type and intensity of contradictions within PSPF. The analysis examines the linguistic and visual aspects of mediated feminisms and their interdiscursivity and looks at the media texts as a form of social practice. This discussion—using elements of discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995; Wodak 2004) and cultural studies approaches (Lotman 1990; Bhabha 1994)—maps the key trends and deviations that illustrate the complexity of PSPF.

The article starts by conceptualising the dual 'post-' aspect of PSPF and clarifies my application of Lotman's model (1990). Following Hesford's (2005) take on the (second

[2]'Post-feminism', *Oxford Reference*, available at: https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100339445, accessed 20 September 2024.

wave) lesbian figure, whose cultural presence as transgressive and repressed phenomenon still haunts present-day feminism, I apply 'haunting' to the Soviet legacy of the female 'emancipation' project, asserting that it still informs (even subconsciously or *via* negation) current discussions and memories, and indicates its (unfulfilled) possibilities. It is presumed that PSPF cannot be equated with its Western counterparts despite its apparent outward similarity, since it is highly idiosyncratic and differs in its genealogy. Decisively, the article's title of 'de/fault' feminism sums up persistent regional attitudes towards feminism as 'achieved' in the USSR or else as radical and predominantly foreign, and therefore an alien feminist movement, which is seen as defective, irrelevant or even harmful.

Theoretical and historical overview

To start with, the prefix 'post-' generally means something that occurs 'after' or following something else with a different potentiality, and it presupposes the dissimilar, transformed nature of the phenomenon in question. It can be of a different modality: either positive or negative. In this case, it implies a new kind of feminism, signalling a 'temporal or historical shift' and highlighting its regenerated nature with a productive modality. It can also represent something undesirable or 'anti-', such as anti-feminism, or a 'backlash against feminism' (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020). This article deals with the double overlapping of 'post-', both aspects of which are inevitably entangled but are discussed in turn: first, 'post-Soviet', and then 'post-feminist'.

'Post-' in 'post-Soviet'

'Post-Soviet' is a term still widely used to define phenomena and processes in the region. Some scholars argue that its ability to maintain its currency, despite the USSR's collapse more than 30 years ago, is due to 'westplaining' and the coloniality of knowledge (Tlostanova 2018). This might partly be the case. However, insights into the socio-cultural aspects of the post-Soviet transformation show that these types of changes take significantly longer, in line with Brandtstadter's theorisation (2007) on post-socialism as a cultural process, thus making post-Sovietness still relevant. For instance, Suverina (2022) highlights the sustained presence of socio-cultural trauma in the art scene, which affects both cinematic production and its reception.

Furthermore, the ongoing prolonged cross-, intra- and inter-cultural dialogue between the 'foreign' and 'domestic' or receiving culture (Lotman 1990) points out a certain ordering within. According to Lotman's framework, there are four stages of cross-cultural dialogue,[3] with the last stage assuming such a close intersection and amalgamation of

[3]Stage 1 is a wholesale, uncritical imitation of certain foreign characteristics, followed by a return to abandoned and neglected local practices that are subsequently adapted and incorporated into the new culture (Stage 2). Next, these amalgamated meanings and innovations are restructured and posited as authentically domestic culture (Stage 3), with the progression to an entirely new, text-generating structural mechanism (Stage 4). Importantly, when penetrating the boundaries of the receiving culture, the codes of the foreign culture, initially perceived as alien, eventually restructure the codes of the receiving culture. Simultaneously, the 'imported' codes themselves are transformed during this translation process. In this manner, both receiving and transmitting cultures acquire the potential for 'revitalization' (Lotman 1990, pp. 16–7).

(what previously constituted) foreign and local culture that it produces a new and unique combination, which is neither local nor foreign. Whilst Lotman's primary sources were cultural (literary and other) texts, here the term 'text' includes mediated feminist discourses. The transitions between stages are not clear-cut and may overlap with one another. Thus, PSPF represents a particular configuration of meanings and ideas related to feminism that is unique to a certain moment in time and space. This is what Yangeldina (2023) calls a 'feminist chronotope'.

When applied to the case of the post-Soviet Russian feminism, the process starts with Stage 1 roughly coinciding with the early 1990s, when imported texts 'keep their strangeness' and are 'of divine origin' (Lotman 1990, p. 146), and gradually enters Stage 2, where there is a mutual restructuring of imported and local texts. After the fall of the USSR, foreign/Western feminism acted as the inspiration for distinct new modes of uncritically 'imported' feminism (Stage 1). This was followed by a gradual move from pure imitation to 'translation' of other 'foreign' feminism(s) concurrent with the revival of the previously discarded elements of domestic feminism, which got (re)interpreted as an organic continuation of old practices (Stage 2). This pertains, for instance, to the return and revaluation of the Soviet legacy including somewhat uncritical recalling of its egalitarian model's attainments.

During Stage 3, imported ideas found their 'true heartland' in Russia (Lotman 1990, p. 147). This stage is informed by the intensified and digitally enabled transnational information flows and proliferation of various media platforms in Russia. Here the revised domestic mediated version of feminism—imbued with the reprocessed 'foreign' connotations—began to be actively mediated by celebrities, influencers and other public figures. At this stage in Lotman's model, the core of the imported knowledge is separated from its original culture to be properly implemented in the receiving culture context. In Stage 4, the imported ideas are entirely dissolved into the receiving culture, which, in turn, starts creating new texts based on 'an original structural model' (Lotman 1990, p. 147) that also acquires transnational resonance. In the case of Russian feminism, it is hypothesised that PSPF is currently predominantly located at Stage 3: the imported and reprocessed 'foreign' ideas are still being cleansed of the originating culture's 'distortions' but are yet to change beyond recognition. This is occurring concurrently with the reworking and restructuring of 'Soviet' egalitarian ideas, as will be made clear in the data analysis.

Another question is what this 'post-Soviet' phenomenon represents. In the case of post-Soviet feminism, I hypothesise the emergence of a complex mixture of the Soviet legacy and contemporary domestic socio-cultural elements with those adopted from other contexts (conceivably, predominantly Western) in the process of an ever-increasing cross-cultural dialogue and transnationalisation of feminism (Dosekun 2020). This is not to say that post-Soviet feminism can easily be defined *via* a set of features. It represents a complex phenomenon and lacks homogeneity. At the same time, one can talk about certain trends or unique characteristics, as this article sets out to demonstrate. However, before doing that, the second part of the notion should be scrutinised.

'Post-' in 'post-feminism'

Post-feminism is a contested notion, especially within the Anglo-American tradition. The variety of definitions include: (i) 'popular feminism' (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020); (ii)

'platform feminism' (Singh 2018); or (iii) 'fourth wave' feminism[4] (Munro 2013), which reflect the role of: (i) popular culture; (ii) the digital affordances for feminism; and (iii) dis/continuity from previous waves, respectively. There is also an acknowledgment of growing internal contradictions within normative feminisms. Some scholars (Gill 2016) suggest that we should now talk about 'post-post-feminism'; others (Dosekun 2020) stress feminism's flexible and transnational nature, as it allows for accommodating difference within post-feminism.

Generally, post-feminism foregrounds individualism, choice and autonomy, or what Rottenberg calls 'hyper-individualizing neoliberal feminism' (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020). It investigates how the neoliberal logic—with its renewed emphasis on the individual—subverts or/and appropriates the feminist agenda (Fraser 2013) by narrowing the set of issues and weakening the collective solidarities distinctive of the previous waves. Furthermore, oppressive structural inequalities are presented as no longer relevant due to advances in gender (and racial) equality (McRobbie 2008; Mukherjee 2011), thus overlooking how women's equality and liberation within the neoliberal capitalist subsystem is largely informed by white masculinist thought (Fraser 2013).

Post-feminism framed as 'postfeminist sensibility' (Gill 2007) or 'popular feminism' constitutes another take on feminism. This focuses on the iterations enabled by digital platformativity, which entail greater visibility and potential to challenge neoliberal ideology. Yet feminism is also being trivialised, as its visibility is informed and permeated by popular and celebrity culture, reminiscent of Angela McRobbie's (2008) famous formulation that feminism has to be 'taken into account' yet 'repudiated', as popular culture simultaneously acknowledged and undermines feminism.

Finally, post-feminism differs in other parts of the world (Dosekun *et al*. 2023), including the divisions within the Global North (not to mention the Global South, which is beyond the scope of this article). For instance, the liberal US feminism, which is deeply embedded in capitalism, differs from British feminism, which tends to emphasise collectivist and socialist principles. British feminism's greater focus on collective action, social justice frequently pushes back against the erosion of women's rights by individual identity politics. In turn, there are calls to review the uniformity of the societal assumptions behind the Nordic model of gender equality (Kolehmainen 2022). This precludes generalising what constitutes feminism in Western democracies. The article argues, however, that the case of PSPF is more peculiar.

PSPF

In contrast to the more grassroots-driven emancipation of women in Western contexts involving campaigns for individual rights and freedoms, in the Soviet Union, arguably, neither feminists nor women in general were the authors of the Soviet gender equality project and agenda (Kollontai 1946). Consequently, applying the terminology of first, second and third waves of feminism to Soviet feminism is inappropriate. Further, Gapova

[4]Whilst the third wave feminism (1990s) focuses on intersectionality, individual empowerment and related issues, the fourth wave feminism (from 2012 onwards) foregrounds the digital realm and the debates around body image, sexual harassment, misogyny, and so forth.

(2015, p. 8) deduces that female oppression in the USSR was seen as a 'by-product' of class inequality (understood in Marxist terms), in contrast to the politics of individualism and recognition of characteristics in the second and subsequent waves, which drew attention to broader structures of inequality (conditioned by patriarchy). These idiosyncrasies of Soviet feminism imply that post-feminism here cannot be equated with its Western counterparts.

Feminism in Russia is frequently and strategically utilised by the micro-, meso- and macro-celebrities as part of their brand,[5] thus resembling the processes within the popular Western post-feminism. However, the article argues that it is not the same mode of feminism. Even though post-socialist modes of 'feminine' representation have similar 'contours' or manifestations of post-feminism (such as promoting an individual entrepreneurial subject who can 'have it all'), they are marked by a difference in 'genealogy or the reasons for resonance' (Kaneva 2015, p. 8). This article delves more deeply into this apparent outward similarity and the internal difference, as well as the universal and particular features of PSPF.

So, although on the surface PSPF might manifest within the same narratives and dilemmas behind women's choices and agency as in the neoliberal economy (such as body positivity), these manifestations occur in an economic, political and socio-cultural environment that diverges from that of Western neoliberalism. To start with, it is informed by the double bind of the Soviet emancipatory legacy and contemporary neoconservative/neotraditional gender order. Secondly, it occurs within an intensified cross-cultural dialogue with contemporary inflections from trans/national feminist discourses. Thirdly, the recent geopolitical upheavals (the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and social-economic militarisation, and so forth), reinvigorate and complicate the feminist movements *via* a feminist anti-war resistance movement, *Feministskoe antivoennoe soprotivlenie* (FAR).[6] In this article, the focus is on the first two factors. Prior to the analysis, the key elements of the post-/Soviet context with regards to the status of women in society are outlined.

Context

The introduction of pioneering policies mainly aimed at integrating women into the workplace after the October 1917 Revolution constituted a unique set of conditions and ideological framings of the 'woman question' in the USSR. The 1920s discussions—built around the need for legal changes to family norms, the formation of a 'new way of life', the emancipation and enculturing (*okul'turivanie*) of women, the rejection of bourgeois/capitalist attitudes towards sexuality (Kon & Riordan 1993) and participation in public life—were novel and even radical for that time (Kollontai 1946). However, such politics was inevitably embedded in (discursive) state power structures. Women were implicitly

[5]Micro-influencers typically have dozens to hundreds (up to 10,000) of followers; meso-influencers have up to a million followers with national visibility; and macro-influencers are often celebrities with over one million followers (Conde & Casais 2023).

[6]'Voina nachinaetsya doma. Broshura o FAS', *FAR, 2024*, available at: https://femagainstwar.notion.site/3d40849f63374e3dbe9b7c8ef98144cb, accessed 28 November 2024.

expected to appreciate these new opportunities that liberated them from the burden of traditional patriarchal modes of life (*byt*) through the state-supported model of the 'working mother' (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2003).[7]

However, there was a mismatch between the 'symbolic glorification' of socialist women (Kaneva 2015) and their actual participation in public life (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2003). Despite the nominal equality and the quotas that ensured female participation in politics, power remained in male hands. Moreover, the late Soviet period was marked by a general dissatisfaction with the stagnating order and mounting problems such as the diminished quality of social support in childcare and healthcare, amongst other things, which manifested in dissident underground movements including feminist activism (Ruthchild 1983). Alongside the rise of academic feminism in the 1990s in Russia (Zdravomyslova 2014; Perheentupa 2022), the societal perception of feminism as 'foreign' or alien—in part due to its association with Western human rights activism (Turbine 2015)—persisted.

The upheavals following *perestroika* and the dissolution of the USSR led to substantial societal shifts, including redefining the 'woman' question. Changes in gender politics happened against the backdrop of economic chaos, rising societal fragmentation and political passivity marked by the crisis of masculinity and the narratives of women as victims of political and economic changes (Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2003). Despite the liberalisation of the media and cultural industries (Miazhevich 2022a) allowing for diverse representations, the increasingly gendered neoconservative/authoritarian regime[8] favoured the 'naturalisation' of gender roles. The amplification of the traditional values rhetoric post-2013 (Muravyeva 2017; Miazhevich 2022b) led to further relegation of women's rights (Turbine 2015) particularly noticeable in the decriminalisation of the Domestic Violence Act (Walker 2017).

Finally, Russia in the 2000s was marked by a cult of glamour, a redefinition of traditional gender contracts with 'sponsor' and 'single mother' models replacing traditional marriage arrangements (Temkina & Rotkirch 2002), and an influx of transnational (popular) feminisms. The growing affordability and availability of the internet in Russia enabled access to new media formats within global media flows, thereby increasing the visibility of feminism. However, only certain gendered identities and ideological positions were deemed desirable or permissible in the re-centralising Russian context with its multifarious state-regulated mediascape (Miazhevich 2022a, 2022b). Consequently, only those highly visible and prevailing discursive manifestations of feminism in Russia form the core of this dataset.

Methodology

This analysis is based on the monitoring of overarching manifestations of feminism within a particular socio-cultural and historical context. This approach, 'conjunctural analysis', was pioneered by the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

[7]For a further overview of pre- and post-World War II Soviet gender politics, see Perheentupa (2022); for the unique arrangement of Soviet party-state controlled femininities and a gendered 'etacratic' order, see Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2003).

[8]See, Sperling (2015) on the masculinity of political subjectivity in Russia.

(CCCS) under Stuart Hall in the 1970s. As Hakim states: 'Methodological dexterity is a hallmark of conjunctural analysis, precisely because the specificity of each cultural formation and the conjunctures in which each emerges require different theoretical, epistemological and methodological tools to make sense of them' (Hakim 2019, p. 5). The conjuncture here is the global context of neoliberalism enmeshed with the Russian subaltern empire (Morozov 2015). Russia's subalternity implies self-colonisation manifested in the selective import of Western models and a simultaneous resentment of its peripheral position in Europe, tying its nationhood to opposing the West. This article's focus is on the prevalent modes of feminism emerging at this historical conjuncture in Russia.

The study also draws on the historical approach to discourse (Wodak 2004, pp. 63–94) to account for the historical events and discourses emerging from the Soviet era. It applies Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) to question the mutually determinant relations between the discursive practices and social structure (Fairclough 1993, p. 135). This analysis starts by examining formal text features, such as vocabulary and semantics (such as absences, underlying meanings), before moving to the meso-level by looking at the intertextual relations (how different texts 'talk to each other', their coherence) and situational context (for example, questions about power relations). The article leaves out the macro-level of discourse analysis questioning the asymmetrical use of power and structural inequalities (Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000) to maintain its focus on PSPF.

The relevant issues and personalities were identified using longitudinal (2017–2022) media monitoring. The study uses the parameters of visibility (Google analytics) and popularity, such as the number of followers or other indicators of esteem (ranking), to ensure a comparable salience of the selected figures. The key figures of the younger generation are the 32-year-old Russian-Tatar, Tatiana Mingalimova, who runs the 'Gentle Editor' (*Nezhnyi redaktor*) vlog on YouTube;[9] the 32-year-old Russian–Tajik singer and 2021 Eurovision participant Manizha; and the 33-year-old Regina Todorenko, a Ukrainian–Russian pop-singer and television presenter who lives in Russia and had one million subscribers as of 2020. The slightly older cohort comprises the 37-year-old liberal feminist and journalist Zalina Marshenkulova, born in the Kabardino-Balkaria region of Russia, ranked in the top 30 influential Muscovites in 2015 according to *The Guardian*;[10] the 43-year-old Nadezhna Strelez, a pro-state blogger born in Voronezh; and the 41-year-old Ksenia Sobchak, daughter of the former St Petersburg mayor and socialite and journalist who ran for the Russian presidency in 2018. The sample is limited to these figures to keep this inquiry manageable and focused. Although several academic feminists, journalists and human rights activists featured in the sample, such as journalist

[9]In 2019, Forbes.ru included Mingalimova amongst the '30 Influential Russians Under 30' (see, '"Forbes" Releases Russian "30 Under 30" Rating for the First Time', *Meduza*, 21 May 2019, available at: https://meduza.io/en/news/2019/05/21/forbes-releases-russian-30-under-30-rating-for-the-first-time, accessed 4 August 2025).

[10]'Moscow 30 Under 30: the People's Power List', New East Network, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2015, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/12/moscow-under-30-the-peoples-power-list, accessed 4 August 2025.

Ekaterina Gordeeva (2020) or Alyona Popova in Sergey Minaev's (2021) dialogue with feminists, they are not in the focus and merit a separate inquiry.

The media data were narrowed down by prioritising both the trends and deviations (silences) from these trends, including glaring misconceptions and omissions. The discussion follows Lotman's stages from the wholesale, uncritical imitation of foreign characteristics (Stage 1) to the restoration of the (now) modified local practices (Stage 2) to Stage 3 when the altered codes of the foreign culture restructure the revised codes of the receiving culture to eventually form an entirely new cultural phenomenon (Stage 4). Specifically, it starts with the perception of the Soviet past as redundant and 'haunting' and uncritical acceptance of the 'Western' feminism (Stage 1) and moves to the (re)translation of foreign and domestic cultural texts in the post-Soviet Russian context (Stage 2/3). The discussion considers the cases of linguistic sexism, gender in/equality, mistranslation of intersectionality and an over-engagement with the Western post-feminism of 'spectacular femininity' and calculated media visibility, which is presented as authentically domestic (Stage 3). At times, the analysis oscillates between the inter-temporal (post/Soviet) and inter-spatial (Western/regional) dimensions, which feed off each other. The findings primarily refer to the Russian Federation rather other former republics of the Soviet Union.

Soviet (as) haunting

In line with Hesford (2005), I understand haunting to consist of a set of distorted, fragmented and irrational collective cultural memories. To start with, there are distorted accounts of Soviet feminism in the collective cultural memory (written and vernacular narratives). This is partially driven by collective trauma, the misconceptions around equality and other democratic principles resulting from the rapid societal transition from a collective socialist to an individualist capitalist society. The examples below demonstrate that the Soviet feminist legacy is mainly misconstrued, rejected or seen as irrelevant, corresponding to Lotman's Stage 1 (rejection of the local and uncritical acceptance of foreign practices).

Within the popular mediated discourse, Soviet feminism has become something of a lingering ghost. Its 'remembering' involves recycling certain stereotypes and commemorative events. For instance, most of the television programmes devoted to feminism are produced for International Women's Day on 8 March, which was traditionally celebrated in the USSR. They rarely mention the key personalities or specific aspects of the Soviet past, mainly focusing on the present or very distant pre-revolutionary past, while some resort to the 'conventional' gender format, engaging a male presenter (Minaev 2021).[11] The narratives of the invited guests are often marked by a defensive and rigid mobilisation of the past. For instance, one of the most common statements is that 'we do not need feminism, we have already achieved gender equality in the USSR' (*dostigli gendernogo ravenstva*). This points to Stage 2 and highlights a

[11]'Feminism v Rossii: Real'nyi razgovor', *YouTube*, 7 March 2021, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8r5XLHqxe8, accessed 20 September 2024.

narrow understanding of gender equality as state-enabled equal participation in the labour force.

When interviewed by Mingalimova for her vlog *Nezhnyi redactor*, television presenter Alena Vodonaeva stated, 'we have equality … I don't like it when men don't pay in a restaurant' (Mingalimova 2019), displaying a distorted understanding of gender equality. Her views map onto the Soviet legacy where gender equality was seen as the redistribution of resources to enable female integration into the labour force. Subsequently, liberation from this socialist emancipation means liberation from employment within state structures (Temkina & Rotkirch 2002) and the privileging of new types of vocations involving independent online work (creative class) or a 'sponsorship' model of gender contract (a female supported by an affluent male typically without joint residence and children), leaving the patriarchal categories of oppression invisible or unquestioned.

Next, the Soviet legacy rarely features as part of the historical narrative of the current feminisms,[12] which demonstrates denial, disconnection from and suppression of the past. This failure to engage with Soviet feminism signals repressed or selective memories. Furthermore, Soviet feminism is viewed in a simplified way and labelled 'weak' and fragmented (Biktimirova & Kravtsova 2022). The feminisms of the early 1990s are seen as more academic (Zdravomyslova 2014), elitist (Sasunkevich 2021), and having no direct ties to the Soviet period.

Indeed, the foreign-funded gender centres that mushroomed throughout the FSU in the early 1990s overinvested in translating Western scholarship rather than examining the history of women and feminism in the Soviet Union (Lotman's Stage 1). There is a sustained perception in Russia that this academic feminism exists within a diachronic timeline, namely, the 1990s. Attempts to integrate it with other modes of feminism are unconvincing. For example, Sobchak's YouTube show with the feminist activists and socialites (Sobchak 2019) employed a series of subtitled formulaic academic definitions of feminism that appear to be blatantly incongruous with the informal mode of the conversation set at the high-end restaurant.

The incongruous Soviet legacy is also evident in the treatment and performance of the public feminist figures. One such example is the writer, Maria Arbatova (born 1957), a key public feminist figure since the collapse of the USSR. The way she is perceived encapsulates the mainstream narrative of feminism as a marginal, contradictory, weird and radical Western movement. Arbatova's own account of feminism is haphazard and incoherent; for example, despite being married three times, she is hostile to men; she has no clear position on gender equality. Her public presence exists separately from the younger celebrity figures' discursive online spaces. She is a 'ghost', representing the recent past that ought to be forgotten. Arbatova embodies a particular, 'authorised' type of feminism, which is simplistic, ostracised and ridiculed, allowing the authorities to compartmentalise it and utilise it when necessary. This treatment of Arbatova, along with the absence of any other 'transitional' figures or sustainable storytelling of the Soviet

[12]Notable exceptions include *Bessmertnyi pol* (Immortal Gender)—Sasha Talaver's Telegram channel—and the 'intellectual activism' of Surman and Rossman (2022).

emancipatory project, represents a highly fragmented and irrational collective cultural remembering. Overall, the fragmented historisation of the Soviet past, as well as its incoherencies and absences, are in line with a continuous haunting by a seemingly disorderly past.

PSPF as (re)translating 'foreign' cultural scripts

As shown above, there is a certain defamiliarisation of the traumatic Soviet past and an incoherent interpretation of the 'domestic' legacy of egalitarianism. This section explores how the PSPF is intertwined with the 'foreign borrowings' enabled by the transnational flows. I will focus on three aspects, namely how PSPF, first, processes 'alien' aspects of feminism, including its radical versions understood as 'women ruling men'; second, how it uncritically appropriates the post/feminist agenda (such as gender-neutral language, body positivity); and third, how it 'mistranslates' intersectionality. These three features are discussed in turn.

To start with, there is a clear opposition to 'radical feminism', which is perceived as simply too extreme (Yangeldina 2023), reflecting widespread societal stereotypes related to representation of feminists as ugly, 'man-hating', aggressive, etc. This almost defensive, irrational affective component or fear of its radical type extends to feminism beyond its radical variants. Subsequently, the term 'feminism' can be used in a derogatory way or as 'an insult' (Kavkazskii 2014). In other words, feminism is frequently viewed in Russian society as a unified ideology wherein lonely, hostile women who abjure all feminine vanity and modes of self-presentation strive to benefit from quotas and misconstrued equality (Minaev 2021). Further, feminism as an omnipresent 'other' is repressed by the patriarchal culture and presented as if 'outside' national history (Hesford 2005) and projected elsewhere (feminism as a foreign alien element, as mentioned above). The Soviet attitude deeming Western feminism a 'bourgeois phenomenon' has carried over to the post-Soviet era (Stage 2) and, hence, non-patriotic. Subscribing to feminism, in this sense, is equated to betraying the homeland.

According to Vikki Turbine, 'feminism is viewed simultaneously as an "outmoded", unnecessary hangover from the Soviet period and as a "new site" of activism that is a threat to "Russian culture" owing to its association with Western human rights activism' (Turbine 2015, p. 338). This association with Western human rights discourse renders feminism alien, something to be rejected. For Gapova (2015) feminism is also alien by virtue of its association with the cosmopolitan modernity, which is perceived as 'foreign'. Thus, the 'foreignness' of feminism for the contemporary domestic culture feeds off entirely different, yet overlapping and cross-contaminated, components.

Secondly, an insight into the appropriation of feminist terminology shows a persistent lack of reflexivity and uneven cross-cultural dialogue between foreign and domestic cultures (Stage 2). For instance, the utilisation of new terms *via* direct translation comes across almost as self-colonising, as terms such as 'empowerment' are simply transliterated with no reflection on their domestic connotations and applicability (for example, Sobchak 2019). Further, the mainstream questioning of linguistic sexism echoes the second or post-second wave of Western feminism, as it rarely includes reflections about sexist words, idioms and expressions (Sobchak 2019). More often, online

discussions focus on gender-neutral language (such as the search for corresponding female nouns) and do not go beyond the terms and linguistic structures to question the 'inequality regimes' (Acker 2006) or sexism that permeates everyday communication. And those that do —such as the podcast by journalist Ekaterina Gordeeva (2020) or the special YouTube channel 'Fem Is' (registered in 2021)[13]—tend not to have high online traction. Remarkably, the language around gender/sexuality is frequently binary, without extensive discussion about gender fluidity and other related intersectional categories.

This brings the discussion to the third dimension: the very selective and specific understanding of intersectionality within PSPF. The 'borrowed' notion of intersectionality has been eagerly used by the feminist influencers and shows an active search for meanings that are appropriate for the domestic context (Stage 3). However, their everyday practices reflect its numerous misconceptions and inconsistent implementations. Namely, the predominantly white urban feminist influencers talk on behalf of other women based in regions with diverse ethnic and religious composition without acknowledging their advantage or differing agenda/priorities. Even though sensitivity to interracial and other intersectional issues is slowly growing (Biktimirova & Kravtsova 2022), these influencers tend to demonstrate low awareness and sensitivity to the issues faced by non-white Russian females.

Decisively, with the exception of Gapova (2005), there is a glaring lack of feminist conceptualisation along the dimension of class.[14] This is in line with the pattern of a highly incoherent amalgamation of the past with the disordered present. The lack of a healthy 'layer' of a well-established middle class in Russia manifests itself in two different ways: either the omission of class, 'a blind spot' in self-identification narratives, or its substitution with the notion of 'elites' (artistic or 'old type' elites similar to the Soviet intelligentsia or a 'new type' of elites defined by wealth). It is somewhat addressed by Sobchak's show (Sobchak 2019) in her purposeful and provocative juxtaposition of old (previously) privileged elites with the younger generation of celebrity media influencers.

Importantly, a lack of sexual education and gender awareness in the former USSR has translated into a limited LGBTQI+ focus within the intersectional rhetoric and a lack of awareness of the impact of colonialism on women in the FSU, such as in Muslim communities. The ideas around ethnicity and race are largely linked to the 'trope' of the (Soviet) multicultural society.[15] As a result, an overt declaration of intersectionality or

[13]'Fem Is—A Project About the History of the Feminist Movement', *YouTube*, available at: https://www.youtube.com/@femis8046/about, accessed 19 September 2024.

[14]Kaneva states that the mythology of 'the socialist super-woman endures in cultural discourse and practices of post-socialist femininity, but it is often re-interpreted through the ideological prism of global consumerism' (Kaneva 2015, p. 8). This focus on popular feminism and neoliberalism obscures the issue of class, or rather the lack of a substantial middle class, that is crucial for this discussion.

[15]The post-imperial nature of Russia/USSR conditioned a different sensitivity to intersectional agendas, which is typically understood as sensitivity to race, class, gender and other differences within Western post-feminism (Rottenberg 2018; Perheentupa 2022). Despite an attempt to build a supranational 'meta-ethnic' entity of Sovetskii narod' (Bassin & Kelly 2012, p. 4), the authorities exercised differing (multicultural) policies in its vast peripheries, which are also intersected with gender. For instance, Soviet colonial attitudes were more pronounced in the Central Asian republics, meaning that the 'woman question' played out differently there, as noted by Gradskova (2013) on the discriminatory treatment of non-white women or *natsionalki* by the Soviet authorities.

inclusivity coexists alongside highly racialised attitudes towards non-white ethnic Russian feminists (such as Manizha) or the elision of coloniality and race from the narratives (including the minorities themselves). So, mixed-race, non-ethnically Russian feminists, such as Tatarka, Masha Yang and Marshenkulova, do not prioritise intersectionality as an issue. Manizha, who took part in Eurovision 2021, downplays her own ethnic, religious and class identity in her discussion of feminism and her positionality (for example, Gordeeva 2021; Sobchak 2022). At the same time, online discussions of her public persona have a xenophobic element arising from Manizha's intersectional background (Yusupova 2024), echoing a complex Soviet legacy of multiculturalism (Miazhevich 2023).

Recently intersectionality has been more actively appropriated—as part of identity politics—by grassroots feminist groups rather than by more visible urban high-profile celebrity feminists. This complicates Stage 3. The partial critique and even rejection of the complex patterns of exclusion within mainstream Russian feminism warrant further research.

PSPF as self/colonising

This section continues illustrating the uncritical and incoherent 'translation' of Western feminisms employing the self/colonising (Bhabha 1994; Morozov 2015) tendencies within PSPF. The analysis also highlights the uneven nature of (inter-)cultural change and dialogue that oscillates between Stage 3 and Stage 1. The self-colonisation is seen *via* domestic manifestations of neoliberal celebrity feminisms that become even more prominent than their Western counterparts due to an overidentification with foreign culture. Similarly to 'Western post-feminism', PSPF is framed as an individual project, inviting women to engage in self-management[16] and invest in practices of self-care, thus detracting from the structural inequalities within the merging patriarchy and neoliberalism. Whilst the politics of appearance (Perheentupa 2022) here is in line with the neoliberal logic of the media-amplified visibility of feminist issues[17] elsewhere, the genealogy of PSPF differs.

This overidentification with a particular form of Western feminism was evident in 1990s academic feminism, which focused on translating Western knowledge without adequately adopting this scholarship to the local context. More recent examples involve social media influencers diligently following the script of neoliberal feminisms enabled by multi-platformativity, especially those celebrities who strategically use feminism to boost their popularity, rankings and revenues, hollowing out the feminist ethos further.[18] Their over-the-top conformity with compulsive beautification and spectacular femininity (Dosekun

[16]For instance, self-management manifests itself as a 'domestication' of neoliberal practices where women are invited to engage in 'the labour of personality, the labour of femininity and the labour of sexuality' to become 'valuable subjects' (Salmenniemi & Adamson 2015).

[17]Social media affordances contain both enabling and constraining features; for example, visibility *vs* precariousness; consumeristic capitalisation instead of campaigning for common causes such as gender equality or social justice. Notably, contemporary feminism in Russia operates within increasingly stringent media regulation.

[18]Banet-Weiser *et al*.'s (2020) discussion of popular feminism can be applied to the post-Soviet preoccupation with visibility.

2020) results in them competing against each other on their YouTube channels, striving for visual perfectionism at all costs (such as *via* medical enhancement). They end up looking the same, losing their individuality and reinforcing self-governmentality regimes brought about by neoliberal capitalism. Some cleverly use this phenomenon to create their image based on the negation of this conformity and perfectionism, such as Mingalimova's image of a relatable 'girl next door' in her *Nezhnyi redaktor* vlog.

PSPF demonstrates an overinvestment in some aspects (for example, lifestyle, beauty regimes) combined with only a partial implementation of other features of post-feminism, such as rare allusions to counselling or therapeutic culture, which was absent in the USSR and is still marginalised in public discourse.[19] Likewise, overbearing beautification informed by different lineages of the Soviet past, glamour and neoliberalism are only occasionally counterpoised with the 'body positivity' discourse, signalling selective, inconsistent or aspirational identification with 'imported' features.

So, with few exceptions, YouTube celebrity vloggers' performance of the (Western) 'choice/agency' feminism in a 'spectacularly feminine style' (Dosekun 2020) is coupled with the Soviet legacy of immaculate presentation.[20] To complicate this further, the glamour-informed feminism of the 2000s also plays a part. Alongside declared self-reflectivity and irony (for example, Strelez being open about her 'classical' glamour-informed curated image), there is a lack of reflection on the 'coloniality' of these beautification regimes, signalling only a partial combination of past/present and local/foreign within Stage 3. Finally, the strategic utilisation of the physical space by celebrities branding themselves as 'feminist' frequently involves an excessive femininity, such as figure-hugging attire and full makeup, reflects the normative positioning of the female.[21]

However, some are not only 'feminizing a woman in "normative terms"' (Dosekun 2020) but knowingly locating the logic of self-management and the entrepreneurial self within a highly patriarchal environment, being purposefully provocative and playing on heteronormative sexual appeal and the male gaze to gain media attention.[22] Cases like this make us wonder whether the perpetual online labour to achieve visibility is governed by a slightly different set of beliefs, where all means are good and 'aesthetic' performance can be supplemented by a playful negation of the established patriarchal order and manifestations of self-irony and subversiveness regarding feminist ideology.

Although this 'overidentification' with essentialised, clichéd tropes of normative or 'classic' femininity is more pronounced amongst celebrity feminists concerned with fame and monetisation, other groups, including activist feminists, might follow suit and invest

[19]For instance, see Todorenko's (2023) unpopular attempt to invite a psychologist onto one of her programmes.

[20]This fixation on appearance and excessive femininity has parallels with Soviet times, encapsulated in films such as *Work Affair* (*Sluzhebnyi roman*) and *The Most Beautiful and Charming* (*Samaya privlekatel'naya i obayatel'naya*), where self-care and beautification regimes were presented as a 'must' for the Soviet working woman.

[21]Alternative looks are frequently binary: an assertive positioning in space, such as in the controversial Reebok sport ad (Oppenheim 2019) featuring Marshenkulova, might be attributed to inappropriate non-feminine or butch behaviour.

[22]For example, Vodonaeva's statement, the 'best thing about a man is his cock'? 'Cocks are the best?', on the *Nezhnyi redaktor* vlog, February 2019, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=inc-yVnRQu0, accessed 12 August 2025.

into this 'politics of appearance'. One such case is the event labelled the 'Fake takeover of Kremlin' or Photoshop feminism of 2017 (Perheentupa 2022). Here a feminist group produced a fake report about a flash mob and fed it to credible oppositional media as a conscious strategy to amplify their visibility as well as resist state ideology. Being placed in domestic postmodern reality—where the government's strategy is to spread 'fake news'—the feminist activists claimed it was justifiable and even necessary for them to do the same. However, they seemed unaware that this strategy means playing according to the pre-set rules, which is like an attempt to challenge patriarchy within the parameters pre-set by the patriarchal system itself. In doing so, they undermined their own activism by diminishing societal trust and damaging reputations, including those of the journalists with whom they had had long-term partnerships. Thus, this example signifies that the 'receiving' culture (Lotman 1990) can go above and beyond the 'borrowed' rules, leading to extremes such as creativity and radicalism and enriching processes at Stage 3.

Finally, the uniqueness of PSPF is its seemingly apolitical nature involving the tactical disengagement of feminism from other political agendas (Ratilainen *et al*. 2025).[23] In the current sample, a pervasive self-definition—'I am not a feminist, it's my set of personal beliefs' uttered by all the guests on *Nezhnyi redaktor*, evident also in Manizha's interviews and stated by Sobchak's guests—points to the complexity of Stage 3. To a degree, this narrative of (a)political engagement is a manoeuvring tactic, as Russian feminism is possible only as a personal project of celebrities in the hostile ideological environment—all the more so after the 2022 social media ban (Sauer 2022) and the proposed 2023 law linking feminism to extremism—and, as such, may lead to their subsequent discrediting. Elsewhere, I have argued that Russian media celebrities consciously delineate their apolitical stance *via* overinvesting in neoliberal post-feminism (Miazhevich 2018).

So, in some instances, PSPF might represent reiterations of contemporary post-feminism that 'do not critique or challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (or the media platforms that are co-constitutive with capitalism) but rather contribute to its normalisation and conceit of inevitability' (Banet-Weiser *et al*. 2020). However, this outward resemblance is misleading. Rather than treating these apolitical individual feminist modes of presentation as an emblematic form of neoliberal development. These new forms of subjectivity should be seen as reflecting the need to disguise female agency and activism within an increasingly oppressive environment. Perheentupa (2022) refers to this as 'the politics of sheltering'.

Coloniality of knowledge, or PSPF as a 'thing in itself'

PSPF is currently more 'self-feeding' (producing meanings that mainly resonate within its own semantic field) and relatively isolated from Western scholarship, with few

[23]Using the case of Ukraine, Plakhotnik (2008, p. 194) asserts that societal stereotypes (such as 'normative femininity') and sustained negative attitudes towards women in politics lead to women either being involved in other types of initiatives (such as humanitarian activities) or top female politicians, such as Yulia Timoshenko, disassociating (*otmezhevanie*) themselves from feminism.

publications, often in Russian.[24] Western feminists continue to discriminate against 'non-European knowledge systems' (Tlostanova 2018) with other feminist scholarship ignored or discursively colonised, such as in the case of Latin American feminism (Alvarez *et al*. 2014; Miñoso & Lia 2022).

The emerging domestic scholarship has started to unpick the post-colonial and centre–periphery hierarchy within the FSU space, as well as the lack of solidarity between women in different regions (Solovei 2021; Biktimirova & Kravtsova 2022). As the discussion above showed, various 'colonialisms' linger, manifested in the uncritical importation of Western theories and practices, a disregard of regional feminism by privileged white urban elites and the performative mimicking of Western celebrity feminism. Although this article strives to problematise post-Soviet post-feminism, it still does so 'in conversation' with the existing—typically Anglo-American—approaches that recognise efforts to open up post-feminism to 'intersectional interrogation' in both the West and FSU spaces.[25] Thus, whilst addressing the issue of feminist (self)colonisation, this article is not immune to it either. Following Tlostanova (2018), I argue for the careful application of Western scholarship to the post-Soviet context rather than its outright rejection.

With the rapid emergence of the anti-war movement in Russia in 2022 and growing female resistance worldwide—such as anti-abortion protests in Poland (2020–2021) and the United States (2023), protests by women in Belarus (2020) and Iran (2022)—the forging of new trans-local (Alvarez *et al*. 2014) solidarities might be more viable. As the trans-local movement of bodies, texts, capital and theories across borders intensifies, closer connections between feminisms across different times and places offer a pathway for a more organic intersection of previously disjointed feminist discourses and practices. It remains to be seen, however, how the transnational dimension of Russian-speaking feminism(s) following the intensified migration from the region post-2022 and the formation of diasporic feminist groups abroad (Ratilainen *et al*. 2025), is going to play out.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated the complex nature of post-Soviet post-feminism and called for the re/conceptualisation of regional feminist variations going beyond the Global North and South. It has exposed the lack of a shared semantic space and shown that the most prominent popular manifestations and discourses of PSPF are marked by the differing saliences of issues and (dis)continuities with the past. PSPF is not developing in a linear manner, potentially replicating Western modes or retracing their steps. It is characterised by a partial 'discursive erasure' of the Soviet past and (un)productive and, at times, simplistic applications of Western approaches to the local context.

Using Lotman's model of inter-cultural dialogue, the article surveyed the features and prominent issues of PSPF. In many instances, the contextualisation of PSPF fluctuates between Lotman's Stages 2 and 3, as some of the modes of feminism constitute a mix of

[24]See, for example, Temkina and Zdravomyslova (2017), Kondakov (2017).
[25]See, for example, Temkina and Zdravomyslova (2017), Biktimirova and Kravtsova (2022).

an uncritically appropriated 'foreign' vocabulary (intersectionality, for instance) and a partial distance from an 'unrefined' past (in this case, the legacy of Soviet-era gender equality, which is frequently misconstrued and rejected). PSPF's varying features can be present in different combinations, with, for instance, some elements of academic, intersectional, popular, Soviet egalitarian and other feminisms, with differing degrees of integration and reworking. While this hybridity precludes overarching generalisations, it also contributes to the PSPF phenomenon. The subsequent studies will map the trajectories and dynamic of PSPF further and account for its impending recalibrations within the neighbouring post-socialist countries.

Clearly, post-February 2022, Russian feminism had to deal with increasingly complex multi-layered structures of oppression encompassing patriarchy, authoritarianism, militarisation and amplified colonialism towards its regions and former republics. This forges different feminist agendas and brings public womanhood to the fore as the soldiers' mothers unify online and offline.[26] Emerging scholarship on creativity of resistance, dilemmas of visibility and resilience of feminist networks (Ratilainen *et al*. 2025; Zhaivoronok 2025) reflects this changing order of priorities. Still, the internal differences, diversity and incoherence of PSPF ought not to be overlooked, as they play out within the anti-war resistance movement or an increasingly depoliticised feminist influencer culture post-2022 (Ratilainen *et al*. 2025). Paradoxically, these fault lines of PSPF might productively highlight its direction of travel in the region and more broadly. Existing scholarship on ongoing anti-war movements, such as Women in Black,[27] would be of help, thus bridging past and present to inform feminist scholarship even further. Thus, the future direction of travel is nested in critical engagement through prioritising historical and cultural contextualised approaches.

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[26]See the 'Committee of the Soldier's Mothers and Wives' and the online petition issued by the soldiers' mothers in alliance with FAR, 'We Demand the Withdrawal of Troops From Ukraine and the Return of Soldiers Home', change.org, 26 November 2022, available at: https://www.change.org/p/требуем-вывести-войска-из-украины-и-вернуть-наших-сыновей-домой, accessed 19 September 2024.

[27]Women in Black is an anti-war women's movement formed in Jerusalem in 1988, available at: https://womeninblack.org/, accessed 20 September 2024.

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