Between the Social and the Political: Russian Women’s Groups’ Response to Ambivalent State Policies

A qualitative study of women’s organizing in contemporary Russia

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Master’s Thesis

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages (ILOS)

University of Oslo

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to examine women’s organizing in contemporary Russia in the context of ambivalent state policies regarding women’s issues and civil society. With Putin’s return to power after a wave of protests in 2012, the Law on foreign agents was adopted. The biggest branch of organizations affected, were those concerned with human rights. At the same time, the regime favors non-profit organizations that provide social services and remain loyal to the government’s narratives. Since women’s issues have both a rights’ aspect and a social aspect, women’s groups are affected by both sides of this co-optation of civil society. Further, the state’s endorsement of “morality politics” and narratives stressing so-called traditional family values have proved an impediment to women’s rights advocacy. In 2017, a state program was launched which aims to improve women’s situation. The National Action Strategy for Women (NASW) is now in its implementation phase and lasts until 2022. So far, few noticeable effects have come out of the strategy, except from promises to reduce the number of professions banned to women from 456 to 100. There still is no law on domestic violence, and both state and church embrace women’s reproductive roles and responsibility in solving demographic problems.

The core of the study is the analysis of 16 qualitative interviews conducted in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Voronezh in February 2019. I explore how women’s groups are affected by policies that on one hand restrict the opportunities of certain civic organizations, but on the other hand seem to benefit others. The thesis’ main argument is that women’s groups stand with one foot in the social sphere and one in the political, and that they strategically frame their activity according to their needs. Although independent women’s organizations are negatively affected by the Law on foreign agents, their work is not infeasible: motivated groups adapt quickly to new restrictive measures and find ways to continue to conduct meaningful work despite difficult times. Their opportunities to impact on policy making are scarce, but increased attention towards women’s issues and feminism in recent years leaves them with hopes for more activism and an increased state focus on women’s issues in the future.

Key words: women’s organizing, civil society, foreign agent law, Russia, feminism, co-optation, National Action Strategy for Women
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## Abbreviations and explanations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>civil society organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>GONGO</td>
<td>government-organized non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>GRO</td>
<td>grassroots’ organization</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<td>Ministry of Labor</td>
<td>Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Russian Federation</td>
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<td>NASW</td>
<td>National Action Strategy for Women (2017-2022)</td>
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<td>NSD</td>
<td>Norwegian Center for Research Data</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>Oblast</td>
<td>An administrative entity in Russia and several other former Soviet countries</td>
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<td>ROC</td>
<td>The Russian Orthodox Church</td>
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<td>Rosstat</td>
<td>Federal State Statistics Service</td>
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<td>SONGO</td>
<td>socially oriented non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>TNGO</td>
<td>traditional non-governmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>VTsIOM</td>
<td>Russian Public Opinion Research Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhensovet</td>
<td>an abbreviation of zhenskii sovet, meaning “women’s council.” A type of state-controlled women’s organizations that was central in the Soviet Union and hold-overs of which are still existing in high numbers today.</td>
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Transliteration from Russian to Latin alphabet

For transliterating from Russian to English, I use a modified version of the romanization table provided by American Library Association and Library of Congress (ALA-LC). The soft sign (ь) and hard sign (Ъ) are transliterated (as ’ and “, respectively), but mainly in the literature list. Other diacritics are not used. Russian names that are known in English with different transliteration rules (such as “Yeltsin”) remain in their most common form.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research topic: women’s organizing in Russia after 2012

As Putin returned to presidency and embarked on his third term in 2012, the once vibrant spirit of the Russian women’s movement of the 1990s seemed a very distant past. 2012 was the year when the Russian state made its opinion about feminism clear by sentencing three members of Pussy Riot to two years of prison for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” after their feminist “punk prayer” in Moscow’s central Orthodox cathedral (BBC, 2013). The same year, the new NGO law came into force, enabling the state to list organizations receiving funding from abroad as “foreign agents”, a term heavily associated with Soviet rhetoric. Among others, human rights’ NGOs were severely affected. At the same time, the state was encouraging growth among “socially oriented” NGOs (SONGOs) (Skokova, Pape & Krasnopolskaya, 2018) if they remained unpolitical and adhered to the state’s narratives of “traditional family values”.

Since then, the Russian-Orthodox Church (ROC) has become an even closer ally of the Russian government (Trenin, 2014). Patriarch Kirill, President Putin, and a number of prominent deputies all promote traditional family values, according to which women are first and foremost mothers and wives. Nonetheless, the Russian state at times seems concerned with being perceived as taking women’s issues seriously. In 2017, on International Women’s Day, prime minister Medvedev launched the National Action Strategy for Women for 2017-2022 (NASW).

When media reports that domestic abuse has been decriminalized in Russia\(^1\) and Putin is waging a “war on women” (Ferris-Rotman, 2018), one is left wondering; what is really going on with women’s rights in Russia? Women make out 54% of the total population and outlive men by ten years (Rosstat, 2018, p. 28). Still, Russian politics are highly male-dominated, and only two percent of men take out parental leave (Motrenko, 2019). Russian women reach a high degree of gender equality in terms of education and health, and progress has been made towards increased equality on the political level as well. However, women’s low representation in parliament and ministerial positions\(^2\) as well as lacking legislation on equal

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\(^1\) See 6.2.3

\(^2\) 15,8 and 9,7 percent, respectively (World Economic Forum, 2018).
pay and domestic violence are among the factors that drag Russia down to 75th place in the World Economic Forum’s 2018 Global Gender Gap Report.

Nonetheless, some things seem to change for the better. In recent years, feminism has gained a foothold in Russia (Perera, 2018); feminists more frequently appear on television, and activists even speak of a high number of male supporters (Ekmanis, 2019). Women’s issues are covered more broadly in Russian media. Particularly scandalous cases on domestic violence have sown serious doubts about traditional Russian proverbs such as “if he beats you, it means he loves you”. Although victim-blaming is still highly present (Strakhovskaya, 2018), domestic abuse cannot longer be shrugged off easily when new stories of jealous men cutting the hands off (BBC, 2018) or killing their female partners appear in newspapers, television and social media. At the same time, Russia remains the only European country without a legislation on domestic violence (Zaikova, 2018).

How is it to fight for women’s rights and combat gender inequality in a country where NGOs risk being listed as agents of the West, political legitimacy and national pride is based on conservative values, and both state and church address women as “keepers of the household” (Kremlin, 2019; RIA Novosti, 2013)? Is constructive women’s advocacy possible, and do women’s groups have a say?

Against the background above, this thesis intends to explore the following research questions:

- 1: How have the amendments to the NGO legislation since 2012 and the co-optation of civil society affected the work and strategies of women’s rights groups in Russia?

- 2: What characterizes the landscape of organizations and initiatives aimed at improving the status of women in contemporary Russia?

- 3. a) How does the Russian government address women’s rights issues, and b) how do women’s rights groups respond to public policies concerning women?

Because of the NGO legislation and the increased risk of conducting activities that could be regarded political, I assume that the “rights” part of women’s rights work in the Russian non-
profit sector has decreased. I expect to find that many women’s organizations adapt to state objectives and choose to focus on politically “safer” issues in the social sphere. The Russian state’s policies on women’s issues seems not as concerned with women’s rights as with the rights of mothers, children and families. Under such circumstances, I assume that socially oriented women’s organizations have the best living conditions. This, as well as the strong disapproval of feminism in Russian society (Sundström, 2002; Sperling, 2014), would imply a greater divide between women’s SONGOs on one hand, and feminist groups that address political issues but are left with very scarce sources of funding on the other. Nonetheless, the National Action Strategy in The Interests of Women for 2017-2022 seems to show some political awareness towards women’s issues, and throughout the thesis I will explore this topic further.

Much important research has been done on women’s organizing in Russia, and many scholars have addressed the law on “foreign agents” since its adoption in 2012 and the “co-optation” of civil society which it is part of. However, there is far less recent research combining these two. This study sheds new light on the NGO law³ and its impacts from a women’s organizing perspective. It does so without losing attention to women’s organizations’ very own history, context and characteristics, and also looks to other existing challenges such as the government’s traditional values’ narrative. An underlying argument of the thesis is thus that analyzing the NGO law’s effect without taking the broader context into account may lead to one-sided and misleading interpretations.

The study also contributes with new empirical data to the secondary literature on women’s organizing in Russia. The broad focus can hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the conditions in which women’s organizing takes place today. I have sought to study women’s organizations on their own terms, and a part of the study has been exploring how organizations see and identify themselves and others. Especially the part on Voronezh and the comparative aspect between this city and Moscow and St. Petersburg reveals new perspectives on the effects on civil society seven years after the state started intensifying conservative narratives and adapted the law on foreign agents.

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³ “The law on foreign agents” and “the NGO law” both refer to the same law amendment and will be used interchangeably. More on this in chapter 5.2.
1.2 Thesis outline

The first chapter has introduced the research topic, presented my research questions and expectations and discussed the relevance of this study. Chapter two looks at women’s organizing from a theoretical angle. The first part discusses how women’s organizing in Russia corresponds to established social movement theory and examines both external and internal mobilizing factors. The second subchapter reviews the existing literature on women’s organizing in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s.

Chapter three addresses the research methodology chosen for this study. First, thematic analysis is presented as an analytical method in qualitative research. Then, I present my operating procedures for the study consisting of 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives from Russian women’s groups and experts on the topic.

Chapter four presents an overview of the historical roots of women’s organizing in Russia, from early twentieth century tsarist Russia to the Soviet Union to perestroika and the Yeltsin years. Chapter five discusses the co-optation of civil society under Putin, focusing on the foreign agent law and increased opportunities for SONGOs.

Chapter six delves into the current context in which women’s organizing takes place. The first subchapter focuses on state policy regarding women. An emphasis is put on women’s labor rights, domestic violence and the NASW. Here, some of the interview material is taken in to analyze how women’s groups response to the NASW. A further subchapter discusses how traditional values have become a strategy of the regime in domestic and as well as international politics. It also addresses developments and attitudes regarding women’s issues and feminism both on state and societal level.

Chapter seven presents the analysis of my interview data from 16 interviews with women’s groups and experts in three Russian cities.

In chapter eight, I sum up the main findings of the thesis, discuss shortcomings and provide suggestions for further research.
2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Social movement theory

Scholars, media, and even Russian women’s advocates sometimes refer to the Russian women’s movement as if it was a distinct entity. As my interview material in chapter 7 will show, women’s groups themselves do not agree on what the term implies, which groups it includes, or whether there is a women’s movement in Russia today at all. If we employ a sociological framework, it becomes difficult to refer to the wide range of women’s groups in Russia as part of a social movement. However, as will be discussed in the following, even poorly networked and rather unpolitical women’s groups share some traits with organizations considered parts of social movements.

Sidney Tarrow (2011, p. 7) limits social movements to “sequences of contentious politics based on underlying social networks, on resonant collective action frames, and on the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents”. As chapter 4 will show, the dynamic women’s movement in Tsarist Russia at the turn to the 20th century with its focus on women’s civil rights seem to meet these criteria. This period probably saw the only real “sequences of contentious politics” by women’s advocates in Russian history. The next wave of women’s activism in the 1990s, although achieving some positive results, was to a large extent characterized by women’s NGOs low numbers, political irrelevance and a high degree of polarization and detachment from society (Sundstrom, 2002). Despite certain successes, they did not fully meet Tarrow’s criteria of a movement. As Sperling (2014, p. 207) writes:

For all its successes in bringing taboo topics into common parlance, creating women’s studies programs at universities around the country and placing issues like women’s unemployment and domestic violence on the political agenda, the women’s movement in the 1990s failed to become a mobilizational movement.

This also holds true for the situation today. As will be made clear in chapter 7, the current situation of women’s organizing in Russia is not compatible with Tarrow’s definition of a

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4 See 7.1.1.
movement. However, women’s organizations do take part in what Tarrow (2011, p. 7) calls the “broader universe of contentious politics,” with dynamics similar to that of social movements. Many of them engage in framing of issues and awareness campaigns, some engage in protests or lobbying, and they are often part of some kind of underlying network. Therefore, the social movement framework can be applied as a means to analyze women’s organizing.

In their analysis and explanation of social mobilization and its outcomes, scholars often focus on political opportunities. When diving into the current situation of women’s organizing in Russia, it becomes clear that explaining a civil society organization’s (CSO) relative success or failure through external factors alone is insufficient. This is further supported by several scholar’s critique of theories on political opportunity structures. As we will see in the following, opportunities can be cultural and gendered as well as political. Furthermore, since internal factors such as identity work have proven decisive in the development of women’s movements in particular, these will also be discussed below.

2.1.1 External factors: Political, cultural and gendered opportunity structures

Political opportunity structures
An important and established concept within social movement theory is that of political opportunity structures. This approach, focusing on political processes, was developed by American political sociologists to explain the rise of contentious politics starting with the Civil Rights movement. It puts an emphasis on resources external to social movement actors. Central to the model are so-called cycles of contention, defined as “spirals of opportunities and threats”, which can open “windows for contentious politics” (Tarrow, 2011, p. 5).

According to this logic, collective actors’ opportunities and constraints are mainly formed by state authorities, or more broadly, political regimes. Political opportunity structures emerged as a versatile framework for analyzing different kinds of civic organizing.

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5 Although I do not claim that there exists a women’s movement in Russia today per se, I will sometimes use the term throughout the thesis. First, employing the term offers some variation from “the specter of women’s organizations” and similar long compositions. Second and most importantly, it is a term that researchers as well as my respondents tend to apply frequently.
Tarrow (2011, pp. 32-33) understands political opportunity structures as “a set of clues for when contentious politics will emerge and will set in motion a chain of causation that may ultimately lead to sustained interaction with authorities and thence to social movements.” Hanspeter Kriesi (1991, p. 3) lets out the interaction with authorities and emphasizes the external aspect of political opportunity structures in his definition: “those aspect of a political system that determine movement development independently of the purposive action of the actors involved” (in Jasper 1997, p. 36).

However voluminous and well-established, political opportunity structure literature has been criticized for focusing too much on political explanations and preferring analysis of social movements that best match these explanations. Political opportunity scholars seemed to have forgotten that contemporary social movements did not represent a specific form of interest politics but were rather “challengers of cultural codes and promoters of new lifestyles and collective identities” (Koopmans, 1999, p. 98). Thus, there are varying degrees to which a social movement is political, and not all have impacting on public policies as their primary goal.

For example, there are subcultural or countercultural movements, whose main interest is to express collective identities through collective action. These are more independent from their political environment. Likewise, there are groups that are “externally oriented” but primarily seeking to change “social and cultural norms, practices, and consciousness” rather than policies (Koopmans 1999, 98). Koopmans refers to the women’s movement, or parts of it, as an example of such a movement group. Although women’s organizations often fought and fight for political rights, many of them mainly address tendencies in society, such as sexism, sexual harassment, stereotypes and patriarchy in general. Completely parting this from politics would prove difficult, but these activists’ main objective is not necessarily policy change.

The cultural factor
Moreover, social movement theorists have often failed to address culture as an important factor of social action (Jasper, 1999; Koopmans, 1999). Koopmans (1999) stresses the need to include analyses of cultural, or structural, opportunity structures in addition to the political part. This would then suit better to explain movement development, since “it is not the general ‘favorableness’ of a political situation, but the relative attractiveness of collective
action compared to the alternative of not acting that counts in explaining decisions” (Koopmans, 1999, p. 104). Correspondingly, Jasper (1999) finds that scholars in the 1990s tended to leave the cultural factors out and treat political opportunity structures as fixed objective entities. He argues: “without extensive attention to culture and biography, it is difficult to distinguish willingness from opportunity, so willingness was dropped as something to be explained” (Jasper, 1999, p. 39).

This thesis deals to a great extent with the cultural context and biography of Russian women’s organizations, with one of the aims being exactly to be able to “distinguish willingness from opportunity” when analyzing their levels of activity and response to state policies. The cultural factor also helps to explain why an account on contemporary women’s organizing requires an assessment of previous women’s movements and feminist activism in the country (or the absence of them). The deep-rooted hostility towards feminism in Russia (Sundstrom, 2002, pp. 223-224; Sperling, 2014) can serve as an example of such a cultural factor that hampers women’s organizing. Public opinion is still influenced by the Soviet narrative of achieved gender equality and has further been shaped by the mostly antifeminist, traditionalist rhetoric of the Putin regime. That being said, the impact of globalization is inevitable also in Russia, and a new wave of feminist activism has developed independent of state objectives that might give rise to increased movement activity in the future (Sperling, 2014). As Jasper (1997, p. 37) puts it, “cognitive liberation depends on cultural processes, some of which may be independent of strategies and political structures”.

**A feminist approach: gendered opportunity structures**

Generally, scholars now seem to agree that political opportunity structure alone is insufficient in explaining movement success or failure. An answer to Koopman’s critique can be found in society-centered approaches to the state, for example based on feminist, class or racial theories. A feminist approach would suggest viewing movement development through the gender lens, in other words analyzing evolving gender relations in the given society where a movement operates. McCammon et al. (2001) propose a framework of political and gendered opportunity structures to explain the success of the U.S. women’s suffrage movements. Here, the gendered aspect helps researchers dig deeper into the broad context in which movements act.
Shifts in political circumstances lead to a changing political context, through which one could speak of increasing or decreasing political opportunities. As for gendered opportunities, they come about as gender relations in society change, resulting in altered views or attitudes in society. Gender relations can be understood as “the social organization of the relationship between the sexes” (Scott, 1986, p. 1053)\(^6\). As for the women’s suffrage movement in the U.S., women’s move into domains traditionally dominated by men gradually changed society’s view on women’s roles. This led to opening gendered opportunity structures. However, since political decision makers were affected by these changes, the result was also changing political opportunities. This example shows how political interests are often intertwined with gendered expectations (McCammon et al., 2001, p. 51).

As we will see, in contemporary Russia, the focus on anti-Western “traditional family values” may have led to closing gendered and political opportunities on one hand, whereas general changes in society towards female empowerment and the increased popularity and approval of feminism in big cities might keep some gendered opportunities open or even create new ones.

### 2.1.2 Internal factors: Identity work and framing

All social movements need to build some kind of solidarity in order to act in a collective and coherent way. This can be achieved through organizational work, but solidarity can also be built around the construction of a collective identity\(^8\) (Tarrow, 2011, pp. 151-152; Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). This especially holds true of the “new social movements” that started replacing class-based political mobilization in the West in the 1960s. Among these were the feminist and the gay and lesbian movements, which sought not first and foremost a redistribution of political power but rather wanted to change the prevailing cultural norms through a “recognition for new identities and lifestyles” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 286).

Yet, as Reger, Myers, and Einwohner (2008, p. 3) show, the process of defining a “we” and what and who that “we” should be can be a most challenging task. Disputes around identity

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6 As cited in McCammon et al., 2001, p. 53.
7 I will stick to this narrow understanding of gender and gender relations throughout the thesis. Gender often refers to more than just the social relationships between the sexes, i.e. between man and woman. The hostile environment in Russia towards non-normative sexual identities (LGBTQI) is a related, but nonetheless separate story and goes beyond the scope of this thesis.
8 Polletta and Jasper (2001, p. 285) define collective identity as “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.”
are not only time consuming and may hamper the organization’s or movement’s work towards its goals, but they might lead to alienation of some participants or a fragmentation of the movement as a whole. Furthermore, movements are not isolated and need to take their surroundings into account. *Identity work* is in fact highly strategic:

> Activists construct and present themselves with an eye toward the potential reactions of external audiences and also respond to the demands of the broader institutional environment and structure of political opportunities. Identity work is, therefore, strategic; activists must grapple with both the “inside” and the “outside” … in creating an identity that serves their needs in a given setting. (Reger et al., 2008, p. 3)

Defining and agreeing on an identity can thus be seen as a strategic choice and is a sort of strategical framing. *Frames* are here to be seen as “the interpretive packages that activists develop to mobilize potential adherents and constituents” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 291). The extent to which a group succeeds in framing an identity to the public, impacts on its access to supporters and new members as well as its ability to make alliances and withstand opposition (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 295).

At the same time, mobilization sometimes takes place without activists having done much strategic identity work on beforehand. Thus, existing collective identities are not necessarily a prerequisite. “*Moral shocks*” can have a mobilizing effect, regardless of whether the people involved know each other. Indeed, such shocks often spark the beginning of recruitment into social movements (Jasper, 1997, p. 106). In the current Russian context, an example of such a “moral shock” is the widely covered and debated story of a young woman whose jealous husband in late 2017 took her to a forest outside Moscow and cut off both her hands with an axe. The victim had contacted the police on an earlier occasion, but their late reaction and failure to protect the woman was a subject of public debate after the incident (Golubev, 2017). Another recent case is that of the Khachaturian sisters (see chapters 6.2.3 and 7.2.1). These stories were indeed shocks and sparked mobilization. They resulted in online and offline protests, petitions and a wave of people arguing that a law against domestic violence was needed.

To such mobilizations and probably new women’s movements in general, the activity and its standpoint are themselves enough to provide solidarity. In the environmental movement, an identity that build solidarity could be “we are people who care about the environment”

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9 The authors base the term *identity work* on work by Snow and Andersen (1987), Snow and McAdam (2000), Hunt and Benford (1994), and Lichterman (1999).
Likewise, in the online movement against domestic violence in Russia, a collective identity other than “we are people who want to combat domestic violence” is not necessarily needed. However, as was discussed above, a strategic framing of identities is crucial in order to maintain a social movement organization and recruit new members.

2.2 Previous research on women’s organizing in Russia and beyond

The following part deals with the rich existing secondary literature on women’s organizing in post-Soviet Russia. In terms of political opportunities and legal conditions, women’s NGOs face the same challenges as most other non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, women’s and feminist organizations struggle with normative barriers that are unique to their activities (Sundstrom, 2002).

2.2.1 Feminism and women’s organizations: distinctions

Researchers vary in their viewpoint when it comes to defining and categorizing Russian women’s organizations. Which kind of organizing leads to empowerment? Can one classify mobilizations as feminist if their prime constituencies do not identify as feminist themselves? Depending on what kind of activity and organization one regards as a women’s organization, and, more importantly, as part of a potential women’s “movement”, one gets very varying answers on the question whether such organizations have played a crucial role in the development of civil society in Russia.

Organizations or networks that specifically address women’s issues are typically described by researchers as feminist. Myra Marx Ferree (2006, p. 7) argues that whereas women’s organizations without feminist goals “construct women as a distinctive interest group” and organize as women to work for social change, the purpose of feminist work or activism lies in “challenging and changing women’s subordination to men”. With feminism not being a constituency, but a goal, this kind of activism can also have men among its constituencies (Ferree, 2006, p. 7; Basu, 2010, p. 4).

Many Russian women are involved in women’s organizations without feminist goals. Typically, they are engaged in social issues like children welfare, health, and aid to disabled
and elderly people. Since many of these organizations have women as their main constituencies and often even the word “woman” in their name, one could argue that it would be rightful to include them in analyses of Russian women’s organizations. An argument defending this stance is that women’s empowerment takes place whenever women engage as active citizens in various organizations. According to this logic, all kinds of women’s organizations regardless of focus can be regarded as part of the “democratic subculture” (Hinterhuber, 2011).

 Nonetheless, although individual empowerment might be the result of different types of organizing, far from all women’s organizations explicitly strive to improve the status of women. Therefore, a more common approach among Western and Russian feminist scholars is that women’s CSOs are organizations that have specific women’s issues central to their agenda. For example, Sundstrom (2002) argues that the extensive Soldiers’ Mothers movement, although mobilizing a great number of women, cannot be regarded as an integral part of the women’s movement per se, since women’s issues are not central to their work. Here, one could divide between women organizing, as is the case with the Soldier’s Mothers movement, and women’s organizing. I will mostly follow the same line throughout the thesis and focus on organizations that in one way or another aim to challenge gender inequality and can be said to have feminist goals.

 However, “feminist” is a contested term even among networks that are characterized as such (Sperling, Ferree & Risman, 2001, p. 1158). Since only a small share of Russian women’s organizations identify as feminist,10 it may seem far-fetched to include them under the umbrella term “feminist organizing” and adapt a feminist theoretical framework to analyze them, which many Western and Russian researchers do. However, this is not necessarily a case of what political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1970) called “conceptual stretching”. Rather, Kulmala (2014, p. 164) argues that it is a way to avoid the somewhat artificial distinction between “feminist” and “women’s” organizing. Many Russian women’s organizations could be described as “latent feminist”. That is, their work is compatible with minimum definitions of feminism, such as the “reappraisal of the position of women in society” (Whelehan, 1995, 10 It should be noted that my research (see chapter 7) suggests that although feminism is still a contested term, many women’s advocates nowadays do identify as feminists, at least when speaking to a Western researcher. It might imply an increased acceptance of the term among people supporting gender equality due to more media cover and discussions on feminism in Russia over the past few years. This was a further argument for me to continue employing the term in this thesis.)
The reason why an organization or individual does not proclaim itself feminist also has to do with the larger cultural and political context. Since feminism has had an extraordinary bad reputation in Russia (i.e. Sperling 2014), openly framing an activity as feminist would not necessarily lead to a broad societal outreach. Like elsewhere in the world, many organizations and individuals who deny feminism still express feminist principles (Kulmala 2014, 178).

2.2.2 Authoritarianism vs. feminism under Putin: framing strategies

With the process of increased authoritarianism under Putin and closing political opportunities starting in the mid-2000s, activists adjust to new policies in order to survive. They quiet down clearly feminist viewpoints in the fear of being judged as “too political” and threatening (Henderson & Jeydel, 2006; in Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 544). An example of this is the Russian women’s crisis center movement, which until the punk group Pussy Riot’s infamous stunt in the Christ our Saviour cathedral in Moscow in 2011 was the most noticeable example of feminist activism in Russia (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 545). Activists often choose to “speak in code” and frame domestic violence as a matter of “difficult life situations” within the family (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 296). This framing is illustrated by the fact that when speaking to Westerners, many Russian women’s activists express feminist viewpoints and identify with the term (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 562).

According to Johnson and Saarinen (2014, p. 549), Russia’s move towards authoritarianism under Putin’s rule has also in fact been a gender regime change. This includes changes in favor of neotraditional gender norms in areas such as demographics, education, and welfare policies (Johnson & Saarinen, 2014, p. 550) Distinctive features of the gender regime under Putin are the “politics of pronatalism, language of self-help and neo-liberal individualism”, in addition to “orthodox Christian nationalism” (Johnson & Saarinen, 2014, p. 547). Activists are forced to frame their claims in ways that do not conflict with the narrative of “traditional values”. With the policies that lead to this framing, the women’s movement is made less visible and feminist activity in particular is driven underground. There is a tendency worldwide that women’s movements correlate negatively with growing authoritarianism: when “states are weak and repressive and there is a chasm between official pronouncements and actual politics and practices”, women’s movements are less likely to appear (Basu, 2010, p. 13; cited in Johnson & Saarinen, 2013, p. 543).
2.2.3 Human rights – whose rights?

Research by Sundstrom, Sperling, and Sayoglu (2019) suggests that there is very little contact and a certain hostility between traditional human rights organizations and advocates of women’s rights in Russia. Generally, human rights defenders tend to focus on issues they regard as “fundamental rights.” This includes civil rights, prisoner’s rights, physical abuse and torture of citizens by state forces such as police or military (p. 106). Discrimination of women, including gender-based violence, workplace discrimination and harassment is not seen as a “fundamental” issue and is rated as less of a problem. Domestic violence, being a key issue for women rights’ advocates, is rarely seen by human rights groups as a case of discrimination against women and not considered fundamental enough to be included on their agenda. This follows the pattern elsewhere in the world, where an issue such as domestic violence is typically not considered a human rights’ concern or a social justice problem unless feminists are pressuring for this to happen (Htun & Weldon 2012, p. 552; cited in Sundstrom et al., 2019, p. 108).

As interviewees in the study by Sundstrom and Sperling (2019, p. 108) suggest, this could be explained by the fact that human rights violations are traditionally seen as “actions taken by the state against citizens.” Cases of sex-based discrimination against women more commonly occur in the private sphere and are not necessarily linked with direct actions by public servants or the state. Therefore, the state’s failure to protect citizens’ (in this case women’s) rights is seen as less of a human rights’ issue compared to when the state is itself actively violating those rights. Human rights defenders show little interest in litigating on discrimination against women, and women’s groups are mostly excluded from trainings in the human rights community (Sundstrom et al., 2019, p. 106). This leaves the two communities poorly networked. Furthermore, the blindness towards violations of women’s rights is not only a trait of human rights NGOs but reflects the situation in the state’s very own human rights mechanisms (Sundstrom et al., p. 111). The state’s blindness towards women’s human rights issues will be further addressed and discussed in chapter 6 and is also well illustrated by respondents in the analysis of chapter 7.

2.2.4 Emancipation or “NGO-ization”: did NGO work lead anywhere?

Hemment (2014) argues that the heavy foreign funding of Russian civil society, and women’s organizations in particular, led not to empowerment but to new hierarchies and an “NGO-
"bureaucratization of feminist knowledge") did not succeed in Russia. Feminist activism was perceived as an elitist activity, and the activists themselves were judged for being more concerned with their own careers than with women’s actual empowerment (Hemment, 2014, p. 140). This was also partly the case: the funding from US, Canadian, German and EU donors benefitted not ordinary Russian women, but the small elite of women engaged in NGOs, who typically had higher education and knew several languages (Hemment, 2014).

The feminism that was exported to Russia by Western democracy assistants was not and could not be the kind of feminism that appeared from the grassroots in Western countries in the late 1960s. Rather, it was a “neoliberal free-market feminism” that proved incapable of empowering women (Hemment, 2014, p. 141). Foreign funding in many ways discouraged organizations’ own initiative to find domestic donors. Cook and Vinogradova (2006, p. 39) find that the competitiveness that came with foreign support generally discouraged cooperation among NGOs in Russia, and this seems to be the case for women’s NGOs as well. With no well-established networking or solidarity between different women’s organizations, it became difficult to survive on one’s own when financing started shrinking. When Western donors changed their priorities away from women’s empowerment projects in the early 2000s, many organizations ceased to exist or restricted their activity (Hemment, 2014).

According to Janet Elise Johnson (2009), the NGO-ization of women’s NGOs in the 1990s and early 2000s may have hampered a grassroots feminist movement from developing in Russia. As foreign states and international organizations provided NGOs with big grants that were earmarked for specific topics, engaging in formal NGOs became the most attractive form of organization for feminist activists. With time, these NGOs were professionalized, and their members gradually became technical experts on women’s issues and gender (Johnson, 2009, p. 46). With that, their ties with the state grew tighter and their awareness of problems such as gender equality “de-radicalized”.

This development is not unique to Russia or Eastern Europe. In Latin America, international donors’ treatment of NGOs as experts rather than citizen’s groups undermined women’s NGOs’ ability to advocate feminist-inspired policies that would contribute to political and social change in terms of gender relations and women’s rights. Democracy assistants also assumed that women’s NGOs would function as “intermediaries” to the general public and
therefore act as “surrogates” of civil society. International donors expected women’s empowerment and gender equality to be achieved through short-term projects, stagnating a process of grassroots feminist activism that could have taken place otherwise (Alvarez, 1999, p. 183).

However, not all challenges faced by women’s organizations are explained by “NGO-ization.” Johnson (2014a) identifies three main reasons why women’s mobilization in NGOs appears to be thwarted in Russia. First, the political opportunities for women’s agency that appeared in the early 1990s were constrained by the new gender regime of “masculinist protectionism and feminine vulnerability” (Johnson, 2014a, p. 227). Second, the shifting international context led to funding problems for Russian women’s NGOs. In the 1990s, women’s rights organizations had been among the target groups of American and Western European democracy promoters. When the latter changed their focus and foreign funding severely decreased, many organizations saw no other way but to close their doors. The third barrier, and perhaps the one that affected women’s organizing in NGOs the most, is the changing politics towards civil society and the consolidation of a more authoritarian regime under Putin (Johnson 2014a, p. 228).

Sundstrom (2002, p. 213) identifies four weaknesses that were typically common to all women’s NGOs in the 1990s and early 2000s, be they traditionally oriented or feminist. First, they were disconnected from ordinary people. Most women did not know about them, and they lacked societal support. Second, both groups faced negative public opinion. Whereas the traditional women’s NGOs were perceived as bland remains of the Soviet past, organizations with feminist stances were met with antifeminist ideas in society and were perceived wrongheaded by officials. Third, women’s NGOs remained poorly networked. Here, some regional NGOs serve as an exception with their tendency to network and collaborate with other women’s NGOs, as opposed to activists in the major cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg where the fragmentation has been more visible. Lastly, women’s NGOs are politically extremely weak and have had few chances to impact on public policy. Traditionalist organizations have typically been more government friendly and willing to collaborate with authorities, but their actual ability to achieve political goals remained very

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11 This does not fit with my findings from St. Petersburg, where women’s CSOs seemed to be fairly good networked. See chapter 7.
limited. Ultimately, the Russian women’s movement was “depoliticized, fragmented, and detached from its purported constituency – women” (Sundstrom, 2002, p. 224).

The low numbers of women’s NGOs in the late 1990s can illustrate how small and thereby politically insignificant women’s organizations have been. In 1998, a time when the Russian women’s movement was still growing and gaining in strength, the number of active independent women’s NGOs was estimated to 2000, which corresponded to 0.5% of all active NGOs (Sundstrom, 2002, p. 210). Although there are no formal statistics on the number of independent women’s NGOs in Russia today, numbers have dropped significantly. It should be noted that there are typically many organizations that are officially registered but practically inactive. Likewise, there are organizations that chose not to register but which are still active. In recent years, a type of feminist activism has emerged that are not registered as NGOs and seek alternative ways of organizing (Sperling, 2014). This will be further addressed in the analysis in chapter 7.

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12 See interviewee 6’s comment on the drop in crisis center NGOs in chapter 7.2.1. Interviewee 1 also confirmed this.
3 Methodology: qualitative interviews

In order to explain my choice of research methodology, it is important to point out that this thesis is written within the field of Russian area studies, a multidisciplinary social research genre focusing on Russia and the former Soviet countries. The theoretical framework draws on various disciplines such as sociology, political science, languages, and cultural studies. Through years of studying Russian language, culture, and politics, I have acquired substantial knowledges in this discipline that enable and justify the broad approach of this master’s thesis.

Qualitative research is concerned with meanings and interpretations and provides us with tools for capturing the complexities of our post-modern world (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 8). However, qualitative research is often affected by quantitative research methods’ emphasis on reliability and replicability. These factors can also be useful to qualitative research, but Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault (2016, p. 11) argue that reliability is often overemphasized in social research. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 49) note that researchers often include too many interviews in their qualitative studies. They then base their choice on a quantitative assumption that a higher number of interviews means a more scientific result. What counts the most in qualitative research, however, is the meaningfulness, or validity, of the study (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 11).

3.1 Thematic analysis

Given the rather broad and in itself multidisciplinary topic of the thesis and its focus on empiricism, thematic analysis seemed a fitting analytic method. The aim of thematic analysis is to find repeated patterns of meaning across a data set. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 4) regard thematic analysis an elementary method of qualitative analysis, which provides the novice researcher with key skills that are needed in order to conduct other types of qualitative research. Its key task to “thematize” patterns of meanings is often seen as a tool needed to conduct research in any of the more established analytic traditions such as grounded theory, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis or conversational analysis.
Because it is not bound to specific theories or strict rules, thematic analysis provides the researcher with flexibility. This is an appealing advantage of this kind of analysis, but it is at the same time a source of criticism. Due to its flexibility, thematic analysis has often not been acknowledged as an analytic method on its own terms, but rather criticized for being a loosely defined way of analyzing qualitative data where “anything goes.” At the same time, Braun and Clarke note that it is indeed a widely used method within various disciplines, although researchers do not always call their analysis “thematic” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 5).

Although qualitative research is generally associated with the inductive approach, themes or patterns within qualitative data can be identified either inductive or deductive. The *inductive* approach tries to code meanings without aiming to fit the material into a pre-existing frame or the researcher’s own presumptions. In this “bottom up” approach, the research question is not fixed on beforehand and can evolve with the coding. A more “top down” approach would be the *deductive*, or *theoretical* thematic analysis. Here, previous research is taken into account early in the process and the coding of data is rather driven by “the researcher’s theoretical or analytical interest in the area” and his or her hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). This approach “demands more specific knowledge on the studied phenomena,” as the researcher will have to test hypotheses during the analytic readings of the interview materials (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 118-119).

In order to conduct informative interviews during my fieldwork, it was necessary for me to have knowledge about previous research on women’s organizing in Russia and the legal, political and cultural context under which women’s activists are working. I also wanted to compare my material with existing research on civil society and women’s organizing in Russia. Therefore, although being aware of own preconceptions, my approach to the project was at first theoretical. In the first phase of coding the interview material, however, I did not try to fit the information into a set theoretical frame or already prepared codes and opened for an inductive analytic approach. The wording of my research questions also partly changed in this phase. However, “researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). The themes and subthemes that emerged in the end (see chapter 7) are partly based on my theoretical expectations according to research questions and secondary literature in the field.
3.2 The study: qualitative semi-structured interviews

In order to obtain as rich data as possible for a thematic analysis, I chose the qualitative semi-structured interview as my main method of collecting data. The semi-structured interview provides for a flexible interview situation where interaction between researcher and interviewee is central. Rather than being someone who is only posing questions, the semi-structured interview invites the researcher to be more involved and function as an instrument (Galletta, 2013, p. 75; 104).

The conversational approach is central to qualitative research, and a very rigid wording of questions is not desired. Rather, this approach allows for a certain variation where the researcher can adjust to the single interview situation. The analysis of qualitative interview data requires an awareness of such variability and the implication it may have for the comparability of data, since “it is not just the responses to the intended questions that need to be analyzed, but rather the conversations that take place” (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012, p. 23). The semi-structured interview is, however, not an everyday conversation, since the researcher leads the interview to certain topics. At the same time, it is not a fixed interview with a closed questionnaire (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp. 14-16).

For most interviews, I chose a rather conversational approach. I did not ask all the questions from the interview guide in a fixed order, and the wording of the questions was flexible. In some interviews, certain questions seemed irrelevant and were left out. Some questions also had their wording slightly revised throughout the interview process. An example would be my question about the existence of a women’s movement. I noticed on an early stage that “women’s movement” (zhenskoe dvizhenie) was understood very differently among respondents, depending on the context in which I would apply it. If I would talk about a “Russian women’s movement” (rossiiskoe zhenskoe dvizhenie), some respondents would immediately understand it as the state-led movement of women’s SONGOs. In some interviews, both “feminist movement” and “women’s movement” were used, which could lead to confusion. The wording that met the least misunderstanding, at least among respondents who self-identified as feminist, appeared to be “independent women’s movement” (nezavisimoe zhenskoe dvizhenie). This speaks of fine linguistic and cultural

13 For interview guide, see appendix.
nuances that may be difficult for a foreigner to catch at first, but also of respondents’ very varying backgrounds and world views.

Doing qualitative interviews is thus a learning-by-doing process. The methodology literature on qualitative methods and interviews provides the researcher with suggestions and advice, but these are only recommendations and not a set of rules. As Taylor et al. (2016, p. 11) argue, “There are guidelines to be followed, but never rules. The methods serve the researcher; never is the researcher a slave to procedure and technique.” Similarly, in conducting qualitative interviews, Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, p. 55) find that “expert knowledge on the theme is far more important than method as rule following.” The researcher is a *craftsperson* who has extensive knowledge on the given topic and follows a flexible research design.

3.2.1 **Geographical scope of the study**

Conducting field work in three different cities might be considered an ambitious task for a master’s thesis. My reason for choosing a third city was not intentionally to do a comparison between center and periphery, although this aspect emerged as a subtheme when I started analyzing the interview material. Rather, I wanted to “even out” the picture that the active women’s CSOs in Moscow and St. Petersburg give of the general situation in Russia. Moscow and St. Petersburg were chosen because they are the two biggest cities in Russia, and previous research suggests that women’s organizations are much more active here than in the regions. Voronezh was included in order to provide a more nuanced description and analysis, and to show that, as in many other cases, Moscow and St. Petersburg are probably exceptions rather than the rule. It was thus an opportunity to test the validity of my findings in Moscow and St. Petersburg. With the Voronezh case, I could see whether the findings in Moscow and St. Petersburg corresponded to “the real world” of a sample regional city. This proved fruitful. For example, several respondents in Moscow and St. Petersburg spoke of the difficulties of civic organizing in the regions. This was something I could test with my Voronezh case.

Deadlines for visa applications and restrictions on cities to visit forced me to decide on the third city on an early stage in the research process. One of my reasons for choosing Voronezh

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14 Such a comparison would indeed be interesting but demands a far more extensive fieldwork with more variables than what is reasonable within the scope of a master’s thesis.
was the city’s geographical location and its good train connections to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Second was the fact that Voronezh is a million city. I expected the possibility of finding active organizations as well as the comparability with Moscow and St. Petersburg to be higher here than in smaller cities. Through research on the internet I learned about the existence of a few potential respondents, which further strengthened my incentives to include Voronezh in the study. I also wanted the third city to be a city where studies on women’s organizing have been less frequent.

It proved more difficult than expected to find active women’s CSOs in Voronezh, and the time frame did not allow me to arrange many more meetings than I did. Nonetheless, the four interviews I conducted in the city provided me with very interesting data for analysis. Where I needed more data, I used available printed and online resources. Including Voronezh in the study gave me some insights regarding women’s organizing that would most likely not have appeared if I stayed only in Moscow and St. Petersburg. I do not claim that Voronezh is representative of the regions in Russia, but it does appear to me that the lack of women’s groups there gives a rather good picture of contemporary women’s organizing in Russia outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

### 3.2.2 Selection of respondents

The sampling of informants for the study was done purposefully and not chosen randomly. Since my main focus was on independent, feminist women’s CSOs, it was a criterion that the largest share of women’s organizations, advocates, or initiatives interviews should be doing some kind of work to emancipate women or combat gender equality. Weeks and months of internet research resulted in a list of potential informants. An emphasis was put on choosing a broad selection of organizations in order to have an information-rich interview material that would enable an in-depth study of women’s organizing in Russia.

Due to my research questions on co-optation and the NGO law, I especially searched for NGOs that were listed as foreign agents or had received presidential grants. Since my thesis

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15 Purposive or purposeful sampling can be understood as “selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study” (Patton, 2015, p. 264).

16 Feminist in the way that they in one way or another address and try to combat gender inequality and women’s subordination in society. As discussed in chapter 2.2.1, this does not require respondents to self-identify as feminists.
explores changes to women’s organizing, I looked both for organizations that had been active since the 1990s as well as those which had been founded only after Putin’s return to power in 2012. For variety, I also wanted to include some traditionalist women’s CSOs. As chapter 7 shows, this resulted in very interesting findings about respondent’s self-perception.

My most frequent method of recruiting participants was e-mail. In some cases, I also used Facebook and its Russian equivalent VKontakte. Three interviews were the result of snowball sampling\(^\text{17}\). While in Russia, I also recruited some respondents through SMS or phone call. In several cases, I had not received an answer from an organization before coming to Russia. On my second request, sometimes via phone, they would answer positively and agree to meet me. I got one rejection, and with one NGO I failed to find an interview time that fit my and their time schedule.

Respondents\(^\text{18}\) could be divided into two groups: twelve respondents represented some kind of organization or initiative, whereas four were interviewed as “experts” on the topic. All of the latter had at some point engaged in civil society. Two were former activists from NGOs that had shut down or were inactive (interviewee 7 and 10), and interviewee 1 was still active in different projects but the interview was based on her extensive knowledge about women’s organizing in Russia through journalistic work.

Not all twelve interviewees from the first group represent women’s rights NGOs. Interviewee 2 leads a GONGO that is organized within state structures. It has become more traditional with time and cannot be defined as an independent women’s rights organization. However, since it has been quite influential through its close ties with authorities and since my thesis is also concerned with the “traditional values” paradigm and co-optation of civil society, an interview with them seemed relevant. At the other end of the scale, interviewees 11 and 14 represent feminist initiatives that are very loosely organized, have few members, and are not funded in any way. The remaining nine are or have features very similar to NGOs. Two respondents (9, 13) represent organizations or initiatives that had received presidential grants. Domestic violence was a main topic across all interviews, and six of my respondents (interviewees 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 16) had this as their only or by far most dominating working field.

\(^{17}\) A sampling technique where already identified research participants suggest or recruit new potential participants.

\(^{18}\) For an overview of respondents, see appendix.
Figure 1 provides a simplified yet analytically effective overview over respondents according to their activities’ orientation and funding situation. It functions as a model to explains the importance of strategical framing of women’s CSOs in their pursuit of funding. The numbers correspond with interviewees’ number (see appendix). I have provided four categories: social support, advocacy, activism and non-political activity. Social support includes mostly CSOs working on domestic violence, but other social projects are also included. Advocacy stands for activities such as lobbying and awareness campaigns. Under activism, I have included feminist initiatives and women’s rights activists that engage actively in street protests. The non-political category refers to groups that do not aim to change society or impact on politics.

As the figure shows, an overlap of two categories is possible – some of the respondents could probably even be placed within three categories. The boundaries between these categories are blurry, and advocates can choose to frame activity towards the social support group in order to increase their funding chances. CSOs in the social support category often try to frame themselves as unpolitical as possible. More of them could therefore be put into the overlap area between the social support and the non-political. For the feminist activists in the activist category, their feminist stances are the core of their activity and they are also not interested in the social support category. However, that means that they also do not receive funding, at least not from the state (respondent no. 5’s feminist group has earlier received funding from abroad). Thus, the figure clearly shows that funding is most likely in the sphere of social support, which explains the need to frame activities in that direction.
In addition to interview data, I bring in court cases, surveys, information from newspaper articles, and excerpts from Putin’s public speeches as well as commentaries from deputies to illustrate and analyze the context in which women’s organizing takes place. Especially chapter 6 is based on such sources.

3.2.3 Implementation of the study

The interviews were conducted between February 6 and 27, 2019. 15 out of 16 respondents were women. Their age spanned from 22 to 70 years, with the largest share being between 35 and 55. Respondents were asked to suggest a location for the interview. Seven interviews took place in cafes or restaurants, seven in the organization’s office or the respondent’s workplace, and two informants invited me to conduct the interview in their home. All 16 interviews were conducted in Russian language and lasted from 25 to 100 minutes, with the average interview lasting approximately 45 minutes.

Interviews were recorded with a digital recorder specifically acquired for the interview process. They were then transferred to my laptop, crypted as zip-files and uploaded to the OneDrive cloud storage provided by UiO. After each interview I sat down and listened through the recording and wrote down thoughts regarding the specific interview. I transcribed every interview verbatim in Russian using the transcription software F5. After that, I imported them to the coding software NVivo. During the coding process, I started out as open as possible and coded all possible themes. With time, certain overarching themes emerged. Of course, the themes I ended up with are also related to my theory and research questions. Parallel with coding, I marked quotes that well illustrated my findings. In order not to lose valuable information in translation, I stuck to the Russian transcripts throughout the whole process and translated only the phrases that are quoted in the thesis into English.

The research project was registered with the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) and approved before my departure to Russia. In accordance with NSD’s guidelines, the identities of informants were anonymized. It could probably have been beneficial to the study

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19 As advised by NSD and the university’s IT section for a safe crossing of the border back from Russia.
20 NSD project number: 698841
to identify some respondents or organizations by name,\textsuperscript{21} since a substantial share of respondents are publicly known persons that are frequently interviewed or quoted by various outlets. Although not being able to use their name when analyzing the interview material, there are some cases in the thesis where I refer to people by name that are also among my anonymized respondents.

The specifics of women’s CSOs in Russia makes a “bulletproof” anonymization practically infeasible if one wants to conduct a meaningful qualitative analysis and contribute with new knowledge. This is especially due to women’s organizations’ low numbers and yet diverging characteristics. Therefore, I do not exclude that respondents may be identifiable, especially to a person familiar with women’s organizing in Russia. However, I have tried my best to share as much as possible about the activity of an organization or person while keeping them as anonymous as possible. I also do not regard the stances presented in the analysis as particularly controversial or as imposing a potential threat to any of the respondents.

As the reader will notice, the analysis and use of interview data is not exclusively limited to chapter 7. I have quoted and referred to respondents throughout the thesis where it seemed appropriate. This is because the in-depth interviews provided very varied and valuable information and perspectives. Respondents’ response to the NASW in particular is discussed and analyzed in chapter 6. I thereby let interviewees comment on public policies as these are presented. This is not always the case, as some topics are left for the analysis in chapter 7. However, I find it purposeful that interviewee’s voices are integrated into the whole thesis and not only to a limited last chapter.

\textsuperscript{21} This is often the case in important studies on women’s organizing in Russia, such as Sperling (2014) and Johnson et al. (2016).
4 Women’s movements in Russia prior to 2000

This chapter provides an overview over the history of women’s organizing in Russia prior to Putin’s presidency. If one could say that feminism has ever bloomed in Russia, it certainly was in the years before and after the October revolution, as well as during the Perestroika and early post-Soviet period. As far as women’s empowerment is concerned, the long period from the 1930s to the mid-1980s can be seen as an “in-between” period between two transformations (Saarinen, Ekonen & Uspenskaia, 2014, p. 7).

4.1 At the turn to the twentieth century

Starting in the 1860s, questions on the woman’s role in society and the issue of women’s empowerment were increasingly subject to public debate in tsarist Russia. Debates on the “Woman Question” included discussions on topics such as women’s right to education and their place in the labor force. In the 1890s, the first organizations addressing these questions appeared. These knew little of each other’s existence, and it was not until the revolutionary year of 1905 that one could speak of Russian women’s movements (Stites, 1978/1991). Two movements emerged: one being the feminist women’s suffrage movement, and the other the socialist women’s movement (Stites, 1978/1991, pp. 160, 191).

Resulting from feminist advocates’ efforts and the government’s fear of women radicalizing during their studies abroad, several women’s courses and women’s universities were established in Russia in the late 19th century, with the number increasing after 1905. In terms of quality and diversity of women’s higher education, Russia was the most progressive country in Europe, beating even England (Stites, 1978/1991, p. 87). In these years, women’s participation in the workforce also started growing rapidly: whereas women constituted 25 percent of the working population in the 1880s, the percentage had increased to 40 percent by 1914 (Stites, 1978/1991, p. 162).

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22 In recent years, observers and activists alike speak of the blooming of Russia’s feminist movement.
23 Stites’ division into a feminist and a socialist movement correlates with Khasbulatova’s (2017) terms liberal-democratic and social-democratic.
Compared to the situation in Western Europe and America, there were many radical women in Russia at the turn to the twentieth century who participated in the revolutionary movement and even in terrorist groups. Although they were not necessarily driven by specific women’s issues, women in Russia were still more active in the late nineteenth century emancipation process than women in most other countries (Engel, 1983; Saarinen et al., 2014, p. 3). Noonan and Nechemias (2001, p. 1) describe the variety of women’s organizations that emerged in these years and developed until 1917:

Women’s movements encompassed a myriad of directions, from women in medicine, to women terrorists, from intellectual women who tried to escape the confines of the prescribed roles of wives and mothers, to revolutionaries who tried to change society. All the movements and groups were born in the idea of the need for change, but there was no consensus from generation to generation and from group to group about what forms change should take. (…) The reform groups wanted to improve the status of women within the tsarist system, whereas the revolutionaries sought to overthrow the system. Some sought reforms for all women; others, for selected groups of women. Some movements focused primarily on the upper and middle classes; others, on the disadvantaged classes. Some groups had a philanthropic orientation, whereas others wanted to affect women’s legal status.

As mentioned above, although organizations’ focus and aims were astonishingly varied, two distinct movements developed. The first group consisted of what Khasbulatova (2017, p. 7) calls liberal-democratic24 women’s organizations, whose constituencies were mainly educated, reform-oriented bourgeois women who fought for women’s suffrage and against women’s subordination in society. The other main group were the social-democratic, or proletarian women’s organizations, who saw women’s improved rights as an integral part of a new socialist society.

The liberal-democratic women’s movement combined the ideas of equality between the sexes with that of personal freedom. In 1985 Russia’s first woman pediatrician and activist Anna Shabanova founded the Russian Mutual Philanthropic Women’s Society (Russkoe zhenskoe vzaimno-blagotvoritel’noe obshchestvo), one of the first women’s organizations in tsarist Russia. A central personage in the women’s suffrage movement, Shabanova proclaimed the fight for women’s right to vote an “instrument of protecting women’s rights, a way to liberate half of humanity” (Shabanova, 1912, p. 27; as cited in Khasbulatova, 2017, p. 8). As the movement gained strengths in the early 20th century, further organizations with similar stances were founded (Khasbulatova, 2017, p. 8).

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24 The term liberal-democratic is employed by Khasbulatova in her work and is not to be confused with the socially conservative, nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), which exists only since 1989 and is led by Vladimir Zhirinovsky.
Just like the liberal-democratic organizations, the proletarian women in the social-democratic movement fought for women’s suffrage and improved working conditions for women. However, they saw these goals as an integral part of overthrowing autocracy and creating a socialist society. Inequality between the sexes was thus seen as a class problem and not a women’s issue. Bolshevik revolutionary women such as Alexandra Kollontai regarded the women’s movement as “the woman side of the worker’s movement, without its own infrastructure” (Khasbulatova 2017, 7).

In 1908 The First All-Russian Women’s Congress was held in St. Petersburg, with more than 1000 delegates. The above-mentioned Anna Shabanova and her organization served as the leader of the organizational committee (Aivazova, 1998). Here, goals of the Russian women’s movement were defined: promoting equal rights between the sexes, increasing women’s self-awareness, identifying and working to overcome men’s domination in all social spheres, and establishing women’s organizations in all regions (Khasbulatova 2017, p. 10). The slogan of the new women’s movement, which by large was equal to the feminist/liberal-democratic direction, was: “Freedom and equality for all before the law regardless of sex” (Mirovich, 1909, p. 148; cited in Khasbulatova, 2019, p. 9).

Liberal-democratic women’s organizations fought for women’s rights in various ways — through petitions to federal councils, demonstrations, and strikes prior to elections to the First State Duma demanding women’s suffrage. Women’s activists collaborated closely with deputies in the First State Duma to promote equality. In all the following Dumas, women’s organizations submitted multiple proposals, such as to widen women’s rights in local government, increase their inheritance rights to be equal with those of men, to adapt laws on legal separation and dissolution of marriage, equal pay for equal work, and women’s equal rights with men to admission to universities (Khasbulatova, 2017, p. 10).

According to Khasbulatova (2017, p. 11-12), women’s movements played an integral part in the societal-political life in the last two decades of tsarist rule. Probably the most evident results of women activist’s struggle were the granting of women’s suffrage in 1917, and women’s right to take on all public positions. Educational opportunities for women were also significantly improved, and women were granted several civil rights. Women’s activists published actively and managed to impact on the public debate. The Union of women’s
equality, established in 1905, brought the ideas of equality between the sexes to the masses and worked closely with organizations such as the Farmer’s Union and the Red Cross (Khasbulatova, 2017, p. 9). However different the two main movements were, they were united by their discontent with the prevailing social status of women and managed to gather thousands of women from all over the country (Khasbulatova, 2017, p. 9).

4.2 Communist era from the 1930s

As Stalin came to power, a further emancipation process of Soviet women was curtailed. After the Communist Party had proclaimed the Woman Question resolved already in 1929, the “Women’s Departments” (zhenotdely) of the Bolshevik party were dissolved in 1930. These were special women’s departments that had been founded in 1919 to perform a dual function of mobilizing women to build a socialist society and at the same time putting women’s issues on the political agenda (Saarinen et al., 2014, p. 7). In line with the new pronatalist incentives that were introduced to build a “new socialist family”, abortion was abolished already in 1936. In the same manner, access to contraceptives and divorce were also restricted in this period (Saarinen et al., 2014, p. 7).

From the 1930s on, there were mainly two arenas of state-sponsored “women’s” activism in the Soviet Union. The first one was The Soviet Women’s Committee, a “mouthpiece for Soviet propaganda”, which engaged mostly in foreign affairs (Nechemias, 1998, p. 10). Second were the Women’s Councils (zhensovety), which engaged in social activities and were politically weak (Nechemias, 1998, p. 10). Their main focus was not to empower women at large, but rather to improve women’s possibility to combine work with childbearing. Women continued to be very underrepresented in decision-making bodies — and not represented at all in the Politburo (Hrycak, 2002, p. 67).

Soviet women did reach a high level of emancipation in terms of workforce participation, equal pay for equal work and educational opportunities (Nechemias, 1998, p. 10). Yet this is not to be seen as a genuine ideological change in the Soviet state view on women and their roles but was rather motivated by demographic and economic needs. The Soviet women’s double burden as mother-workers illustrates this well: they embraced new “emancipated” roles in the workforce but remained in their traditional roles in the private sphere.
Even in the workforce women were not as emancipated as the state and communist officials claimed they were. They may have had equal pay for equal work, but women still earned only around 70 percent of what men earned (Bridger, Kay, & Pinnick, 1996, p. 16). This reflected women’s relegation to and concentration in sectors that demanded lower skills and were relatively low paid. One way to compensate for this was to take night shifts, which again increased the already heavy burden of full-time paid work and unpaid domestic work (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 16). Since the Soviet state needed more workforce and more citizens, Soviet women were thus treated “as an interest group with a common identity — ‘working mothers’” (Hrycak, 2002, p. 67).

4.3 Perestroika and the 1990s

Under perestroika, reforms were introduced that removed gender quotas in public organizations. This led to a drastic fall in the level of women’s representation from 35.5% before the reforms to 5.4% after, which was a wake-up call for women’s activism (Nechemias, 1998, p. 12). Women deputies did rise women’s issues but framed them in a way that stressed women’s roles as mother and wives. For example, the problem of inadequate working conditions was centered mainly around the negative consequences it had for women’s reproductive health and ability to give birth to healthy children (Nechemias, 1998, p. 13). Feminist scholars also noted that none of the women who enjoyed public recognition in this period publicly identified themselves with women’s issues (Nechemias, 1998, p. 14).

With Gorbachev’s claim that women should to be sent back to their “purely womanly mission as home-makers” (Hemment, 2014, p. 135), his gender politics were criticized by Russian feminists and researchers of enacting a backlash against the emancipation of women (Nechemias, 1998). Others did find Gorbachev’s policies gender-sensitive, because these did in fact try to ease the women’s double burden, however in an essentialist way (Zdravomyslova, 2014, p. 114).

In the late Gorbachev period, the zhensovets got their rejuvenation. They were now included under the renowned Soviet Women’s Committee, which had connections to women’s groups in other countries. This led Soviet women out of their isolation and provided them with opportunities to create new international coalitions (Hrycak, 2002, p. 67). Further, the revival
of the *zhensovets* led to a significant growth in these organizations, from only 15 in the Moscow region before 1986 to 600 by 1987 (Nechemias, 1998, p. 14). By April 1988, there were purportedly 236,000 *zhensovets* in the Soviet Union, with a total of 2.3 million members (Buckley, 1989, p. 21).

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new opportunities opened to women’s advocates in Russia. During the turbulent first post-Soviet years, women’s organizations increasingly turned towards public advocacy and increased their influence. As was discussed in chapter 2.2.4, the 1990s were also the heydays of foreign democracy assistance to Russian civil society. Western states and agencies, with the biggest being the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Soros Foundation, allocated large amounts of money to strengthen NGOs and build democracy “from below” (Richter, 2002, p. 30; Hemment, 2007). The transition to market economy affected women more severely than men and organizing in NGOs was often one of very few alternatives (Richter, 2002; Johnson, 2009).

During these years, women from groups such as the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, the Information Center of the Independent Women’s Forum, and the Consortium of Women’s Non-Governmental Organizations engaged in lobbying through Duma hearings, wrote reports to government officials, and sometimes even were invited to take part in working groups aiming to develop legislation (Nechemias, 1998, p. 21). Feminist critique introduced new concepts for analysis to the Russian discourse, such as *gender, sexism* and *sexual harassment*. Feminist scholars at the newly established centers for gender studies analyzed the Soviet gender order, soviet masculinization of femininity and the following crisis in masculinity, as well as the Soviet women’s double burden (Zdravomyslova 2014, 120).

In the Soviet Union’s last year of existence, in March 1991, the first Independent Women’s Forum was organized in Dubna outside of Moscow. Their motto was “democracy without women is not democracy”, with which they took a clearly feminist stance against all forms of discrimination against women. Around 200 participants from 48 women’s organizations attended the forum (Nechemias, 1998, p. 15). Even delegates from Western countries were present, which was new to the post-Soviet (and Soviet) women’s movement. In our interview, a former feminist activist who had taken part in Dubna recollected the vibrant spirit of the first forum and stressed the diversity of the participants:
The first (forum) was the most interesting, because there were completely different (people there). Moms, Russian patriots who preached the orthodox family with Russian traditions. On the other hand, there were lesbians, there were mothers of Afghanistan soldiers, all kinds of people. And some women with rather political ambitions. It was interesting, because everyone had their things to tell, and I think it would have been right to try to unite all that. But… there were no willingness to actually unite and promote action. (…) We thought that everything would work out on its own. And no one took on themselves the roles as actual political organizers. (…) The second forum was already more structured, but less dedicated. It didn’t address further challenges [ne stavil novykh zadach].

(interviewee 7)

The first forum remains a unique event in the newer history of women’s organizing in Russia. As Interviewee 7 mentions in the quote above, a subsequent forum was held the year after. However, it was the last Independent Women’s Forum to be organized. Nonetheless, in 1997, a Charter of Solidarity was signed by more than 300 women’s organizations across a broad philosophical specter, with the aim of coordinating and strengthening their advocacy power (Nechemias, 1998, p. 21; Sundstrom, 2002, p. 211).

Another remarkable achievement of women’s advocates in these years was the success of the political bloc Women of Russia. In the new Russia’s first national election in 1993, Women of Russia won 8% of the vote and 22 seats in the lower house (Ferree, Risman, Sperling, Gurikova, & Hyde, 1999, p. 86). Women’s advocates had made their way into institutional politics; however, it would not last long. Women of Russia remained loyal to the unpopular president Yeltsin and failed to deliver what they had promised (Pershina, 2011, p. 116).

Gradually, Women of Russia lost their support among women’s organizations. The bloc was criticized for not taking a clear enough stand against the war in Chechnya25, and women’s advocates perceived its members as “pragmatic politicians who entered into coalitions, traded votes, and failed to institute effective social welfare programs as their platform had promised” (Ferree et al., 1999, pp. 101-102). In the 1995 elections, Women of Russia did not meet the threshold of five percent and was not reelected (Pershina, 2011, p. 116).

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25 The First Chechen War was fought from December 1994 to August 1996 and was an armed conflict between Chechen separatists and Russian federal forces.
4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the history of women’s movements and women’s policies in Russia, which sets a backdrop against which contemporary women’s organizing can be analyzed. The account on the vibrant women’s movements of the early twentieth century shows that Russia has a history of feminist activism that goes further back than to perestroika. The main successes of these early movements’ struggle were the granting of women’s suffrage in 1917, and women having increased access to education and increased civil rights.

The Soviet state used this history of women’s achieved rights as a reason to proclaim the “Woman Question” solved. Officially, women in the Soviet Union seemed to have achieved a much higher degree of equality with men than their counterparts in the West. However, the narrative of the Soviet women’s emancipation was a false perception that still remains in the Russian population today and explains some of the negative discourses around feminism. The Soviet Union’s attitude towards women was driven by economic needs to build the country effectively. For that, women were needed in the workforce, but they were also responsible for having more children and taking care of the household. Therefore, more was being done here than in most other countries to improve women’s possibility to combine full-time work with childbearing and domestic work.

Even if women finally had the chance to organize more freely under Gorbachev, his women’s policies were still conservative and focused first and foremost on women as mothers. He conveyed an essentialist view in wanting to “free” women from their double burdens by letting them return to only childbearing and housekeeping – and did not address gender inequality or specific women’s issues as pressing problems.

During a short period of time in the 1990s, opportunities for women’s advocates opened under Yeltsin. If one compares the situation today with the 1990s, it makes sense to speak of a “retraditionalization” of politics and society. This historical chapter has shown us, however, that the state’s attitude towards women have for the most part remained conservative and essentialist. Putin’s new course of “morality politics”, as will be discussed in chapter 6.3, is therefore a carefully chosen strategy that follows historical lines and also resonates with many people in Russia.
5 Russian civil society under pressure

5.1 Co-optation of civil society under Putin

Early in Putin’s first presidency, in 2001, the first Civic Forum was held. It gathered around 5000 SONGO representatives, and the boundaries of what was defined as civil society by the Russian state were gradually being defined. The perceived threat from NGOs funded by Western sponsors increased incentives to welcome and seek dialogue with the “right” NGOs, while excluding the “wrong” ones (Richter, 2009, pp. 9-10). Starting with the amendments to the Law on non-profit organizations (often referred to as the NGO law) in 2006 and continuing with the Law on foreign agents in 2012, such incentives to exclude certain NGOs have intensified.

The Russian government under Putin has thus sought to tighten legal restrictions on the NGO sector and thereby oppress and marginalize organizations that are seen as political and potentially threatening. In the creation of a civil society that aligns with its preferences, the Russian state discourages existing and future initiatives in politically contested areas such as human rights and environment protection. Notwithstanding the targeted attack on a specific part of civil society, the intensifying policies have “affected the position of the entire (…) sector and its internal structure” (Skokova et al., 2018, p. 540).

While the state discriminates, and sometimes represses organizations which it regards as disadvantageous to its own strength and survival, it likewise strives to strengthen initiatives in areas that correspond with its preferences and from which it can profit. This co-optation of civil society first and foremost favors the social sphere, in which public budgets and services tend to fall short. The “socially oriented” (sotsialno orientirovannyе) organizations are thus the ones that are viewed by the government as serving the common good (Skokova et al., 2018, p. 532). The combination of restricting foreign funding and political NGO activity on the one hand and promoting SONGOs on the other has had a splitting effect on civil society and has caused a decline in solidarity in the non-profit sector (Skokova et al., 2018, p. 556).
5.1.1 The Law on Foreign Agents

In 2012, The Federal Law No. 121 “On Foreign Agents” marked the beginning of a new wave of restrictive measures that further clamped down on the parts of civil society regarded as undesirable to the state. The law requires NGOs receiving funding from abroad and engaging in vaguely defined “political activities” to register as “foreign agents”. The term has overtly negative connotations among Russian citizens, especially considering their country’s Soviet past, and is associated with words such as “spy” or “traitor” (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2018a).

As of April 2019, there were 74 organizations on the list (Ministry of Justice 2019). However, a total of 177 organizations have at some point been in the register. Of these, 67 have shut down and 37 have managed to be removed (Plantan, 2019) 26. Since the foreign agent law was introduced, a minimum of eleven NGOs 27 that may be considered women’s organizations have been on the list, of which eight have been removed. Four organizations have been liquidated (Plantan, 2019). In recent years, there are some implications that the situation for organizations listed as foreign agents may be “stabilizing.” In 2018, 46 out of 75 “agents” received funding from abroad. This was an increase from the year before, when the number was 38 (BBC, 2019).

The Kaliningrad women’s NGO “Mir zhenshchin” (Women’s world) was one of the organizations that most undoubtedly received both the carrot and the stick, and their case serves as a vivid example of the ambivalent state policies with regards to the non-profit sector. In December 2015, they were labelled a Foreign Agent, without having directly received money from abroad. Their Russian sponsors, however, had received foreign money. Mir zhenshchin had also once organized an event for pensioners with deputies from the region in a library, which was enough for the Ministry of Justice to regard their activity as political. In an interview with Novaia Gazeta, the organization’s vice-leader recollected how they were labelled foreign agents while at the same time being among the winners of presidential grants:

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26 I am very grateful to Elizabeth Plantan (2019), who shared her unpublished dataset on the foreign agent law with me.

27 Since women’s organizations are difficult to classify, this number does not fully reflect the total number of women’s NGOs affected. I know of one NGO working among other things on domestic violence and at least two centers for gender studies that are not included in this number, but which also have been designated foreign agents. As far as I could find out, the first is still active and in the register, whereas the two others are liquidated.
In December 2015 I got to feel what it is like to be an outcast. After our organization had been recognized as a foreign agent, two people immediately left, and we lost our office premises. The most interesting thing was that in that year we had applied for presidential grants, and when we were officially included in the registry as foreign agents, the disbursement of grants was announced, and among (the receivers) were we. All of this happened in one day (Barkovskaia, 2017).

This ambivalence illustrates how state institutions are not unified and maybe even have different views on civil society’s role. Whereas the legal structures were “out to get them”, the co-optation structures were encouraging Mir Zhenshchin’s socially oriented activity by awarding them public grants. The NGO managed to be removed from the register and are now receiving presidential grants (Barkovskaia 2017).

Three years after the Foreign Agent Law, another law was introduced that further signaled the Russian state’s disliking of foreign and international organizations’ activity in Russia. The law on “Undesirable Organizations” (Federal Law No. 129-FZ, 2015) effectively forced foreign organizations deemed undesirable to close their offices in Russia. De facto, it meant a ban of foreign and international NGOs, as they were prohibited “from establishing branches in Russia and from distributing information through the internet or media” (Skokova et al., 2018, p. 542). As of April 2019, there were 15 organizations on the list (Ministry of Justice, n.d.). None of these are women’s organizations, but both donors’ and NGOs’ fear of being associated with an “undesirable” organization left the whole NGO sector affected.

5.1.2 Windows of opportunities for the “good” civil society

The state’s division of civil society into a “good” and a “bad” often forces CSOs to adapt their activity to fit with state narratives. For the state’s preferred civil society actors, namely SONGOs or CSOs that are willing to frame themselves as such, new windows of opportunities have appeared (Bogdanova, Cook and Kulmala (2018, p. 508). Over the last two decades, Russia has established new cross-sectoral bodies and launched grant competitions that support and strengthen the position of SONGOs.

The Public Chamber (Obshchestvennaia palata) was established in 2005 as an intermediary institution between the state and civil society, a model which has been implemented across the country on the regional level. Some regions even have multiple such chambers; a regional one, on connected with the local Duma, a youth chamber, and several municipal chambers.
(Richter, 2009, p. 7). However, to be able to advocate their interests and possibly influence on public policy, civil society organizations must know “the rule of the game.” This includes avoiding confrontation with the state and rather be willing to “work constructively with the state”, and thus following the tactics of persuasion rather than demands (Bogdanova et al., 2018, p. 509).

In 2006, The Public Chamber introduced its first grant competition and started disbursing grants to officially registered and approved NGOs (Hemment, 2012, p. 244). This program was launched to support governmentally approved NGOs financially and offer an alternative to foreign grants. With such grants, the state could better encourage the development of its desired types of NGOs. Later on, in 2017, the disbursement of these federal grants was coordinated under the new Presidential Grant’s Fund [Fond prezidentskikh grantov]. Another competition is the Federal Support Program for SONGOs, run by the Ministry of Economic Development (Tarasenko, 2018, p. 516). Of all registered non-profit organizations in Russia, by far the largest share are SONGOs (Tarasenko, 2018).

As has been shown in this chapter, the contradicting state policies of both suppression and support to non-profit activity in Russia is a type of selective repression (Plantan, 2019) that has made the non-profit sector “more unstable, vulnerable and internally divided” (Skokova et al. 2018, p. 533). With such policies it can seem tempting to divide civil society organizations in Russia into two categories, namely a large group of unpolitical SONGOs and a smaller group of advocacy-oriented political NGOs. However, such a division can be misleading (Bogdanova et al., 2018; Kulmala, 2016).

Under increasing authoritarian rule, political activities are reframed as “unpolitical” as they are forced into the socially oriented sector. Thus, much of everyday political activity in Russia takes place in the field of social welfare (Bogdanova, Cook, & Kulmala 2018, p. 510). Women’s organizations are an example of a whole branch of organizations that can choose to frame themselves as both political and concerned with rights, as well as unpolitical and concerned with social work. The analysis in chapter 7 will explore this further. Before that, the following chapter will deal with the context in which women’s organizing takes place in today’s Russia.
6 The context of women’s organizing in Russia: present

In this chapter, I will discuss the broader conditions under which women’s groups are working in Russia today. That includes factors impacting on the women’s rights situation such as legislation on domestic violence and the NASW, a growing patriotic conservatism focusing on traditional values, public opinion on gender equality and feminism, and legal proceedings of feminist activity. The aim is to set a backdrop for the analysis in chapter 7. An emphasis is laid on how the Russian government addresses women’s rights issues (research question 3a).

At the same time, this chapter is concerned with women’s groups response to government policies (research question 3b). Therefore, as different topics and policies are discussed, I will bring in views and comments from my interviewees on the given subject. An analysis of informants’ reactions to the NASW and the state’s failure to adapt a law on domestic violence will follow in this chapter as the topics are discussed.

6.1 Russian women in numbers and statistics

In demographic terms, women in Russia by far outlive and outnumber men. According to the Federal state statistics service (Rosstat, 2018, p. 28), with a life expectancy of 77.6 years in 2017, women were expected to live ten years longer than men. This fact is reflected in the general population statistics. As of January 2018, women outweighed men by 10.7 million and made out 54 percent of the total population. Women start to outlive men already in their 40s.

If adding to this demographic discrepancy that until the pension reforms of 2018, the retirement age for women was 55, five years lower than for men, it becomes no surprise that women constitute the large bulk (67 percent) of Russia’s pensioners (Rosstat, 2018, p. 189) and a considerable electorate. It was this electorate Putin appealed to when he softened the pension reforms in August 2018, for example by increasing women’s retirement age not to 63 as proposed by the Government, but to 60 (from 55 years before). He argued that in Russia, one treats women “specially”:
In our country the attitude towards women is special, careful. We understand that they do not only work on their main workplace, the entire house, family care, upbringing of children, hassle with grandchildren is usually on them (Kremlin 29.08.2018).

Here, Putin acknowledges that women often face a double burden of full-time paid work and unpaid domestic work. However, he does not address this as a problem, but rather accepts it as a simple fact and used it as a reason to cherish women for their hard work. The solution, according to Putin, is not to try to let men take some of the burden, but to treat women “carefully” and let them retire earlier. As the rest of this chapter will show, such essentialist viewpoints are common in Russian politics. Prevailing gender stereotypes ultimately impinge on women’s rights and are a barrier to women’s advocacy.

6.2 Laws and policy impacting on women’s rights – and the lack of them

Article 19.3 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation (1993) guarantees men and women with “equal rights and freedoms and equal opportunities to exercise them”. Further legal mechanisms to secure gender equality are scarce. A draft legislation was introduced in 2003 by the Duma committee on family, women’s and children’s issues that would further ensure gender equality in the constitution, but after fifteen years of waiting for the second reading, the bill had become outdated and was rejected in July 2018. The lawmakers then said a new law would be introduced that would focus on women’s social rights and labor rights (TASS, 2018).

6.2.1 Working conditions and labor rights

Women constitute nearly 53% of the working population in Russia (Rosstat, 2018, p. 129) and are highly represented in spheres such as education, science, health care, culture and social protection (NASW, 2017, p. 2). In 2017, women earned on average 32 658 rubles per month\(^{28}\), which was 28.3% lower than men’s average monthly salary. In the Labor Code there are already many laws mentioning women and their rights. For example, it is prohibited to refuse to hire women for reasons associated with pregnancy or children (Labor Code, 2001, art. 64). However, with their focus on women’s reproductive functions, these laws are in many cases communicating women’s inequality rather than equality with men.

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\(^{28}\) Equals ca. 453 Euros or 4338 Norwegian kroner (as of April 2019).
As of 2018, Russia was one of nine post-Soviet countries that still had a list of professions banned for women. Its origin can be traced back to the 1970s, when the Soviet government saw the need to protect women’s reproductive health and fertility. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the list was “carried over” to the labor laws of the newly independent states, and such bans were not viewed as discriminatory against women. In recent years, several countries have removed their lists due to closer ties with the EU (ADC Memorial, 2018).

In Russia, the “List of hard types of work and work with harmful or dangerous working conditions” bans employment of women to 456 professions (Federal Law no. 181-F3, 1999, art. 10). This means women in Russia cannot formally be employed as firefighters, mariners, metro train drivers,29 and many more. In accordance with the NASW, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (Ministry of Labor) promised in 2018 that the list would be evaluated to “ensure fair working conditions” (Koroleva 2018). In August 2019, the minister of labor signed a document that will decrease the number of forbidden professions to 100 by 2021 (Order no. 512n, 2019). The professions that are still to remain on the list, are the ones that are still considered harmful to women’s reproductive functions, such as firefighting, professional diving and work that requires lifting and carrying heavy loads (Gusenko, 2019).

There are women working in the banned professions, but many of these have had to fight a long way before taking on their job. Such a case was the one of Svetlana Medvedeva, a navigation officer who wanted to become a captain. When she applied to work with a shipping company, she was turned down on the basis of the list of banned professions. After two rejections by a district court and a regional court, she filed a complaint with UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which recognized her dismissal as discrimination and also deemed the List of hard types of work discriminatory. In 2017, after five years of legal battle, she won a case in a Russian district court for discrimination and could start working as a captain (Visser 2017).

In 2012, preceding and significantly hampering Medvedeva’s case, the Russian constitutional court rejected a complaint by a citizen of St. Petersburg who demanded the right to work as a metro driver. The court ruled that the “principle of juridical equality cannot be implemented

29 The ban on the profession as a metro driver was introduced in the 1980s. Before that, female metro drivers were a common sight (Babaian, 2007).
without taking into account the universally recognized social role of women in reproduction” (Ruling No. 617-0-0; RBK, 2017). Other arguments were dissatisfactory sanitary conditions for women in the profession, as well as the “great physical and emotional load”, “time pressure”, and “great responsibility” connected with the job, which, according to the court, made it unsuitable for employment of women (ADC Memorial, 2018).

A recent case with a somewhat surprising outcome in the Russian context, includes a transwoman from Saint Petersburg who was dismissed from her job in printing in 2017 after having changed her name and sex. The employer had justified the dismissal by referring to the Labor code, where it is stated that women are banned to work as printers. In April 2019, the court recognized her dismissal as gender discrimination. The employer had to pay her a total compensation of 1,86 million rubles for enforced idleness. The woman and her lawyers’ arguments converged around the claim that main objective of the list of forbidden professions is to protect maternity, which does not apply to a trans-gender woman (Dozhd, 2019).

Regardless of discriminatory laws and practices, Russia lies ahead of many industrialized countries when it comes to gender balance in business. According to a 2017 report, Russia boosts with 47% women in senior management positions, and scores significantly better than the EU states, where an average of 26% of senior roles are held by women. Possibly a heritage from the Soviet formal gender equality in the workforce, Russia was the only country in the report in which every business had a woman in its senior leadership team30 (Grant Thornton 2017, 10). However, chairwoman of the Central Bank and one of Russia’s most influential women Elvira Nabiullina stated in 2018 that there is still a long way to go: Despite education and experience “women rarely assert themselves in higher positions”. Through a project focusing on young woman leaders, she wants to break the glass ceiling (lenta.ru, 2018).

6.2.2 The National Action Strategy for Women 2017-2022

On March 8, 2017, prime minister Medvedev signed the National Action Strategy for Women for 2017-2022 (NASW) as a gift to Russian women on the International Women’s Day. In its introduction on the general women’s situation in Russia, the NASW acknowledges that

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30 The report was based on 5,526 interviews with senior decision-makers from all sectors in mid-market businesses in 36 countries (Grant Thornton 2017, 23). The relevance of the ranking is contestable, as it includes so few countries. For examples, the countries with the highest scores on WEF’s Global Gender Gap Report (the Nordic countries, Nicaragua, and Rwanda) are not included in Grant Thornton’s report.
persisting stereotypes about women’s social role in Russian society are an impediment to women’s self-realization and their right to free choice of profession and way of life, and in effect hampers the process towards gender equality in public and socio-economic life (Order no. 410-r, 2017, p. 7). However, concrete measures to overcome this problem are not presented. Societal recognition of men and women’s shared responsibility in the family is suggested as a possible solution in making women capable of combining professional life and family duties, but there is little talk in the strategy about how that should eventually be accomplished.

In general, the ambivalence of the NASW seems to reflect the conflict of interest that has persisted among its authors. In the final version, the strategy states five main directions that should be implemented by the end of its working period: 1) Health protection of women of all ages, 2) improvement of women’s economic position and well-being, 3) prevention of women’s social disadvantages and violence against women, 4) increasing women’s participation in public and political life, and 5) improving official statistics on the status of women in society (Order no. 410-r, 2017).

In the strategy it is stated that NGOs are “insufficiently involved in helping women who have suffered from violence”. Whether this also refer to non-governmental crisis centers that receive funding from abroad or not, remains unclear. Furthermore, the general lack of concrete measures to achieve the stated goals leaves the strategy with an ambivalent and unclear vision and has left respondents in my study questioning the intentions behind it.

Informants interviewed for this study were not particularly enthusiastic about the NASW and often used sarcasm to illustrate their negative attitudes, although views differed. One respondent from a crisis center (interviewee 4) referred to the strategy as “merely paperwork” and a necessary response to “international demands”. Mostly, interviewees agreed that it is better that such a strategy exists than if it did not, and some were also rather positive. Those who had followed the process from its writing to the beginning of its implementation also agreed that the original draft had been more constructive and directly pointed at problems such as domestic violence, but that the final version first and foremost promotes women’s reproductive roles due to pressure from promoters of traditional values (interviewees 9, 15, 16).
In early 2019, the Ministry of Labor started its way towards implementation of the strategy through a cooperative project with the Council of Europe, focusing on two main areas: 1) increasing the percentage of women in power and politics, and 2) preventing women’s social disadvantages and combatting domestic violence against women (Ministry of Labor, 2019).

Interviewee 3 said that the cooperation with the Council of Europe looked good on paper, but that the composition of the committee from the Russian side was less encouraging:

> There were women speaking from that exact committee on women’s issues that had initiated the decriminalization of violence[^31]. What can one expect from those women, who don’t know anything, (…) don’t want to understand anything and are just following orders? For now, I don’t see any possibility for me to believe that something will come out of it. But I will do anything in my power for it to work out. A very important task for us is to explain the state that protecting those women is actually the state’s responsibility.

Another striking detail on this matter was when Russia sent deputy Leonid Slutskii to the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women’s annual session in New York in March 2019. Only a year earlier, several journalists had accused Slutskii of sexual harassment. Despite one journalist playing a recording in the Duma committee of ethics of Slutskii harassing her, as well as efforts from the Independent Journalists’ Union to have Slutskii being deprived his mandate, and protests from several non-governmental medias, he was not held to account for his purported actions (Global Voices, 2019).

As a starting shot for the NASW, in September 2018, the second Eurasian Women’s Forum was held in St. Petersburg, with representatives from more than 100 countries. The forum was initiated by Valentina Matvienko and “aims to consolidate and develop collaboration between women-leaders in solving current problems and enhancing the atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding in the world on the basis of universal values of humanism, rights, and dignity” (Second Eurasian Women’s Forum, 2018). With its focus on women in business and little mention of women’s human rights, the forum includes and follows the line of women’s organizations closely allied with the state.

[^31]: Several respondents (3, 5, 9) referred to the law change that decriminalized first-time battery as the “decriminalization of violence”. Whether they really perceived the new law as such, or whether it was just a convenient nickname to refer to it, was unclear to me.
President Putin spoke at the 2018 forum, and his speech seemed adapted to the international audience. Although the term gender\textsuperscript{32} is typically avoided in official bills and documents, with the NASW being an example, Putin applied it once during this speech. He said it to be of common interest to “solve the problems of gender inequality”, remove stereotypes and limited career opportunities for women, “many of which are unfortunately still existing.” Further, he stressed the need of access to education for girls, as well as better working conditions and opportunities to start an own business (Kremlin, 2018a).

More importantly, notwithstanding his mentioning of gender and general women’s issues-focused statements, Putin proceeded by reminding that one also needs to preserve “family and maternity values”, which “do not depend on social order and technological progress” and are “common for countries with different cultures, practices and codes” (Kremlin, 2018a). He then continued that such values were the very base of “our new project in demography” on improving conditions for children and maternity. Here, Putin refers to the NASW. By calling it a project in demography based on conservative values, Putin openly discloses the real purpose of the strategy: population growth, and not increased gender equality. He thereby undermines the statements made in the strategy on the need to address women’s issues in order to combat prevailing gender inequality.

When describing the strategy, Putin focused on the social aspect as well as entrepreneurship, or the combination of these:

Our strategy of action in the interests of women is complex and multidimensional. It includes assisting small business and individual entrepreneurship, among other things in the social sphere, supporting volunteerism and NGOs, developing education and healthcare, creating conditions for the success of all active and dedicated people. (Kremlin, 2018a)

Support to civil society is also included, but not all organizations concerned with women’s issues fit into the civil society that is promoted in the NASW. “Active and dedicated” women should engage in a co-opted civil society of social service provision, helping not necessarily other women, but children, elderly, disabled persons, etc. Also, these civil servants should be promoting the correct values. If women are to be helped, it should be based on these values.

\textsuperscript{32} The term “gender” was imported to Russian from English in the 1990s and is frequently used in compositions such as gendernoe ravenstvo (gender equality). However, due to the Western connotation of the term and its association with other sexual orientations and identities, ravnopravie/ravenstvo polov (equality of the sexes) are often preferred.
Whereas the NASW was known to all respondents and most regarded it positive that such a strategy existed, many reacted with indifference or sarcasm when asked about the Women’s Forum and Putin’s speech on the forum. Interviewee 7 remarked that “none of the feminists” knew about the forum or who participated in it and had nothing favorable to say about it: “It’s a simulator. They’re doing a good job [oni molodtsy]”. She saw the Women’s Forum as a “fake mask” that was put on to show other countries a “non-existing reality” of a “liberal state.” Also, she regarded organizing such events a convenient way of distributing state budget money, where “everyone” — organizers, administrators, hotels, and conference halls — “get their chunk.”

The combination of acknowledging women’s disadvantage in many spheres and a rigid focus on maternity and increased birth rates well illustrates the ambivalence of the state’s official stance on women’s issues. The state seems to understand that if demographic challenges are to be solved with the help of women, a general improvement of women’s situation is needed. However, at the same time, women should not become so empowered that they free themselves from traditional beliefs. Women are thus encouraged to see childbirth not only as a personal matter, but nearly as a civic responsibility.

6.2.3 Domestic violence

Despite continuous efforts over more than a decade by NGOs, women’s right advocates and some policymakers there is no national law on domestic violence in Russia. Thus, Russia remains the only country in Europe and one of very few in the former Soviet Union to not have legal mechanisms protecting victims of domestic violence (Zaikova, 2018). Domestic violence is typically seen by officials and police as a “family matter” (HRW 2018, p. 52) and incentives to change the legislation on this issue are most often met with reluctance.

Along with Azerbaijan, Russia remains the only member state of The Council of Europe which has neither signed nor ratified the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which came into force on August 1, 2014. The convention recognizes all acts of gender-based violence against women as a violation of human rights, and defines domestic violence as “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim” (Council of Europe, 2019).
In Russian laws, there is no definition of domestic violence, and incentives to introduce such are fought against. In an interview with RTVI (2018), Oksana Pushkina, one of few Duma deputies that openly advocate for a law on domestic violence, could tell that the Duma had on that very morning received a letter signed by 200 “rather respected persons” urging not to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Their argument had been that the Convention posed an “immediate threat to the country’s moral sovereignty and national security.” The same group of persons had also called for a moratorium on the realization of the NASW in the interest of women. Pushkina further said that such letters were common and that “people not only write to the Duma, they write to the president, to the prime minister”. She strongly hoped for “some adequate, reasonable reaction from those whom they are writing” (RTVI, 2018).

In July 2016, Russia had introduced amendments to the Criminal Code Article 116 on battery. For the first time, battery against “close persons” was criminalized and distinguished from battery, the latter which was moved to the Administrative Code. Penalties were also strengthened. Where abusers according to the law prior to July 2016 could expect a maximum of three months’ imprisonment, with the new law, they could be charged with up to two years of jail or 360 hours of community service. The amendments were welcomed by advocates working on domestic violence issues, but as the new law was operative for only half a year, conclusions about its effect were difficult to draw (HRW, 2018b, p. 27). Because, already in February 2017, simple battery was moved from the Criminal Code to the Administrative Code, effectively “decriminalizing” beatings that do not lead to hospitalization of the victim and that do not occur more than once per year (HRW, 2018b, 33).

These sudden changes were caused by pressure from the ROC and influential deputies propagating traditional “family values.” The ROC expressed their “deep concern” over the adoption of the new version of Article 116, since they regarded “the opportunity to use physical punishment in a reasonable and loving way an integral part of parents’ rights, prescribed by God himself”. They were worried that the new law could lead to criminal

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33 According to Pushkina, among those who had signed the petition was the former leader of the communist Party of Peace and Unity (no longer existing), Sazhi Umalatova. She also spoke of a respected lecturer at RANEPA, Moscow biggest university, whose name she was not willing to reveal (RTVI, 2018).

34 However, “close persons” did not include former partners or spouses. HRW (2018b, p. 40) report on a case where a woman was beaten by her husband over several years, but where the court in 2016 dropped two cases against the abuser, as the beatings under those cases had occurred after the couple was divorced.
prosecution of conscientious parents punishing (their) children “moderately and reasonably” (ROC, 2016). Only a few weeks after, Yelena Mizulina, co-author of several controversial laws since 2012 (Gavrilko-Alekseev, 2017) and former chairwoman of the Committee of Family, Women’s and Children’s Issues, proposed to remove battery in close relations from the Criminal Code. She criticized the new amendments of being “anti-family”, and called it “impermissible” that “slapping” a family member now could result in up to two years of prison and one being “branded as a criminal” for the rest of one’s life, whereas beating someone on the street would give a fine up to 40 000 rubles (TASS, 2016).

On a later occasion, Mizulina denied that domestic violence was a serious problem in Russian families and claimed that the country had “one of the most advanced laws with regard to responsibility for domestic violence.” Rather, she found women’s lack of “affection” and “respect” of their husbands as “the authority in the family” a bigger problem. She described women as “weak creatures” that should accept everything - even violence, from their husbands. To Mizulina, a woman humiliating a man was worse than violence: “even if a man beats his wife, there is no such an insult as when (a woman) insults or humiliates a man” (Dozhd, 2016).

Mizulina’s bill, often referred to in media as the “decriminalization of beatings” or even of domestic violence, passed and was signed on February 7, 2017. On paper, what was decriminalized were first assaults that did not cause severe injuries. However, according to lawyers and advocates working on the issue, this indeed meant “a green light” to domestic violence for abusers (HRW, 2018b, p. 34). Victims were left with less opportunities to defend themselves, and since beatings are now under the administrative code, bringing an abuser to court has become more challenging (HRW, 2018b, pp. 37-38).

Of the people I interviewed for this thesis, many expressed their concern about the law on decriminalization of battery (interviewees 3, 4, 9, 11, 16). They were concerned about the consequences the law had for victims of violence and their abusers, but also about the signals such a law sends to society. The decriminalization of battery signaled a government policy that was dominated by conservative groups whose voices where more important to the state than securing women’s essential human rights.
To some advocates, however, the changes were mostly symbolic. As the situation with domestic violence had always been disadvantageous to women, the new law did not necessarily imply as critical changes to the average Russian woman as some outlets and advocates described it. Interviewee 6 from a crisis center found the consequences of the law to be somewhat blown out of proportion and context by Western media:

> When we had the decriminalization of battery, a lot of foreign medias contacted us, not Russian, but foreign. They asked, “how are your women going to live now?” I said, “frankly, our women didn’t know that beatings had been criminalized, that earlier it was forbidden to hit them.” We always had a very tough situation with domestic violence. Therefore, for us, decriminalization was not completely terrifying. But yes, we see the effects, but things were very bad before that as well.

A positive side effect of the law as perceived by some respondents (3, 8, 16) was the enormous public attention it received, both domestically and internationally. That the law change was so regressive and therefore scandalous turned it to center of debate, and Mizulina’s quotes went viral in online media. It was a moral shock that made more ordinary people aware of how the legislation regarding domestic violence actually worked in Russia. Interviewee 8 noticed that more people were contacting them, and that people had finally started discussing the problem. “Other than that, there are no changes,” he said, but confessed that “we don’t really engage in politics and legislation” and added that “a law (on domestic violence) would of course be an advantage.” Interviewee 3’s experience, on the other hand, was that the decriminalization had indeed functioned as a green light to violence, with even famous TV shows joking about how men were now allowed to beat their wife. Nonetheless, she also saw the positive effects of the Duma’s “black PR”:

> After the decriminalization went through, a lot of people who had been indifferent finally saw this entire nonsense. Like they say, black PR is also PR. The State Duma really managed to draw attention to the problem. Earlier, everyone had thought that things are more or less okay here. But when the Duma said that beatings (only result in) a fine, all normal people were shocked.

This is further supported by interviewee 16:

> The decriminalization of violence really started something. People understood what’s going on. (…) the number of people who find that violence against women and children have very dangerous consequences for society is increasing.

Over the past years, there have been several such moral shocks concerning domestic violence that have caused waves of support and activism. One was the already mentioned case of a young woman whose jealous husband took her to the woods and cut off both her hands.
Another case that caused widespread public attention in state media as well as oppositional outlets was that of the Khachaturian sisters, who were arrested for having killed their father in July 2018. According to their lawyers, the three sisters had suffered under continuous physical and sexual violence from their father over the course of several years and were acting in self-defense. Still, as of August 2019, two of them (one was 17 at the time of the incident) risk from 8 to 20 years of imprisonment in accordance with article 105 of the Federal Criminal Code for “murder committed by a group of persons acting in a conspiracy” (Sivushkina, 2019). An analysis by Medizona showed that as much as 80 percent of all women convicted of murder in Russia between 2016 and 2018 were acting in self-defense against abusive partners or close male relatives (Zhenshchiny 105 UK RF, n.d.).

A petition on change.org in support of the Khachaturian sisters had received nearly 350 000 signatures two months after its publication (Popova, 2019b). Another petition, originally published in 2014, demanding a national law on domestic violence almost got its signatures doubled from around 400 000 in March 2019 to 723 450 as of August 7, 2019 (Popova, 2019a). In addition to online activism and viral hashtags such as “We are the Khachaturian sisters” [#мысестрыхачатурян] and “I didn’t want to die” [#янехотелаумирать], civic activists organized concerts, meetings and street protests in different cities in support of the sisters.

In this case, even some politicians expressed their concern. As hashtags demanding a law on domestic violence went viral, Valentina Matvienko, Chairwoman of the Federation Council, ordered senators to go through the existing legislation on this issue and find out why it is not working properly. Matvienko, who had previously been a supporter of the law that decriminalized battery, asked for better statistics, so that the scope of the problem would become clear to everyone and needed amendments “to protect women from domestic violence” could be adapted (TASS, 2019). In the same fashion, lawmakers late declared that the already written bill on domestic violence would be submitted to the State Duma in the fall of 2019 (Borisova, 2019).

This is a notable contrast to the situation in the 1990s, when domestic violence was silenced in media and women’s crisis centers were accused by the Ministry of Justice of “laundering money” and being told that “there is no such problem in Russia” (interviewee 4). Domestic violence is no longer tabooed and is widely debated in all media spheres. However, wide
public resonance and the submission of the bill does not guarantee that the law will be adapted. According to *Nasiliu.net* (“No to Violence”), whose advocates are also actively advocating for the law, as many as 40 bills on domestic violence has been put forward over the last ten years, neither of which has been submitted even to the first reading in the Duma (Nasiliu.net, n.d.). The shocking circumstances around the past years’ loud criminal cases accentuate the urgent need of a functioning legislation. In an interview with *Izvestiia*, women’s rights advocate and leader of Nasiliu.net Mari Davtian described all the existing legislation on domestic violence today as functioning only “post factum”, meaning that “we have to await some serious physical injuries or even murder in order to punish the perpetrator” (Borisova, 2019).

6.3 Gender, nation and traditional values

6.3.1 Conservatism, patriotism and “morality politics”

Since his return to power in 2012, Putin has sought to minimize Western influence and win full sovereignty over Russia by centering his foreign policy around conservative values and patriotism. A focus on conservative values rooted in Orthodox Christianity as well as a perceived brotherhood with Slavic peoples or former Soviet Union republics has been applied to distinguish out the “uniqueness” of the so-called “Russian world”, of which Russia sees itself as center. Also, it was used to justify Russia’s interventions in neighboring countries such as Georgia and Ukraine (Trenin, 2014). With this ideology shift, Russia rejected Europe, “not only as a mentor, but also as a model” (Trenin, 2014). With his antithesis to “Western values,” Putin became the world’s “keeper of traditional values” (Loftus, 2019).

A focus on national traditions and “family values” had been present in Putin’s earlier two presidencies as well, with the return of the Soviet anthem in 2000 and pronatalist policies being introduced in 2006-2007 (Sharafutdinova, 2014, p. 616). As so-called color revolutions broke loose in neighboring countries, the official Russian narrative was that these revolutions were anti-Russian takeovers by the West. However, it was not until the wave of discontent and big-scale protests in 2011-2012 that the regime staked out Russia’s new course of “morality politics” as a specific strategy to restore legitimacy (Sharafutdinova, 2014). The
protests had shown the regime that it was in need of a political strategy to regain Putin’s popularity and control the opposition.

The Pussy Riot affair (BBC, 2013) offered itself as a chance for Putin to employ and intensify the traditionalist course. The court’s ruling mostly ignored the political message of Pussy Riot’s protest, but rather focused on the “anti-Russian” values promoted by the punk group. Two years after the court case, Sharafutdinova (2014, p. 616) observed the following:

It is revealing that the regime has defined its values in almost direct contradiction to those advanced by the Pussy Riot. Their radical feminism and support for gay rights, their opposition to the church-state symbiosis in Russia, their use of the Western tradition of performance art, their reliance on the new social media – all these elements of Pussy Riot’s identity have been under sharp ideological attack in Russia over the last two years.

For the regime, the Pussy Riot affair also spoke for an increased interaction with the ROC. Thus, state and church became closer allies and the ROC took on the special role as carrier of traditional values (Trenin, 2014). This is further illustrated by the resurrection of religiosity in the population. The proportion of people identifying as Orthodox Christians has increased from around 30 percent in 1991 to above 70 percent today (Pew Research Center, 2017). In the strategy of “morality politics”, there is no place for feminism. Rather, the focus on traditional values and the ROC’s increased influence has intensified the pressure on women’s reproductive rights and made the public sphere more accessible for Orthodox activists (see 7.3.2).

In Russia, the family is traditionally seen as a “private matter”, and as chapter 6.2.3 already discussed, conservative groups have become increasingly influential. The traditional value frame has become an official narrative of United Russia and is promoted not only by Putin, but a number of high-profile politicians, with Yelena Mizulina and Vitaly Milonov35 being among the most pronounced proponents. Combined, this creates an environment where traditional gender roles and a “condemnation” of feminism are endorsed (Sundstrom et al., 2019, p. 118).

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35 Milonov was the initiator behind the law on homosexual propaganda and is also a strong opponent of feminism. For example, he has called for “feminist propaganda” to be included in art. 2820 incitement to hatred, enmity or insults to human dignity (Agenstvo Moskva, 2018).
6.3.2 Masculinity as a political legitimation strategy

If not part of the regime’s strategy of “morality politics”, then a parallel strategy that serves some of the same purposes, is the focus on patriotic machismo. The construction of Putin’s macho image since the very beginning of his presidency is if seen through the gender lens a means to legitimate power and even restore national unity and pride. As the Russian sociologists Riabov and Riabova point out, the gender discourse is engaged in the shaping of world views and legitimation of power and is thus to be seen as a resource of power. Political competition can here be interpreted as a competition between masculinities (Riabov & Riabova, 2010, p. 50). In this context, Putin’s popularity is connected with the “re-masculinization of national identity”. The masculinization of power and politics is relevant to the position of women and organizations working on women’s issues, as it implies a delegitimization of womanliness and thus contributes to a lowering of women’s role in politics (Riabov & Riabova, 2010, p. 61).

According to Riabov and Riabova (2010, p. 51), Putin’s macho image is formed by three factors. First, Putin is being militarized. The dominating narrative is that “a real man should be with the ones who defend the fatherland” (Riabov & Riabova, 2010, p. 52). Putin as a sportsman is also part of this militarization, as “sports” can act as a substitute for “war.” Accounts and photos of Putin practicing judo and going mountain skiing are ways to demonstrate his masculinity, virility, and health. Second, Putin is being eroticized. Although the president has generally always had a high approval rating, he is typically more popular among women than men. In a 2012 survey, 20 percent of the women asked even said they would not mind marrying Vladimir Putin (Levada, 2012). Riabov and Riabova (2010, p. 52) note that many women tend to evaluate Putin’s level of masculinity higher than his political program, which further strengthens sexist stereotypes. The erotization of the political leader is to be seen as a consequence of the erotization of the political discourse as a whole. This is visible in the use of sexual metaphors – i.e. marriage, potency/impotency, and prostitution – in political discussions. In this way, the sexual sphere becomes politically relevant (Riabov & Riabova, 2010, p. 53).

Thirdly and perhaps most important, is the ongoing nationalization of masculinity, which to a significant extent applies to Putin. Here, the “muzhik” concept is central. A muzhik is traditionally a word for peasant man, with the female equalent being baba. Whereas “baba”
remains a derogatory term for “woman”, “muzhik” has become a positive gradable category denoting a “real, macho man.” “Muzhik” has become the norm of post-soviet masculinity, and the image of Putin has formed its connotations. A “muzhik” is an independent, non-individualistic man. His assumed non-Western qualities elevate him above liberal political correctness and legitimizes his use of sexism and homophobia. He is strong, robust and tough, and what is more – he is a real patriot ready to fight for his fatherland. He shows that he is a muzhik by proving that he is not a woman, not a child, and not a homosexual (Riabov & Riabova, 2010, p. 54).

The masculinization of power is needed in order to feminize and in this way surmount Others. American politicians and post-soviet states where “color revolutions” took place are feminized or associated with homosexuality or prostitution. Likewise, this framing is used in defining internal Others. NGOs, especially those who have received funding from abroad or work on “sensitive” topics, are not only labeled as foreign agents. They are also demasculinized and “prostituted” through terms as prodazhnyi, meaning “dirty” or “crooked” (Riabov & Riabova, 2010, p. 60).

6.3.3 Women and the demographic crisis

In his annual address to the Federal Assembly on the Russian Constitution Day in 2012, Putin spoke of the necessity of demographic growth and the upholding of values:

> At the beginning of the 21st century we hit a real catastrophe in demographics and values, a real crisis of demographics and values. And if the nation is not capable of saving itself and reproduce, if it loses guidance and ideals in life, it does not even need an external enemy, everything will just collapse on its own (State of The Nation Speech, 2012).

He then appealed to Russian women by stating that “if Russia is to be sovereign and strong, there needs to be more of us and we must be better in morality, in competency, in work, in creativity.” Although reassuring that he did not want to push women to give birth to a second child, because “our women know themselves what to do and when,” he stressed the need to provide “favorable conditions first and foremost for women, so that they will not be afraid that having a second and subsequent children will close their paths towards career (and) a good job, (or) that it will force them to be consigned only to homemaking.” Such solutions were according to Putin shorter kindergarten waiting lines, professional career preparation for women with children, and supporting flexible forms of work. At the same time, the state had
to “fully support institutions that are carriers of traditional values” (State of The Nation Speech, 2012).

Indeed, the traditional value frame has proved efficient in different policy fields. Not only was it a needed tool for the state to regain strength both domestically and internationally. It also proved a useful narrative to address the demographic crisis and intensify pronatalist policies. Like many other countries in Europe, Russia is experiencing a significant drop in population. The demographic problem has therefore been a core issue in Russia’s welfare policy since the early 2000s. A means to solve the crisis has been to encourage Russian women to give birth to more children through the “maternity capital” policy and contests like the “Order of Parental Glory.” With “Support to family, maternity, paternity and childhood” being an own project category in the presidential grants’ contest (Fond prezidentstkykh grantov, 2019), it is clear that the state favors SONGOs supporting and promoting pronatalist values.

The maternity capital (materinskii kapital) was introduced in 2007 as a federal program of state support to Russian families with the aim to increase birth rates. According to the program, women who give birth to or adopt a second or subsequent child are entitled to a one-time sum of money (Slonimczyk & Yurko, 2014). Starting from 2018, the money can also be received on a monthly basis until the second child has turned 1.5 years. Between 2015 and 2019, the maternity capital was not indexed and constituted 453 000 rubles (Pensionnyi fond, n.d.). Pronatalist policies are common in several Western countries as well, but in Russia, childbirth is particularly framed within a patriotic scheme of traditional values, where women should follow their “predestination” as mothers and thereby save the nation from a demographic catastrophe (for more on this, see chapter 7.3.2).

The Order of Parental Glory (Orden “roditelskaia slava”) is another example of this. Launched in 2008, it offers families with many children the opportunity to win a prize and a lump sum of 100 000 rubles (Ruling no. 775). The yearly rewarding ceremony is arranged in the Kremlin, and the symbolic importance of the competition is signalized by the fact that the president himself hands the winners their award and holds an annual speech on the occasion. During the 2012 ceremony, where the winners were families with 7 to 13 children from eight different regions, Putin stated that families with many children must once again become “an essential value”, while families with two and three children should become “the preferred standard” (Kremlin, 2012).
6.3.4 A “retraditionalization” of public opinion? Views on gender equality and feminism

The Putin era, especially from 2012 on, has been characterized by a “retraditionalization” with regard to laws and public strategies as well as public opinion (Sundstrom et al., 2019, p. 119). It seems that in Russia, law changes are able to change public opinion, not only reflect it. For example, this seemed to be the case with the 2013 law that banned “homosexual propaganda.” In the Soviet Union and in Russia, there has been a correlation between changing views in society and the softening or tightening of the legislation on this issue, although it is hard to prove in each case what comes first – public opinion or public policy (Sundstrom et al., 2019, p. 118).

Such a retraditionalization can be observed in public opinion regarding women in politics. In 2006, 65 percent were positive to the idea of a female president in the next 10-15 years. Eleven years later, the proportion had decreased to 33 percent (Levada, 2017).36

![Figure 2. A woman president in Russia? Public opinion. Source: Levada (2017).](image)

Similarly, in 2006, three-quarters of Russians approved of women’s participation in politics. Now, only two-thirds answer the same. Between 1998 and 2018, the proportion of Russians judging abortions as impermissible regardless of a woman’s economic problems also increased from 12 to 35 percent (Levada, 2018).

36 According to Levada (2019), 45 percent of women and only 19 percent of men are now positive to the idea of a female president.
When in early 2019 a group of woman deputies in Ekaterinburg announced the creation of a women’s caucus in the local Duma, their leader assured journalists that this was “not a feminist caucus, we are not men haters” (Komarov, 2019). This well illustrates how feminism is still perceived negatively in society and politics, which explains the need to frame activity as “womanly” rather than feminist. The head of the ROC, patriarch Kirill, has called feminism “a very dangerous phenomenon” which ignores “women’s predestination” as wives and mothers (RIA Novosti, 2013).

However, although public opinion in Russia is generally more conservative than a decade ago, lawmakers and Church activists have not managed to influence on the whole population. In a survey published by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) in March 2019, 62 percent found it necessary to strive to achieve equal rights between men and women. In the same study, respondents were asked about their opinion on feminism. The results suggest that the negative stigma associated with feminism is still heavily present in people’s mindset, but nonetheless declining among the younger generation. Whereas 31 percent of all respondents answered that they “certainly” or “rather” support feminism, 44 percent in the age group 18–24 years answered the same (VTsIOM, 2019).

During a Q&A session at an educational center for gifted children in 2017, Putin was asked to share his opinion on feminism. This was already five years after the Pussy Riot affair, and Putin appeared rather balanced in his answer. He called feminism in itself “a righteous, good direction of protecting women’s rights”, and pointed towards existing problems such as salary levels. However, he soon pointed out that such a problem is not particular for Russia but also present in “the so-called developed economies” of the EU. In his last commentary, he refers to radical feminists and indirectly also Pussy Riot: “(...) dealing with this issue is definitely needed, (but in a way) that no sphere of activity perverts itself, that no one lose their mind in that regard, as sometimes happens” (“Putin on feminism”, 2017).

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37 In the survey, 1600 respondents were asked. 22% answered “undoubtedly yes”, whereas 40% answered “rather yes than no.”
38 Respondents were asked the following question: “Feminism is a movement aimed at achieving equal political, economic, personal and social rights for women and men. What do you think of the movement feminism?” Only one answer was allowed, ranging from “certainly support” to “certainly do not support”. 8% of men and 7% of women answered that they “certainly support” feminism.
6.3.5 Police investigations and trials on feminist activities

In the wake of the infamous Pussy Riot case and large-scale protests in Moscow in 2011-2012, the police were not willing to let a March 8 feminist demonstration in Moscow in 2013 called “Feminism is liberation” pass by without notice. The rally was organized by the political party Yabloko and authorized by authorities. Still, 16 people were arrested. Among them were LGBT-activist and feminist Anastasia Briazgina, who was accused of having kicked a police officer in the groin, although footages from the rally reportedly showed that she did not hit or kick anyone. A criminal case was opened against Briazgina, who later got political asylum in France (Grani.ru, 2015).

Among the people participating in the rally, was also the prominent feminist activist Tatiana Sukhareva. About the need for feminists to take to the streets she then told the Russian-language Golos Ameriki: “We’re all different, but one thing unites us — no one represents women’s interests in Russia. We can rely only on ourselves” (Osharov, 2013). The year after, Sukhareva was going to run for the Moscow City Council from the party A Just Russia. On July 10, 2014, the very same day that she was supposed to receive the confirmation on successful registration, ten armed men burst into her home and violently arrested her on insurance fraud charges. For eight months, Sukhareva shared a cell in a detention prison with 40 other women before being moved to house arrest until August 2018, when she was released (Volkova, 2016; Memorial, 2018).

In September 2018, criminal proceedings were initiated against an Omsk citizen for hatred towards men in her two radical feminist groups on the Russian social networking site VKontakte (Yurtaev, 2018). The case was opened under Article 282 part 1 of the Criminal Code on “Incitement to hatred or enmity or insults to human dignity” after an anonymous citizen had filed a complaint on her. The criminal accusation was based primarily on an investigation of fourteen VKontakte posts. SOVA Center (2018) described these as having varying degrees of “aggressiveness” but found the proceedings to be a case of misuse of Article 282, since “public danger of aggressive statements made by radical feminists is low.” In February 2019, the case was dropped.39

39 It should be noted that this article has also been applied to accuse men of hatred against women. In the same month as a criminal case was opened against Kalugina, a young Kaliningrad man was charged under the same
In March 2019, a theater festival in Komsomolsk-na-Amur was cancelled after local authorities deemed a children’s play about gender stereotypes called *golubye i rozovye* (“light blue and pink”) an “LGBT”-event. A week after authorities had stopped the organizer from finding a location, the main organizer was summoned to an interview at a police station, where she was asked to explain six body positive drawings that she had made as part of the project #женщина_не_кукла (“a woman is no a doll”). The simplistic drawings showed women with body hair, menstruation, body fat, wrinkles, stretch-marks and muscles and called all of these features normal for “alive women”. The police on their hand found the drawings to be “pornographic” (Meduza, 2019).

### 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the broader context under which women’s organizing takes place in Russia today. My aim has been to show how the Russian state addresses women’s issues, both on policy level and on the narrative level. I have discussed the legal frameworks concerning women’s labor rights and domestic violence, as well as the NASW and its resonance among women’s advocates. Some of Putin’s speeches has been used to illustrate the official view on feminism, women’s perceived role in reproduction and demography, as well as perceptions of the NASW. Other parliamentarians’ views have also been brought in to illustrate the situation.

The Russian state’s focus on traditional values, patriotic machismo, and “morality politics” encompasses more than just strengthening national traditions and citizen’s moral. It has been part of a strategy for Russia and Putin to regain strength both domestically and internationally. Such focuses undoubtedly impact on women’s issues’ work. Women’s independence and reproductive rights are targeted by pronatalist incentives to fight a demographic crisis. In consequence, as was also my hypothesis, far more is being done to protect the rights of mothers, children, and families than of women. This resembles the

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40 *Goluboi* is the Russian word for “light blue”, but also carries the meaning “gay”.
41 Body positivity is a social movement that addresses today’s beauty standards and advocates the acceptance of all bodies regardless of size, form or appearance. The movement has become increasingly popular in Russia, and the VK group “Body Positive/Бодипозитив” is with more than 71 000 followers (per 23 April 2019) one of the biggest feminist social media communities in Russian language.
policies of the Soviet Union. Women’s organizations are thus not only trapped between a “good” and a “bad”, meaning a social and a political, civil society. Women’s rights are also trapped in big politics. Women’s advocates are both directly affected by policies such as the decriminalization of battery, and indirectly through society’s views changing in a more conservative direction on some issues.

Nonetheless, it would be unfair to say that the state does not address women’s issues at all. The NASW shows that improving women’s situation in certain areas are in the state’s interest — at least on paper. In recent years, Putin has also been careful not to criticize feminism too harshly and to express the need to combat gender inequality (again, in certain areas). This may be due to the fact that women are a considerable electorate whose loyalty is needed if the regime is to remain strong, which also explains Putin’s essentialist, “careful” treatment of women. However balanced Putin may try to seem towards feminism, chapter 6.3.4. showed that restricting laws introduced by the regime since 2012 may well affect feminist activities and label them “insulting” or “promoting homosexual propaganda.”

However, the actual achievements on women’s issues since 2012 are scarce. A result of the NASW is that women will be allowed to take on previously banned professions from 2021. However, 100 professions are to remain on the list of professions banned to women. Russia still has no specific law on domestic violence, and sexual harassment is neither addressed nor combatted.
7 Women’s organizing in contemporary Russia: thematic analysis of findings from interviews

In this chapter, I will present the results of the fieldwork I conducted in Russia in February 2019. I have used interview material to highlight topics in previous chapters too, but here, I will focus on the themes that appeared during analysis of the data which I perceived as most significant and relevant to my first two research questions: 1) how the amendments to the NGO legislation since 2012 and the co-optation of civil society have affected the work and strategies of women’s rights groups in Russia, and 2) what characterizes the landscape of organizations and initiatives aimed at improving the status of women in contemporary Russia.

7.1 Introduction: women’s groups’ sense of self and of others

7.1.1 The “movement” question and categories of women’s organizations

Coming from different contexts and backgrounds, respondents did not always have the same understanding of all concepts related to women’s organizing. The term “women’s movement” (zhenskoe dvizhenie) was particularly diversely perceived. This may be due to the interview context and the exact wording of the questions asked, but the word movement itself seemed to bring up varying associations. Interviewee 4 understood the term as a kind of women’s movement focusing on the family, from which she excluded her NGO. Interviewee 2 saw her GONGO as part of such a traditionalist women’s movement with several thousand organizations all over Russia.

Interviewee 6 was convinced that there is a women’s movement which is so split that it makes more sense to rather speak of three different movements; one consisting of NGOs providing support to women on feminist principles (often women’s crisis centers), another one of smaller grassroot and/or feminist initiatives, and the third being the pro-government, essentialist women’s organizations, often in the form of zhensovets. This fits rather good with the classification set by Crotty, Hall and Ljubownikow (2014) in their account on the impact of the NGO law. They separate between marionette organizations, grassroots initiatives (GRO) and traditional NGOs (TNGO). The traits separating the latter two categories is
whether they have been able to pay staff or not and to which extent they receive or used to receive grants from abroad.

The marionette category is, however, more complicated. The category was introduced by Cook and Vinogradova (2006) as one of five behavioral types of grassroots/social sector NGOs. Here, marionettes are defined as “created by the state or government officials” and having “no leadership or constituency in society” (Cook & Vinogradova, 2006, p. 34). This category in the way it is adapted by Crotty et al. (2014) is not easily adaptable to women’s organizing. The word “marionette” implies that such organizations are not independent and autonomous. But not all organizations in this category are GONGOs. In the sphere of women’s organizations, they are rather SONGOs, indeed with fairly close ties to state structures either on the local level or the governmental level. Regardless of their alignment with state narratives, stating that they have no “leadership or constituency in society” still may be an exaggeration. Cook and Vinogradova (2006, p. 32) propose the additional behavioral types “political dependency clientelism” and “non-political behavior”, which seem to apply better to several women’s organizations in this category.

Also, the current funding situation for civil society makes it almost necessary for people wanting to serve the common good to adhere to state narratives in one way or another. Calling an organization “marionette” because it receives state funding, i.e. presidential grants, seems to take away some of the true engagement that the people behind such organizations can indeed have. For example, interviewee 9’s organization would have to fall under this category, since its existence and (however small) payment of staff relies on presidential grants only and its leader has close ties within the city administration. However, as it appeared to me, the work performed by this NGO is not necessarily less helpful to women in need or less “independent” in its work than that of TNGOs. Interviewee 9 had feminist stances very similar to those of several TNGOs and GROs interviewed, but in contrast to the latter, she had adapted to the current situation of civil society and found a way to frame her activity in a way that fits with state narratives and makes public funding possible.

Interviewee 16 too had no doubt that an independent movement existed, but confessed that the movement from the 1990s, of which she had been a part, had not left behind many followers. She still spoke of a chain of more than 150 non-governmental and governmental women’s crisis centers and shelters all over Russia and in the former Soviet Union. Governmental institutions and NGOs are often collaborating on domestic violence, be it
cooperation on shelters (interviewee 6), training staff and exchanging knowledge (interviewee 16) or meeting on conferences (interviewee 4). Interviewee 4, also representing a women’s crisis center, understood the term *women’s movement* differently and did not see her organization a part of it.  

Several respondents spoke of a women’s movement that was not a united *movement* in a sociological sense. Rather, their impression sometimes seemed to reflect the activity from women online. Because, on Facebook, there was “a lot of women’s movement” (interviewee 4). There was no united offline movement, no overarching “all-Russian women’s movement of women’s NGOs” (interviewee 15), but in a digital reality the online movement seemed to compensate for this. On the internet, respondents saw women helping each other out, showing solidarity and creating support communities.

Interviewee 5 and 14, who represented feminist groups, agreed that there is a feminist movement in Russia today, however small and weak it may be. Interviewee 7 on her hand, who had been a respected feminist activist also in the 1990s, did not consider any of the movements in post-soviet Russia to be feminist or women’s *movements*. Rather, she called the contemporary “movement” a *tusovka*, a word which means “party” or “get-together” but is also used colloquially about (mostly informal) groups of people with a common interest.

### 7.1.2 “I couldn’t work on human rights issues and not be a feminist”: views on feminism

If respondents disagreed on whether there exists a women’s movement and whether they are a part of it, they were far more unison about their opinion on feminism. Somewhat surprising, given feminism’s reputation and in Russia and elsewhere, very few respondents (interviewee 10 and 13 were not asked this question) were completely reluctant to call themselves feminists, although some interviewees (2, 12) refrained from a direct “yes” and answered that “it depends on which type of feminism we talk about”.

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42 Interviewee 4 was asked about the Russian [*rossiiskoe*] women’s movement. Probably, since the resemblance with “all-Russian” [*vserossiiskoe*] is quite remarkable, the respondent immediately thought of the state-sponsored socially oriented women’s movement fronted by women such as Svetlana Medvedeva, prime minister Medvedev’s wife.

43 In a study on the women’s crisis center movement in Russia, only five out of thirty-six crisis centers leaders saw their work as feminist in 2008 (Johnson and Saarinen, 2013, p. 554).
For example, interviewee 2 defined feminism as “protecting women’s rights” but had not been using the term actively in nearly two decades because of its reputation in Russia and the inclusion of same-sex relationships in the understanding of feminism. Since feminism is a contested term even in the West, and in order to avoid “concept stretching”, I asked most respondents about their understanding of feminism as this topic was addressed. Among those who declared themselves and/or their organizations feminist, a common understanding of the term was that feminism is about the freedom of choice for both women and men, and that it means a fight with gender stereotypes and sexism.

Although many interviewees called themselves feminists, they underlined that the word is still very negatively perceived in the population, and that it is normal that people who work on women’s issues do not necessarily acknowledge the idea of feminism. Interviewee 16 from a Moscow crisis center talked about organizations’ latent feminism and the paradox it implies:

> Among our organizations, definitely, not all call themselves feminists. Not all associate themselves with feminism. But nevertheless, (they) all work on feminist principles of (victim) support. It’s a paradox. Probably it’s linked to the fact that deeply understanding all principles of feminism for oneself is harder than following specific methods and principles of helping victims.

This is further illustrated by interviewee 3, who discovered feminism for herself only after starting actively working on women’s issues:

> Five years ago, I thought that feminists were completely crazy women. When I started working on that issue, I thought that I couldn’t work on human rights issues and not be a feminist. Now that I already took on such a path (…), feminism seems so obvious that it would be strange to live without feminism. (…) I first stuck to one opinion, then I went through all those things myself and came to another opinion.

Such stories are normal and nothing unique to Russia. Interviewee 15 told a similar story: before realizing she was a feminist she had her own start-up with projects aimed at women in business while at the same time resenting the word feminism and discriminating female job applicants by asking them about children and family planning.

My only male interviewee (8) described himself as becoming more feminist with each year. He had a hard time convincing his wife, although “when she read the definition of feminism in Wikipedia, she said ‘well yes, there’s nothing bad in that’”. He continues: “But in our society there are words that are perceived negatively, especially all kind of Western words; gender, feminism and all the rest. People just (…) prefer separating everything into black and
white.” He agreed that feminism was talked more about, but that feminists were still perceived as freaks, like it “has been everywhere”.

Although interviewee 3 saw that most people acknowledge that beating women is bad, her experience was that feminists are still often perceived as “lesbians” who “hate men and look like monsters.” On the other hand, she could not deny that feminism was indeed gaining popularity among younger generations. She explained this as a consequence of globalization and influence from the West. It was all about who young people want to identify with and are influenced by; “of course, when Beyonce sings in a t-shirt that says she’s a feminist, most girls want to be like Beyonce and not like some (…) Mizulina. That’s obvious.” Interviewee 6 agreed that the situation is steadily improving and that the discourse on feminism has moved to include more than just the general prejudice that “feminists are horrible, evil and eat men.”

7.2 Russian women’s groups’ internal challenges

7.2.1 Theme 1: Lack of unity/solidarity

As chapter 2.1 discussed, a degree of solidarity is needed if one is to achieve a social movement. Although several respondents expressed a wish that women’s groups would stop arguing and instead focus on things they have in common, attempts to unite large specters of groups or work to build a common identity has not succeeded in the Russian women’s “movement.” In the 2000s, one has not seen events similar to the first women’s congress in Dubna in 1991 or the signing of the Charter of Solidarity in 1997. This lack of unity and solidarity limits women’s groups’ potential as civic actors aiming to impact on politics and society. The issue was addressed as a problem by some interviewees (1, 14, 15). When analyzing the interview material, however, it became clear that also other interviewees were telling stories of a very divided and split women’s “movement.”

During interviews, it was not uncommon that interviewees complained about how other women’s groups were working. Interviewee 3 accused established NGOs from the 1990s for having too little focus on outreach and found that they were just “sitting there in their tiny boxes” without increasing their visibility towards society or connecting with other branches of women’s NGOs. Interestingly, women’s advocates who had been active in the 1990s had very similar complaints about the younger generation of feminist initiatives. Interviewee 9
was very fond of young feminist groups and called them “awesome” but criticized them for being “a little detached from society” and stuck in their own environment, whereas interviewee 7 found them to be “distanced from their own history and to the culture of their own country.” Interviewees 1 and 16 found themselves sometimes being frowned upon by young feminists. Interviewee 1 explained that women’s advocates from the 1990s are afraid of young activists, as they are more radical, “pushy”, and aggressive.

Although also slightly criticizing other women’s groups, interviewee 9 was one of few that appeared ready to collaborate with everyone – governmental institutions, traditionalist women’s organizations, radical feminists, and women’s youth groups. Comparing with the situation 20 years ago, she found that nowadays, it was easier to unite. Her NGO is a member of the Woman Alliance (zhenskii al’ians), an organization coordinating over 40 women’s organizations in St. Petersburg. Most of their member list seems to belong to the essentialist branch of women’s NGOs, and my other respondents in St. Petersburg were not members. Still, interviewee 6, also from St. Petersburg, shared a similar stance and called the situation in the city “a rare story”, where ties between NGOs and governmental institutions have typically been close.

The fact that women’s rights advocates, feminist activists and women’s NGOs do not necessarily identify with each other and also do not stand together, causes a challenge in making themselves visible to the public. Public protests and demonstrations have been used by feminists and women’s rights activists all over the world, also in Russia. According to respondents, however, with stricter laws impinging on the freedom of assembly since 2012, taking to the streets has steadily become a less attractive way of gathering women’s activists. Interviewee 14 from a Moscow feminist group expressed her frustration over the lack of solidarity between feminists and the failure to even gather for a March 8 event in Moscow:

A: I was very surprised by our new format of protest events. That is when instead of uniting with some other organizations (…), you separate from everyone and organize your own event consisting of six people. That’s awful, that’s depressing. Because of that I went to St. Petersburg for the 8th of March last year.

Q: Were there more people there?

A: There (the authorities) approved the demonstration, therefore we had that sort of situation for which feminism in Russia needs demonstrations. It doesn’t need them in order to get its agenda out to
the general public. Frankly, nowadays there’s no way demonstrations can cope with that. They are needed in order to gather everyone together, a group of a hundred people, to shout, feel unity (engl).

The lack of unity even among outspoken feminists in Russia’s capital city gives a hint about how far away Russia is from having a women’s movement. Hemment’s (2014, p. 136) description of the women’s movement in the late 1990s as “notoriously split and divided” holds true also for the contemporary feminist movement. However, although a divided movement and lack of motivation can be seen as reasons for their failure to unite, these factors are also partly logical consequences of restrictive measures taken by the state since Putin returned to office in 2012.

A problem for activists in Moscow is that after the Bolotnaia protests in 2011 and 2012, government-critical demonstrations are either not approved by authorities, or they are typically approved only to Sokolniki park, far from the city center. There, activists can do little harm to authorities and have correspondingly little impact. Organizing unapproved demonstrations is not a real option, according to interviewee no. 15: “first of all, no one will show up, secondly, it’s going to be very depressing.” Her stance is well-founded: organizers as well as participants of such demonstration risk high penalties, arrests, and potential police violence. In December 2018, the State Duma even introduced a law according to which organizers of unapproved protests that involve minors risk up to 15 days of arrest and a penalty of up to 500 000 rubles (Interfax, 2018).

During our interview, interviewee 15 and a colleague went to a Moscow municipal office to apply for permission to organize a March 8 demonstration. Although their application text was framed as an event in support of the implementation of the NASW and included no mention of feminism, they were certain that their first try would be rejected. They assumed that if the event would be approved at all, it would have to take place in Sokolniki park.

Although St. Petersburg seems to be somewhat freer in this matter, interviewee 5, a rather well-known feminist activist from the city, shared the view that organizing street protests has become notably more challenging since 2012. Before that, “laws were easier, there were no

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44 In 2013, Sokolniki park was one of two parks to be opened as a free speech zone a la Hyde Park, where all kinds of rallies with up to 2000 participants can be held without prior authorization (Bausin, 2013).
45 The fact that they tried this framing strategy proves that the NASW does have some value to feminists, since it is a new official document they can refer to when defending their actions or arguments.
fines, generally, things were far more liberal than now”. She argued that online activism, which she considered more popular than the offline one, also serves a purpose, especially in informing people and enabling collaboration and offline meetings. However, she stated that “we are definitely in favor of bringing people to the streets”, because “online protest is less noticeable for the state (...) than when something happens on the square”.

A recent event that managed to gather more than just a few people on the streets, was the demonstration in support of the Khachaturian sisters in St. Petersburg on August 4, 2019. Around one thousand people gathered and demanded the government to adapt a law on domestic violence. As with the March 8 rally mentioned by interviewee 15, this demonstration had also been approved by the municipal authorities. Demonstrators held posters with slogans such as “If he beats you, it means (we need) an article!”, “Guilty of every kind of violence is always the abuser”, “hatred towards women is the most traditional value” (Fontanka, 2019). Whether such demonstrations will be more frequent in the future, is hard to say by the time of writing this thesis.

Even if it may vary from city to city, the state’s measures to restrict street protests are an obstacle not only to organizational freedom in general, but to feminist organizing in particular. Developing a movement with solidarity across ideologies becomes challenging when organizing a peaceful March 8 demonstration proves difficult. Therefore, much activity is driven online. Online activity in women’s network in social media was by several respondents perceived positively and described as a source of hope for what the women’s movement could be if it turned outwards and went offline. At the same time, online activism is a soft form. Interviewee 15 wished to see more mutual self-help initiatives in the offline world that would actually contribute to a change towards women’s empowerment:

(…) “We are all good. We do not help. Or, we help, we transferred some money to a sick child, which is good”. It’s fine what you are doing, but you do not mutually assist each other, you do not multiply your efforts in order for women to rise as others to survive.

The extreme lack of solidarity between different kinds of groups and organizations is one of the factors that make the emerging of a mass-based social movement for gender equality and

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46 This is a wordplay referring to the Russian proverb “if he beats you, it means he loves you” [b’et – znachit l’iubit]. The phrase is often being used by women’s rights advocates and demonstrators to address outdated and traditionalist attitudes in society and on state level.
women’s rights seem unrealistic in the near future. A united women’s movement would mean that advocacy would have to be extended even to those organizations that are centered around mother’s rights (Hrycak, 2002; Johnson, 2009, p. 48). Although such attempts were made in the 1990s (see chapter 4.3), building a coalition between outspoken feminist groups and traditionalist women’s organizations seems unrealistic given the present Russian context.

As mentioned earlier, Sundstrom’s (2002) described the Russian women’s movement of the 1990s as “depoliticized, fragmented, and detached from its purported constituency – women.” In several cases, newer and older generations do not seem to know about each other at all. I had to tell one respondent that there are also many traditional women’s organizations in Russia, and another was unaware that feminist groups are existing and active in Russia today. This will be further discussed in the next theme: the lack of continuity.

7.2.2 Theme 2: Lack of continuity

Accounts on the changing conditions for civil society in Russia have typically focused on amendments made to the NGO legislation. Nonetheless, internal factors within organizations are also important in explaining their decline or success. Not every closure of an NGO in Russia can be explained by tightening legal conditions and thereby scarce financing. The lack of continuity is an internal problem among women’s organizations in Russia that is also connected with organizations’ leadership, hierarchy, and failure to attract new members and leaders.

Interviewees 7, 12, 14, 16 stressed the lack of continuity as the most critical (7, 12) or one of the biggest problems regarding feminist and women’s organizing in Russia. Interviewee 12, a Voronezh university lecturer, saw the failure to attract young members a big problem of all kinds of women’s organizations. She did not exclude that there could be some “inflow of youth” to zhensoviets existing under public administration, but her experience with established independent women’s NGOs with roots from the 1990s was that elderly women were highly overrepresented. She referred to one time in recent years where she had participated in a conference of an important women’s NGO, and “noticed that those are not young women”, adding that “that’s probably the biggest problem”.

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As interviewees 1, 6, and 7 confirmed, the number of women’s organizations had already begun declining before the first amendments were made to the NGO law in 2006. In the early 2000s, Western democracy assistants steadily started pulling out, with Russian women’s NGOs being left with the message that “civil society had now been established” and they were now strong enough to continue on their own (interviewee 6, 7). Respondents 1 and 7, who had lived through these times as active participants in civil society and media, linked international donors’ withdrawal from Russia directly to 9/11 and a redirection of the latter’s focus. As donors later on experienced pressure from the Russian state, even more of them left. But the withdrawal of foreign funding alone is not sufficient in explaining organizations’ failure to secure continuity.

The development of women’s crisis center NGOs can here serve as an example. Domestic violence is and has long been a core topic among Russian women’s organizations, and in the 2000s, researchers even spoke of a women’s crisis center movement (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013). Three interviewees represented non-governmental crisis centers that have existed since the early 1990s. They are among few such centers to have survived the withdrawal of Western donors and a tightening grip on NGOs in the 2000s. Interviewee 6 recalled how their community has drastically diminished over the past 13 years:

> We had a big all-Russian conference in 2006, and there were really more than 70 crisis centers from different regions represented. And then I remember the same conference in 2012, when there were 30 left. Even less. In fact, now there are 15 that are actually active.

She explained their failure to survive by several factors. First of all, since crisis centers constitute an extremely small sphere of NGOs, they have a hard time attracting qualified experts. Accordingly, their conferences are “depressing”, their services “uninteresting”, and they usually do not have functioning websites and/or are not visible in social media. She confirmed with a chuckle that the situation is not only due to the lack of money: “it is just a very long stagnating story.” She acknowledged that there are plenty of difficulties, including financial challenges, but found some organizations to be self-pitying or seemingly just not motivated enough:

> It’s just about willingness [zhelanie]. I cannot fully explain it. But when we talk with (crisis centers from) the regions, they say “we have a hard time here, we are very poor”. I very often tell them: “attract activists, volunteers, students, and you will have a very active vibrant atmosphere. You’ll move forward.” It’s difficult to make an assessment, but that’s the way it looks. (There’s) a lot of the
“we’re a small civic organization, we’re so poor, we have three people working here” and the like. But you can find someone to help you with social media. There are many requests. We get a lot of applications for internships. People write us from other regions. “Can I work with you off-site/remote? Here we have nothing.” I think it’s a good process. With time there will have to be some changes.

This quote not only tells about organizations being unwilling or unmotivated. It also tells the ever-returning story of organizations in the regions struggling more with most aspects of their activity compared to their colleagues in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Interviewee 6 seems sure that these organizations have a far bigger potential than they realize, and that they tend to be stuck in their own misery. In order to realize their potential, they need to attract young people, which again leads to new ideas, “a vibrant environment” and ultimately, continuity.

Why do organizations face such problems? Is it not in their interest to attract younger generations? Do organizations depend solely on their long-standing leader’s commitment? An organization’s failure to ensure continuity also has to do with its internal structure and leadership. Interviewee 16 explained the reason why women’s CSOs often have a hard time surviving with the fact that “a lot depends on the leaders’ situation”. She continued that organizations suffer from leaders’ “burnout effect” or “the effect of something changing in life (of the leaders).” Her statement seems to imply that women’s organizations in many cases depend their whole existence on leaders. They lack structures that would ensure that the baton is passed on to a new leader before it is too late.

Reger and Staggenborg (2006, p. 318) argue that a CSO’s mobilization or degree of success can to some extent be explained by its leaders’ strategical response “to events to maximize organizational viability and maintenance.” Among American feminist CSOs, the relative success of an organization correlates with its ability to maintain long-term leaders and continuity while at the same time train new ones. If there is an interaction between leaders and new activists as well as internal structures through which new leaders can develop, the chances are higher that an organization will be more resistant in the case of external changes (Reger & Staggenborg, 2006, p. 320).

If we adapt this to the Russian context, women’s organizations seem good at maintaining long-term leaders, but they often fail when it comes to ensuring continuity by training new leaders. Several of my interviewees lead organizations that either never had a leaders’ shift, or where the last shift happened decades ago. Interviewee 6’s organization was among few to
have had a successful change of leaders (with a younger leader replacing an elderly) in the last years that seemed to have strengthened the NGO’s viability.

7.3 Women’s groups between the political and the social

7.3.1 Theme 3: Fearing the foreign agent label: impacts of the NGO law

One of this thesis’ main objectives is to see if and to which extent amendments to the NGO legislation, and more specifically the foreign agent law, have affected women’s organizing in Russia. Before conducting the fieldwork, I was aware of the possibility that this topic might not be as pressing an issue for respondents as my research in advance implied. In order to obtain an overview as neutral as possible, I specifically did not ask concrete questions mentioning the law on foreign agents (only once, with interviewee 6).

The interviews showed that the law is indeed a problem that occupies women’s groups. Although only one NGO (interviewee 16) was listed as a foreign agent, as many as seven other interviewees (1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15) raised this topic while answering questions on general challenges to women’s groups’ activity or funding opportunities. The situation was, however, not fatal for all groups, and the extent to which they were worried about their organization’s survival varied. The current situation further has consequences for funding and leads many organizations to reframe their activities.

Consequences of the law

The NGO law affects not only organizations that were established and received foreign funding before the law was adapted. It has also shaped how organizations founded after 2012 perceive and assess their grant opportunities. Interviewee 15’s initiative was founded after the law on foreign agents was adopted. She did not consider applying for grants from abroad an option:

> With foreign grants we have a complete disastrous story. Because as soon as you receive foreign grants you become (...) an agent of a foreign state, acting in the interests of that state. In Russia that is like a black spot [chernaia metka].

Her concerns show how the law has affected civil society actors’ thinking in terms of funding. For established NGOs that were already well-known and respected before they were put in the registry, receiving foreign money is still possible. That also holds true for organizations that
are very conscious about framing their activity as non-political and are focusing only on social assistance (such as the NGO represented by interviewee 8). New initiatives and organizations that may be ascribed political traits, however, seem so frightened by the consequences of the law that they do not even consider applying for foreign grants. The NGO law has split civil society by changing the public perception of a certain group of organizations: “the attitude towards CSOs that protect rights has changed. In general, human rights’, thereunder women’s rights” (interviewee 16).

Several informants (4, 5, 6, 15) expressed their concern about the potential threat of being declared foreign agents. Mostly, this fear was connected with prospects of financing. Interviewee 5’s feminist initiative was not registered as an NGO but had previously gotten their funding through foreign grants that were earmarked for private persons. As they feared being labeled foreign agents and forced to close if they would at some point register and receive money from abroad, they did not consider registering the organization legally an option. Even funded as a private person, they were not safe: interviewee 5 expressed concerns about the bill proposal that could label individuals as foreign agents if they receive grants from abroad, as was done with media outlets (Moscow Times, 2018). Interviewee 9 in her turn was relatively content with the situation and could not say that everything was “horrible”, however adding that they were indeed “partly frightened”. When I asked about why they were frightened, she referred to the fact that organizations are being designated foreign agents. Still, she found that her NGO could live with that.

Although the NGO legislation was an important reason why many women’s organizations has ceased to exist (interviewee 1), the law was not necessarily targeting women’s NGOs specially. However, since they were “the smallest sphere of NGOs” (interviewee 6) and therefore already rather disadvantaged, they were hit extra hard by the law. When foreign financing now seemed an impossible option for some and risking for others, maintaining projects was dependent on reframing into a clearly pronounced “social” sphere and hope for public grants, or go on with no or very scarce financing. The NGO law was just part of a bigger picture which kept restricting the women’s movement to the internet and unofficial social media where the government could not interfere:

I can’t provide you with a line where it’s written that a women’s movement is a huge problem. I can’t. Because at the same time in Facebook there’s a lot of women’s movement. But that’s not state media.
Interviewee 4’s experience was that the NGO law has weighed organizations down with paperwork, reporting, and the constant stress caused by the fact that representatives of any state organ could show up and demand an inspection:

It’s time, resources, nerves. Instead of searching for funds in order to survive, so much time is needed for that… But for now, God has spared us. Because we did not have one report [otchet] (yet), and the number of organizations who have to report is growing. Not only with audits. Anyone can come to us. Starting with the Ministry of Justice, of which all civil society organizations are afraid. Proceeding with Rospotrebnadzor\(^47\), the procurator’s office, fire inspections… Everyone can come and find something in their field and charge us a fine. Therefore, of course, working does not become easier.

Interviewee 6 had a more optimistic stance and found it possible to work constructively under the current conditions, although her NGO had been subject to a thorough audit by the Ministry of Justice. She did not think it was or could be random which NGOs that ended up in the foreign agent registry, as the month-long audits performed by the ministry of justice were very “serious” and detailed. Her organization had been “as open as possible” in the process, and the result was satisfying:

Yes, of course, they could have (declared us foreign agents). But no. They actually wrote in the conclusion that our activity if of public-societal important character. That it is not lobbyism or critique of the state.

**Funding: applying for grants or not?**

The funding situation among my interview objects was surprisingly diverse (see attachment 2 in appendix) and deserves some attention. Four organizations (interviewees 5, 6, 8, 16) had received foreign money after the Foreign Agent Law passed. It should be mentioned that three of these were located in St. Petersburg, where ties to and collaboration with the Nordic countries are more significant and chances to receive foreign funding from those countries are perhaps higher than in Moscow. Also, the Russian government seems to be less suspicious of Nordic donors, since they most often fund social welfare projects\(^48\) (Johnson et al., 2016, p. 294).

\(^47\) Federal Service for Supervision of Consumers Rights Protection and Human Well-Being

\(^48\) It should be noted that the Nordic Council of Ministers closed its office in St. Petersburg in 2015 due to the foreign agent law (Staalesen, 2015).
As mentioned above, two respondents had received presidential grants. Two more had applied without winning (interviewees 6, 8), while some groups (interviewees 3, 15) firmly stated that they would rather go on with no or very scarce, crowdfunding-based funding than to apply for presidential grants. For them, whether to receive money from the state or not was a moral issue. Interviewee 15 connected their refusal to apply for presidential grants with their unwillingness to receive back tax money from a political system they did not approve of: “We are not willing to stand in line hat in hand for the president, a politician who I, for example, don’t support in anyway, so that he could give me a small piece of my taxes.” For those receiving money from abroad, state funding is automatically excluded. The presidential fund does not allow its recipients to have foreign funding, and foreign grants are mostly significantly higher than state funding or presidential grants.

Interviewee 3 is not willing to fund her NGO’s work with state money as long as the state does not acknowledge and address domestic violence as a problem:

If they will recognize the problem, we won’t be needing a grant. The problem will be solved. Today they don’t support us. I can safely say that the government system does not recognize the problem (domestic violence), it does not want to take action. And if I get a presidential grant, people will start saying (to the government): “Look, you are already acting”, no! I don’t need three crumbs in the size of 50 000 dollar. I need a law, I need a public system, I need policemen and doctors who work properly. Besides that, unfortunately, today the state doesn’t seem a hopeful partner. And I don’t know how it will behave tomorrow.

Her argument is that the state puts itself in a better light with the presidential grants by disbursing small grants to organizations working on issues the state usually behaves indifferently towards. The quote implies that the state uses presidential grants for its own purposes, sometimes to improve its reputation, sometimes to avoid acting to overcome core problems in the system. Interviewee 3 here addresses faults in the system that cause problems for all CSOs, not only women’s CSOs. Although admitting that the lack of financing was one of her main concerns, she was happy to have “absolute freedom”: “I say everything I want to. I don’t have to report to anyone on what I’m doing.”

As interviewee 1 pointed out, maybe because of the negative focus on NGOs, many organizations prefer not being formally registered. That leaves them with minimal financial resources and no chances of receiving neither foreign nor governmental grants. However, interviewee 1 argued that they have more freedom and flexibility:
It’s easier that way. Why pay for an accountant (when) there are no bills? We gather ourselves, and if we want, we can bring food and wine and throw some kind of party. We come together, discuss important topics.

Also, applying for state grants is not necessarily easy for those who lack resources or experience in the field. Receiving money from business is also not a realistic alternative for feminist groups. Therefore, many groups choose to stay in their informal formats and spare themselves the efforts. Interviewee 1 hoped that more such self-organized initiatives would appear and make the first steps towards a women’s movement:

(…) the procedure of receiving state money is rather complicated. First you have to work a year, and then you need something to show. It’s for those who already have some kind of resources. You can’t start from scratch. From scratch you can get money from business, but business doesn’t give money to women. And even woman entrepreneurs rather prefer establishing clubs for makeup lovers. They can be doing good things; they can be supporting crisis centers. But that national self-organization of women is important. It hasn’t developed among rich people yet. But I think it will. (interviewee 1)

To SONGOs not concerned with women’s rights, the changes to the NGO legislation have been beneficial. The importance of such organizations is stressed by the state and more budget money is allocated to projects in the social sphere. Interviewee 2, who leads a socially oriented women’s GONGO, reflected the state’s objectives in regard to the NGO law. She said that the situation over the past ten years had worsened only for those who received foreign money and were in her view “dependent” and “politicized”, whereas organizations in the social sphere had better funding opportunities with the presidential grants: “Since we are not a foreign agent, the law did not affect us in any way that could impinge on our rights. On the contrary. Socially oriented organizations benefit from it.” This picture also fits with interviewee 13’s overwhelmingly positive experience with (partially) funding a social project for women in Voronezh with presidential grants.

Framing strategies
However, even rights’ work is possible within the state funded socially oriented sphere if it is framed convincingly. As it appeared, it is possible to finance the whole activity of an organization whose leader considers herself a feminist working on women’s rights issues with presidential grants (interviewee 9). This contradicted my expectations to find a relatively clear division between feminist groups with scarce or foreign funding on the one hand and more
traditional, non-feminist SONGOs receiving public funding on the other. Since the largest share of respondents identified as feminists, such a divide proved false and unfruitful.

Although interviewee 9 mostly found that her NGO’s autonomy was not restrained by the presidential grants and could not say that they were somehow “doing something they did not want to”, she still explained her framing strategies for grants applications. Although she was convinced that “one can apply for anything” with presidential grants, it seems indeed that writing a grant proposal includes several tactical considerations:

Q: Is it written in your application that you work in the sphere women’s rights’ protection?

A: I write “social support”. To single them out is difficult – social support or protection of rights. In practice, it’s social rights’ help. There are mothers with many children, victims of violence, migrant women. (The fact) that it’s connected with rights, I write inside the program. That there’s an intersection (with human rights), that we prepare a rapport to the (Human Rights) Commissioner. We write that violations of rights are the result of rather common difficult life situations. We write all that, it’s all being (financially) supported.

In this case, my respondent has the freedom to choose how her NGO’s activity is to be framed and thereby understood by others. Choosing the social support or family values frames lessens possible risks of being mistrusted as too political, as compared to when employing the (human) rights frame. As interviewee 9 further says, human rights’ work can readily be mentioned in the application, but a tactical way to do so is to fit it within the frame of social support. In effect, choosing a frame also means taking a stand on what kind of relationship one desires to have with authorities and thereby which sources of funding one is after (and vice versa).

In a study of Russian environmental NGOs’ responses to the law on foreign agents, Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva and Henry (2018, p. 634) conclude that after the passing of the law, only NGOs that do not receive funding from abroad are considered “socially useful” by state officials. This implies that cooperation with state authorities has become as good as impossible for NGOs that receive foreign funding, and as a general picture this seems to hold true also for women’s NGOs. However, it is my impression that certain women’s NGOs can frame their activity as “socially useful” more easily than environmental NGOs can. Their position both in the sphere of human rights as well as in social policy can on one hand restrict their possibilities, yet on the other hand, they can reframe activity towards the “family” sphere. This is supported by Johnson et al. (2016, pp. 293-4; 296), who find that some
accounts on the effects of the NGO law often miss central aspects because they are so biased by Western “frameworks of doom and gloom and state-led paternalism”. The law has had negative consequences for women’s NGOs, but it has not made their work infeasible.

Two of the women’s NGOs interviewed for this thesis (interviewees 6, 16) explicitly pronounced that state officials do view them as socially useful, even if they receive foreign funding or are listed as foreign agents. NGOs that offer social services in areas where governmental institutions’ offer and competency fall short, seem to have better chances of being perceived as useful. In the sphere of women’s NGOs, this typically means organizations that work concretely with victims (or abusers) of domestic violence or human trafficking (interviewees 4, 6, 8, 16).

Indeed, the crisis centers NGOs that survived after 2012 seem to maintain their credibility and integrity among some state organs regardless of foreign funding or even political statements, perhaps because they work “concretely on the problem” and stress that domestic violence is not a women’s problem but rather a problem of the society as a whole (interviewee 4). They are able to frame their work into the “family” and “values” lenses, as interviewee 4 pointed out: “We can also say that yes, that’s values. And indeed, that’s values. Family is values. Children are values.” At the same time, they stay true to their mission and “will not say like the state that beatings are slaps [shchlepki], (…) or that the man is in charge (in the family), that the woman has to sit in the kitchen” (interviewee 4).

When crisis centers tone down their focus on women’s humans’ rights, they also need to reconsider whether they should take part in lobbying and public protests or not. If they do so, they risk being viewed as political. Interviewee 6 argued that their crisis center is first and foremost providing social support, and that their activity could hardly be viewed as political. They work primarily with victim support and awareness building, and do not organize or participate in rallies or protests. However, this had not always been the case: until 2012, they used to engage politically and also took part in protests. According to my informant, their reasons for ceasing their political activities was not only due to the foreign agent law, but also to the lack of public resonance to such activity:

Before the (adoption of the) law on foreign agents we took part in different actions, rallies. (…) we participated very actively in lobbying of the law on domestic violence. In fact, in 2012, after twenty years of lobbying, even without the law on foreign agents we would have decided that it’s better to find a different approach. Our reason (for that) is that for now, there is no public interest in that law.
What’s happening now is rather work with society, with public opinion. Creating a demand for the law.

Regardless of her statements about lack of public interest in the law, the fact that the organization no longer takes part in public protest events shows that the NGO law combined with conservative policies and attitudes have indeed left them affected. It is my general impression that organizations are especially concerned about keeping political activity low if they depend on external financing, be it foreign or domestic. Initiatives without or with very little funding, such as those of interviewees 3, 5, 14, 15 seem to be somewhat freer when it comes to expressing political opinions. Interviewee 16’s case is again somewhat special, since her NGO is listed as a foreign agent. They were influential and strong enough to survive the Foreign Agent label and were still receiving foreign funding, even if it was less than before the law passed. Therefore, they had no plans to stop their political work.

Center vs. periphery
Respondents generally shared the view that both the NGO law and conservative pronatalist policies hit women in the regions harder than in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Interviewee 1 found the contrast between center and periphery decisive in this context. NGOs outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg did not have the resources to simply not care about their statuses as foreign agents:

(…) there are (organizations) who either way collaborate with foreign partners. But it sounds awful, because they call you agent. It’s disgusting. In Moscow there are people who don’t care about it and write “I was recognized an agent; I do not agree on that”. But that’s the elite. (…)

Having this label in Moscow or St. Petersburg does not necessarily mean the end, as interviewee 16’s case demonstrates. In intellectual environments, the foreign agent label has become a trademark that gives positive connotations about the given NGO, as they are then probably doing something that really has an impact:

To say that everyone turned their backs would also not be true. People probably understood somehow that… it’s a post-Soviet effect. When the state goes after you [presleduet], it might mean you’re doing something good (interviewee 16).

As interviewee 1 points out, such privileges are reserved for organizations mainly from the two capital cities. Because “in the provinces it’s very difficult. And many (organizations) ceased their activities.” My troubles in finding active non-governmental women’s NGOs in
Voronezh seem to suggest the same. One assumption would be that the very fact that NGOs are not active is a consequence of the NGO law and its impinging effect on (foreign) funding and attitudes towards NGOs that may be regarded political. However, as the chapter on Voronezh will show, this is probably not the whole truth. The NGO law does undoubtedly play a role, but factors such as the already mentioned lack of continuity, activists’ ageing, and a low prioritization of women’s issues among CSOs may be just as crucial in this context.

7.3.2 Theme 4: Growing conservatism

As mentioned in chapter 2.2, in addition to general restrictions on civil society, women’s organizations fight with normative barriers that other groups of CSOs do not face to the same extent (Sundstrom, 2002). In contemporary Russia, these barriers include the increased focus on traditional values. However, as respondent 3 pointed out, there is not one Russian society. Rather, parallel and contradicting tendencies are present. On the one hand, informants agreed that women seemed more emancipated now than before 2012 and that women’s issues were being addressed more frequently in the media. The situation was definitely better than before Putin returned to power, but that that was “in no way thanks to Putin”, rather, “to the fact that it’s not 1996 anymore, but 2019” (interviewee 14). Because, on the other hand, “a loud minority” (interviewee 9) of conservative orthodox groups had increased their influence, and the ties between state and church had grown tighter.

Interviewees agreed that society was more Western and modern, and that awareness of women’s issues was rising. Yet, at the same time, the state was proposing and adapting laws that were hitting hard on less advantaged women (of which there were many) and that were seemingly supported by a large group of deputies. Not only had the foreign agent law hit women’s groups hard, but they were also facing additional obstacles through the activization of small but influential fundamentalist groups. Interviewee 1 put the Pussy Riot case forward as an example that had been used by these groups to show society and state how terrible feminists were. Interviewee 9, who had herself been active in regional policy making, recalled how fundamental groups had made themselves louder and more visible after the first amendments were made to the law on battery in July 2016 (see chapter 6.2.3.):

When the violence topic was hot, orthodox groups immediately jumped forward, started running around. And their part, if I can say it with Soviet language, dug trenches [okopalis'] in the Public Chamber (laughs). They sat down densely, started simulating that it was an intrusion in the family,
juvenile justice… Propaganda, invasion of the private sphere. “The state wants to break in, take our children”. Offending each other about our national tradition.

Harassment and intimidation

Some respondents’ organizations had either received threats from fundamental groups (interviewee 5) or been subject to smear campaigns on the internet where they were accused of being agents of the West, propagandists of homosexuality or of wanting to “destroy the Russian family” (interviewee 3, 9, 16). Through her former public position within the city administration, interviewee 9 had been so plagued by harassing messages and threats that she now refrains from publishing her name on her NGO’s webpage.49 Especially if organizations or their representatives had some kind of relation to the West, fundamentalists knew how to exploit it:

(…) since we advocate for a law and for the fact that women are people, there are some foul organizations of citizens who say that we undermine Russian family traditions (…) I, for example, studied abroad. There are articles about me that I left (Russia), that the U.S. State Department trained me, and I came (back) with an order to destroy families. A bunch of nonsense, but I don’t pay attention to that anymore, because we have a lot of support. (interviewee 3)

Also, groups with clearly feminist stances seem more prone to aggression from conservative citizens. At the time of the interview, interviewee 5’s feminist group had yet to be attacked physically, but they were regularly receiving threats: “Today someone wrote us that they want to bring us twenty liters benzine so that we could set ourselves on fire. There is generally a lot of threats about physical violence”. She could tell that fellow feminists in Perm had faced direct physical aggression from people who had attacked them with electroshock weapons and eggs. Similarly, in Kazan, three feminists standing quiet on a street with posters saying “I am a women, not a dishwasher” and “We are for the protection of our rights, and not equal rights” were intimidated by a man who tore the posters away and poured liquid on the women while recording it with his phone (“Feminists were attacked in Kazan”, 2019).

Nonetheless, interviewee 5 found that feminists first and foremost face online harassment. According to her, some groups are even afraid to go public and try to stay anonymous due to fears of physical attacks. Concerning the state and its internet laws that can cause people being jailed as extremists from sharing a post on VKontakte, interviewee 5 did not think that

49 Harassment and intimidation were not topics I specifically raised in interviews, but it would indeed be interesting to find out to which extent women’s NGOs generally experience this.
the time had come for feminists yet, although the Omsk case (see 6.3.4) was an example of such. For now, according to interviewee 5, the state has enough with anarchists, although she thought the time will come for feminists as well:

For now, we don’t have such problems. The state has concrete (targets), for example anarchists. “Those are anarchists, and we’re going to pester [pristavat’] anarchists.” And as far as I understand, feminists have yet to reach their press list (engl.) (laughing) of people that have to be destroyed with all possible methods. But I think that the more successful our movement will be, the sooner we’ll find ourselves there.

Pronatalist, conservative propaganda

Another important concern among several respondents, was the state’ pronatalist focus on women as keys to solve demographical problems. As on most other topics addressed during interviews, interviewee 2 stuck out from the rest with her view that “women’s main task” was to give birth\(^50\). For most other respondents, the state’s blindness and failure to see women as citizens or that women’s rights are also human’s rights was a source of frustration, as illustrated by interviewee 4:

Back to my grievance. Where do I live? I live in a state, or where? Why doesn’t anyone tell me where my civic rights are, or the civic rights of my children? (…) Women are first and foremost citizens. They have the right to choose. And I have the right to choose. I can’t hear that nonsense from the state and officials, representatives of power, about what my destiny [prednaznachenie] is. (…) Today that state suddenly realized it has too few citizens. How to make more of them? Stop speaking about civic rights, divide citizens into men and women. Well, the things that we’re seeing. Speaking of some mythical Russian family. (…) I feel like spitting.

Interviewee 11 regarded the state’s proposals to the church simply a convenient way of pursuing unpopular policies: “by justifying projects by claiming that they mean morality, spirituality, that causes even more support in the population”. The state’s current attitude towards women’s issues was “sexist, patriarchal, brutal, orthodox, autocratic” (interviewee 7) and reason enough why an independent women’s movement was indeed needed: in order for women’s rights advocates to come to power and “make laws that would protect women, and not return them to their biological functions” (interviewee 5).

Interviewee 3 viewed the state’s conservative attitude towards women as part of an anti-Western strategy that generally steers Russian politics and propaganda:

\(^{50}\) Although interviewee 2 sticks out from the crowd among my informants, her view is not uncommon among people and organizations with a traditional focus — of which there are many.
Now, we’re against the West. If there are gays in the West, we don’t have gays. If the West has democracy, liberals, perverts, then we don’t have that. If the West has immigrants, then we don’t have them. If the West has women and feminism, then we don’t have that. It’s very important to say that everyone over there has gone insane, and that here everything is good. (interviewee 3)

This is an important point that illustrates exactly how women’s rights are caught in big politics and state strategies to maintain power. The conservative narrative also comes from societal traditions that the state had chosen to embrace rather than address as problems. Interviewee 15 explained the current view on women with the fact that “everything is piled up on women” and referred to women’s low wages and their double shifts of full-time work and unpaid domestic work. This resembles Putin’s statement on the uniqueness of Russian women (see 6.1), only he seems to cherish women’s double burden rather than to regard it as a problem.

Furthermore, interview 15 found the propaganda on state television channels to be extremely influential and targeting women particularly hard. Television is still the preferred source of information and news for most Russians. The numbers have decreased in the last years, and among young people between 18 and 30 years, internet is significantly more preferred (61 percent as opposed to 45 percent TV). In the general population, 71 percent name television as one of their main sources of information. More important, television is also the media people trust the most (43 percent as opposed to 20 percent internet) (FOM, 2018).

According to interviewee 15, it was no wonder that the human rights’ situation for women is not satisfying when every TV “shouts” out war propaganda and promotes a view according to which men, because there are fewer of them, “should be treated as piece goods” [shtuchnye tovary] and “cherished as defenders of the country”, whereas state media “shouts” that women “definitely need to find themselves a husband, because without a husband you are no one and nothing”. She was sure that if a more progressive point of view would be propagated in television, society would also have a different image of gender relations in everyday life. She stressed television’s efficiency in promoting state propaganda, with the “traditional values” that are often put forward by politicians and state media as an example:

(…) Of course, if every TV is shouting “marriage, family, family values, women and men”, then people pick up that “yes, a marriage always means woman and man, and family values are always good.” No one knows what those values are, but everyone knows that they’re good. Because with that one can manipulate. (…) The woman is always the guilty party, she should endure [terpet’]
everything. Therefore, “let’s not interfere with the family and not adopt a law on domestic violence, and let’s blame women for everything, because they’re provoking everything themselves.”

She speaks of a state propaganda of which not only men, but also many women, are affected. According to her, people do not question why traditional values should be something important; and neither they nor officials ask themselves what the abstract term “traditional values” really means.

**Masculinization of politics**

Inspired by the already mentioned works by Riabov and Riabova (2010), I asked some respondents (3, 5, 14, 15) whether they saw a link between pronatalist policies, sexism and growing conservatism, and president Putin’s macho image (see 6.3.2). Although several agreed that society was male-dominated, chauvinist and “masculinized”, they mostly refrained from connecting that to the president, as illustrated by interviewee 5:

> I don’t think that’s connected. I think it’s just an archaic structure which exists in many countries, not only in Russia. We can observe that when the authorities are rights-conservative, then even if a woman comes to power, she will translate the same ideas. It’s unlikely that changing one person with another will impact on the situation.

The last observation seems to fit. Pronatalist and thereby anti-empowerment policies are often proposed by women, with Yelena Mizulina serving as an example in the Russian case. Putin’s masculinity image seems to be important in the shaping of the “ideal man” for some Russians, but respondents seemed to think that society and politics would have been the same even if the regime had a leader considered “less macho”, like Medvedev. This does not mean that Riabov & Riabova’s (2010) account on Putin’s macho image is wrong, but that his macho cult only is the top of a deeper rooted “archaic structure”, as interviewee 5 points out.

Interviewee 2’s viewpoints are interesting to bring up here, since they correlate to a high degree with the state’s official narrative and may illustrate the deep-rooted archaic system mentioned above. In the 1990s, interviewee 2 had been a strong advocate of the ideas of feminism and gender. She had engaged in proposing bills where wording such as gender equality (gendernoe ravenstvo) were explicitly applied, as well as bringing gender awareness into school curriculums. With time, however, she had seen how gender was adopted by Westerners to include not only “the social relationship between men and women”, as she used to understand the term. The inclusions of other genders and gender identities than that of man and woman conflicted with “our Russian mentality”. Since feminism is negatively perceived
in Russia and often associated with lesbianism, she could not see the point in using the word at all. She added that her organization sometimes uses these words, but only in contact with organizations abroad.

Asked why her organization is now more concerned with family and maternity questions than issues clearly pointed at empowering women, interviewee 2 presented a line of thoughts that seemed to acknowledge that women were indeed more disadvantaged than men, although she had for the most part denied this earlier in the interview:

A: You know, I went through everything. I’m already analyzing post factum. Yes, we talked a lot (about) gender equality (...) You see, that topic isn’t accepted because in power are mainly men. And the topic is negatively perceived.

Q: And what if there would be more women (in power)?

A: A woman is more accepted only when she’s a professional. Why are we engaging in family issues? Frankly, for us, the Social [sotsialka] is nearer. Men are afraid of that topic. That’s how it works here. If a you’re a woman and know well the problems of family, family policies, children, elderly, social questions, if you step into an auditorium you will easily beat a man. But if a man is running for elections and a woman is also running, if she’s going to say “gender, gender, gender” … She can even say gender a hundred times. And no one will elect her. If she will be talking about the problems that people worry about, only then (they) will understand. And people are first and foremost concerned about family! Domestic matters. And who’s electing men? Women!

The overarching message that interviewee 2 wants to communicate here, seems to primarily be that it is easier to achieve results if you adapt to the actual situation in the country and frame your arguments according to people’s mindset, rather than to force a terminology and topics upon them for which they are not ready. Nonetheless, the most interesting message considering her general, rather essentialist viewpoints, is that women are indeed suffering from the fact that power mostly lies with men. The idea of gender equality, even in a context where it implies merely equality between heterosexual men and women, is simply not accepted since the government institutions are so masculinized. Women are accepted only if they behave “manly” or focus their efforts on “feminine domains” in the social sphere such as family, maternity, children, and elderly people.
7.3.3 Theme 5: Opportunities to impact

 Interviewee no. 9 was the only among my respondents who believed that there are opportunities for women’s NGOs alone to impact on politics, even if these might be scarce. Her view could possibly be explained by the fact that she herself had previously worked on promoting gender equality and women’s rights in one federal and one international agency in St. Petersburg. Also, her NGO’s membership in the Woman Alliance gave her the impression that women’s organizations could have an impact. She assured that they “do not change the laws”, as that task was left to state structures. But since they do analytics and “show them the real situation”, her claim was that they had some kind of impact.

 Another interviewee (no. 16) from a Moscow crisis center expressed that they used to think that they had an impact on politics, even if in “a rather narrow spectrum”. They had been lobbying for a law on domestic violence, writing monitoring reports on the women’s rights situation and collaborated with the Ministry of labor on topics concerning women’s labor rights. After the organization was labelled a Foreign Agent, however, she started doubting their real impact: “When we were put in the registry (of Foreign Agents) and the law (on domestic violence) was not being adopted, I thought that we really cannot impact on anything.” Yet, notwithstanding their Foreign Agent label, the NGO still has contacts within the Ministry of Labor and did not experience that other organizations or even state agencies refrained from working with them. Nonetheless, the respondent now views the NGO’s impact potential on the societal level:

> Now I understand that we probably do not impact on the political situation. We impact on (raising) awareness of problems. We rather impact on society, on how single citizens and society in the end start generally perceiving this problem and its consequences. That is, there is less and less victim blaming, even if there is still a lot, but less compared to how it was in the very beginning.

 The belief that impact is possible only on the societal level was shared by the larger share of my respondents from both NGOs and feminist initiatives. Media’s growing interest towards women’s issues and feminism was said to be a positive change in the right direction. When asked whether her organization had any opportunities to impact on the political situation, interviewee 3 pointed to their influence through media channels. Even state medias were now interested in domestic violence, a problem that has traditionally been seen as a private matter and therefore not broadly covered:
Q: Are there any opportunities for you as an organization to impact on the political situation?

A: I’ll put it this way. Today, there is probably not one media where I would not go, where I would not be invited, where I would not tell about (domestic violence). For example, yesterday, I gave a commentary to Russia Today. First time in my life. I really don’t like them, I really don’t respect them, they are not journalists. But I understand that if they are prepared to speak about my topic, I will talk even with them. I do what I can do. We strive to fill the media landscape.

The answer seems to imply that her NGO’s opportunities to directly impact on politics are fairly scarce, but that a lot of impact is already made when the topic is broadly covered in media. According to this respondent, all medias now seem to acknowledge that domestic violence is a problem that should be combatted. However, it is not necessarily seen in a context of general women’s rights problems in Russia. Behind the camera, journalists would credit her for her good work but tell her: “but by any means, do not become a feminist!” Interviewee 5 also agreed that media was the only channel through which feminists had any chance of impacting. “There is no opportunity to impact on politics”, she said, but added that feminists are doing the best they can in the cultural sphere, in art and music.

That feminists are more frequently invited in media, is also confirmed by an interview from June 2019 with feminist activist Zalina Marchenkulova, who runs the popular Telegram channel “Woman Power” (Zhenskaia vlast). She told The Week that feminists being showed on television was “one of the big victories for feminism (that) happened just in the past two years”, because:

Now feminists sometimes appear on television, and not too long ago we were completely invisible. It's a big accomplishment for us that some channels started talking about feminism in a neutral tone as opposed to highly negative tone. In the past, it was all negative. (Ekmanis, 2019)

Interviewee 5 had twice run for local and Duma elections and had written and lobbied for laws on women’s rights in the Duma. Through her lobbying and political campaigning, she guessed that people see her more as a politician than a civil society activist. When confronted with the question on whether she had more opportunity to impact on decision-making than other activists, since she had already been in the Duma and talked to deputies, her answer was that she alone or any other “super-important” person could barely have any impact. Rather, she argued that a lot of people have an opportunity to impact, but only when they gather together in high numbers:
If 60,000 people, mothers, rise around the State Duma, then that will be an argument. Or not even 60,000, but at least 20,000. You clearly don’t arrest 20,000 women; you don’t put them in the slammer \( [v\, kutzku] \).

That again points back to the obvious lack of unity that many interviewees refer to. Regardless of whether the idea that the police would refuse to arrest women is realistic or not, it is interesting that the desire to gather women in larger groups and have the women’s movement renew itself was pronounced by several respondents. They shared an optimistic belief that things can and will change, but only if women unite and stand strong before the state, so that the state will acknowledge and address important problems. As of now “women practically don’t have any opportunities to impact on politics, since there are no feminists represented in organs of power.” (interviewee 5)

Although interviewees for the most part rejected that they had any opportunities to directly influence on politics, eight of them (1, 15, 16, 9, 10, 14, 2, 4) mentioned their contact or cooperation with some governmental institution on the federal or municipal level. Therefore, speaking of a complete isolation from the state would not be applicable for all groups and organizations. Interviewee 4 spoke of the Moscow mayor office’s increased willingness to collaborate with civil society and lend them affordable or free premises for events, and interviewee 6’s NGO was working closely with governmental institutions in St. Petersburg.

Due to its long experience and reputation, interviewee 16’s NGO has had a stable collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and had not completely lost their contacts after being put in the foreign agent registry. They were regularly sharing their knowledge with governmental institutions. Interviewee 6 also spoke of their collaboration with governmental shelters and crisis centers. Interviewees 1 and 2 had been involved in or asked for advice regarding the NASW. As was discussed in 6.2.2, respondents had little faith in the strategy but found it positive that such a document existed.

In the next subchapter, I will turn to Voronezh to explore women’s organizing in a city other than St. Petersburg and Moscow.
7.4 Women’s issues in a regional city on the example of Voronezh: “there are other more pressing issues”

In this part, I present the results of analysis of the data set that consists of four interviews conducted in Voronezh, Russia’s 14th most populous city with roughly one million inhabitants located 520 km south of Moscow.

Women’s rights issues did not seem to be high up on the agenda among CSOs in the city. Respondents shared the impression that civil society organizations were indeed active, but concerned with other issues, such as providing help to disabled people. Those organizations working on human rights were also not concerned with women’s rights issues. This is similar to findings by Sundstrom and Sperling (see also 2.2.5.): according to a human rights activist, they could not reach out to cover everything, since there were more fundamental problems in Russia than the ones concerned with gender discrimination (Sundstrom et al., 2019, p. 112). For Voronezh, this seems to hold true. Women’s issues appear to be lowly prioritized both in the human rights’ sector as well as in the socially oriented sphere.

Nonetheless, earlier on, there had been active NGOs addressing women’s issues and promoting gender equality and feminism in Voronezh. Either they had seized to exist, they were not active anymore or they had redirected their focus. Interviewee 10 had been a central figure in a once very active women’s NGO that still exists, but which, as was the case with many NGOs of the time, failed to pass on the baton to younger generations. This resulted in members pulling out due to old age, illness or death, which let to inevitable changes to the organizations’ activity levels and priorities. Interviewee 10 also stated that times had changed too: in the 1990s, the interest towards everything new and Western was bigger, so was civil society’s interest in gender research and gender awareness. The most important result, according to interviewee 10, was that after some time, the word gender was even adapted by officials.

In the more active years, The NGO for the most part consisted of highly educated women, typically sociologists or historians working at universities in the city, some of which were themselves teaching courses on gender topics. According to interviewee 10, many of them had engaged in society from a young age; first in Komsomol, then in the Communist Party.
Their main focus was to bring gender awareness to the people and the regional government through educational work, publishing, conferences, and awareness campaigns. Interviewee 10 recalled their good cooperation with local authorities; for example, they had engaged in the publishing of a free bulletin focusing on women’s issues only, the printing of which was financially made possible by the local government. By the end of Putin’s second term, the bulletin ceased to exist when the government stopped supporting the publishing of CSOs’ newspapers.

At this time, the NGO had also worked on domestic violence, a topic that does not seem to be prioritized by non-governmental organizations in the city today. Interviewee 10’s NGO had been among the organizers of a telephone hotline as well a municipal crisis center for victims, for which the city administration had lent them the premises. However, at some point the work stopped due to problems with premises and general a general lack of resources – the psychologists had been consulting women in their spare time only (“He hits you because he loves you?”, 2008).

During a working meeting for women’s organizations in the Public Chamber of Voronezh oblast on family policy in 2007, the leader of an organization addressing domestic violence against women expressed her concern about the lack of permanent structures that would provide psychological help to women and victims of violence. She also stressed that Voronezh had already for several years been in urgent need of a crisis center or a crisis service for women. The reasons why such services were needed were many. Women not only faced violence, but they also bore many other burdens on their shoulders: “Women often put up with male alcoholism, are subject to humiliations, often face the problem of relatives’ and friends’ drug abuse. Often the responsibility of breadwinning lies on women” (Public Chamber of Voronezh oblast, Press Office, 2007). Whether such meetings had any effect and whether they are still possible today, is not clear. In 2007, the Public Chamber even had an own committee on “Woman politics.”

However, it seems that already back then, organizations were more concerned with the above-mentioned family policy — with domestic violence being framed exactly as a family
problem. Interviewee 12 saw that the topic of domestic violence has decreased\(^{51}\), as has most focus on women’s issues in the region — at least on the local governmental level. For example, the committee on maternity and childhood has disappeared. She also referred to the City duma’s own gender expertise that has existed in the 1990s, but which had also disappeared.

My suggestion that there is little focus on domestic violence in Voronezh is of course colored by my lack of any respondents that work on this issue. However, there are several crisis centers for women in Voronezh. Two centers aim to prevent abortions and focus primarily on pregnant women and women with children and were thus not within my target group of organizations aiming to empower women. Another center in the outskirts of the city provides support to all women facing domestic violence and would have been a very interesting interview object. Unfortunately, I found out about its existence only upon arrival in Voronezh, and due to my tight time schedule and the center’s remote location, I did not ask them for an interview.

A lecturer at a local university who had studied the women’s movement in Russia’s regions in the early 2000s, divided women’s organizations in Voronezh into two groups. The first one consisted of different women’s NGOs, some working on topics related to gender awareness and women’s empowerment, others gathered women with sick children, or soldiers’ mothers etc. The second group of organizations were so-called women’s councils (zhensoviets) that derived from state structures and had remained in their form after the fall of the Soviet Union. Common for socially focused women’s organizations, according to interviewee 12, was that their emergence and high numbers in the 1990s was an indispensable effect of the turmoil that the country was in at the time:

> When we talk about the nineties, when Russia had a severe economic crisis, those poor mothers with sick children simply had nowhere to go. They were forced to organize somehow. The Soviet state had, after all, helped them, there was a big support from the state, but in the nineties, it was gone. They had to survive. Surviving is after all possible when you unite. Therefore, those organizations appeared. (Interviewee 12)

\(^{51}\) Still, statistics seem to suggest that domestic violence is a big problem. In 2015, almost half of all murders (22 of 47) in Voronezh and 66 cases of serious bodily harm were committed within the family (Voronezh Media, 2016).
As Johnson (2009) also argues, many women were indeed left with civil society as their only option. However, this was not only due to the economic crisis itself. Women were encouraged to stay out of “dirty” politics and business and were relegated to civil society, a “weaker” and less public sphere where their “assumed affinity for social issues and their greater morality” (p. 47) would come in handy. The overrepresentation of women and civil society’s general weakness and low status compared to big business or formal politics resulted in civil society being a feminized sphere where exactly the traditional gender assumptions that feminist activists wanted to combat, reproduced themselves (Johnson 2009, p. 47). As interviewee 2’s already mentioned viewpoints show, such understandings were embraced by many women as well and still persist today.

Interviewee 12 further argued that independent women’s organizations in the form they occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s had “fulfilled their mission”, which was bringing gender awareness to both society and local authorities. She acknowledged that the women’s groups active in the oblast nowadays for the most part are zhensoviets. Although they are mostly nonpolitical and less concerned with women’s issues than the NGOs from the 1990s and early 2000s, she nonetheless found that their voluntary work is useful for the region, in culture and questions concerning family and maternity and explained that therefore, she “would not start sharply criticizing that form and talk about its non-viability.” Nonetheless, regardless of the zhensoviets’ contribution to the common good and perhaps to the women engaging in them, what remains is that such organizations rarely engage in women’s empowerment.

A young administrator of a Voronezh online feminist community which also organizes offline events (interviewee 11), had herself not heard politicians in the city addressing women’s issues and explained that the population had other needs: there were “many issues more pressing” than the ones concerned with women’s rights. All four respondents from Voronezh seemed to agree on this, and the city’s many people with disabilities were put forward as an example of such a pressing issue (by interviewee 10, 13). These had to be prioritized, so that “the city could at least start functioning better” (interviewee 11), but “as for now, action does not reach women’s issues”.

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Interviewee 12’s account on the transition phase after foreign donors withdrew their support reveals an interesting view on which organizations the region needs or do not need in the first place:

Of course, there were many organizations which received help from foreign funds. (…) very often the sole purpose of the organization was chasing after those subsidies. When that support rushed back, when it decreased, when it stopped, those organizations stayed that indeed have some kind of significance in public life.

If one adapts this logic to the situation in Voronezh today, one would find that the women’s organizations that have “some kind of significance” are first and foremost SONGOs with ties to the city administration, often zhensoviets. As previously mentioned, these organizations’ constituencies are mainly women, but the topics they cover may be very far from feminist thought and may not be concerned with women as a group at all.

Civic activity in Voronezh thus seemed centered around social problems. Interviewee 13 received presidential grants to a project whose aim was to give women in “difficult life situations” free education in the beauty sphere. Throughout the project, the participating women also engaged in charity and sew clothes to and visited elderly and disabled persons. The results were overwhelming for a one-year project: 120 women were trained and many more positively affected. Herself an entrepreneur and businesswoman, interviewee 13 put a lot of own money into the project in addition to the grants. However, she assured that the project would not have been possible without governmental support and praised the increased funding opportunities and improved conditions for SONGOs in recent years. Interviewee 13 and her colleagues decided to establish and register an NGO that would continue the work pursued in the project, a process which she described as particularly time-consuming and challenging.

Interviewee 13’s educational project serves as an example of how a certain degree of women’s empowerment can undoubtedly be reached through non-feminist, state-sponsored projects in the social sphere. However, it should be underlined that in this example, no work is done to combat or raise awareness about gender stereotypes and other deep-rooted problems faced by women. Educating women in stereotypical “woman professions” may also be considered a rather soft version of empowerment. Nonetheless, the participating women were individually empowered through the project.

Thus, the low number of women’s CSOs does not automatically imply that there is no room for addressing women’s issues in Voronezh, but chances to get funding for such projects are
indeed scarce if they are not framed within a state-aligned narrative in the social sphere. Women’s groups’ inactivity is connected to many factors and cannot be explained by a supposedly low significance.

Interviewee 10 saw a big problem in the fact that CSOs in the city are typically very detached from society: “ordinary citizens usually do not know which organizations exist in the city, or what they are doing.” In the early 2000s she had even run for municipal elections from a women’s party with the aim to make CSOs more visible to the public. She was convinced that civil society engagement is only for highly motivated people, as the work they do is rarely recognized by the general public:

Engaging in community work [obschestvennaia rabota] is really a tough business [tiazhkoe delo]. People devote their strengths, time, health, and no one even says thank you. You want to unite, you want to discuss, you want to attract attention. We wrote multiple resolutions to the authorities, all kinds of proposals. We discussed it all with the public, with citizens, then we formulated (them). We took part in a lot. They knew about us in Moscow (…)

The quote illustrates how the CSOs might were doing good work; they were in contact with the government, they networked with other organizations and went to conferences, but did not reach out to women, which were their target group.

When finishing her answer on why the topic of domestic violence is less addressed in Voronezh than in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Interviewee 10 went on addressing the closing of human rights organizations in the city. She seemed rather confused about whether NGOs being branched as foreign agents are actually fulfilling valuable work and serving the common good or if they are indeed agents of the West. In her answer, two conflicting viewpoints are constantly colliding:

A: (…) We have many human rights’ organizations, although many of them simply close due to politicization. Either they are forced to close, or they close themselves.

Q: Because of laws?

A: Well, because we have the foreign agent law. Many fall under that category if they receive grants from abroad. And the things they are doing might be all good. But here one has to look very carefully. It seems to me that there is indeed a political order [politicheskii zakas]. There is such a fashion. But they are in fact doing good things. But at the same time there are also those who (…) are fulfilling orders from foreign funds. But we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. They are needed, the human rights defenders.
The answer reflects a conflicted reasoning trapped between state narratives and outright propaganda on one hand, and own experiences from the NGO sector and general “commonsense” on the other hand. The word “politization” is clearly a vocabulary picked up from state narratives and fits well with interviewees 2’s stance. The same goes for “political order.” Yet at the same, time she keeps repeating that human rights defenders are doing important work.

Up until the beginning of this decade, women’s organizations were more active than today. In 2007, the first and until this day last women’s congress was held in Voronezh. Interviewee 10 recalled that some 50 people from Voronezh oblast were gathered, a number she regarded “a drop in the ocean” for the size of the region. Still, they “sort of consolidated” and pursued questions regarding women’s role in social policy and proposed their suggestions to the regional authorities. She explained their choice of a gender topic by stating that:

> After all, women are indeed more repressed everywhere here. According to the law everything is good, in the constitution it is written that men and women are equal. Generally, the laws are not hindering us, but rather gender stereotypes, habits, prejudices, even starting a business… Insecurity in ourselves. We do have a male (dominated) society, after all.

Interviewee 11 admitted that she would have liked to organize events more often and attract bigger audiences, but that finding an affordable and suitable location for such events was the biggest challenge. Since the initiative was not funded in any way, organizers would depend on someone lending them a premise for free, or they would have to pay themselves. Organizing events on a university’s premises was also challenging, as the dean’s office would not necessarily approve of the topic. Even when organizing events not related to feminism or women’s issues, she had faced challenges such as having to collect a certain number or signatures or gathering a minimum number of people for an event. She found the general lack of resources to be the biggest problem to initiatives pointed at women’s issues, and not necessarily insufficient motivation – although the two are undoubtedly intertwined.

She saw these challenges in a bigger perspective and connected them to the general “changing situation in the country.” The government was tightening its grip and it had become “more

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52 Such a choice is not obvious, since many traditional/essentialist women’s organizations focus on topics concerned with children, maternity, charity, disabled persons, veterans etc., and not women’s issues from a feminist viewpoint.
difficult to do something that is not connected with the state.” Like interviewee 15 in Moscow and interviewee 5 in St. Petersburg, she raised the difficulties of approving and organizing a demonstration as one such example of a tightening grip on civil society. In 2013, before she had moved to the city, a demonstration against the passing of the law on homosexual propaganda resulted in organizers being attacked by counterdemonstrators (not police) and the LGBT protesters being forced to leave for their own security (Goriachev, 2013). Not only are feminists in Russia often “confused” with lesbians, but the feminist and LGBT communities in Voronezh have fairly close ties. Therefore, according to interviewee 11, events such as this scared not only LGBT activists but also feminists from taking to the street.

Women’s organizing in Voronezh thus differs from Moscow and St. Petersburg in several ways. The most remarkable difference concerns activity levels. Although a million city, Voronezh’s small size compared with the two capital cities explains some of this. The activity levels have decreased over the last decade; parallel with the local and federal government’s lowering interest in gender policies throughout the 2000s, women’s organizations are less active than they were ten years ago. The women that brought feminist vocabulary to the municipal government in the 1990s are now above retirement age, and as it appears, they have failed to recruit new members. As far as I could find, no new generation of feminist initiatives have taken over the lead so far, although interviewee 11’s feminist group might be an example of a slow beginning in this direction.

The absence of funding unless one is committed to the social sphere is a prime obstacle to women’s organizing in Voronezh. Lack of funding, prejudices towards feminism, and sometimes time-consuming procedures leave feminists with difficulties finding premises for events. In general, organizing projects with no connections to the state has become increasingly difficult. It indeed seems that the NGO law has worsened conditions for CSOs. There is a civil society in Voronezh, but it focuses on other problems than women’s issues. There are generally many problems in Voronezh, and women’s issues are not among the issues “fundamental” enough to be addressed neither by civil society nor the government. If one looks at all these obstacles together, it becomes no surprise that women’s groups in Voronezh have little outreach and the general public know very little about them.
7.5 Keeping hopes up. Summarizing discussion

Generally, although respondents had their complaints about the state’s functioning and were concerned about the situation for women’s organizations, they were mostly surprisingly positive about the current state of affairs and especially the future. They were motivated to continue their work despite of threats from fundamentalist groups or regressive law changes or proposals by the government. Interviewees 1, 3, 9, and 15 expressed their faith in the generation born around the millennium, which is making itself visible on the internet and sometimes in street protests.

Asked whether it would be correct to sum up the interview by saying that being an activist had become more difficult, interviewee 5 answered that mass street protests had become more difficult, but that activism itself had become “more interesting”, and added with a chuckle: “Like one of our colleagues says: “all the bans are just a way to develop your creativity!” More than anything, this positive attitude is a sign of women’s organizations’ highly trained abilities to adapt to changing conditions, which seems a prerequisite to stay motivated and survive in the current context.

Maybe reacting to a majority of questions that seem to expect negative answers, interviewee 6 repeated her optimistic view throughout the interview. She believed that the women’s movement will at some point transform itself, a process of which she already saw the contours in St. Petersburg — maybe more in forms alternative to traditional NGOs, such as civil associations or other grassroots initiatives. Asked to name the main obstacle to their work by the end of the interview, she denied perceiving challenges as obstacles:

Nothing (laughs). We don’t have any obstacles in our work. Seriously! We’d like something ideal here, we’d like to have a lot of money there, but a lot of money may also very well slacken you at some point. We’d like to have a lot of things, but from what we have, I think it’s fully possible to live and work with that. I have an optimistic view.

Interviewee 15 on her side was sure that the women’s rights’ situation as well as the political system will have to change, and connected it to three factors: “economy, demography and generations.” In an economical perspective, lowly paid women would at some point rise and reclaim their wages and pensions:
As soon as those women realize that their good pensions were taken away from them, that their good life were taken away from them, they will start moving slowly towards those changes. Since they themselves are the system, they are those people who falsify election results, (...) they are those people who teach children, who can scream at them that “What? You went on Navalny’s rally? That’s bad⁵³”. They are the blood of the system. As soon as the blood of the system understands that something is not right and starts flowing in a different direction, the system starts shaking.

She also argued that the demographical discrepancy between men and women would cause women to take over the lead. She was sure that women are more moral than men and “think a lot about their legacy”. With generations, she meant the new technologies that the younger generation is surrounded with. Although the president has been the same their whole lives, the millennials have grown up with technologies that have allowed them to see how things work in other parts of the world. Interviewee 15 was convinced that these three factors could be made into a mathematical model, according to which a system change would have to be the result. And “it will be during our lifetime”, she argued, although admitting that many people do not believe her.

Not only were respondents hoping that women would eventually unite and stand up against the regime, some were also convinced that if or when the state one day acknowledges and starts taking women’s issues seriously, NGOs would not be needed to the same extent as today since the state would take responsibility for women’s basic human rights (interviewee 3). But for now, women’s CSOs continue their work, knowing that:

(…) the things that we’re doing surpass the state. They transcend territory. They surpass political ambitions. They question a historically very unjust system that should no longer be in the future. (interviewee 3)

For an outside observer, it is hard not to admire Russian women’s advocates’ courage, resilience and motivation to keep doing work to combat gender inequality and stand up for women’s rights despite legal and normative obstacles. They adapt quickly to new circumstances and are able to navigate in a landscape of laws, institutions, media, politicians that is sexist and repeatedly blames victims of domestic violence or reduces women to their biological functions. Because on the other hand, women’s groups see that more and more people acknowledge the importance of their work and support them. They are also able to analyze the situation.

⁵³ During the protest waves in Moscow in 2018 and 2019, there were many rapports on teachers and professors urging pupils and students not to go to rallies organized by Navalny.
However, this is only one side of the story. For the most part, I have interviewed representatives of organizations that are active in big cities. The findings from Voronezh suggest that the conditions for women’s organizing in even smaller provincial cities are restricted to the state-supported zhensovet style. If this is true, the prospects for independent women’s organizing seem dependent on internet networks. Increased online activity improves the prognoses for the emerging of a social movement for gender equality in Russia.

In the next and final chapter, I will present the main empirical findings from this study and also make suggestions for further research.
8 Conclusion: main findings

The aim of this thesis has been to study women’s organizing and women’s advocacy in contemporary Russia in the light of changing laws on civil society and state policies on women’s issues. The main argument is that women’s groups find themselves situated between the social and the political: although their work is often concerned with women’s human rights, a lot of work on women’s issues takes place within the state-approved “socially oriented” sphere. Even groups that do not identify with this narrative can take advantage of the situation by framing their activity within the “family” or “traditional values” lenses. Women’s CSOs thus often tone down feminist stances and concerns about women’s rights on webpages, in public documents, and grant applications. This is a matter of tactical framing, which is sometimes necessary if one is to achieve results in a country where the state endorses traditional anti-feminist sentiments in society.

Not only are women’s advocates trapped between the social and the political, women’s issues also seem to be caught in state narratives and even foreign policy. The Putin regime’s strategy of “morality politics” as a means to restore sovereignty and national pride has had the side effects that women’s issues are underprioritized and overshadowed by patriotic, pronatalist narratives of women as mothers and wives. Women are expected to solve the demographic crisis by having more children. Nonetheless, on the societal level, things are changing. Women’s advocates see positive tendencies towards more awareness of women’s issues in society and place their hopes on younger generations.

The NASW is the clearest example of how the state in recent years has started very modestly to address women’s issues. The document is important because it acknowledges that women face gender discrimination in multiple areas and thereby indirectly acknowledges the importance of women’s groups work. At the same time, Putin has called the strategy a demographic project, which undermines its statements about the need to combat gender inequality. The implementation of the strategy has so far given few results, except for women’s opportunity to take on a whole list of new professions from 2021. Domestic violence is one of the strategy’s focal areas, but women’s groups sow doubt as to whether a legislation defining and combatting domestic violence will appear by the end of the implementation period in 2022. Nonetheless, the NASW serves a purpose as a new official
document that feminist activists can make use of when framing their claims or activities to state organs.

This study argues that the NGO law has affected women’s organizations both directly and indirectly. Approximately a dozen has been added to the foreign agent register, but the ripple effect is noticeable for all organizations, except for SONGOs and GONGOs that endorse state narratives and engage only in areas of social support. The latter now have increased access to funding opportunities and thus benefit from the developments. However, women’s CSOs adapt quickly to new challenges. Although the NGO law may be regarded a “crackdown” on civil society, motivated CSOs still find ways to survive. Several influential women’s CSOs have been established after the law passed, meaning women’s organizing is still possible today but demands other strategies.

Women’s CSOs have to be very conscious about their strategical framing. On webpages, in public documents and in grant applications, women’s CSOs can tone down their feminist stances and frame their activity as social support. At the same time, not all are willing to adapt to the state’s current preferences. For some, promoting feminism is a key point in identifying and addressing gender discrimination in society. When sexism is so rampant and domestic violence and sexual harassment is not taken seriously by officials, it is difficult to address and combat this within a non-feminist, state narrative of “social support”. Those who do not adapt, are left with scarce sources of funding and typically rely on crowdfunding.

Another solution to the problem can be to simply refrain from registering as an NGO, or to register but work without grants. After 2012, several feminist initiatives have appeared that manage to reach out to the public in ways that the more traditional organizations do not, even with very scarce sources of funding. Thus, for very motivated women’s advocates, this is an alternative that eliminates the potential stress connected with the fear of being listed as a foreign agent. Although having less resources, these groups enjoy a fuller freedom and do not have to account for their actions to anyone.

My research suggests that the law has more notable negative consequences to independent women’s organizing outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg. In the two biggest cities, the stigma accompanying the law does not have to be damaging to NGOs’ reputation, since people are able to see through the foreign agent label. Sometimes the label is understood as a
sign that the organization is doing something important. My findings from Voronezh imply that the NGO law and the stigma that follows with it may be one of the reasons why independent women’s organizations are few and mostly inactive.

Whereas projects in the governmentally approved social sphere are possible in Voronezh, organizing independently of the state is far more challenging. The shortage of funding opportunities, which may partly be connected with the Foreign agent law, causes a general lack of motivation. Voronezh also faces many other problems that even women’s advocates themselves regard as more “fundamental” and pressing than those of gender discrimination. Thus, there is less political and societal interest in women’s issues than in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Potential activists also feel threatened by the outcomes of street protests and society’s negative perception of feminism.

In addition to external limitations and challenges, my research identifies two important internal factors that women’s organizations struggle with. First, although many organizations’ representatives identify as feminists (at least in Moscow and St. Petersburg), they show little solidarity with other generations of women’s organizations than their own. If a proper social movement in support of women’s issues is to emerge, women’s advocates will need a common identity and a narrative that could unite them in their work for gender equality and decrease the splitting element. This is an elementary feature that is lacking today.

Another problem that is characteristic of women’s organizations in Russia is the lack of continuity. This particular trait is closely connected with funding opportunities and political climate. With the NGO law, several women’s organizations were extinguished. At the same time, this issue also has to do with internal hierarchic structures within organizations and the failure to recruit new members and potential leaders.

If one compares my findings with the ones reported by Sundstrom (2002) nearly two decades ago (see 2.2.3), it becomes clear that there have been changes to women’s organizing in Russia throughout the 2000s. First of all, in Moscow and St. Petersburg at least, more people seem to know about (some) women’s organizations and their work. This results in the second change, which is more attention to gender inequality in media and most importantly, more positive coverage of feminism and women’s issues. This development is closely connected with the emerging of social media and internet outlets, but also speaks of a different attitude
towards central women’s issues in media. Domestic violence is more frequently addressed, and women’s advocates report that the awareness on this issue has increased.

The third problem Sundstrom identified in the Russian women’s movement twenty years ago, was that they were poorly networked. In my study, crisis centers and partly feminist groups spoke of contacts and networks around the country. Nonetheless, it would probably be fair to say that the problem of networking remains today. The number of women’s organizations has also dropped significantly, although a new generation of initiatives that are not formally registered as NGOs has appeared. At the same time, the internet and social networks are powerful tools that can increase advocates’ networking opportunities in a way that was not possible two decades ago.

Sundstrom’s last claim was about women’s organizations’ political weakness and lack of opportunities to impact on policy. This problem still remains today. Few Russian officials are in favor of laws supporting gender equality, and women’s advocates have few opportunities to actively lobby for new laws on that matter. Despite their contact with state officials, mostly on the local level, advocates alone are not able to impact on legislation and decision making. Although taking to the street is an option fraught with danger for many activists and organizations, some women’s advocates argue that big-scale protests are the only way to make the state take women’s issues seriously. At the same time, women’s rights activists’ visibility in media and support from citizens through petitions speak of a growing audience and opportunity to at least impact on public opinion. Time will show whether and when Russia is ready for a new mobilizational feminist women’s movement.

A challenge in designing and writing this study has been to limit its scope. The result is a thesis with a broad approach. It focuses on independent women’s organizing, but also takes the voices of more traditional women’s groups and initiatives into account. I have analyzed the state’s attitude towards women’s issues through laws, speeches, and commentaries, and I have looked at the broader context under which women’s advocates are working. It could be argued that my approach involves too many variables and that a narrowing of the topic could have seemed beneficial. I could have focused only on the Russian state’s policies on women’s issues and adapted the gender lens throughout the thesis to identify the state’s stances. But as soon as interviews took place and the topic of obstacles and challenges came up, the NGO law was, in most cases, indispensable. Likewise, assessing the effect of the NGO law on
women’s organizations without taking the context into account did not seem constructive. My aim has been to study women’s organizations on their own terms, while also exploring their response to specific policies.

One possible limitation of the thesis is that it has been concerned with very recent events and phenomena, some of which are still ongoing. The NASW still has another three years of implementation ahead before it is possible to fully start analyzing its successes and shortcomings. Accordingly, respondents’ assessment of the strategy and areas it affects might change quickly. During the summer of 2019, larger feminist protests demanding a law on domestic violence have taken place in Russia. As of September 2019, the question whether these were just single events or mark the beginning of increased women’s mobilization in Russia, remains unanswered.

Through the case of Voronezh and its comparison with Moscow and St. Petersburg, this thesis has touched upon the center – periphery aspect of women’s organizing and of civil society in general. More research on the regions is needed to see whether my results from Voronezh are representative of the general situation. Also, although the study included interviews with groups that are not formally registered as NGOs, a more extensive study could have focused more on the informal alternatives to NGOs that now seem to be popular among feminists. Sperling (2014) addresses this, and a follow-up of her study would be interesting. The feminist discourse in Russia today is generally a very interesting topic of which I have only scratched the surface.
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## Appendix

### Attachment 1: Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Est. prior to 2012?</th>
<th>Officially registered organization?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 1*</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Expert: journalist, author</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 2</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Maternity, elderly women, strengthening the family</td>
<td>State funding</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 3</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Make domestic violence visible, advocacy</td>
<td>No funding/crowdfunding</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 4</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>Donations (previously foreign grants)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 5</td>
<td>St. P.</td>
<td>Promote feminism, activism, fight gender stereotypes</td>
<td>No funding/crowdfunding (previously foreign funding)</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 6</td>
<td>St. P.</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>Foreign funding</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 7*</td>
<td>St. P.</td>
<td>Expert: former activist</td>
<td>Foreign (yes) (yes)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 8</td>
<td>St. P.</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>Foreign funding</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 9</td>
<td>St. P.</td>
<td>Juridical consulting of women, domestic violence</td>
<td>Presidential grants</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 10*</td>
<td>V.</td>
<td>Expert: former activist</td>
<td>- (yes) (yes)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 11</td>
<td>V.</td>
<td>Promote feminism</td>
<td>No funding</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 12*</td>
<td>V.</td>
<td>Expert: researcher</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 13</td>
<td>V.</td>
<td>Free education for women in difficult life situations, charity</td>
<td>Presidential grants</td>
<td>no (after project ended)</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 14</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Unite feminists, promote feminism, activism</td>
<td>No funding</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 15</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Women’s rights advocacy, activism, lobbying</td>
<td>No funding</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 16</td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>Domestic violence</td>
<td>Foreign funding</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

54 Respondents interviewed as experts are marked with (*). If experts have been active in organizations, information on the organization’s activity is filled in, but in parenthesis.

55 Cities: Moscow (M.), St. Petersburg (St. P.) and Voronezh (V.)

56 In order to preserve respondents’ anonymity, founding year is not disclosed. Since the thesis deals primarily with the period from 2012, I have chosen to show which organizations were established prior to and after 2012.
Attachment 2: Interview guide

1) Вы можете мне, пожалуйста, рассказать коротко о главных направлениях деятельности Вашей организации? (Could you please tell shortly about the main activities of your organization?)

2) Как Вы в целом оцениваете положение женщин в сегодняшней России? (How do you value women’s general situation in Russia today?)*

3) По Вашему мнению, существует ли в России сегодня женское движение? Если да, как Вы бы описывали его? Если нет, почему? (In your opinion, is a women’s movement existing in Russia today? If yes, how would you describe it? If not, why?)*

4) На Ваш взгляд, существует ли в сегодняшней России для женских активисток реальные возможности влиять на официальную политику? Если да, какие? (Are there any real opportunities for women’s activists to impact on public policies in today’s Russia? If yes, which?)

5) Вы сталкиваетесь с какими-нибудь препятствиями в работе Вашей организации? Если да, какие? (Does your organization face any obstacles in its work? If yes, which?)

6) a. Как Вы относитесь к феминизму? b. Как Вы понимаете термин «феминизм» в российском контексте? (a. What is your stand towards feminism? b. How do you understand this concept in the Russian context?)*

7) Были ли в течение последнего десятилетия какие-либо изменения в российском законодательстве, которые влияли на деятельность Вашей организации? Если да, какие? (Over the last decade, were there any changes to the Russian legislation which impacted on the work of your organization? If yes, which?)

8) По Вашему опыту, как российское общество относится к инициативам, направленным на улучшение положения женщин? Были ли в этом плане какие-нибудь изменения? (How does the Russian society react to initiatives aimed at improving women’s situation?)

9) Как Вы бы описывали ситуацию с финансированием для некоммерческих женских организаций в России? (How would you describe the funding situation for non-profit women’s organizations in Russia?)

10) Россией уже восемнадцать лет управляет мужчина, который многими считается настоящим мужчиной и сильным лидером. Влияет ли эта культура маскулинности на положение женщин? (For eighteen years, Russia has been ruled by a man who many people regard as a “real man” and a strong leader. Does this culture of masculinity impact on women’s situation?)

*Questions marked with (*) were the main questions asked to the expert group, although other questions from the interview guide were also touched upon.
8 марта 2017 г. Премьер-министр Дмитрий Медведев подписал национальную стратегию действий в интересах женщин на 2017-2022 годы. На втором евразийском женском форуме в 2018 г. президент Путин отметил, что необходимо решить проблему гендерного неравенства в мире, убрать стереотипы и карьерные ограничения для женщин. Как Вы оцениваете подобные шаги? (On March 8, 2017 prime minister Medvedev signed the new strategy of action on women’s interests. On the second Eurasian Women Forum in St. Petersburg in 2018, president Putin declared it necessary to solve the global problem of gender inequality and remove stereotypes and career obstacles to women. How do you interpret such steps?)*