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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of International Studies

Department of Russian and Eastern European Studies

Master's Thesis

2024 Luca Zucchetti

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Russian LGBTQ+ activism in times of war and repressions: the experience of activists in emigration.

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Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 28/07/2024 Luca Zucchetti

References

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Introduction

The beginning of the war brought significant changes to the life of queer people in Russia and therefore to the priorities and activities of LGBTQ+ activists, who had to reevaluate their activities according to the new legislative framework but also to a changing society. This dissertation, therefore, sets out to understand such changes, focusing on the experience of Russian LGBTQ+ activists in emigration. The aim is to outline some of the main shifts in Russian LGBTQ+ activism following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and establish the new strategies, priorities, and approaches developed by activists in the aftermath of February 2022. Thanks to the insights provided by the interviews with activists and human rights defenders, it was also possible to contextualize the changes that took place within the wider context of Russian LGBTQ+ activism.

The war represented a turning point for Russian society at large as well as for the LGBTQ+ community and LGBTQ+ rights. Shortly after its beginning, the Russian authorities introduced the article 6.22 of the Code on administrative offenses, which prohibits the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships and (or) sexual preference, and gender reassignment," with burdensome consequences for the community but also for some businesses such as publishing houses and film productions[1]. The following step was imposing a total ban on gender reassignment surgery, which in the past had been a relatively accessible procedure, especially in the main cities[2], a radical measure contested by experts and the Ministry of Health[3]. Furtherly, on the 30th of November 2023, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation declared the "International Social LGBTQ+ Movement" an extremist organization.

1"Gosduma prinyala zakon o zaprete gej-propagande" *BBC News Russian service*, November 22, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-63714632; see also "Federalnyi zakon ot 05.12.2022 #479-FZ "O vnesenii izmenenii v Kodeks Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob administrativnykh pravonarusheniiakh".

2 Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, "Access to Trans Healthcare in Russia." In *Trans Health*, ed. by Max Nicolai Appenroth and María do Mar Castro Varela (transcript publishing, 2022), 68.

3 "Minzdrav ne podderzhal zakon o zaprete transperekhoda, ukazav na vozmozhnyi rost suitsidov. Volodin poprosil ne predlagat popravok k zakonu", *The Insider*, June 14, 2023. https://theins.ru/news/262567

Two months after the court's decision, the independent media "Svobodnye Novosti" obtained and published the classified document. The leaked document could be interpreted as a white paper of the Russian authorities' position on the issue of LGBTQ+ rights, people, and community. In the interpretation of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, the "International LGBTQ+ Social Movement" must be considered extremist as it "propagandizes the destruction of traditional values of family and marriage, through the attainment of the full moral equality of non-traditional sexual relationships and traditional ones […]", "embodies a destructive ideological mechanism of influence on citizens, […], threatens the demographic situation in the country and allows the development of the conditions of the self-destruction of society[…]", "[…] exerts negative influence on different parts of the population, including children and adolescents"[4]. These quotes constitute only a partial overview of the reasons behind the decision to designate the movement as extremist. However, in combination with previously adopted legislation, they provide a clear understanding of the Russian authorities' stance on LGBTQ+ rights and therefore activism. At least until the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, two narratives on the LGBTQ+ community, albeit unequally represented, existed: the state discourse and that of LGBTQ+ activists[5]. On the one hand, the state projected the fault of the demographic crisis in Russia onto the LGBTQ+ community, along with feminism and the "childfree ideology"[6], accusing them of promoting harmful ideas that allegedly impact birthrates in the country[7]. This rhetoric is complemented by a strong focus on "traditional values" and on the heteronormative family, which is considered the foundation of Russian society[8]. Most LGBTQ+ individuals are

4 "Razrushenie traditsionnykh tsennostei i feminitivy. "Svobodnye novosti" publikuiut polnyi tekst resheniia Verkhovnogo suda RF o priznanii ekstremistskim "dvizheniia LGBT", *Svobodnye Novosti*, January 18, 2024. https://fn-volga.ru/news/view/id/219533

5 Alexander Kondakov, "Resisting the Silence: The Use of Tolerance and Equality Arguments by Gay and Lesbian Activist Groups in Russia 1." *Canadian Journal of Law and Society* 28, no. 3 (2013): 404.

6 "V komissii pri RKN predlozhili priznat′ ekstremizmom radikal′nyj feminizm i chajld-fri", *Tass*, September 29, 2021. https://tass.ru/obschestvo/12537875

7 Radzhana Buyantueva, "LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia." *Journal of Homosexuality* 65, no.4 (2017): 472.

8 F. Stella and N. Nartova, "Sexual citizenship, nationalism and biopolitics in Putin's Russia". In *Sexuality, Citizenship and Belonging: Trans-National and Intersectional Perspectives*, ed: F. Stella, Y. Taylor, T. Reynolds, and A. Rogers,

convinced that the real reason for this campaign is political and aims at creating the image of an enemy to, among other things, discredit the pro-Western opposition[9]. However, the intensification of the campaign after the meticulous wipeout of political opposition in the country should raise the question of whether the campaign is simply a homophobic one. On the other hand, LGBTQ+ activists have tried to oppose this campaign, contesting the definition of "traditional values," and shaping a competing narrative that aims to rehumanize queer people[10]. In an attempt to make their claims heard, LGBTQ+ activists tried to frame the question of LGBTQ+ rights as part of the wider human rights framework[11], which has a longer tradition in Russia, dating back to the Helsinki Accords of 1975.

According to scholars, throughout the first twenty years of Putin's rule, the issue of LGBTQ+ rights (as well as that of women's rights) remained substantially invisible, a legacy of the Soviet time. However, in 2021 a sharp conservative turn took place: the topic became more central and started to appear in Putin's speeches[12]. The beginning of the war and the legislative and judicial changes further precipitated the situation and forced many to leave the country. Among them, there are LGBTQ+ activists who moved abroad to protect themselves and their families and to pursue activism from abroad. Their experience is crucial to understanding the changes LGBTQ+ activism underwent following the adoption of even stricter legislation and the wave of emigration following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Moreover, the decision to move abroad establishes a before and after, allowing the activists to analyze with some detachment the development of their experience as LGBTQ+ activists.

Thus, this dissertation aims to explore the consequences of the war and repressive practices for Russian LGBTQ + activism. However, for safety reasons, the analysis will focus exclusively on activists who

(London: Routledge, 2015): 29.

9 Irina V. Soboleva, and Yaroslav A. Bakhmetjev, "Political Awareness and Self-Blame in the Explanatory Narratives of LGBT People amid the Anti-LGBT Campaign in Russia." *Sexuality & Culture* 19, no. 2 (2014): 286-287.

10 Cai Wilkinson, "Putting 'Traditional Values' into Practice: The Rise and Contestation of Anti-Homopropaganda Laws in Russia." *Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 3 (2014): 371.

11 Kondakov, *Resisting the silence,* 411

12 Alexandra Novitskaya, Valerie Sperling, Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom, and Janet Elise Johnson, "Unpacking 'Traditional Values' in Russia's Conservative Turn: Gender, Sexuality and the Soviet Legacy." *Europe-Asia Studies* 76, no. 2 (2024): 191.

have decided to emigrate. While the qualitative nature of this research prevents it from exploring all the changes LGBTQ+ activism has undergone following the events of February 2022, it provides a unique opportunity to listen to the protagonists' views and opinions.

Studying LGBTQ+ Activism in the Context of Emigration

Social movement theory has been used in multiple instances to study LGBTQ+ activism[13] and represents a suitable framework to discuss the experience of Russian LGBTQ+ activists and the development of Russian LGBTQ+ activism. The correct formulation should be "social movement theories" as interpretations often differ significantly. However, except for earlier versions such as collective behavior theory, they all share a similar kernel. Developed initially in the US and modified by European scholars, this theoretical approach has been used preeminently to describe Western social movements.

A central characteristic of social movements, on which all scholars agree, is their network-like nature[14]: a single or even more organizations cannot constitute a social movement, no matter its membership or structure. Social movements also have a broader purpose, which differentiates them from interest groups, which are usually associated with specific organizations or issues[15]. Scholars also agreed on the social movements' non-institutionalized nature, the relevance of shared grievances and solidarity, and the importance of collective action[16]. Social movements are located outside institutionalized politics but, due to their tendency to campaign for change in society, are nonetheless involved in politics in a non-institutionalized manner, thus distinguishing them from lobbyists. A necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of a new social movement is the existence of shared grievances.

13 See: Phillip Ayoub, When States Come Out: Europe's Sexual Minorities and the Politics of Visibility (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

14 Mario Diani, "The Concept of Social Movement." *The Sociological Review* 40, no. 1 (1992): 7.

15 Mario Diani, "Interest Organizations in Social Movements: An Empirical Exploration." *Interest Groups & Advocacy* 1, no. 1 (2012): 27.

16 Diani, *The Concept of Social Movement,* 8-12.

However, as will be explained further, not all grievances are strong enough to mobilize a considerable number of individuals due to different factors such as lack of opportunities or inability to properly frame the grievances. These grievances are oftentimes expressed in the form of collective actions such as strikes, marches, sit-ins, and other forms of protesting.

Starting from these shared concepts, each different formulation focuses on one aspect of social movements. For instance, McCarty and Zeld stress the relevance of the organizational factor, focusing on the availability of resources and the consequent process of recruitment and mobilization necessary to attain the resources necessary to sustain the movement. The two scholars believe that shared grievances are important but secondary to the economic aspect, which is key to success[17]. Another relevant approach is the Political Process Theory developed by Tarrow, Tilly, and McAdam. At its core is the concept of political opportunities and threats[18], which govern mobilization: the absence of either prevents mobilization from occurring. Examples of political opportunities are access to political power but also infighting within the elite, while threats usually take the form of repression but also economic hardship. According to scholars, opportunities and threats equally contribute to the birth and development of social movements. However, threats cannot always be transformed into opportunities as, according to this author, the Russian case demonstrates. Among its drawbacks, this approach has been criticized for focusing excessively on the state as the only source of power[19].

Both Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Process Theory are widely used and accepted as valid approaches to studying social movements and have been used to analyze LGBTQ+ activism[20]. However, they do not consider the reasons behind the formation of social movements. To use the word

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17 John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory." *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1215-1217.

18 Sidney Tarrow, "Political Opportunities and Constraints.". In *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 161.

19 Elizabeth A Armstrong, and Mary Bernstein, "Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements." *Sociological Theory* 26, no. 1 (2008): 75.

20 Radzhana Buyanteva, *The Emergence and Development of LGBT Protest Activity in Russia* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 3.

of Melucci "The theories to which I refer are theories of the activation of the factors of collective action, but they tell us nothing about the structural cause of this phenomenon. They tell us how social movements are born and develop; and how collective action is manifested but not why[21]. His theorization of "new social movements" is particularly useful for the study of phenomena such as LGBTQ+ activism, which bring what is oftentimes considered private into the public sphere. He also stresses the elements of deviance and marginality that can be found in these new social movements and the centrality of body; extremely important concepts for LGBTQ+ activism[22]. A solution that combines all these approaches was proposed by Armstrong and Bernstein in the form of a Multi-Institutional Politics approach to social movements. They argue that in society there are multiple sources of power besides the state and nowadays claim-making is not always aimed at the state authorities and the desirable outcome is not always policy change but could also be a demand for cultural change[23].

Social Movements in Authoritarian Contexts: Transnational Movements as the Solution?

Social movement theory has been developed to describe social movements in Western liberal democracies. In more recent years, scholars have focused their attention on this issue and analyzed social movements outside liberal democracies, the focus of the original theorists. The study of social movements in hybrid or authoritarian regimes (such as Russia) requires considering the local socio-political environment, which has considerable influence over the formation and development of social movements, and some adjustments need to be made. Literature on civil society and social movements in authoritarian contexts has focused on different approaches to repression and the ability of the authorities to relieve the pressure by making concessions[24], but also on the effect of transnational

21 A. Melucci, "The New Social Movements: A Theoretical Approach." Social Science Information 19, no. 2 (1980): 212
22 Melucci, "The New Social Movements", 219-220.
23 Armstrong, and Mary Bernstein, "Culture, Power, and Institutions", 75.
24 Chen Xi, Dana M. Moss, "Authoritarian Regimes and Social Movements." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. by David A. Snow et al., (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2018) 669-671.

advocacy on the regime and the role of the elite in managing dissent[25]. In his work on the protests in El Salvador in the 60s, Almeida adapts political process theory to the authoritarian context of the Central American country and identifies some of the differences with the liberal model, stating that "while political opportunities increase the likelihood for movement emergence in democratic settings, in nondemocratic contexts they first encourage the formation of challenger organizations"[26]. The literature on social movements in authoritarian contexts is relevant as this research focuses on Russia, a country where civil society's autonomy has been progressively curtailed, leaving no space for many forms of activism as in the case of LGBTQ+ activists. While previous research has found the commonplace regarding Russian people's unwillingness to protest to be false, scholars have also highlighted the undeniable restrictions and caveats that limit the activity of civil society and therefore the application of some of the tenets of social movement theory in its original Western interpretation[27]. Greene stresses the issue of access to power, which is highly regulated, thus alienating citizens from public life[28]. At a closer look, the issue seems to lie in the inability to reach "across localities and using broad frames to appeal to inclusive identities"[29]. Protests tend to be "primarily local in nature, based on narrowly conceived notions of identity, and making demands that are largely material, exclusive, and conservative or defensive in nature"[30]. This could be one of the reasons why LGBTQ+ activism, based on a strong and shared notion of identity, struggles to attract members. In his book "Moscow in Movement" he presents another, complementary, reason, related to access to politics, or the lack of it to be more precise. He argued that the power base of the regime consists of regional authorities and the

25 Xi, "Authoritarian Regimes and Social Movements", 673-675.

26 Almeida, Paul D., "Opportunity Organizations and Threat-Induced Contention: Protest Waves in Authoritarian Settings." American Journal of Sociology 109, no. 2 (2003): 348.

27 Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 7.

28 Samuel A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement : Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014): 7.

29 Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes*, 42.

30 Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes*, 42.

security apparatus[31]. Once the power base was fully subjugated, de facto nullifying elite political contention (during Putin's first presidential mandate), almost no room for contention remained, at least on a large scale. The result, according to Greene, was a shift in focus towards the self and family. The response to elite disengagement with society was civic disengagement[32], thus preventing activists from being able to mobilize larger sectors of the population. This applies to any form of activism and therefore it is valid also for LGBTQ+ activists.

When it comes to applying Social Movement Theory to countries that are not liberal democracies, it is therefore important not to overlook the specificities of the authoritarian context and the country of interest. In the Russian case, for instance, access to power is highly regulated and constitutes a significant impediment to the development of social movements.

Notwithstanding the central role of nation-states in the contemporary world and their influence over the development and success of social movements transnational activism[33] has progressively strengthened over the recent years. Ideas, claims, and grievances have assumed a transnational character while at the same time initiating the birth of local movements of resistance[34]. Transnational networks favor the exchange of ideas, strategies, and experiences and represent an invaluable source of innovation once adapted to the local context[35]. The grassroots nature of transnational social movements and international NGOs makes them less vulnerable to pressure from states as adherents provide most of the funding and the reliance on state funds is limited[36]. However, states have plenty of leeway to

31 Samuel A. Greene, "Moscow in Movement : Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia". (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014): 7.

32 Greene, *Moscow in Movement*, 10.

33 "A coordinated international campaign on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions" as defined by Della Porta & Tarrow 2005.

34 Donatella della Porta, and Hanspeter Kriesi, "Social Movements in a Globalizing World: An Introduction." In *Social Movements in a Globalizing World*, ed. by Victoria Johnson, Donatella della Porta, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Dieter Rucht (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999) 4.

35 W. Lance Bennett, "Social Movements beyond Borders: Understanding Two Eras of Transnational Activists." In *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, Ed. By Porta, Donatella and Tarrow, Sidney (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 207.

36 Della Porta, "Social Movements in a Globalizing World", 18.

obstruct, limit, or even outright block the activities of such organizations[37], as it was clearly shown in the Russian case[38]. Transnational connections also affected countermovements, which are born to contrast the efforts of social movements. In Russia, for example, Occupy Pedophilia and the Safe-Internet League[39], which were born in the 2010s as a reaction to the development of LGBTQ+ organizations, appear to have enjoyed the support of American evangelicals[40].

Social media and in general the Internet are key to the success of transnational activism and what could be called "online activism." Without these means of communication, the transmission of information would not be possible, at least this quickly and on such a wide scale. Cammaerts claim that our hypermediated society has changed social movements' ontology and the repertoire of contention, introducing new alternative approaches such as fundraising, online petitions, and many other forms of online activism[41]. At the same time, he believes that the success of activists on social media is limited not only because of algorithms and bans but also because of the nature of social media, which engenders "filter bubbles and homophilic echo-chambers whereby the impression is created 'that our narrow self-interest is all that exists'"[42]. However, while some see this as an issue[43], it does not necessarily have to be one: social movements' actors do not primarily aim to convert people or change their minds but rather mobilize and recruit those who share the same grievances. Therefore, the issue must be framed to create a sense of solidarity, and a valid collective identity, to mobilize the highest

37 Della Porta, "Social Movements in a Globalizing World", 10-1.
38 Aleksandr Voronov, "Nichto na zemle ne byvaet zelenyj", *Kommersant*, May 15, 2023. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5998437
39 Both organizations allegedly support "traditional family values" and are explicitly homophobic. The chairwoman of the Safe-Internet League played a central role in advocating for the 2013 gay propaganda bill.
40 Adam Federman, "How US Evangelicals Fueled the Rise of Russia's 'Pro-Family' Right," *The Nation*, January 27, 2014.
41 Bart Cammaerts, "The new-new social movements: are social media changing the ontology of social movements?" *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 26, no.3 (2021): 344.
42 Bart Cammaerts, "The new-new social movements", 350.
43 Dieter Rucht,, 'Social Movement Structures in Action: Conceptual Propositions and Empirical Illustration', in *The Future of Social Movement Research: Dynamics, Mechanisms, and Processes*, ed. by Jacquelien van Stekelenburg, Conny Roggeband, and Bert Klandermans, (Minneapolis: Minnesota Scholarship Online, 2013), 175.

possible number of people, and social media can be helpful in this task[44]. The Internet offers a unique chance to compress space and provide a constant flow of communication in real time. The opportunities that it provides are several: mobilizing disconnected actors, channeling information, connecting like-minded groups, and expanding the repertoire[45]. The internet can also play a key role in the process of shaping a collective identity, a central part of the formation of any social movement[46] as well as facilitate community-building efforts and evade the state's attention in authoritarian contexts[47].

Researching Russian LGBTQ+ Voices in Emigration

As shown above, this dissertation will use several concepts derived from the different formulations of social movement theory: Political Process Theory (PPT), Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), and the New Social Movement theory. The concept of threats and opportunities provided by PPT is helpful to understand why activists decide to remain engaged in activism in a new country while RMT offers the tools to understand how Russian LGBTQ+ activism can survive in these newfound conditions. On the other hand, Melucci's new social movements' approach with the focus on collective identity and the need to promote cultural as well as policy change in society is also necessary to fully understand the LGBTQ+ movement in Russia. Different approaches to claim-making and distinct positions on key topics such as equal marriage, and manifestations of unity such as pride can compromise the creation of a strong and shared collective identity and lead to divisions.

However, as it was previously demonstrated, these theories are Western-centric and focus chiefly on democratic regimes. Therefore, the theoretical framework has been integrated with existing literature

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44 Bart Cammaerts, *The new-new social movements*, 351.

45 Phillip M. Ayoub, and Olga Brzezinska, "Caught in a Web?: The Internet and the Deterritorialization of LGBT Activism." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Lesbian and Gay Activism*, ed. by David Paternotte, Manon Tremblay. (London: Routledge, 2015): 226-227.

46 Francesca Polletta, and James M. Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (2001): 298.

47 Ayoub, and Brzezinska, "Caught in a Web?", 244-45.

on social movements in authoritarian contexts, which have peculiar characteristics and may respond differently to the social movements' demands. Moreover, the technological development of the past twenty years has made it possible to extend social movements' networks outside of the states' borders and thus facilitated the development of transnational activism. Considering that the focus of this analysis is the experience of Russian LGBTQ+ activists who emigrated from the country but remained engaged in activism, it is crucial to identify preexisting transnational connections with foreign and Russian-speaking LGBTQ+ communities in the countries of destination and understand their nature. In a transnational context, where activists are engaged in activism in their home country, the local LGBTQ+ community, and the Russian-speaking LGBTQ+ community of the new country, it is also impossible to overlook the importance of the Internet: especially social media and videoconference platforms, which, as it will be shown, are fundamental for the survivals of activism.

Hirschman's Voice and Exit

In addition to social movement theory, this dissertation will refer to other theories to support the research and provide better explanations for certain phenomena. For instance, a sizable portion of the literature that focuses on activism from abroad draws upon Albert O. Hirschman's "voice and exit" concept[48], initially formulated to explain consumer behavior but later adapted to explain political phenomena. Hirschman states that, in certain circumstances, individuals are compelled to choose exit as the only means of expressing their discontent. This framework finds resonance in authoritarian contexts like Russia, where dissenting voices are suppressed, rendering exit, typically in the form of emigration, the primary solution. This migration carries various immediate and enduring consequences, including brain drain. Additionally, the exit leads to a dwindling pool of activists within the home country, strengthening the authorities but potentially allowing the emergence of alternative forms of

48 Albert O. Hirschman, "Exit, Voice, and the State." *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (1978): 90.

resistance. Scholars of activism amended Hirschman's original theory, admitting the possibility of the coexistence of voice and exit[49].

This model suits many authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, where voice is unwelcome. Exit therefore means migration with various short- and long-term consequences[50] such as the brain drain, which appears to have significantly impacted Russia's developers' community[51]. Another consequence of exit is the progressive reduction in the number of activists in the home country, which, at first glance, would result in a strengthening of the authorities but could also be interpreted as the appearance of a different type of resource[52]. While the exit of activists results in the weakening of activism, those who have emigrated often have access to a socio-political environment richer in resources and opportunities, which allows them to gather meaningful experiences that can be later applied in their home country. Scholars have applied Hirschman's ideas to their works but also disputed some of its tenets. For example, Fomina argued that exit and voice are not mutually incompatible, as it may appear in Hirschman's interpretation[53]; in some circumstances, exit is rather an enabler of voice by facilitating transnational networks of activists and organizations[54]. Scholars have also highlighted the strong focus of the existing literature on wider diaspora groups and governments in exile rather than on less institutionalized voices such as those of activists[55]. These two groups cannot be analyzed together as they have quite different aims: while government in exile and political dissidents usually fight for regime change, activists' frames are usually narrower. For example, ecological activists may attempt to prevent the approval of specific legislative acts that are considered detrimental.

49 Joanna Fomina, "Voice, Exit and Voice Again: Democratic Remittances by Recent Russian Emigrants to the EU." Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 47, no.11 (2019): 2441.
50 Hirschman, "Exit, Voice, and the State." 102-106.
51 Johannes Wachs, "Digital traces of brain drain: developers during the Russian invasion of Ukraine" *EPJ Data Sci.* 12, no. 14 (2023).
52 Ayoub, "Migration and Queer Mobilisation", 2772-2773.
53 Joanna Fomina, "Voice, Exit and Voice Again: Democratic Remittances by Recent Russian Emigrants to the EU." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no.11 (2019): 2441.
54 Laura Henry, and Elizabeth Plantan, "Activism in Exile: How Russian Environmentalists Maintain Voice after Exit." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2021): 276.
55 Henry, and Plantan, "Activism in Exile", 276.

Voice has also been characterized in two ways: horizontal and vertical[56]. Horizontal voice is aimed at the wider public of activists and regular citizens while vertical voice is used to directly or indirectly used to pressure and influence the authorities[57]. Horizontal voice loses strength among activists abroad as the connections with the homeland are partly severed and so is the ability to reach a wider audience while vertical influence could become stronger thanks to transnational networks and foreign governments that could put pressure on the authorities of the home country. However, the effectiveness of vertical voice in Russia, where access to power is strictly controlled and foreign pressure does not seem to be considered, is in doubt. Authorities have also learned to counteract the threat of politically active citizens from abroad by organizing smearing campaigns to discredit emigrants[58].

The reinterpretation of Hirschman's concepts of voice and exit, which at first glance appear contradictory and mutually exclusive, provides a suitable terminology to explain how activism can survive and thrive in these newfound conditions, away from the home country.

Citizenship Theory: Acts Of Citizenship and Homonationalism

Demands for equal rights are demands for full access to citizenship, a concept that has been the object of several scholarly debates[59]. The theory of citizenship focuses on the evolution of membership in society for various categories of individuals under different circumstances (social, political, and civil rights). Sexual citizenship, for example, is defined as full access to sexual rights or, according to a different interpretation, the level of access to citizenship according to one's sexual orientation or gender

56 O'Donnell, G.A., "*On the Fruitful Convergences of Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty and Shifting Involvements: Reflections from the Recent Argentine Experience*." In *Development, Democracy, and the Art of Trespassing: Essays in Honor of Albert O. Hirschman*, ed. A. Foxley, M. S. McPherson, and G. O'Donnell, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986): 256.

57 Henry, and Plantan, "Activism in Exile", 275.

58 Marcus Michaelsen, "Exit and Voice in a Digital Age: Iran's Exiled Activists and the Authoritarian State." Globalizations 15, no.2 (2018): 259.

59 Bryan S. Turner, "Outline of a theory of citizenship." Sociology 24, no. 2 (1990): 189–217.

identity[60]. The debate on (sexual) citizenship produced a set of useful concepts such as homonationalism and acts of citizenship.

JK Puar, who devised the idea of homonationalism, describes it as "[…] a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality"[61]. Acts of citizenship, on the other hand, have been described as "[…] acts that may not be considered as political and demonstrate that their enactment does indeed instantiate constituents"[62]. They could therefore be interpreted as an involuntary or hidden form of activism, which, as we shall see, resurface once political opportunities dwindle.

Both concepts can prove useful for this dissertation: activists who emigrated from Russia to countries where policies towards LGB(TQ+) individuals are more favorable, as in the case of the United States, may encounter or even embrace homonationalism, internalizing an orientalist narrative on LGBTQ+ rights in Russia while overlooking the issues faced by the community in the country of destination. On the other hand, acts of citizenship is a useful concept to explain certain trends in the Russian LGBTQ+ community in recent years in response to an increased level of repressions, which resemble those of Soviet times described by Kondakov[63].

Literature review

Studying the development of Russian LGBTQ+ activism following the events of February 2022 means contributing to two main streams of literature: activism in exile and Russian LGBTQ+ activism. While activism in exile has been extensively studied, Russian LGBTQ+ activism has received less scholarly

60 Diane Richardson, "Sexuality and citizenship." Sociology 32, no. 1 (1998): 84.
61 Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 33.
62 Isin, Engin F., "Theorizing acts of citizenship". In *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. by Isin, Engin F. and Nielsen, Greg M. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 18.
63 Alexander Kondakov, "Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship from Queer and Post-Soviet Perspectives: Queer Urban Spaces and the Right to the Socialist City." *Sexualities* 22 no. 3 (2017): 412.

attention. The following section will therefore provide a brief review of the existing literature on both topics. This is necessary as the knowledge gathered by previous scholars will be central to the understanding of the change Russian LGBTQ+ activism underwent.

LGBTQ+ Activism in Russia

The development of the LGBTQ+ movement in contemporary Russia has been traced on multiple occasions, with several authors providing a chronology of the events since the independence, usually starting from the 1993 decision to abolish the crime of sodomy[64]. Low levels of activism in the 90s were followed by an increase in civil activity throughout Russia during the 2000s, also due to the economic growth that facilitated access to resources. Protest activity increased along with the number of LGBTQ+ organizations, which peaked in 2010. Following the beginning of Putin's third mandate and the approval of the gay propaganda law in 2013, the situation progressively worsened till the present day.

Considering that at the height of the protest activity in 2010, the number of participants never surpassed a few hundred[65], it is not surprising that existing literature has found that LGBTQ+ activism is oftentimes seen in a negative light by LGBTQ+ individuals themselves as they believe it is more damaging than it is helpful[66]. Some could argue that the rejection of LGBTQ+ activism is linked to a general passivity of the Russian people who are not interested in uniting to put forward their claims.

64 See Radzhana Buyantueva, "LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia." Journal of Homosexuality 65, no.4 (2017): 456–83, and also Cai Wilkinson, "LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union: The Evolution of Hypervisibility." In *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, ed. M. J. Bosia, S. M. McEvoy, and M. Rahman, (Oxford University Press, 2020): 233–248.

65 Radzhana Buyanteva, *The Emergence and Development of LGBT Protest Activity in Russia* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 3.

66 Mariya Levitanus, and Polina Kislitsyna, "'Why Wave the Flag?': (In)Visible Queer Activism in Authoritarian Kazakhstan and Russia." Central Asian Survey (2023): 14.

However, research on the topic has proven this stereotype of passivity and tolerance wrong, showing how in times of need the population mobilized to make demands[67].

Previous research on LGBTQ+ activism has thus provided a chronological history of the development of the movement and shown that its efforts toward collective actions have not been overly successful. Different scholars have tried providing explanations for this disenfranchisement, rejecting the orientalist claim that Russian people are not prone to protesting and pointing at the specificities of the Russian context.

To explain the paralysis of LGBTQ+ activism in Russia, Wilkinson highlighted the issue of the movement's reliance, at least in its more institutionalized form, on Western funding and therefore Western practices, which could appear alien to Russian queers and prove ineffective[68]. The Western approach, blind to the collaboration between Evangelical Americans and Russian politicians on topics such as the "gay propaganda" law of 2013 and the restriction on women's reproductive rights, focused instead on Putin's Russia as an especially repressive case of violation of LGBTQ+ rights[69]. By measuring the situation with Western standards, it is inevitable to miss some crucial elements of Russian queerness such as fluidity, which is not a feature of the Western queer community that prefers more rigid categorizations linked to orientation and identity[70]. Coming out, a central part of the Western queer experience is not seen as necessary in the Russian context: secrets and multiple private spheres are considered valuable elements of intimate relationships[71]. As Stella shows[72], even the occupation of

67 Graeme B. Robertson, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 7.

68 Cai Wilkinson, "LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union: The Evolution of Hypervisibility", 2.

69 Michele Rivkin-Fish, and Cassandra Hartblay, "When Global LGBTQ Advocacy Became Entangled with New Cold War Sentiment: A Call for Examining Russian Queer Experience." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 98.

70 Alexander Kondakov, *Violent Affections: Queer Sexuality, Techniques of Power, and Law in Russia*. (London: UCL Press, 2022): 84.

71 Rivkin-Fish and Hartblay, "When Global LGBTQ Advocacy", 103.

72 Francesca Stella, "The Politics of In/Visibility: Carving out Queer Space in Ul'yanovsk." Europe-Asia Studies 64 no. 10 (2012): 27.

public space is not considered an empowering act, a coming out, but rather a way of remaining invisible.

Another central feature of the Russian LGBTQ+ experience is that of (in)visibility which encompasses all the issues that LGBTQ+ activists must face whilst attempting to put forward their claims. According to Wilkinson[73], queer people in Russia (and before that in the Soviet Union) underwent three separate phases. The first was silence and complete erasure of the topic from the public space. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the liberalization that ensued, invisibility turned into visibility. While far from acceptance, it allowed the first public forms of activism. The third stage is hypervisibility: a result of the homophobic legislation that started developing in 2006 on a regional level and then in 2012 on the federal level. Hypervisibility brought along a series of unwanted consequences such as the rise of countermovements and unpunished homophobic attacks[74] but also criticism from the same LGBTQ+ individuals for provoking more hostility towards the community without bringing any real benefit[75].

Hypervisibility shaped the self-perception of LGBTQ+ individuals in Russia but also the strategies of activists. Since the aim of any social movement is to create a shared sense of identity that can allow individuals to feel part of something bigger, activists had to frame their discourse taking into account the issue of hypervisibility and how it affected the community. As Kondakov demonstrated, LGBTQ+ organizations approached the issue in two ways: some focused on stressing the need for equal rights while others promoted tolerance toward LGBTQ+ people[76]. While those that favored equality (and also marriage equality) positioned themselves as opposed to the authorities, organizations that framed the question in terms of tolerance had a more favorable view of the authorities and often discarded

73 Wilkinson, "LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union", 3.
74 Wilkinson, "LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union", 9.
75 Cai Weaver, "'I'm Gay, but I'm Not like Those Perverts': Perceptions of Self, the LGBT Community, and LGBT Activists among Gay and Bisexual Russian Men." In *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Radzhana Buyantueva, Maryna Shevtsova. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 116.
76 Kondakov, "Resisting the silence", 413.

altogether the topic of marriage and/or civil unions[77]. We could argue that the first group resisted the official homophobic discourse while the latter attempted to come to terms with it.

The rhetoric of tolerance, moreover, tends to accept heteronormativity as the only real model, thus acknowledging the LGBTQ+ as deviant from the norm[78]. According to Soboleva and Bakhmetjev[79], LGBTQ+ individuals usually respond to the official homophobic and heteronormative discourse in three ways: self-blame (loyalty), awareness (exit), and resistance (voice). While the first is incompatible with any form of activism, the following ones are consistent with the two aforementioned approaches to activism (tolerance and equality). These dehumanizing narratives, relinquish equality in exchange for a quiet life[80], making mobilization extremely difficult if not unachievable. This is the consequence of external conditions that result in internalized homophobia and consequent narratives of self-blame.

Hence, it should not come as a surprise that among LGBTQ+ activists there is a widespread tendency to deny the link between politics and activism, which in practice means focusing mostly on community building rather than carrying out political actions[81]. Overtly political actions such as protests are perceived as dangerous as they could provoke a reaction of the authorities since access to politics is strictly regulated. Focusing on community building appeared as a safe way of helping the community without drawing the attention of the authorities.

Low levels of street mobilization and public activism, however, should not be interpreted as a lack of resistance, but rather as incompatibility of some forms of activism with the local realia[82]. Kondakov highlights the preference for grassroots activism among Russian LGBTQ+ individuals[83]. In their

77 Kondakov, “Resisting the silence”, 413.
78 Kondakov, “Resisting the silence”, 419.
79 Soboleva, “Political Awareness and Self-Blame”, 286–89.
80 Soboleva, “Political Awareness and Self-Blame”, 292.
81 Lucy Pakhnyuk, “Foreign Agents and Gay Propaganda: Russian Lgbt Rights Activism under Pressure.” *Demokratizatsiya*: *The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 27, no. 4 (2019): 486.
82 Stella, “The Politics of In/Visibility”, 1830.
83 Kondakov, “Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship from Queer and Post-Soviet Perspectives”, 412.

interpretation, this form of activism does not include actions such as street protests, which are seen as institutional political participation. Although this could surprise a Western observer, scholars of social movements have already stressed that repertoires of contention are ever-changing. In the words of Charles Tilly, "repertoires vary from place to place, time to time, and pair to pair. But on the whole, when people make collective claims, they innovate within limits set by the repertoire already established for their place, time, and pair"[84].

Resistance takes place in the form of acts of citizenship through the appropriation of public spaces while preserving invisibility[85]. Stella brings the example of the LGBTQ+ community in Ul'yanovsk, a city without any safe space for queer individuals, where resistance materializes through *tusovky*: the gathering of LGBTQ+ people in private apartments (*kvartirniki)* or public spaces such as squares or parks. The temporary appropriation of a heterosexualized space represents a form of resistance that parts ways with the conception of territorialized queer space[86]. Despite the unconscious nature of these acts of citizenship, they represent a valid form of claim-making that aims at obtaining equal access to citizenship rights[87].

Acts of citizenship appeared as the only viable alternative to the Soviet queers. The attempt to completely erase the private sphere encouraged the creation of alternative spaces (*tusovky*). The fall of the USSR, the market reforms, and the new political course, while not acknowledging the rights or even the existence of LGBTQ+ people, granted new freedoms in the private sphere through the commodification of the queer experience[88]. However, recent developments seem to indicate that the state of private space is regressing to Soviet times but without the advantages of invisibility. The Russian state's growing interest in the intimate and personal lives of its citizens deprives LGBTQ+

84 Charles Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 35.
85 Kondakov, "Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship", 5.
86 Stella, "The Politics of In/Visibility", 1829.
87 Kondakov, "Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship", 5-6.
88 Kondakov, "Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship", 10.

individuals of the few available spaces while exposing them to discrimination and hatred[89]. Even the Internet, which Kondakov regarded as a new avenue of political resistance[90], has fallen under the strict control of the authorities, thus leaving little space for maneuver.

This short review has shown some of the defining features of Russian LGBTQ+ activism. However, the events of February 2022 and the exodus of many activists from Russia require a further expansion of this literature review in order to include previous research on Russian (LGBTQ+) activism in exile, which provides fundamental insights for this dissertation.

Russian (LGBTQ+) Migration and Activism

Despite the extensive existing literature on LGBTQ+ rights in Russia, three years later the statement by Buyanteva regarding the lack of research on LGBTQ+ activism still holds[91]. While new literature is being published, covering relevant topics such as memory politics and its effect on LGBTQ+ mobilization in Russia[92], the increasingly repressive political system has provided new avenues for researchers of migration studies. New projects have appeared[93], aimed at analyzing changes in Russian society but also in activism. In the aftermath of February 2022, scholars began to approach the topic of post-war emigration, investigating the social background of migrants. According to the results, the

89 Olga Lebedeva, "V Orenburge arestovany sotrudniki LGBT-kluba za "ekstremizm", *DW*, March 20, 2024. https://www.dw.com/ru/v-orenburge-arestovany-sotrudniki-lgbtkluba-po-delu-ob-ekstremizme/a-68626469

90 Kondakov, "Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship", 12.

91 Radzhana Buyantueva, "Resource Mobilisation and Russian LGBT Activism." *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 1.

92 Pauline Stoltz, and Anna Khlusova, "Russian LGBT Activism and the Memory Politics of Sexual Citizenship." *Memory Studies* 0, no. 0 2024.

93 See for example outrush.io led by scholars of the EUI.

majority of emigrants were representatives of the middle class[94] and more likely to be politically engaged than the average Russian citizen[95].

War, mobilization, and new draconian bills forced millions out of the country, some of whom are yet to return. Among them, there are people members of the LGBTQ+ community and activists, who, due to their identity or activity, are exposed to higher risks than average Russian emigres[96]. However, leaving does not necessarily entail disenfranchisement from politics or activism, on the contrary, many decide to remain engaged in activism[97] and some, as it will be shown, discover the world of activism for the first time.

There are different ways to be politically engaged from abroad: in the Belarusian case for example Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya remained engaged in institutional politics, albeit outside Belarus. On the other hand, Russians in emigration have developed or preserved forms of civic activism: eco-activists, LGBTQ+ activists, and human rights activists are some examples. Research on this topic is still limited as it is a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore this phenomenon, focusing on LGBTQ+ activism and activists.

Worldwide LGBTQ+ migration is a widely researched topic[98] and scholars have already partially researched the topic of Russian LGBTQ+ migration. Novitskaya in her work on Russian LGBTQ+ migrants to the United States focused for example on the concept of homonationalism and its attractiveness for LGBTQ+ migrants from places like Russia, where, after a period of relative invisibility, society's perception of LGBTQ+ people significantly deteriorated as a result of politically

94 Margarita Zavadskaya, Ivetta Sergeeva, and Emil Kamalov, "Voice After Exit? Exploring Civic Activism Among Russian Migrant Communities in Eurasia After February 24, 2022." *SocArXiv*. December 23 (2023): 10.

95 Zavadskaya, "*Voice After Exit?"* SocArXiv, 24.

96 Emil Kamalov, Veronica Kostenko, Ivetta Sergeeva, Margarita Zavadskaya, "New Russian Migrants Against the War: Political Action in Russia and Abroad", *The Russian crisis*, June 2023, 12.

97 Kamalov, Sergeeva, Zavadskaya, *New Russian Migrants Against the War*, 12.

98 See: Phillip M. Ayoub, and Lauren Bauman, "Migration and Queer Mobilizations: How Migration Facilitates Cross-Border LGBTQ Activism." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 45, no. 15, 13 July 2018, pp. 2758–2778, or, Richard C. M Mole*, Queer Migration and Asylum in Europe*. UCL Press, 2021. Or Arzu Güler, Maryna Shevtsova, Denise Venturi, *LGBTI Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Legal and Political Perspective*, (Springer Verlag: 2019).

motivated hypervisibility[99]. Homonationalism is the existence of a favorable legal and social environment for LGBTQ+ people, which results in the community's support for more nationalist policies; scholars have described it as problematic since it perpetuates orientalist narratives[100]. Migrants from countries where LGBTQ+ rights are limited or have been restricted could internalize these narratives as in the case of Polish migrants in Western Europe interviewed by Binnie and Klesse who had developed essentialist views of Polish homophobia[101].

Migration while offering a safe solution for persecuted LGBTQ+ individuals exposes them to homonationalist narratives. However, while previous research has shown that these narratives are effective among regular individuals, their effectiveness among activists has not been proven.

Researching the activity of activists abroad, Fomina has focused on democratic remittances and their power to influence the situation in the home country and bring about change outside the electoral process[102]. Among direct remittances, we could list the support and promotion of civil society in Russia, shaping public opinion, and lobbying, while an example of indirect remittances is the attempt to counteract the homophobic discourse in Russian official sources[103]. Most of these activities are possible only thanks to the existence of transnational networks that involve Russian activists in Russia and abroad as well as activists from the host countries. Transnational interventions, however, are not always successful due to cultural differences that at times are disregarded in favor of allegedly universally applicable models[104].

99 A. Novitskaya, "I have come to this Country to be happy": Homonationalism as Infrastructure of post-Soviet Queer Migration to the United States". *Sexuality & Culture* 27, (2023) 2018.

100 Jon Binnie, and Christian Klesse, "'Like a Bomb in the Gasoline Station': East–West Migration and Transnational Activism around Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Politics in Poland." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 7 (2013): 1117.

101 Binnie and Klesse, *Like a Bomb*, 1117.

102 Joanna Fomina, "Voice, Exit and Voice Again", 2241.

103 Joanna Fomina, "Voice, Exit and Voice Again", 2454.

104 Binnie, and Klesse, "Like a Bomb in the Gasoline Station", 1116.

Under the more favorable circumstances provided by the host country, activists can have access to resources more easily, open new organizations, and exchange valuable information[105]. Additionally, a more accepting environment is empowering and can mobilize LGBTQ+ individuals and get them involved in activism, thus expanding the pool of resources[106]. Scholars have also concluded that oftentimes activism is seen as a moral obligation towards those who remain in the country[107].

This dissertation, building on the existing literature, aims to expand the knowledge of the Russian LGBTQ+ movement by analyzing the changes that took place after the beginning of the war and the mass emigration from the country. The full-scale war in Ukraine represented a turning point for many, among them Russian activists who decided or were forced to leave the country. Life in a new country could provide activists with new insights into the past but also inspirations for the future of Russian LGBTQ+ activism, which currently finds itself in survival mode. The center of this research is not only activism as an abstract but also the experience of the activists: it will focus on the reasons for emigrating, the process of adaptation, and the decision to pursue activism from abroad.

As mentioned previously, post-February 2024 research on emigration from Russia already exists, although it has mainly focused on general emigration. This research will further explore this topic through the eyes of LGBTQ+ activists, who, due to their status, could have significantly different experiences from the rest of the emigrants. Drawing from the literature on activism from abroad, special attention will be dedicated to the changes in strategies that happened as a consequence of moving abroad and the relevance of the Internet and social media. Previous research on Russian LGBTQ+ emigrants, moreover, focused mostly on non-activists, whose experience could be different from that of outspoken activists.

105 Ayoub, and Bauman, “Migration and Queer Mobilisation”, 2760.
106 Ayoub, and Bauman, “Migration and Queer Mobilisation”, 2767.
107 Ayoub, and Bauman, “Migration and Queer Mobilisation”, 2761.

The ruling of the Russian Supreme Court, by designating the non-existent LGBTQ organization as extremist, de-iure outlawed LGBTQ+ activism[108]. This decision marks a before and after for LGBTQ+ activism in Russia. Therefore, this dissertation also attempts to provide the opinion of the activists on the reasons why LGBTQ+ activism evolved the way it did in the last decade, thus tracing a commented history of its development. Since the interviewees do not belong to the same age group, it is not possible to determine an exact timeframe, but the analysis will not stretch further than the beginning of Putin's presidency.

Methodology

Interviews with activists were singled out as the most effective approach to understanding the changes LGBTQ+ activism has undergone since the beginning of the war and the constantly intensifying waves of repression. Their personal experience is a source of invaluable information that could not be obtained otherwise. The sensitive nature of the research was one of the main obstacles to the data collection process, as both the number of LGBTQ+ activists and those who are comfortable granting an interview are limited. However, it was possible to reach a sufficient number of respondents: The study began by surveying personal contacts, and then shifted to utilizing a convenience sampling technique known as the "snowball sample." This method involved using the activists' networks to identify other suitable participants, thus achieving a satisfactory number of respondents. The participants were all informed of their rights: in particular the right to anonymity and to withdraw from the study before the transcription of the materials and were acquainted with the purposes of this dissertation. Three main criteria were established to determine suitable respondents: living outside Russia (or planning to leave the country in the immediate future), possessing Russian citizenship, and considering themselves

108 "Razrushenie traditsionnykh tsennostei i feminitivy. "Svobodnye novosti" publikuiut polnyi tekst resheniia Verkhovnogo suda RF o priznanii ekstremistskim "dvizheniia LGBT", *Svobodnye Novosti*, January 18, 2024. https://fn-volga.ru/news/view/id/219533

LGBTQ+ activists. Although most respondents are or had been either volunteers or workers in NGOs, the emphasis of social movement theory on non-institutionalization and grassroots initiatives led to the choice of letting the individual determine whether they identify, fully or partially, with the LGBTQ+ movement. The sample contains both human rights defender and activists[109] for a total of twelve interviewees. Age, country of destination, sexual orientation, and gender identity were taken into account to obtain a sample as varied as possible. Seven respondents resided in the European Union, one in Central America, one in South America, one in North America, one in the Caucasus, and one respondent was in Russia. Data regarding the gender of the interviewees will not be disclosed to preserve their anonymity. However, both male, female, and non-binary individuals were interviewed. The interviewees belonged to different age groups, ranging from 24 to 55 years old. The sample was adjusted to include activists from various regions of Russia to offer diverse perspectives on the evolution of activism within the country. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to allow the respondents to elaborate as much as possible on their answers while maintaining an overall structure, consisting of questions prepared in advance by the interviewer. Semi-structured interviews also allow the interviewer to follow up on specific meaningful statements of the interviewees that could provide further unexpected insights. The interviews were held over three months[110]. Russian was chosen as the working language to allow the interviewees to express themselves in their native language. Interviews were conducted online through different videoconferencing platforms as the interviewer and the respondents live in different countries. The duration ranged from half an hour to an hour. Following the transcription process, the conversations were carefully analyzed through thematic analysis: the data were coded and then examined to identify recurring patterns and themes, which will be presented in the result section and furtherly analyzed in the context of the theoretical framework and

109 For the purposes of this dissertation a human rights defender is a professional figure whose main occupation is activism while activists dedicate their free time to activism

110 For further details see the Appendix to the dissertation.

literature review in the discussion section. Themes were not developed in advance, instead an inductive approach was chosen. Recurring patterns, such as the relevance of preexisting networks, were identified and highlighted in the coding process and then analyzed in the discussion section. The limited sample prevents this research from providing a comprehensive overview of all the changes LGBTQ+ activism has undergone in recent years, particularly after the war broke out. However, it provides different views on the development of Russian LGBTQ+ activism, some of the changes it experiences, the process of adaptation in a new country, and activism from abroad.

Results

Leaving the Country

The beginning of the war impacted all the interviewees and contributed to their decision to leave the country. However, two activists had already left Russia by the time of the invasion. Only one of the activists (KU) left the country right after the beginning of the war. He stated that his decision to move "was absolutely an emotional one […] and it was most definitely not planned. It was like a thought that came to mind and I could not find a reason not to do it" (KU, activist). In this case, the decision was made only a few weeks after the beginning of the war. The interviewee, who now lives in the United States, declared that he had never considered leaving the country beforehand, had rarely traveled outside Russia before, and did not speak any foreign language. His decision was not linked to a personal risk due to LGBTQ+ activism as he was not an activist at the time but mostly "due to the political events." This explanation is of note as it contrasts with further statements by KU who described himself as "a person extremely far from politics" and who "knew who the President and the Prime Minister are and that is where my knowledge ended" (KU, activist). Only one (MG) of the two activists who left the country before February 2022 had been an activist before moving. In his case, the

reason was linked to the involvement of the Federal Security Service (FSB)[111] and direct threats to his safety. He admitted he could have remained in the country. However, he stated, "I decided to leave since the risks were rather high and I preferred to choose the right to life" (MG, human rights defender). On the other hand, AM who had been a journalist and civil activist but was never involved in LGBTQ+ activism until he moved to Mexico stated that "the situation of the LGBTQ+ community in Russia in 2021 did not look promising and therefore I decided to move" (AM, activist). Most activists were not under direct threat but decided to leave before the situation worsened. This is not true for AN who had to leave to avoid criminal prosecution. "It was a necessity directly connected to my activism as director of the organization. As a queer person, I also faced assaults. After the beginning of the war, the pressure on human rights organizations intensified in Russia. Police came with a search warrant, they called me many times, saying they wanted to meet with me. I did everything I could to avoid this meeting because I did not want an unnecessary meeting with the police. They came to our offices. They talked to my parents and told them that I was involved in activities against the state. The last drop was the call from the FSB, they wanted to talk to me about the work of the organization. They told me they know that we receive funding from an undesirable organization and that they would charge me if I did not meet with them". (AN, human rights defender). With the onset of the war, AA, whose greatest fear was losing her child, decided that her priority was to protect the integrity of her family. Despite the reassurances of her lawyer that the new legislation would not allow the state to deprive her of her child, she preferred not to wait for further developments, which could have endangered her family.

While most activists moved abroad on a visa or to seek asylum, VS decided to take a different approach and applied for a project organized by the European Solidarity Corps. The opportunity to work for a Swedish organization was for him "a possibility to receive useful international experience […] but also a chance to hide from the awfulness, to see how things were going to develop during the nine months

111 The main Russian security agency

of the program”(VS, human rights defender). In the end, at the end of the seventh month, he decided to ask for asylum and was moved to the north of the country. At the moment of the interview, almost half of the respondents had received asylum or were waiting for their request to be processed. Two of the respondents, on the other hand, confessed that they had not actively considered seeking asylum due to their or their partner’s desire to be able to return to Russia. AG, who now lives in Argentina with her partner and a child, when talking about her status in the country of destination revealed that “that path [asylum] turned out to be unacceptable for my wife because for her it is important to have, at least in theory, the possibility to return to Russia” (AA, activist). Explaining her decision to move to Georgia with her partner, DG expressed her hope to be able to return home because “when you are in Tbilisi, in Georgia, you are in some sort of hub. You could say you are here temporarily, as a guest” (DG, human rights defender). Russian citizens in Georgia are entitled to remain in the country for up to a year without a visa. After that period, it is customary practice to leave the country for a short period to be eligible for a new visa-free period. Seeking asylum is not always a viable option as in the case of TR, who at the time of the interview lived in Russia. “I did not consider seeking asylum for different reasons: because it is a very difficult process and because I felt it would not allow me to keep working, at least for a long period, and I am afraid that in that period the organization would stop working” (TR, human rights defender). He stressed the importance of preserving his organization, which is the only queer organization remaining in the Southern Federal District. “The closest organization in Russia,” he stated, “is located in Moscow, a thousand kilometers from here” (TR, human rights defender). While most respondents who sought asylum had a relatively trouble-free experience, one of the interviewees reported experiencing discrimination linked to his sexual orientation during his time in the reception centers in Norway. “In the course of my time here I had confrontations with several people mainly because of my being LGBT. […] After the interview with my case officer, I moved to a different center. However, the situation did not improve much as I was assigned to a room with homophobic people

with whom I had issues. One person beat me, and another threw away my rainbow flag. In general, I haven't felt safe during my time here" (AN, human rights defender). Moving to a new country in some instances proved difficult even for some of the most known queer activists. Before applying for and receiving the humanitarian visa offered by Germany, NG attempted to move to Germany through the procedure of family reunification, as their partner already lived in Germany. However, their request was denied. They believed that part of the problem was the personal views of the case officer who was in charge of their case. "This officer tried in any way to prevent me from being able to live in Germany […]. It was as if his ideology, his worldview, did not accept the existence of LGBT people. I cannot say that for sure but he was very resistant to us living here" (NG, human rights defender). In their case, direct contacts with the personnel of the German embassy in Russia were sufficient to solve the issue.

Relocation and Adaptation

Although the process of moving to a new country was not devoid of problems for many of the activists, the subsequent process of adaptation seems to have been relatively straightforward, with limited inconveniences. "I cannot say that there were not some everyday problems for me because it is always necessary to contextualize the new country from different points of view, such as the economic one as these matters can greatly differ from the home country" (AG, human rights defender). Another issue that transpired during the conversations with the activists was that of the language. For some, as in the case of AN, it was a way to adapt swiftly to the new society. "[…] In my time in Norway I made a lot of friends, also among Norwegians because I speak some English and this in a sense saved me […]" (AN, human rights defender). One activist did not move to Europe because of the necessity to learn English, which she associated with "a different system, a different mentality, and more stress" (DG, human rights defender). In her opinion, moving to Europe would have required a more serious decision. Others, such as KU, did not know English: he had to learn it upon arrival in the United States.

However, the local language is not a priority for everyone: AA who moved to Argentina with her partner and child and volunteers in her free time after work admitted she “does not know Spanish and does not even have time to learn it” (AA, activist). Unfortunately, some activists recognized that, although English is helpful, it is not the ultimate solution when dealing with bureaucratic matters and in some cases the knowledge of the local language is necessary.

Oftentimes, adaptation is aided by an existing network in the country of destination. As previously mentioned, NG attempted to join their partner in Germany: although the family reunification was unsuccessful, they chose to apply for the humanitarian visa and move to Germany rather than moving for work, as their organization had offered them. KU also moved to a country where he knew he could rely on support from family members as her sister had been living in the US. However, a network need not be family members; TL moved to Lithuania after the war since in 2016 her organization had opened a legal entity in the country to ensure a steady source of funding. In the first months, she and her partner were hosted by a friend who only required them to pay the utilities. A similar scenario applies to the case of MG who left Russia with his partner and was at first hosted by friends in Germany. For DG, the network was the wider Russian-speaking community present in Georgia: “Here there is a significant Russian speaking community […], an active Russian civil society of activists which organizes different events. Let’s say there is a community you can join” (DG, human rights defender). Not everyone, unfortunately, was able to move to a country where they could access a support network. AN, for example, sought asylum in The Netherlands where his friends lived but, as he had a Norwegian visa, he was transferred to Norway according to the Dublin Agreement.

Due to the nature of the interviews, which focused mainly on activism, when talking about the advantages of living in a new country, the respondents mostly focused on the status of civil rights in the country and the difference between LGBTQ+ activism in Russia and the new country. KU and AA, whose activism started only after the beginning of the war, were surprised by the fact that queer people

were able to hold hands in public, go on dates, and show the rainbow flag without risks. Talking about her overall perception of the level of LGBTQ+ friendliness among Argentinians, AA admitted she was confused when an elderly lady approached her and her family and expressed her approval. “You think: “Woman, you are from a different generation, you should spit on us and shout “perverts,” what are you doing? Please do not break my stereotypes” (AA activist). More long-standing activists focused chiefly on the Russian abysmal human rights record and declared that “In Russia fighting for LGBTQ+ rights means fighting for human rights, while in Europe they are somewhat different things” (NG, human rights defender). Activists highlighted how different contexts sometimes prevent the full understanding of the situation in the other country. For example, NG had to explain to local Russian-speaking activists why no protest was organized following the ban on gender reassignment surgeries and the change of the sex marker on documents in Russia.

Remaining an Activist

All the activists at the moment of the interview were involved in different projects, concerning LGBTQ+ activism in Russia or the host country. Since their status as activists or queer people was the reason why they had to leave the country, it is important to understand the reason behind the choice to continue engaging in activism. Many respondents used the term “privileged” to describe their situation and to explain their decision to remain engaged. “Here I have the privilege of freely expressing my mind and speaking openly, I can be the voice of those people who remained in Russia […]. Moreover, it was LGBTQ+ activism that gave me the chance to move here since I was denied the family reunification and I believe that I have a moral duty” (NG, human rights defender).

Another reason is the professionalization of activism: “I think the answer is that in these years activism has become my profession” (VS, human rights defender). Almost all the respondents were human rights defenders whose main occupation is LGBTQ+ or HIV-related activism. As opposed to human

rights defenders, the three activists who are involved in LGBTQ+ activism as volunteers only began engaging in activism once they moved to a new country or while they were finalizing their move. AM explained his choice by arguing that being an activist in Russia "would not have served any purpose besides being beaten at a protest" (AM, activist). On the other hand, AA and KU never really considered it a possibility until the beginning of the war. For AA activism represented a way to fight the feeling of powerlessness that arose in her after the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine: "When we went back to Russia, I had a severe depressive episode and I understood that I could not do anything. I had the feeling of powerlessness as if nothing depended on me" (AA, activist). KU, a medical professional, turned to activism to compensate for the inability to help people as a doctor and continued to help queer people move and settle in the US, thus overcoming his strong fear of living as an openly queer person.

While all the activists continued to be engaged, they took quite different approaches. TL, for instance, ruled out any personal involvement in Lithuanian LGBTQ+ activism. "If I stop working for Russia, I will leave LGBTQ+ activism once and for all, I am fifty years old and I have dedicated many years to activism. They will manage without me. It is a Lithuanian question […] and I believe they will perfectly manage by themselves" (TL, human rights defender). According to her, Lithuanian activists do not need the intervention of Russians who have already lost everything at home. On the other hand, VS claimed that his experience in Swedish LGBTQ+ activism "is an important part of my integration in Sweden. For me it's important to work with Swedish organizations and understand the Swedish context and the value of their activism" (VS, human rights defender). While benefitting from a more liberal political environment and new opportunities and avenues for activism, Russian activists often bring relevant expertise to local organizations, for example in the field of HIV prevention. VS, for instance, attempted to introduce in Sweden the index of stigma, a research project on the quality of life

of HIV-positive people, which in Russia has already been carried out two times. The respondent was able to mobilize contacts and resources and raise funds for the project, which is now suspended.

However, he asserted that in the future he would like to continue influencing the situation in Russia. Activism in a different country also means different and new opportunities as in the case of AN who was able to not only attend but also actively organize a Pride march in Oslo, something he defined as "a dream I realized" (AN, human rights defender). While not all activists engage with local LGBTQ+ activists, some have expressed interest in doing so in the future. "I would like to work in some German organization in the future since I live here, and I am planning to stay. As for which kind of organization, I guess I would like to work with people who arrived in Germany recently, it doesn't matter where from […]" (NG, human rights defender).

While some of the activists like AM and VS are predominantly engaged in local activism, most of the respondents are still involved in Russian LGBTQ+ activism in Russia. Due to the repressive political environment, offline activities have been discontinued or, where possible, moved online. To be sure, there are still individuals who remain in Russia and are involved in LGBTQ+ activism. However, for safety reasons, activists preferred not to disclose any details on the topic. The current state of affairs, which makes any form of advocacy both in and outside the country useless or outright dangerous, has forced activists to reorganize. "Our organization is developed as a community center and in the last two months we have been restructuring our activity and I do not know how it will look in the future" (TL, human rights defender). While previously her organization was able to rent spaces in Moscow to allow queer people and allies to spend time together and develop a sense of community, with the beginning of the war they had to cease every offline activity. In TL's organization "around 30 people were expressing support for Putin's regime in this war, and we had to sort this out and create a space where people can be open not only as gays, lesbians, and so on but also about their political views" (TL, human rights defender). RG's organization, which mainly caters to the queer people of the Far East

Federal District, had to cancel all the offline support groups after the police interrupted a meeting and took the participants to the police station. However, her support groups never stopped and have been taking place online. According to her, "the practice shows that online support groups are also successful, many people sign up, even more than offline because many people were afraid or embarrassed of interacting in person" (RG, human rights defender). Along with support groups, the other main lines of work of LGBTQ+ activists are consultancy, support to individuals who want to leave Russia, and research. In the last year, the number of individuals trying to leave Russia diminished and therefore some organizations stopped offering such services. Individual activists continue to offer their help outside the organization. Both KU and NG still consult people who reach out to them asking for help to emigrate to the US or Germany. However, KU argued that the focus has now switched to "local assistance here in New York rather than relocation assistance because the migration wave has now subsided" (KU, activist). It is necessary to ensure newcomers can find accommodation, a job, insurance, learning the language, and in general adapting to life in a new country. Some activists bring their professional skills to activism as in the case of AA who works as a career consultant and in her free time consults queer people and helps them find a new job. In some cases, moving to a new country did not significantly affect the activity of the respondents: it is the case of directors of organizations, coordinators, and activists who focus on conducting research and drafting reports.

The presence of a large Russian diaspora in some of the countries of destination of the activists means that activists can rely on an already existing network, which oftentimes includes LGBTQ+ organizations as in the case of Quarteera in Germany, Queer Dom in Spain, Rusa LGBT in the US, and Q space in Estonia. Some activists, such as MG and AG, are directly involved in these organizations while others collaborate from time to time. KU, for example, volunteers for an organization previously based in Russia but has contacts within Rusa LGBT and resorts to their help whenever necessary. For some activists, the presence of a Russian LGBT diaspora is a central part of everyday life. AA

described the situation in Argentina in the following way: "[…] If we talk about the LGBT community in general, then here in Argentina there is an extraordinarily strong Russian emigrant community. They are trying. In addition to information resources, for example, there is a bulletin board for LGBT people, and there are some hairdressing salons that serve LGBT customers. Well, it is clear that they do not work only for LGBT people, but their main customers are LGBT people from Russia. Some people prepare Russian food and make discounts for LGBT people because they are LGBT themselves. I mean, there's a kind of community life inside the community. I had my computer fixed by a girl from the LGBT community […]" (AA, activist). The members of these communities are not only Russian citizens but also Belarusians, Ukrainians, and people from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Some organizations moved from Russia and scattered throughout the world as in the case of the film festival Side by Side while some others relocated to a specific country, as in the case of Frame, which moved from Saint Petersburg to Tbilisi. DG, who attends events organized by Frame, admitted that "different people, Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, come to the events. Sometimes even locals come to watch movies" (DG, human rights defender). The respondents also cooperate with Russian-speaking activists who have been living in the country for longer to provide support to LGBTQ+ immigrants who are seeking asylum in the new country. RG, for instance, held three seminars on sensitive topics such as hate speech, women's rights, and feminism for recent migrants. Sometimes, however, the local Russian-speaking community can also be a source of potential discomfort as in the case of KU. "I work in two clinics and one is in Brooklyn, in the Russian neighborhood, while the other is in Manhattan. In the American clinic, I am out while in the Russian clinic, they can guess but they do not know because there are still jokes with negative connotations about [sexual] orientation in the Russian community." (KU, activist)

Past Struggles, Present Challenges, and Future Hopes

The interviews with LGBTQ+ activists focused mainly on their experience abroad: the process of adaptation, the relationships with the local LGBTQ+ activists and already existing Russian-speaking communities, and the changes their activism underwent to continue operating in Russia and for Russians. However, it would be difficult to grasp some of the changes that took place after 2022 and the activists' decision to move abroad without considering the previous ten years of LGBTQ+ activism in Russia. To be sure, scholars have already analyzed some of the major trends[112], the changes in self-perception,[113] and the tactics deployed by activists[114]. However, the approval of the aforementioned laws and the beginning of the war represented a turning point for LGBTQ+ activists, de-facto banning any form of public activism. These interviews therefore represented a chance to understand how, according to the activists, LGBTQ+ activism developed in the previous years, what are the reasons for the campaign against the community, and what are the expectations for the future.

Several respondents pointed at the "gay propaganda law" of 2013 as the main turning point for the LGBTQ+ community in the country. According to NG, "everything instantly became different […] for me there is a before and after the law" (NG, human rights defender). Although in 2013 the legislation concerned exclusively the "propaganda" towards minors, they started worrying about their tenant discovering that they lived with their same-sex partner in an apartment with only one bed. A long-standing activist, TL believes that the situation significantly worsened once the Kremlin and the FSB started to take direct interest. "I would say that in the regions activists were challenged by not very bright officials and they often won their fight against them but once the FSB and the Presidential

112 Radzhana Buyantueva, "What Motivates LGBT Activists to Protest? The Case of Russia", *Problems of Post-Communism* 69, no.3 (2022): 242-255. See also: Kondakov, Alexander. "Resisting the Silence: The Use of Tolerance and Equality Arguments by Gay and Lesbian Activist Groups in Russia" *Canadian Journal of Law and Society / Revue Canadienne Droit et Société* 28, no. 3 (2013), 403–24.

113 Soboleva, "Political Awareness and Self-Blame", 278.

114 Radzhana Buyantueva, "Resource Mobilisation and Russian LGBT Activism." *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 16.

Administration joined the fight our forces became unequal" (TL, human rights defender). Among the younger respondents, VS claimed that the point of no return for LGBTQ+ activism and the community is much later: at the end of 2020. "I believe the point of no return was in 2019-2020 because as an activist I noticed a renaissance in the Russian society. I was comfortable as a queer person in big cities […] I could go to gay clubs, and everyone knew about them. Moreover, in the sphere of arts and communication, there were some interesting cases such as the video of Russian Vogue with drag queens and mister Kirkorov […]" (VS, human rights defender). One activist struggled to identify a point of no return and stated that the question had to be analyzed from a unique perspective. "I would not say that there is a specific moment after which everything got bad […]. It could maybe be possible to say that there are some turning points but the change in attitude towards queer people was not immediate and did not begin in 2022, it started much earlier, before 2013" (AG, human rights defender). She recognized the important work of LGBTQ+ activists in educating the population on the topic but at the same time, she claimed that this did not imply an improvement of the attitude toward queer people in Russia. "In my opinion, it is about the polarization of society that arose around the topic of the queer agenda: there is a liberal minority and a conservative majority […]. Can we say that a lot was done? Of course, we can. However, visibility does not equal improvement" (NG, human rights defender). NG believes that Russia does not represent an exception but simply followed a worldwide trend of "paying attention to a marginalized minority, which is in the periphery of civic opportunities and is systematically suffering" (NG, human rights defender).

The issues of street protests and advocacy have not made an appearance in this analysis, and this is because political conditions made it unappealing, if not impossible. However, the respondents never rejected them and simply believed them to be effective and dangerous at the present moment. One of the activists, for instance, claimed he is planning a public action in the capital of the country where he

is currently seeking asylum, which will be dedicated to the Russian LGBTQ+ community. Many of the respondents participated in Pride marches in the new country – many did it for the first time.

As was shown throughout the analysis, LGBTQ+ activism in Russia is either hidden and led from abroad or absent. However, some of the interviewees offered an alternative view on the matter. AA, for instance, believes that "being out is already activism in Russia" (AA, activist). In her opinion, it can be called activism as it is a path towards normalization of LGBTQ+ people in society, which, as it will be shown further, is extremely important to some of the respondents. KU drew a similar picture of LGBTQ+ activism in contemporary Russia and called it "everyday activism." In particular, he mentioned the *kvartirniki* (meetings held in private apartments), which are still taking place and represent a rare chance for queer people to gather.

During the interviews, not all activists mentioned plans for the future of LGBTQ+ activism and rights in Russia or how they expect the situation to evolve. While this was to be expected as the war and the current state of affairs in Russia do not suggest a pattern of liberalization, some activists had prognoses for the future or, at least, an opinion on how the situation should look like under a new regime. According to AG, the hypervisibility of queer people in Russia, which gradually increased over the last ten years, is eventually going to end. "My prediction may not come true, but I believe that soon enough, in one way or another, in Russia there will be an oversaturation of the LGBTQ+ topic" (NG, human rights defender). "With time" she added "it is a path to oversaturation of this topic and the average Russian citizen will grow tired of this. This does not solve real issues as it is not linked to the macro situation in the country and with the access to basic benefits" (NG, human rights defender).

Some of the activists have a clear opinion on how LGBTQ+ rights and activism should look in Russia under a new regime. However, their opinions do not always align. TL, for instance, believes that the LGBTQ+ community should be one of the priorities in a new Russia. "It is clear that now we are a

turning point […] and that we won't be able to openly protest like in Bolotnaya […] but right now even the fact that we can help our own is very important […]. This empire will fall but we and the rest of the people will not disappear. What is most important is that politicians won't say "We have more urgent matters now" and will remember who had to suffer first. The LGBTQ+ community is the litmus test of human rights in any country. […] We must not let ourselves be forgotten; we need to form an agenda, and we need to start doing it now" (TL, human rights defender). On the other hand, AM believes that the LGBTQ+ community needs to be normalized in society. "I believe that there should be some changes first in activism. It is necessary to show that being a member of the LGBTQ+ community is normal. We need normalization without radicalism. It would maybe be better, once Putin dies, not to hold a gay pride in Saint Petersburg" (AM, activist). In his opinion, people would otherwise perceive it as propaganda and would therefore not understand it. His opinion is supported by AA, who moved to Argentina with her partner and her child. "Normalization is essential, and it is especially important to be able to just show that here we are, we are just like you: in some ways better, in some ways worse. But we're there, we're no different from you. Well, sometimes we are, but everybody's different" (AA, activist).

The future of LGBTQ+ activism also calls into question its nature and its being political. Some believe that activism is inherently political. "Many LGBTQ+ organizations in Russia assert that they are out of politics but I believe this is a great lie and they lie to themselves because it is impossible to remain out of politics when politics enters your affairs […] I do not agree with those who say we are out of politics, on the contrary, I think we work in the field of politics. Yes, we do not have a political program, we are human rights defenders, and this job is linked to politics in regimes that do not sufficiently protect human rights" (NG, human rights defender). TL, on the other hand, categorically refused to call her activism political, stating that "LGBTQ+ organizations in Russia were never political. They were not political parties and not even something close to that. At best, they were human

rights defenders" (TL, human rights defender). At the same time, however, she underlined how in the past organizations understood that "it was important to reach out to the establishment and promote our agenda."

Discussion

Activism in Emigration

The results have shown how much the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as well as the approval of new repressive legislation, impacted the lives and the activity of LGBTQ+ activists in Russia, forcing many of them to seek alternative solutions, often in the form of emigration. The following discussion will analyze the main themes that emerged in the course of the interviews. It will include the reasons for leaving Russia, the process of adaption with its challenges and advantages, the decision to remain engaged in activism, and the different approaches of each activist. Moreover, some of the activists decided to share their views on the development of Russian LBGTQ+ activism, focusing on the reasons why many of them were eventually forced into emigration, the current state of LGBTQ+ activism in Russia, and the prospects of future activism.

The deteriorating political climate was the main, underlying, reason that motivated most of the respondents to leave the country. However, only two of the respondents admitted to receiving direct threats to their safety, usually in the form of criminal prosecution. The case of MG, who was forced to emigrate well before the beginning of the war, shows how these practices of intimidation were already present before the invasion of Ukraine. Despite the absence of immediate risks, some of the respondents felt that their position as publicly known LGBTQ+ activists would eventually become a problem due to the new legislation. A clear anti-war stance in the context of hypervisibility of the LBGTQ+ community[115] and laws punishing the publication of fake news on the activities of the

115 Wilkinson, "LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union: The Evolution of Hypervisibility.", 3.

Russian army[116] meant that jail was the only alternative to migration. Although the risk was high, the decision to leave the country was not always hasty, and, in many cases, it took place months after the beginning of the invasion, signaling that for many respondents there was no immediate danger.

The level of fear and uncertainty regarding future developments becomes clear when we look at the experience of queer families as in the case of AA who preferred to leave the country rather than hope the authorities would not attempt to separate her family. After the ruling of the Supreme Court on the extremist nature of the "LGBTQ+ international social movement," it remains unclear what concrete consequences this decision bears for the community.

Although almost half of the respondents applied for asylum, not all of them sought it on arrival. Some of the activists decided to follow the developments in the country and sought asylum once it became clear that returning would have been too dangerous. Two of the respondents, however, chose not to seek asylum because they or their partners wanted to have the opportunity to return to Russia, which is impossible for asylees.

We could argue that an increase in visibility of the LGBTQ+ community due to the combination of strengthened nationalist rhetoric and anti-Western narratives, and new repressive legislation following the war has further worsened the position of LGBTQ+ activists, whose sole presence in Russia became dangerous notwithstanding the lack of advocacy work or protest activity. To use Hirschman's terminology, exit represented for the activists the only way to maintain horizontal voice, that is communication with the community and the wider public while vertical voice had already been lost before the beginning of the war due to the authorities' choice to legally and morally prosecute LGBTQ+ individuals.

The adaptation process varied among activists, with language barriers and bureaucratic hurdles being the most significant challenges. Among the respondents, none reported difficulties related to adaptation

116 "Gosduma priniala zakon ob ugolovnoi otvetstvennosti za "feiki" o rossiiskoi armii" *BBC News Russian service*, March 4, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60615902

to the local culture[117].This is a significant factor as it shows that in most cases, the process was not extremely challenging, and activists were able to integrate into the new society in little time. In the case of long-standing activists, one of the reasons could be their relatively privileged status since the majority of them had already traveled or lived abroad, especially in Europe. The situation is slightly different for younger activists or individuals who engaged in activism only after moving abroad as they oftentimes do not know foreign languages and are not used to an unfamiliar cultural environment. This complicates the process of adaptation as learning a new language requires time and resources. DG, for instance, chose to move to Georgia rather than Europe for these reasons.

Moreover, thanks to their previous experience, long-standing activists appear to be more likely to have an established network of contacts abroad, which can be family members, friends, or colleagues. The presence of such a network is an advantage as it facilitates the process of adaptation both from a practical and an emotional point of view[118]. It is therefore unsurprising that most of the respondents tried to emigrate to a country where they could rely on a preexisting network. Bureaucratic hurdles and asylum regulations such as the Dublin Agreement, however, prevented some respondents from reaching the chosen country as in the case of AN. His asylum request had to be processed in Norway rather than in the Netherlands, where he had originally flown to in the hope of moving to a country where he could rely on an already existing support network. The lack of such a network increases the vulnerability of emigrants. This is particularly true for asylum seekers in reception centers, where they often face various forms of violence. For example, AN suffered physical violence because of his sexual orientation while staying in a reception center in Norway whereas KU, who was allowed to live with his sister while his asylum request was processed, did not.

117 The respondents now live in South America, North America, Europe, and the Caucasus.

118 Maja Djundeva, and Lea Ellwardt, "Social Support Networks and Loneliness of Polish Migrants in the Netherlands." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 7 (2019), 1286.

Most of the receiving countries are home to Russian-speaking communities that both represent a fundamental resource and also a source of concern for the respondents. The Russian LGBTQ+ diaspora over the years has opened several organizations in different countries, which now, among other things, tightly collaborate with the exiled Russian organizations to provide support to recent migrants through the organization of seminars but also more concrete help in adapting to a new society. On the other hand, some of the organizations, that used to be active in Russia, have fully relocated to a new country and continue their activity as in the case of Frame, offering a space to LGBTQ+ Russian-speaking individuals regardless of their country of origin. The LGBTQ+ diaspora is more than just organizations and for some respondents, the local queer community represented an invaluable form of everyday support. The Russian-speaking community, however, can also be a source of discomfort due to the prevalence of a homophobic discourse outside the LGBTQ+ bubble.

Although most respondents had a positive view of the new country, especially regarding LGBTQ+ rights, suggesting that adaptation was generally smooth in most cases, there were no signs to indicate that the activists' perception of the new country was informed by homonationalist discourses. One possible explanation for this might be their status as activists. While prior research has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals in Russia who are not activists may be vulnerable to homonationalist narratives[119], activists are primarily concerned with improving the situation within Russia. Consequently, embracing essentialist perspectives on LGBTQ+ rights would be incongruent with their activism.

It is therefore possible to say that adaptation was successful in all cases, although one respondent faced discrimination in the reception centers. One of the reasons for this success is certainly the existence of networks of support developed in previous years through activism or personal contacts. Their position

119 Novitskaya, "I have come to this Country to be happy", 2026

as activists, moreover, shielded them from internalizing orientalist narratives while allowing them to enjoy the benefits of a more liberal environment.

Results show that the human rights defenders, whose main form of income is linked to their activism, did not question whether remaining activists or not. However, while some admitted that the main reason was the experience accumulated in the years and the fact that activism had become their profession, others offered more idealistic explanations, citing the duty to speak out for those who cannot and highlighting the privileged position that allowed them to leave and settle in a new country. What they defined as privilege is, in social movement terms, access to resources and political opportunities for activism. To be sure, the opportunities offered by activism in emigration are not comparable to those within the country as the activists' ability to influence the situation is greatly reduced by the geographical distance and the campaign aimed at discrediting those who have left the country[120]. However, the current political situation in Russia does not offer any openings that could turn into opportunities for activists to exploit while legislation on foreign agents, undesirable organizations, and extremist organizations prevent access to tangible resources. While scholar of Political Process Theory argue that threats can be transformed into opportunities, they also admit that threats in authoritarian contexts can represent an insurmountable challege for social movements[121]. The Russian case clearly is one of these extreme cases where the development of social movement is inhibited through state policy. Activism in exile, therefore, represents a temporary solution with limited efficacy.

While the majority of respondents had previous experience of activism in Russia, three of them became involved either shortly before or after their relocation abroad. Their reasons for volunteering for the LGBTQ+ community therefore significantly different from those provided by human rights defenders. One of them, who had previous activist experience unrelated to LGBTQ+, chose to become involved to

120 "Peskov vyskazalsya ob uyehavshikh iz strany rossiyanakh", *Lenta.ru,* March 26, 2024 https://lenta.ru/news/2024/03/26/ppeskov/

121 Hank Johnston, *What Is a Social Movement? Hank Johnston* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 62.

help people relocating abroad. His refusal to engage in LGBTQ+ activism while in Russia was linked to the feeling of helplessness and inability to influence the situation within the country. The socio-political environment he encountered in the new country and the skills he developed or, in social movement terms, the appearance of opportunities and access to new resources pushed him towards activism. For the other two respondents, LGBTQ+ activism was a way to overcome the feeling of helplessness and inability to influence the situation. While before the war they had not even contemplated the option of becoming involved in activism, the political developments induced them to turn to activism.

Thus, human rights defenders felt compelled to continue their activity both for idealistic reasons and because of a process of professionalization of their activism, which has made them full-time activists. The new socio-political context provided them space for voicing their concerns openly and working to support the community, albeit less efficiently than in Russia. On the other hand, activists became involved in activism either in response to large-scale events, which they felt they could not control, or due to the more permissive environment where they felt they could make a difference. Their choice is further proof to disprove the thesis of Russian citizens' passivity and inability to protest. Once they found themselves in a different environment characterized by a significantly different level of opportunities and threats, they started engaging in activism. Mobilization is therefore closely linked to the socio-political situation in the country.

Although emigration allows activists to ensure a steady source of financing for their activism, it has several drawbacks, the greatest being the lack of direct contact with the local community. To solve this issue, some organizations were split in two parts with some members remaining in Russia under the protection of anonymity while the rest moved abroad. In some cases, group chats and social media pages were cleared of any symbol or content that could constitute a threat to users still living in Russia. While this process led to the dispersion of the activists who are now scattered throughout different

countries and forced to communicate mainly online, it also allows activists to maintain horizontal voice not only from exile but also within the country.

Thanks to the greater level of freedom provided by the new circumstances, activists in emigration are usually engaged in advocacy work[122], one of the main purposes of transnational activism, which allows activists from authoritarian countries to pressure their countries' authorities through the intercession of international bodies or foreign states. However, the Russian authorities' rejection of any form of external pressure makes advocacy futile. Therefore, the activists' efforts are directed at keeping the community safe and united. This is achieved through different methods: online support groups, individual sessions with therapists, career consulting, or help to relocate abroad and start a new life. The respondents' main task is the coordination of all these projects that ensure that the LGBTQ+ community in Russia has access to useful services such as legal advice, psychological support, and career consulting for free.

The political circumstances in Russia have de-facto outlawed LGBTQ+ activism, with private meetings interrupted by police raids. Human rights defenders and activists, however, continue to provide support to the community from abroad through projects that address the main needs of the individuals who remain in Russia. All the activities take place online and anonymity is a key element of the process.

Some of the respondents perceived LGBTQ+ activism as a way to adapt quickly to the new society. They joined local organizations and got involved in several projects, contributing with the expertise they had previously accumulated. Collaboration with local organizations is mutually beneficial, as it grants Russian activists access to more resources and an environment rich in opportunities, surpassing those available in their country. In the long term, this collaboration will allow activists to acquire valuable expertise, which they can later apply in Russia. Collaboration between locals and Russian LGBTQ+ migrants is more than a mutually beneficial relationship: for some respondents, it represented

122 For example, through European institutions such as the ECHR, the Council of Europe, and the European Union.

a way towards adaptation to the new society. Knowing the local context and establishing a network within the host country helps newcomers to adapt more quickly to the new society. While most activists who are not yet involved in local activism stated that they are planning to do so if they remain in the new country, some respondents rejected this option, arguing that local activists do not need the interference of foreign activists.

The majority of LGBTQ+ human rights defenders and activists thus appear to be open to the possibility of becoming involved in activism in the new country. The usually more liberal socio-political environment of the new country allows them to acquire new skills such as the organization of large-scale events. However, a minority of respondents rejected this option.

The Trajectory of LGBTQ+ Activism in Russia according to Activists

According to the majority of the respondents, the approval of the 2013 "gay propaganda" law represented a turning point for Russian LGBTQ+ activism. While the law was rarely enforced, it started drawing the attention of the wider Russian population towards the LGBTQ+ community. The combination of hypervisibility and the denigrating state narrative slowly contributed to the development of a widespread feeling of intolerance towards the community and therefore activism. However, as one of the respondents argued, intolerance and discrimination were not a consequence of the new law but preexisting factors. The approval of the law enhanced an already existing polarization of public opinion, splitting society in two: a conservative majority and a liberally minded minority. Initially, the struggle was predominantly conducted at the regional level. For example, activists faced challenges such as the refusal to register new LGBTQ+ organizations. Once the federal authorities started taking interest, the balance of power became unequal, leading to a reduction in spaces where activism could operate freely. VS claimed that the situation did not worsen until 2021, bringing as

examples of "queer Renaissance" the decision of some Russian magazines to showcase transgender individuals on their covers. However, while achieving visibility is one of the main goals of social movements, it can have dangerous consequences[123] or, as one of the respondents states, "visibility does not equal better relationships."

Russia's 2013 "gay propaganda" law sparked heightened awareness of the LGBTQ+ issue leading to growing divisions in society. Once the federal authorities started to directly oppose activists, their activity became significantly more difficult. Ultimately, the unsustainable pressure of hypervisibility and repression resulted in the cessation of public LGBTQ+ activism.

As extensively discussed previously, the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought significant changes to Russian society and LGBTQ+ activism. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community left but several are still in the country. While all forms of public activism are banned following new repressive legislation, old forms of resistance have experienced a resurgence. In particular, gatherings of people in private apartments, known as *kvartirniki*, have become the only way for LGBTQ+ people to assemble and socialize. While these gatherings cannot be classified as activism, their challenge to established societal norms allows them to fit the definition of acts of citizenship, as Stella and Kondakov have already shown[124]. The LGBTQ+ community in Russia has thus been forced to retreat to the private sphere while still enduring the negative consequences of hypervisibility.

Although there are no signs of liberalization in Russia, some of the respondents decided to share their priorities for LGBTQ+ activism in a new Russia. On one hand, activists stressed the importance of the normalization of LGBTQ+ people within Russian society. To achieve this result, one respondent claimed that provocatory events such as pride marches should not be held, at least in the beginning. On the other, human rights defenders claimed that equal rights should be a priority of a future government.

123 Wilkinson, "LGBT Rights in the Former Soviet Union", 3. See also: Julie Uldam, "Social Media Visibility: Challenges to Activism." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2017) 44-45.

124 Stella, "The Politics of In/Visibility", 27 and Kondakov, "Rethinking the Sexual Citizenship", 10.

The opposition between advocates of tolerance and equality perfectly matches previous literature on the topic[125] and shows how internalized narratives are projected not only on the past and the present but also on the future.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the experiences of Russian LGBTQ+ activists in emigration, focusing on their status as emigrants and activists. The data collected through semi-structured interviews was fundamental to understanding not only how LGBTQ+ activism changed after the beginning of the war and the intensification of the repression but also how the lives of single individuals were affected by large-scale geopolitical events. To be sure, this analysis has several limits: among them is the limited number of respondents that were interviewed, which makes it impossible to generalize the findings. However, it has been possible to trace some of the changes that took place in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine: the complete cancellation of in-person events within Russia, the development and improvement of online services for LGBTQ+ individuals who remain in Russia or are planning to leave the country, the decision to split teams as to maintain a presence on their territory despite the challenging socio-political situation. Emigration changed the lives of the activists and prompted many of them to become involved in LGBTQ+ activism in the new country, where conditions are usually more favorable and allow advocacy work and more freedom of association. This dissertation has also explored the role of the Russian diaspora, particularly the LGBTQ+ diaspora, which in some countries is already strong and organized, and its cooperation with the activists who emigrated from Russia.

The interviews also represented an opportunity to research LBGTQ+ migration, contributing to an already existing body of literature on LGBTQ+ activism and specifically Russian LGBTQ+ activism.

125 Kondakov, “Resisting the silence”, 413.

For instance, it appears that activists are not likely to be informed by homonationalist narratives while existing literature has shown these narratives are common among non-activists[126]. Moreover, it was ascertained that adaptation was aided by existing networks, which could be relatives as well as friends or the wider Russian-speaking LGBTQ+ community.

Having access to activists enabled the author to identify some of the most significant turning points in the history of LGBTQ+ rights and activism in Russia, as well as to understand the underlying causes of the current situation. While activists did not always agree on the exact reasons, they provided several compelling arguments that should be further explored. New research on this topic should resort to a larger pool of respondents and the examination of secondary sources. Several constraints have prevented this analysis from focusing on the situation of LGBTQ+ activism within Russia, although some respondents provided insights, which could provide the starting point for new research. Another potential avenue for scholar of the LGBTQ+ community could be the consequences of the war on the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ individuals (non-activists) in Russia.

This analysis has demonstrated how LGBTQ+ activists continue to resist the attempt of the Russian authorities to suppress their activism. While many activists as well as regular queer people have been forced into emigration or back into a metaphorical closet through repressive legislation and hate campaigns, their activities continue, albeit in an online regime and with a lower reach and adapt to the new challenging circumstances.

126 Novitskaya, “I have come to this Country to be happy”, 2026.

Summary

This dissertation examines the changes in Russian LGBTQ+ activism following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the introduction of new repressive legislation, focusing particularly on the experiences of LGBTQ+ activists who have emigrated. It employs Social Movement Theory, along with concepts from Hirschman's Voice and Exit and Citizenship Theory, to provide a framework for understanding these shifts. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with Russian LGBTQ+ activists living abroad. This qualitative method offered insights into their personal experiences as well as their activism, allowing for a detailed analysis of the process of adaptation and activism in the new countries.

The findings are divided into two main sections: life in a new country and the activists' views on the development of Russian LGBTQ+ activism. The research explores the initial challenges and processes involved in adjusting to a new country, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the role of support networks. Despite these obstacles, many activists found solidarity and support within local LGBTQ+ and human rights communities. Once they had settled, these activists continued their work, often focusing on supporting the community in Russia and building support networks for LGBTQ+ migrants. They made use of the freedoms and resources available in their new countries to amplify their voices and support their activism.

The activists also reflected on the evolution of LGBTQ+ activism within Russia, noting increased repression and the strategies adopted by those who remained. Despite the oppressive environment, they pointed at an underground movement continuing to fight for LGBTQ+ rights. The activism of the diaspora has significantly impacted perceptions of Russian LGBTQ+ issues, providing critical support to those still in the country.

The results are discussed within the context of existing literature on activism in emigration and Russian LGBTQ+ activism. The theoretical framework of Social Movement Theory, supplemented by Hirschman's Voice and Exit and Citizenship Theory, helps to interpret the dynamics of activism in emigration. This discussion highlights the dual role of emigrant activists in both supporting the movement within Russia and becoming involved in activism in the new country.

In conclusion, the dissertation summarizes the main findings, emphasizing the ability of Russian LGBTQ+ activists to adapt. It also highlights the significant changes in activism post-emigration,

including strategic shifts and new opportunities that have emerged. The study also acknowledges limitations, such as potential biases from relying only on emigrant perspectives, and suggests further research, particularly into the experiences of activists who remain in Russia and the long-term impacts of transnational activism. This research offers insights for scholars, policymakers, and activists, contributing to a deeper understanding of the ongoing fight for LGBTQ+ rights and the critical role of activism in exile.

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