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Readers' Responses to Mainstream Media Articles about Women

as a Reflection of Contemporary Gender Politics in Russia

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Abstract

In its unique way, this dissertation joins a complex conversation about gender politics in Russia as well as the role of mainstream media in shaping and channelling them to the audience. Understanding gender politics as the struggle to alter existing gender relations and exploring the notion of power which is central to these relations, this dissertation argues that readers' online responses to news articles about women in Russia accurately reflect the ongoing debate on gender roles and gender-based violence in Russia. Moreover, online discussions provide key sources of the authorities that are responsible for shaping gender politics. The functions of the Russian state, the Orthodox Church and the West explored in this dissertation illuminate the process in which agents of power solidify gender relations and impact public opinion. By examining existing literature in the field and testing its major points with the help of a grounded theory approach to online responses, this project shows the interconnectedness of gender politics and conventional politics in Russia.

Contents

1. Introduction

Intersections of media and gender politics have long been a research topic for scholars who studied advertising, reporting, news coverage, readership, language use in the press, editorial decision making, etc. – all largely with a focus on women (Ross, 2010). One of the key questions in these studies is the operation of power and its distribution among members of society, which makes it a political issue (Connell, 1987). These political aspects are crucial for my research interest: how Russians perceive and understand gender politics which are usually shaped by the state (Corrin, 1999). One way to look at this is to examine people's responses to mainstream media articles about women in Russia. Whilst understanding that this is an intersectional study, I aimed to examine audience's responses through political lenses. My approach thus was to explore the roles which holders of power, such as the state and the church, play in forming gender politics and how gender politics fit into a larger realm of the state politics and political developments in the country. To make my research as up-to-date as possible, I turned to arguably one of the fastest producers of data within any topic -- online commentary to mainstream news publications about women in Russia.

Online comments appear to be an important new way of gaining insight into public attitudes and perspectives to complement opinion polls, interviews, surveys, etc. The range of topics that internet users choose to comment on is as wide as one can imagine. Because comment sections on social media or news sites have become routine ways of communicating and exchanging opinions around the world (Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, and Malinen, 2015), social and political scientists realised that they could be a primary source of data. In the past five years, scholars examined online comments to discuss people's political views, cultural differences, health care systems, attitudes towards religious beliefs, to name but a few (Len-Ríos, Bhandari, and Medvedeva, 2014; Sung and Lee, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; Taylor et al, 2016; Rahman, Fung and Yeo, 2016; Anderson et al, 2013; Aharony et al, 2012). Collecting data from comment sections has a number of advantages. First and foremost, these data are public, which means they are readily available to anyone with internet access. Secondly, online comments indicate important issues and trends that members of society care about and hope to understand or change (Rahman, Fung, and Yeo, 2016). Finally, users are unaware that their opinions in the form of online responses are observed by a researcher, which helps to avoid self-reports and uncertain recall from research participants (Woodfield et al., 2013). Considering that online comments are already public (and some are anonymous), gathering such data should not raise ethical issues regarding people's consent.

Apart from a research interest, online comments have also been of professional interest to me for the past three years. As a working journalist writing in Russian and mostly about Russia, I have had a chance to see many readers' responses, opinions, and discussions relating to published articles. From my experience, such topics as gender roles, feminism, women's rights, etc. rarely fail to attract readers' attention. Recent studies also confirm that there has been an increase in the volume and frequency of gender debates on social media (Carstensen, 2015). Such keen public interest was the first reason for me to focus on online comments to articles on women's rights and positions. The second reason was the absence of relevant academic studies on gender politics and women's rights in Russia as reflected in readers' response. This makes my research findings unique and contributory to future studies in the field.

Even though online comments may not meet the same professional standards for accuracy as news articles, their power should not be underestimated, as they have the potential to affect a large number of people who will read them. As suggested by a number of studies, the tone of online comments, particularly with a negative connotation, had a greater impact on readers' attitudes toward certain issues than the tone of the article itself (Yang, 2008; Sung and Lee, 2014). What is even more interesting, is that the impact of such comments creates a lasting bias toward the issue with people who have read them, including unconscious or automatic attitudes (Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, and Malinen, 2015).

Considering that sexism -- along with bigotry and racism -- is one of the most common features of negative comments to different types of articles (Nielsen, 2014), looking at online responses to the articles about women should present an opportunity to identify major patterns of gender politics in Russia. I believe that assessment of such data will be invaluable to researchers, journalists, and women's advocates. It has been noted that studies of online comments offer readers and scholars the opportunity to raise public awareness, change or shift norms, and potentially affect policymaking (Leung, 2009).

A few words must be said about the context in which my study is conducted. In the last three years, Russia's position in the international community has been drawn into question because of its assertive foreign policy that neglects international law and other countries' interests. The highlights of this period would be the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian crisis and the alleged interference in the US elections (BBC News, 2014; Lake, 2016; Friedman, 2017). Interestingly enough, this assertiveness (traditional masculine quality) seems to translate into domestic policy in ways which draw strongly on and also influence the politics of gender. Vladimir Putin's image as a shirtless macho man on a horse may have also played a role in the process which some scholars call masculinisation of Russia (Riabov and Riabova, 2014). It is possible to propose that Putin's 'hegemonic masculinity', a dominant and socially powerful

masculinity (Connell, 1987), portrayed by the media around the world and Russian foreign policy have influenced the gender order in Russia. Furthermore, ideas of gender equality and feminism are often perceived within Russia as an instance of western far-fetched political correctness. Because the West has long been Russia's adversary, it is common for popular narratives to express a dislike towards 'imposed' feminist ideas that may be destructive to traditional Russian values (Vanhala-Aniszewski, 2007 Tsygankov, 2016).

The aim of this study, therefore, is to conduct a content analysis of online comments to three online articles published on widely read Russian news sites. The chosen articles cover different aspects of women's lives and their roles in modern Russian (family roles, social inequality, maternity, domestic violence, to name a few) and therefore present a great opportunity to examine people's understandings of gender politics. How users introduce their arguments and present evidence to support their views when discussing the topic of the publication will also be considered. Additionally, I will be looking at the ways in which people communicate with other members of the discussion. Comments were collected from the news websites and corresponding social media pages (Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte).

1.1 Major Research Questions

The central research question explored in this dissertation is:

How are contemporary gender politics in Russia reflected in audience responses to mainstream media articles about women?

In answering this question, the dissertation also considers the following sub-questions:

a) what are the main features of the gender politics in Russia?

b) how do online commentators understand gender and gender order?

c) what are the recurring themes in online commentary, and how do these reflect the gender politics?

d) to what extent do comments have a political context?

e) how do users communicate with each other and what can this tell us about the gender politics of online communication?

1.2 Methodology

Due to the nature of my research, it was evident from the beginning that quantitative methods would most likely be unsuitable due to the level of puns, humour, and sarcasm in people's online responses (Len-Ríos, Bhandari, and Medvedeva, 2014). Thus, I turned to qualitative research methods, where CDA and grounded theory proved to be the most efficient ones in assisting my research endeavours. To answer my research questions[1], I first used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to look into the chosen three publications and identify main features of the gender politics in Russia, paying particular attention to the themes of the articles and the gendered language. The latter is an often underrated factor, despite the fact that words connotations and phrases introduced by the authors often play a role in manipulating opinions (Bloor and Bloor, 2007). Second, I used a grounded theory approach to analyse online comments left in response to the chosen articles. Below I briefly explain the choice of the publications and news sites, which is followed by an overview of the grounded theory and the way I applied it in my work.

1.2.1 Sources

The choice of the three articles was not arbitrary and is conditioned by a number of reasons. First and foremost, the chosen articles were published by largely popular sites that have a different reach and target audience, which means, for this dissertation, a wider representation of commentators. The sites are *Meduza*, *Kommersant*, and *W-O-S*.

Meduza is a Russian language news and feature stories outlet that chooses to 'write about what they think is important' (Meduza.io, 2017a). *Meduza* was founded in 2015 by former journalists of a highly popular news site Lenta.ru which had been put under political pressure after the Euromaidan movement and the war in Eastern Ukraine (BBC Russian Service, 2014). By the end of 2016, *Meduza* reached 5.2 million visitors monthly (Frolov, 2017).

Kommersant is a multi-media publishing house that has several printed periodicals, an integrating website (with approximately 7 million visitors monthly), and a radio station (Kommersant.ru, 2017). The site's major focus is political and business news that often contains insider's information from high-ranking politicians.

W-O-S had the smallest readership among the three websites (around 1 million readers) and covered such topics as history, culture, politics, social experiments, etc. (W-O-S.ru, 2016).

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[1] The first research question will be answered in the literature review and background chapters.

The niche website was famous for its mission to educate and enlighten their readers. It was closed in the autumn of 2016 due to financial reasons (Andreeva, 2016).

The second reason for choosing these articles is their controversial topics that attracted numerous readers and sparked many discussions online. For example, the *W-O-S* article was one of the most read articles in the history of the site; and the *Meduza's* article inspired other journalists to publish numerous columns on the topic. Moreover, all three publications sparked various long-lived discussions on different platforms (other news sites, blogs, Facebook posts, tweets, etc.).

Finally, the chosen articles illustrate various aspects of gender politics in modern Russia. The *Kommersant* article deals with the topic of women's reproductive roles and rights. Looking at the audience's responses should present a good overview of how Russians see marriage, parenthood, childbearing and upbringing and how it fits the gender order in the time of ongoing masculinisation. The *W-O-S* publication covers a violent case of domestic abuse which is of particular importance in the light of the recent statistics estimating that one woman dies every 40 minutes from domestic abuse in Russia (Sebastian and Mortensen, 2017). It should also be mentioned that at the beginning of February 2017, Putin signed into law a controversial amendment that decriminalises some forms of domestic violence in Russia making 'moderate' violence within families an administrative, rather than criminal, offence (Walker, 2017). Last but not least, the *Meduza* article presents a set of instructions on how not to be sexist in Russia. This piece will contribute to my study by showing the norms and understandings regarding gender roles in the society. This article and *Meduza's* tweet that followed it sparked a great controversy because of its contradictory message containing derogatory words.

1.2.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory approach was developed by Strauss and Glaser in the 1960s and soon gained wide popularity among social scientists (Strauss and Glaser, 1967). In the five decades that followed, grounded theory has undergone a few transformations creating different generations of scholars who developed and applied this method (Strauss, 1987). Despite variations, grounded theory continues to be appealing to researchers for many reasons. First and foremost, the core idea of grounded theory -- generating a new theory from data instead of testing an existing theory -- resonate with many social scientists, as it helps to overcome limitations of existing knowledge and preconceived ideas (Birks and Mills, 2011). Additionally, grounded theory's goal is to generate an idea that accounts for a pattern of behaviour which is

relevant for those involved (Strauss, 1987). Finally, as pointed out by Birks and Mills (2011), grounded theory is useful when little is known about the area of study and when the generation of theory with explanatory power is the desired outcome. The points mentioned above make the use of grounded theory in my research crucial: analysing online comments will help to see people's understanding of the gender order (pattern of behaviour) and to examine the ways how gender politics in Russia are reflected through online discussions (explanation of the existing order).

Grounded theory's central concept is coding data. A code is 'most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data' (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014, p.72). Coding creates the critical link between data collection and their explanation. Through coding, researchers can go beyond statements and phrases and raise probing questions about their meaning (Charmaz, 2014). There are various types and stages of coding that have been developed in the last years. I will now discuss the methods I adopted as well as what challenges I faced in the process of building my grounded theory.

1.2.3 Data Collection

For this dissertation, I chose to use inductive coding, which means I did not prepare a list of possible codes before the analysis but came up with the codes as they emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2014). In total, my comments data base consisted of 592 textual comments (excluding memes, gifs and pictures), which includes 184 comments to the Kommersant article (Facebook, website), 228 responses to the Meduza article (Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte), and 180 to the W-O-S article (website). The number of comments to the Meduza article is significantly higher because many comments to the article about sexism were terse (especially tweets that consisted of a couple of words) and often off-topic.

The coding process consisted of four stages. First, I collected the necessary data, numbering the comments and marking the sex of each commentator as M for male, F for female, or X when the sex was unclear. Despite occasional fictional or neutral nicknames, people's sex was easy to determine by the language they used (for instance, gendered verb forms). Second, I identified the themes of each comment and assigned codes to every posting with regard to the language and style, type of argument, attitude to other users/the author of the article, and type of authority the user was referring to. I mostly did three kinds of coding: descriptive (using nouns to summarise a topic of the comment), values coding (to identify values, attitudes, and beliefs of

the user), and process coding (using gerunds to see possible 'actions' in the data, such as cause and effect relationships, evolving arguments, etc) (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). Third, I continued with the second cycle coding by clustering together similar codes to create more conceptual pattern codes (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). Despite different topics of the articles, the comments always contained recurring larger themes that directed me in my analysis (for example, the role of Russia as a country in the world and its comparison to other nations/ societies; historical parallels, political backwardness, the rise of the Church, etc.). Finally, I analysed and reflected on these emergent categories and themes that helped me identify causes, explanations, relationships among users and other processes crucial for discussing gender politics.

Since I did not have another coder to compare and contrast codes with, I decided to do the coding in two stages. I first did open coding of all comments (comment = unit of analysis) which consisted of a single sentence, groups of sentences and even paragraphs. I then took a break from coding and began writing my reflections in the form of memos. One week later I returned to the coding I had done before and examined the codes afresh which helped me to see points that I had overlooked and miscoded the first time. After this, I began the second cycle of coding -- grouping codes together.

Regarding the language, the comments were written in Russian, and I conducted my coding and memo writing in English. Also, all the comments I am quoting in this work were translated into English by me to the best of my ability. I did not experience any particular difficulties or challenges concerning translation, perhaps, except for puns or political, cultural, and historical references that English speaking readers might not be familiar with. Those I tried to explain more clearly either in the text or footnotes. Generally, second language research is standard in any field, including online commentary. For instance, scholars who analysed Dutch comments (Hille and Bakker, 2014) or German comments (Rösner and Krämer, 2016) and published their findings in English did not mention the language to be a limitation or any challenge.

To explore various audiences and commenting styles, I believed it was fruitful to collect comments from a range of social media platforms as well as the news sites themselves. According to the latest data, 60 per cent of Russians have at least one social media account (Levada centre, 2017): 40 per cent of people use VKontakte, 9 per cent have a presence on Facebook, and only 5 per cent reported using Twitter. The poll data suggest that Facebook and Twitter users in Russia are often men from a middle or upper class, who are more likely to be better educated and to hold leadership positions. Whilst I have no solid evidence to underpin these findings, I did notice a few differences in commenting styles depending on the platform.

First, Twitter comments were shorter and more concise, and, more importantly, they were more likely to contain rude or obscene language. It should be mentioned that comments on the Kommersant website were moderated and some postings were deleted (which is stated in the thread). Additionally, direct insults among users appeared more often on Twitter and VKontakte than on other platforms. Comments on the websites were usually longer, more thought-through and well-written as opposed to comments on social media pages, where users left shorter and more sarcastic messages. Regarding the content of the comments, those posted on VKontakte were more likely to constitute longer discussions. This resulted in a higher number of comments and a lower number of users. Interaction among users was present on all platforms, albeit some were less active than others.

It should be noted that grounded theory, like any other research method, is not impeccable, and I was aware of its major limitations. One of them is a subjectivity issue, for the theory is closely linked to the researcher due to a reflective nature of coding and interpretation. However, I share Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory, who says that social reality (which a researcher is a part of) is multiple and constructed and there is more than one way to explore and interpret it. This also helps a researcher to realise that grounded theory results are constructed rather than discovered. By and large, I am aware of the fact that this type of research is particularly interpretive and is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world (Birks and Mills, 2011). I think that different stages of coding (initial and then intermediate), studying the existing literature relating to my topic as well as applying CDA to the three articles could to some extent help to avoid this limitation. Absence of any information on commentators at first seemed to be another limitation but having familiarised myself with existing literature on social media analysis, I discovered that socio-demographic factors do not play a significant role in how people express their opinions or communicate with each other (Woodfield et al., 2013; Rösner and Krämer, 2016).

1.3 Dissertation Layout

The structure of my work will be as follows: I start with the Literature Review that helps me to build my theoretical and conceptual framework based on the existing academic literature on gender, power, and politics. This section also explores how these theories work in the Russian context and talks about change and continuity after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. New features of the gender order in modern Russia are also inspected. Among them are masculinisation of Russia (which shows how 'big' politics affect everything within the country, including the gender order) and new narratives surrounding rape and domestic violence.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation provides further background information on gender politics in Russia as channelled by mainstream media (Gill, 2007). It explores women's portrayals, representative images and gender stereotypes in the popular media, such as press, social media platforms, TV, and advertising. This chapter also helps to understand the context in which Russian readers consume information about women, which builds a valuable foundation needed to interpret my research findings.

Chapter 4 opens with the discourses in the chosen publications from *Kommersant*, *W-O-S,* and *Meduza* and focuses on why these articles sparked a big online discussion at the time. It then summarises the research findings that help to answer the research questions regarding people's understandings of gender politics in Russia, the role of the agents of power, such as the state and the church, and principles of online communication.

Finally, the dissertation closes with some concluding remarks on how Russian readers understand and recreate gender politics in online responses and presents suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a theoretical and conceptual framework of the dissertation focusing on the existing literature and academic publications relevant to this study. It starts with a discussion of the key theoretical concepts, such as gender, gender order, and gender politics. It then examines more complex categories contextually, including gender politics in Russia and the role of the state in them. An overview of change and continuity after the collapse of the USSR is also given. The chapter then explores the current condition of the gender order in Russia. First, it discusses a recent trend towards masculinisation of Russia linked to Vladimir Putin's image and actions in the world and explores the possibility of a causal relationship between the conventional politics and the gender order. Second, the chapter examines the discourses of rape and domestic violence in Russia as part of gender politics and their consequences.

2.1 Key Concepts

The core term *gender* has attracted a lot of scholarly attention in the last 30 years and has become an English-language name to describe the whole field that deals with identity, male-female dichotomy, sexuality, class, etc. The word itself was borrowed from linguistic terminology where it is used to distinguish among distinct classes of nouns such as feminine, masculine, and neuter. In this dissertation, I will use the following definition presented by Connell and Pearse (2015, p.11):

> *'Gender is the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social practices'.*

In other words, as the scholars explain, gender is a multidimensional pattern in our social arrangements that include a plethora of individualistic categories of identity, power, sexuality, work, etc. – all at the same time.

It should be noted that gender is not a result of biological sex: it formed through political, social and cultural influences (Johnson and Robinson, 2007). This means that gender norms and practices cannot be discussed independently from governmental organisations, different institutions such as family or education, and, of course, mainstream media.

Another key concept for this work is *gender order*, which like gender, is a socially and politically constructed category. This term refers to the historically formed pattern of power

relations between men and women and definitions of masculinity and femininity in a given society (Connell, 1987, 98-9). Construction of the gender order largely depends on the state as it is one of the biggest holders of power. The state, in turn, is not neutral but has been described by scholars as 'a historically constructed patriarchal institution that institutionalises hegemonic masculinity' (ibid.). Barrett (1980) argues that the state promotes women's oppression through regulation of education, representation of sexuality, the underlying gender assumptions of legal, judicial and penal systems. Apart from exercising its power through different institutions, the state can also shape gender relations indirectly. For instance, many governments have referred to the privacy of the family as grounds for not interfering with a man's treatment of his wife even in the cases of domestic abuse (Randall, 1987). This public-private divide is constructed by the state and promotes a hierarchal order in which men and women are given pre-established roles (Waylen, 1998). Not to mention, that the institution of (heterosexual) marriage has long been defined and regulated by the state (Vogel, 1998).

The term *gender order* is very close to the concept of *gender politics*, and in the course of my dissertation, I sometimes use them interchangeably, even though the latter also describes various state policies and practices that affect the gender order. The next section examines different reasons why gender politics should be considered as part of politics.

2.2 Gender Politics

One way to define *gender politics* would be to see it as the struggle to alter existing gender relations or to resist alteration (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Since feminism has been the most significant movement in gender politics (ibid.), it was common to approach gender politics as part of women's studies and rarely as part of political science studies. However, a large number of scholars argue that gender politics and sexual relationships are of political nature, and could be studied as a political science topic (Millett, 1970; Barrett, 1980; Randall, 1987; Corrin, 1999). This section aims to present major arguments as to why gender politics should be regarded as part of 'real' politics and studied respectively. Then, it discusses a complex, multifaceted relationship between women, state and politics.

One explanation as to why studies on women were excluded from political science for so long is simply because not many scholars paid attention. In this sense, political studies are very similar to historical studies which until recently focused mainly on the actions of 'great white men', whilst women, being wives and mothers, happened to be outside history or incidental to it (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p.187; Squires, 1999; Klimenkova, 2001). As a male-dominated field, political science has long neglected the topic of women, except for women's political

participation (i.e. elections) and representation in parliament. Moreover, women and conventional politics (such as political activism, parties, elections, etc.) did not intersect because of a long-lived stereotype that women know less about politics, are less interested and less psychologically involved in it than men (Randall, 1987).

Another reason why gender politics and women's studies often seem to lie outside the realm of political science is because of the definitions of politics. In a conventional sense, politics has been seen as the process by which members of the community decide on matters deemed to be of public concern and participate in the distribution of various resources among citizens (ibid.). Feminist thinking, however, argues that this definition of politics is too narrow to describe all complexities and nuances of people's public and private lives in a given country. This is why many scholars suggested viewing politics as relations of power and thus to consider all forms of relationships as political (Millett, 1970; Randall, 1987; Corrin, 1999). This approach makes political science more inclusive and representative, for it shifts the focus from politics as concerned with external events to considerations of relations of power among people in everyday life. With this in mind, gender politics and gender order, including the politics of the family or the politics of reproduction, can be studied in the same way as, say, the politics of elections.

The notion of power, its allocation and distribution, is a core concept in politics, and because gender relations significantly determine the distribution of power, political theory needs to analyse their operation (Squires, 1999). As Corrin (1999) suggests, a coercive strand of power has been used to 'normalise' or legitimise women's subordination. One example of this hierarchy would be that women were traditionally seen not as subjects but as objects of social, political, and private discourses: they are wives, mothers, housekeepers, nursemaids, etc. These categories place women into 'the private' (female) as opposed to 'the public' (male), and, thus exclude them from conventional politics of the government (Randall, 1987). As a result of this gender divide, women were restricted 'to areas where they had fewer material resources and less power to define either their own lives or the shape that society should take' (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p.181). The public-private divide has been deeply rooted in many women's worldview and made them believe that one has to choose between the two. As one Soviet woman named Lyalya summed it up in an interview with Swedish scholars, *'if a woman wants to get anywhere, she has to loosen her grip on the family. It's either/or'* (Hansson et al., 1983, p.31). What Lyalya meant by 'to get anywhere' was, of course, woman's professional career that belongs to the public sphere. The stereotypes that appeared due to the public-private divide include 'woman the carer' and 'man the breadwinner', which has proved very difficult to remove from much social and political thinking and policy-making (Corrin, 1999).

Any power relations to some extent result in oppression of the weaker group. According to Randall (1987), gender oppression implies men's direct material power over women and their indirect ability to make women feel inferior and unaware of alternative ways of living. Imposed inferiority as a product of power relations has been discussed long ago and yet is still relevant. At the end of the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote that 'women's artificial weakness produces a propensity to tyrannise' (2007 (1792), p.78). She continued saying (p.87),

'Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of poverty, will obtain for them the protection of man.'

Two centuries later, Millett (1970) offers a similar argument. She argues that members of a minority (or marginal) group such as women often develop insecurities after being constantly reminded of their inferiority. Some women find their subordinate position so hard to bear that they repress or deny its existence. Along similar lines, Soviet women believed that society had reached equality and thus feminism is unnecessary (Hansson et al., 1983) – the notion that is still present in modern Russian, as demonstrated by my research findings below.

These two artificially constructed principles -- women's weakness and their indispensable dependence on men (first, father and then husband) -- contributed to a universal acceptance of a value system based on male supremacy (Millett, 1970). Being continually dependent on someone else encouraged women to develop servile habits, which soon were assumed to be women's 'natural' characteristics (Wollstonecraft, 1772; Corrin, 1999). 'Nature versus culture' debates often contribute to power relations between men and women. Women's ability to bear and care for children is associated with nature and stands in opposition to culture, which is traditionally man-made and thus viewed as superior (Randall, 1987). Physical differences, instincts and natural characteristics are probably the most common arguments in favour of the status quo of the power relations with women being inferior (Jordan and Weedon, 1995). As one Soviet woman put it, *'from time immemorial, women's instincts have been rooted in taking care of their families, tending to their husbands, sewing, washing -- all the household chores. <...> This is so deeply ingrained in women that there's no way of changing it'* (Hansson et al., 1983, p.50).

The concepts of power and politics are inseparable from the concept of the state as a primary authority. A large number of scholars agree that not only does the state interfere in gender relations, it also creates them through, for example, artificially made categories of 'husband', 'wife', 'mother' etc. Hence, social roles and, more broadly, gender derives its meanings

from the law and not some independent essence (Vogel, 1998). The state is often regarded as an actor that increases male power and enforces women's subordination (Corrin, 1999; Waylen, 1998). Even though the discussion on the nature of the state is still ongoing, there is a compelling reason to argue that the state is inherently patriarchal and reflects the male dominated nature of society (Connell, 1987). Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the state often acts to uphold and defend male interests at the expense of women (Waylen, 1998).

That being said, a relationship between women and the state is not as straightforward as it may seem at first: it is neither top-down nor bottom-up (Randall, 1998). It is nuanced and tangled partly because the state is not a homogeneous entity but a collection of institutions and contested power relations, just like women do not constitute a class with the identical positions, roles and rights (Barrett, 1980). The articles chosen for analysis in this dissertation, as well as the readers' responses, illustrate the complexity of the nature of the relationship between the state, its agents of power, and the people.

2.3 Soviet and Russian Context

Having covered the key terms and concepts for discussing gender politics, I would now like to add the Russian context to the dissertation background, which includes the specificities of the contemporary gender order and state policies. This section also examines the Soviet gender order and its influence on the formation of the Russian gender order after the collapse of the USSR.

Due to the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party had a full monopoly on people's lives and, what is important to the topic of my research, controlled the politics of gender construction. Various scholars have observed that the Soviet approach to gender was full of contradictions (Buckley, 1989; Ashwin, 2000; Voronina, 2004). First of all, communists were seeking social transformation towards class and gender equality, whilst simultaneously accepting 'natural' sexual differences between men and women and regarded male dominance as a norm. Consequently, women's success and supremacy were often seen as a threat because it undermined the masculinity of the men around them and illustrated unnatural deviation from the rule (Ashwin, 2000). Second, Soviets aimed to emancipate women and bring them to the workforce, but the thinking behind it was far from liberating. Introducing women to work was conditioned by two major needs of the State: first, to increase economic growth and second, to make women more amenable to the control of the state (Aivazova, 2001; Voronina, 2004). Finally, whilst the state proclaimed men and women equal, power relations and divisions of roles in the private sphere did not disappear, and no one on the state level tried to question

them. Another key thing to remember is that, in the Soviet Union, gender was not understood as distinct from sex (Johnson and Robinson, 2007), meaning that people had been ascribed to roles and rights on the basis of their biological sex. Such ascription was not arbitrary; rather, it was tied with ideological purposes of the state, with the main one being the building of communism. This makes the Soviet gender order a unique three-party relationship among women, men and the Communist Party, where the latter created a system in which an oppressor was not the man but the state with undoubtedly masculine characteristics (Ashwin, 2000; Voronina, 2004).

One of the ways the Soviet state shaped the gender order was through the institution of family which was often described as the primary cell of the Soviet society. Before the 1917 Revolution, marriage and family had been under control of the Church. When the communists came to power, they took this privilege from the Church and acquired access to and control over the private sphere through various laws regulating the civil registration of deaths, births, and marriages as well as reproductive policies, such as abortion ban (Ashwin, 2000). Family and marriage continued to be thought as a women's realm, which created further inequalities. On the one hand, women's employment made them more socially and economically independent, but on the other hand, it intensified the so-called double-burden because women were the ones responsible for child care and domestic chores. Power relations between husband and wife were also established with the help of the state, as highlighted by numerous newspaper publications. The Soviet press usually channelled traditional gender order where it was accepted as a norm that women were responsible for house chores and childrearing, whilst men were the head of the family and the breadwinner (Tartakovskaya, 2000). This and other problems formed the 'woman's question' which stayed unresolved in the Soviet times due to the fundamental misconceptions on which the gender order was based.

Another feature of the Soviet gender order is the way in which the state constructed male and female identities. First and foremost, men and women were defined primarily through their duty to the communist state; thus, all citizens were workers that contributed to the building of Communism. However, women's identity was more than just a labourer: they were working mothers (Buckley, 1989; Voronina, 2004). This makes women reproductive roles political: mothers were serving their duty to the state by giving birth to future communists and by being mediators between the child and the state (Ashwin, 2000). Needless to say, the state tried to encourage women to have as many children as they could (for instance, by introducing an award of the mother-hero who gave birth to more than ten children) (Voronina, 2004). It is thus not surprising that Soviet media publications described motherhood as the greatest source of happiness for women (Tartakovskaya, 2000). Meanwhile, men were excluded from the family realm (the 'father-hero' award never existed, nor did the concept of a 'working gather'). The

Soviet state, however, chose another way for men to do the greatest service to the people – by compulsory military service. Eichler (2012, p.22) argues that 'the state's valorisation of the military and of militarised masculinity was one of the ways in which male power was entrenched' in the USSR. Militarised masculinity constituted a big part of the Soviet gender order because the state was constantly trying to live up to the image of a world superpower that was opposing the West (first, during the Great Patriotic War, and then in the Cold War years) (Shaw, 1999).

After the collapse of the USSR, main elements of the Soviet gender order were reproduced in the new Russia[2] (Ashwin and Lytkina, 2004). One possible explanation is that the new Russian state was consolidating power and retreated from shaping gender politics; therefore the Soviet model continued to exist because there were no institutions to change it (Voronina, 2004). Soviet legacy also meant that the contradictions regarding a woman's status in society continued to exist in Russia. On the one hand, no one disputed legal equality of men and women, but on the other hand, patriarchal culture was still dominant in many spheres, especially because women still believed that 'the male' represents the norm and women's discrimination is an 'imagined feminist problem' (Klimenkova, 2001, p.129). Another key thing to mention would be the disappearance of the Communist Party that used to be a part of the three-party relationship between men and women, on which the Soviet gender order was built. This resulted in the emergence of a new type of gender politics, which Rimashevskaya (2001, p. 256) identifies as 'the renaissance of the patriarchy'.

Among other features that were inherited from the USSR by a newly born post-communist society in Russia were often assumed male dominance in society, reduced but still present cult of motherhood (even though it is not a duty to the state anymore), the virgin/whore dichotomy in the public view of women, division of roles in the domestic realm, as well as negative attitudes towards western ideas of gender equality (Tartakovskaya, 2000; Ashwin and Lytkina, 2004; Voronina, 2004).

The scholarly literature shows that due to the ever changing nature of gender arrangements and gender order in any country, new features are bound to appear with the new political, economic, and international developments (Connell, 1987; Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Connell and Pearse, 2015). This is why it seems fair to devote the next section to the new developments in the gender order in Russia after the disintegration of the USSR. Due to an insufficient amount of academic research on the changing state of gender politics in modern Russia, the following two sections mostly build on existing examples found in mainstream

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[2] I will discuss these features in the following chapters in more detail.

media, such as press, TV, and social media platforms, backed, when possible, with scholarly knowledge.

2.4 Masculinisation of Russia

The gender order, being socially and politically constructed, is constantly changing depending on geopolitical boundaries and social constraints on who and why imagining whom (Millett, 1970; Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Butler, 2004). After the fall of the USSR, some features of the gender order ceased to exist, and others transformed. Klimenkova (2001) writes that emergence of capitalism in Russia gave an illusion of change in gender politics, but in fact, the patriarchal culture was preserved. This happened partly because after the disappearance of the authoritarian state, men were expected to take on patriarchal roles and thus regain power taken from them by the communist hegemony (Ashwin, 2000). There is also enough evidence to suggest that militarisation of the USSR transformed into broader masculinisation of Russia and first resulted in large numbers of masculinised men that formed criminal gangs in the 90s (Klimenkova, 2001). Additionally, masculinisation was able to replace militarisation as an ideological trend because the latter was no longer essential – the Cold War (technically) ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Shaw, 1999).

Eichler (2012) argues that early Russia's political leadership mainly focused on militarisation, nationalism and patriotism to consolidate power. But this strategy changed when Vladimir Putin came to power in the early 2000s and turned toward masculinisation which was primarily exercised through assertive behaviour both at home and abroad, wish to dominate, binary view of the world (us versus them) and lack of empathy (Millett, 1970; Corrin, 1999; Tsygankov, 2016). This process can be illustrated by his early political decisions (such as the war in Chechnya and the war on terrorism in a short-term coalition with the USA), his inner circle of men originating from the security services like himself, and, last but not least, his public image as a former KGB-agent who does judo and goes fishing bare-chested.

When Putin returned to power in 2012 after Medvedev's term, he continued to display masculine characteristics (strength, reason, will, responsibility, vigour) and attribute them to the image of Russia (Riabov and Riabova, 2014). Additionally, image makers persistently promoted Putin's image as a macho-man (Reuters, 2011): mass media masculinised Putin primarily through militarisation and eroticisation, which is typical for any society that is built on a patriarchal system of values (Sperling, 2016). This 'remasculinisation' is also connected with the anti-Western rhetoric in Russian politics and state media that climaxed around the time of the

Ukrainian crisis in 2013-2014. It seems reasonable to suggest that Putin's assertive foreign policy towards the West also played a role in masculinising the gender order (Tsygankov, 2016). Furthermore, resurgent 'masculinity' also has implications for discourses around femininities and associated expectations of women, their roles, position in society, etc. This links back with the Soviet portrayals of women based on limited views of gender where masculinities and femininities were treated as binaries (Hansson et al., 1983).

It is worth mentioning that masculinisation goes hand in hand with the influence of religion in Russia that is patriarchal per se. The support of the Orthodox Church today has reached its record levels, according to Levada centre opinion poll: fifty-six per cent of Russians like the degree of the Church's involvement/participation in state politics, and sixteen per cent wish it were even higher (Kozlov, 2016). It is important to note that Russians, unlike people in western countries, tend to blindly follow religious principles and do not contrast or compare them to the principles of law (Malysheva, 2001). Vladimir Putin seems to be highly religious himself, and what is interesting, his religiousness affects both domestic and foreign affairs and is used to justify practically any political decisions. One of the famous examples would be his address to Russia's Federal Assembly after annexation of the Crimean Peninsula when he defended his decision by reminding that 'it was in Crimea, in the ancient city of Chersonesus or Korsun, as ancient Russian chroniclers called it, that Grand Prince Vladimir was baptised before bringing Christianity to Rus' (Putin, 2014).

Masculinisation of the current gender order in Russia can also be observed in men's experiences and women's expectations of men, especially in a relationship. In 2015 the *Afisha* magazine[3] published a feature story called *'Sexism non-stop: Men on how they are discriminated by women'* (Krasilnikova and Kravtsova, 2015). In personal experience stories, Russian men revealed how they, too, can be victims of the patriarchal gender order in Russia: they reported that their girlfriends expect them to be manly, which, in their understanding, means rude, aggressive and even abusive. As Igor, 28, recalls, *'I was often told that I was earning too little, could not tell my wife where her place was, and therefore was not a man'.* Likewise, Alexander, 27, recounts that his girlfriend *'hinted [that I did not behave like a real men], then said to me that I am too soft with her, that she does not feel I am a man because, for example, I would not slap her in the face when she was hysterical'.* These men's experiences demonstrate how hegemonic

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[3] Started as a magazine about entertainment and culture in the city in 1999, *Afisha* (literally meaning 'placard') is now a multi-media company with many versatile projects about art, music, entertainment -- anything that would be interesting to a 'reader in the 21st century'. Online readership has reached 11,7 million people monthly (Afisha.ru, 2017).

masculinites constructed within the gender order can be oppressive to men as well as women (Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

Another political aspect affecting the gender order in Russia would be the relationship with the West, briefly mentioned above in the context of world superpowers and long-lived antagonism (Mankoff, 2012). The available evidence seems to suggest that topics like gender equality and feminism are usually seen as western concepts, and thus, Russians often regard them with suspicion and hostility (Klimenkova, 2001). This perception of feminism goes all the way back to the Soviet era when women themselves had a very incomplete and distorted image of the feminist movement that was portrayed in Soviet media. As a famous scholar Gail Lapidus noted in the introduction to the book 'Moscow women', *'western feminism is perceived as embodying attitudes of hostility toward men or a critical view of the family as a social institution'* (Hansson et al., 1983, p.xv). Further evidence supporting these claims lies in the findings of Tartakovskaya (2000), who states that Soviet newspapers indeed portrayed families in western (meaning capitalist) countries as joyless and unhappy. As will be shown later in my work, despite feminist movements in today's Russia, it appears that views on gender equality, including men's and women's roles in society, have not changed drastically since the late Soviet years. According to a survey by Levada-centre from March 2016, one out of three respondents thinks that it is does not matter whether women have equal rights with men (Interfax.ru, 2016).

2.5 Rape Culture and Domestic Violence in Russia

Gender politics, like any other kind of politics, also deal with the outbreaks of violence -- often a result of unequal power distribution and corresponding oppression (Corrin, 1999). The struggle against gender-based violence has been an essential feature of gender politics (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Cases of domestic violence and rape -- where the majority of victims are women -- are so frequent in today's Russia that the situation seems to be critical. Whilst official data on domestic violence are not centrally collected, state-run news agency *RIA Novosti* has reported that 36,000 women are beaten by their husbands daily, and 12,000 women die yearly as a result of domestic violence -- one woman every 44 minutes (Sebastian and Mortensen, 2017). The biggest Russian centre[4] that deals with rape and domestic violence *'Сёстры'* (Sisters) claims that only ten to twelve per cent of victims go to the police. What is even more striking is that only one case out of five will be registered by police, and only 2,9 per cent of all domestic violence cases will make it to court (Takiedela.ru, 2015). Furthermore, in February 2017,

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[4] It is estimated that there are around 600 women's rights organisations in Russia which at times strongly disagree with each other's work, claiming that they are either too aggressive or not active enough (Kharlamov, 2017).

President Vladimir Putin signed into law a controversial amendment that decriminalises some forms of domestic violence in Russia making 'moderate' violence within families an administrative, rather than criminal, offence (Walker, 2017).

The topics of rape and abuse have long been swept under the carpet in Soviet and modern Russia (Rimashevskaya, 1999), as it is typical for violated victims in a patriarchal society to experience feelings of shame and guilt which forces them to stay silent about their experiences (Millett, 1970). As with the case of feminism and gender equality, sexual harassment and abuse are often regarded as a product of western political correctness which some Russians find far-fetched and unnecessary (Klimenkova, 2001). In fact, these are the consequences of gender relations between the strong and the weak, for sexual harassment is 'an exercise of power, directed to the body of the target' (Connell and Pearse, 2015, p.50).The silence surrounding this topic arguably ended in July 2016, after hundreds, if not thousands of Russian-speaking women started publicly sharing their experiences of sexual harassment and rape. Women's posts with a hashtag '*Я не боюсь сказать*' ('I am not afraid to speak') first appeared on Facebook and VKontakte, in Ukraine, but quickly became popular in Russia (Kryvets, 2016; Walker, 2016; Wonderzine, 2016a). This campaign is important to a wider discussion on the gender order due to two reasons. First, the overwhelmingly high number of women who shared their stories demonstrated how common the problem of sexual violence is and at the same time how invisible it appears to be to the public. Secondly, this campaign received a comprehensive response from male users on social media, and many men seemed to be surprised to learn how many of their female friends had been victims of rape, abuse or harassment. For some, it came as a shock that women had to keep it secret from their families because they thought it was their fault that they had been raped or abused (Melnychenko, 2016). As one man wrote, *'I am terrified by how many of you there are [who were raped or abused]. I cannot grasp it*'. Additionally, the popularity of this campaign helped some men to redefine their previous understandings of sexual violence and consent.

'Did I stop after she said her first 'no' [to my advances] or did she have to repeat it a few times? I am afraid she did', recalls one man who was reflecting on the nature of abusive actions (Wonderzine, 2016b).

Whilst it was eye-opening for many men to find out how sexual consent works, for others it is still uncharted waters. For instance, the idea that rape is impossible when you are in a relationship or married is still prevalent in Russia and appears to support a long-lived view on women in a patriarchal society as the sexual property of men (Barrett, 1980). One example would be themed groups on Russian social medium VKontakte called *'Спящий секс' (Sleeping*

sex) where users, mostly men, discuss how to have sex with a sleeping woman and share ideas on what drugs to use if they need to put their partner to sleep (Wonderzine, 2016c). Many men join these communities and seek advice:

'I want to [have sex with] my wife whilst she is deep asleep. Any advice how I can make her unconscious with simple medication we have at home?', asks one man.

Additionally, many members of these groups admitted that they were planning to do something that their partner refused to try, for example, anal sex. One explanation for this behaviour may be found in gender literature that discusses sexual experimentation as a way for men to prove their manhood (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Moreover, not only did these men ask for and give advice, but they also shared photos and videos of their sleeping girlfriends or wives. Despite many complaints from feminists communities and journalists to the VKontakte team, the social medium refused to block such pages because they did not see a 'direct appeal to commit sexual abuse', and thus, it was not against the law. According to their spokesman, closing these groups would be 'an act of censorship' (ibid).

In the light of the evidence presented in this section, it is reasonable to argue that sexual violence as an everyday practice constitutes a significant part of the gender order in Russia. One of its defining features would be the culture of victim blaming, which operates on the myth that women provoke men to have sex with them and are therefore responsible for men's actions (Gill, 2007; Johnson, 2009). One story, in particular, underpins this point: it is a case of a 17-year-old girl named Diana from Ulyanovsk, who had been raped at a student party, and the court then sentenced the 21-year-old man to 8 years in jail, later changing it to 3 years and 3 months (Meduza.io, 2017b). The fact that Diana reportedly had been drinking at the party, initiated flirting and wanted to have sex with the man further convinced readers that what had happened to Diana was her fault (Vadeeva, 2017). After appearing on a TV talk-show, Diana became a viral internet meme which was used at least twice for commercial purposes by large enterprises - - a Russian tabloid *Life* and *Burger King*[5]. Overall, Diana's image demonstrates how mainstream media act as a channel for gender politics creating and solidifying narratives about a victim, an abuser, and power relations between the two.

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[5] See Appendix A.

3. Russian Women in the Media

Since all types of media are involved in constructing reality and channelling gender politics (Gill, 2007), it is crucial for this dissertation to examine this process in more detail. As indicated by Connell (1987), because of their ubiquity and influence, media are responsible for distribution of power and constructing 'normality', which often results in people believing that normative and dominant are the same things (Connell, 1987). For instance, marriage and family in Russia are usually portrayed as the only 'normal' relationship between two people (a man and a woman) and often perceived as such, even though, in fact, this view simply retranslates gender politics of the state regarding a reproductive arena (Shpakovskaya, 2012). The power of media is central to this dissertation, as it shows the ways how gender politics are channelled to and perceived by the public. Overall, the relationship between media and women are far from being a good one. As Ross (2010, p.118) puts it, '...the media's framing of women in highly restricted and negative ways [...] is a global phenomenon which has endured over time and across media formats, and continues to do so'.

That said, this chapter presents contextual information necessary for this dissertation and focuses on women's portrayals and representation in contemporary mainstream media in Russia, including printed press, social media platforms, advertising and TV commercials. It begins with a discussion on how and for what purposes women's images are constructed and presented across different media platforms. It then explores how these portrayals contribute to the existing gender order and how they correspond to the Soviet gender order.

3.1 Women's Images

One of the core ideas about women's portrayal in media or art works would be that visual images of women throughout history were defined by a male gaze and were supposed to be consumed by a male spectator (Millett, 1970; Jordan and Weedon, 1995). Thus it is not hard to see why highly sexualised women's pictures can still be found anywhere in the modern world and Russia is no exception. This thinking is supported by post-Soviet scholars who studied women's images in different media, such as press and advertising. Voronina (1999) in her article *'Freedom of speech and stereotypical image of a woman in media'* suggests that in the 90s, gender stereotypes about women inundated press, TV commercials, and printed advertising. She writes that a woman was shown either as part of the kitchen or kids bedroom interior or as a sex object – roles that have been typical for patriarchal societies for centuries (Corrin, 1999). Gender

stereotypes were retranslated even in newspaper's heading and rubrics, such as the section called *'Father and son are smart'*, which contained observation/attention games; or the section *'For you, women'* that had a few culinary recipes implying that women are the ones who cook (Voronina, 1999). In her later article, Voronina (2004) stresses that the revival of conservative and patriarchal views on women's 'nature' began in the 1980s and continued well through the 1990s – the period that Rimashevskaya's (2001) called 'the renaissance of the patriarchy'. But even in Russia today, the image of woman as a good and preferably agreeable wife is still easily discovered in mainstream publications. One recent example would be a column titled 'Woman, know your place' written by a senior editor of *Allure* Alexei Belyakov (Belyakov, 2016). In his piece, Belyakov writes that women's roles are 'to agree, to nod, and to smile' and that, in fact, 'our women are sincerely happy to have this role'. His article also contains principles of the masculinised gender order (discussed in the literature review), for he believes that Russian women like men who are rude and threatening.

Another influential media channel for gender politics would be advertising that has long depicted women as happy housewives or sex objects (Gill, 2007). Among TV commercials oriented at Russian women in the 1990s, 61 per cent were about products and appliances that help to take care of the house, children, and husband, and 39 per cent were beauty products (Voronina, 1999). In other words, *'women in commercials are constantly cleaning, washing, tidying up, cooking, changing diapers, whilst taking care of how they look, getting rid of the bad odour, dandruff, yellow teeth, constipation and so on*' (ibid.). This is a clear continuation of the tradition started by Soviet magazines, where household appliances were illustrated by pictures of women and addressed at women, despite the attempts of the Communist Party to encourage men to help their wives around the house (Attwood, 2010).

Sexualised images of women in the media were well studied by Stambler (2012) who discovered a plethora of examples of how women are used as sex objects in Russian and Ukrainian commercials full of euphemised puns and phallic symbols[6]. The scholar also demonstrates that political advertising is, too, guilty of exploiting women's images in a sexualised and derogatory way. For instance, the 2011 election campaign video called 'Putin's Army' features half-dressed young women who express their support for Vladimir Putin[7]. As Stambler puts it,

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[6] See Appendix B.

[7] See Appendix C.

'The video suggests to male voters that voting for Putin may somehow lead to being with an attractive young woman. The government is unabashedly using sexually appealing images to lure potential voters.'

It appears that product advertising does not have to be about household tools, cleaning or beauty products to perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and outright discrimination. In October 2016, a Moscow-based ice-cream company Tim & Tim introduced 'special brutal ice-cream with a lot of Kraken rum' that would be sold to 'real men only' (*для настоящих мужчин*) (Stolyarova, 2016). When a girl tried to purchase this ice-cream intended for 'men over 18 and capable members of society', she was refused. After her complaints, the company's representatives stated that 'they wanted men to have something that only they could have'. Moreover, they suggested that women could ask men to buy this ice-cream for them, which only stressed women's powerlessness. This case is central to understanding the gender order in Russia that affects women and men, too, for this campaign also segregated 'real men' from all other men, and supported the notion of hegemonic, as Connell (1987) put it.

Whilst Voronina's (and to some extent Stambler's) findings might seem outdated, in fact, they are still relevant today and show the continuity of the Soviet gender order discussed in the literature review. One stereotypical woman's image, in particular, continues to exist in the media just like it was 40 years ago: it is the importance of family and husband for a woman. In the 2014 *Cosmopolitan* article, the magazine discussed the three most important events in a woman's life -- two of which were '*becoming a mother'* and '*finding love'* (Cosmo.ru, 2014). Both events reproduce common images and roles ascribed to women in the USSR or elsewhere. A focus on motherhood can be partly explained by the fact that motherhood was often seen as an indication of female success (Kosterina, 2012). Likewise, Tartakovskaya (2000) notes that journalists interviewing successful women often try to stress the importance of love and family for the heroine, as if she would not be complete without it. This discourse constitutes a significant part of the patriarchal gender order where marriage and romance are used as primary means by which women are subordinated (Millett, 1970; Corrin, 1999; Squires, 1999).

While media often mirror political, cultural, and social discourses, they can also help to create narratives through repetition of the same patterns (Gill, 2007). This is why around the world at different times, women in advertising, modelling, and cinema look very similar -- young and conventionally attractive. Media culture also affects how women evaluate their looks and what they think the society expects of them. As one of the interviewees, Liza, from a Soviet era book 'Moscow women' reflects,

'A woman also has to be beautiful. Even if nature hasn't made her that way, she must know how to make herself beautiful' (Hansson et al., 1983, p.18).

Regularly recurring women's images thus soon become a 'norm' by which ordinary women are measured and defined. Because most women's images are constructed by men in such a way that they suit heterosexual men's needs, media portrayals of women are highly sexualised (Millett, 1970). As Johnson (2009) observed, a commodification of women's bodies together with a deluge of pornography became especially widespread and acceptable after the fall of the USSR.

In modern Russia, many women are still often judged by standardised canons of female beauty that can be found in mainstream media. In 2015, news media reported on an allegedly arranged marriage between a 47-year-old Chechen police chief and a 17-year-old girl (BBC, 2015). Online response focused on the age difference and the fact that the man was already married (it is permitted to have more than one wife in Chechnya, and the minimum age of marriage is 16 even though it is 18 in other parts of Russia). Amid heated online discussions, now former Russian children's rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov took the man's side and said,

'Let's not be prudish. Emancipation and sexual maturity happen earlier in the Caucasus. There are places where women have wrinkles at age 27, and they look 50 by our standards.'

Such beauty standards for Russian women expressed by a male official led to an uproar in social media, where hundreds of women started posting selfies with a scrunched face to mock Astakhov's words about women's wrinkles at the age of 27. He soon issued an apology which again was full of gender stereotypes regarding male and female roles.

'Women of any age are splendid and adorable. God created Woman so that we could love her, defend her, take care of her, glorify her. A clumsy comparison, a rash word taken out of the context cannot change my attitude to the Fair Sex. I've loved, love and shall love and respect [them]! I apologise for the mistake I've made!'

Media stereotypes about female beauty successfully coexist with stereotypes about women's inferior intellect (Gill, 2007). A belief that attractive women are naturally stupid and irrational is often exploited by the Russian media, as in the recent case of an educational website *'ПостНаука' (Post-Science)*. On Facebook, they illustrated their article about unsolved

problems in physics with a photo of a famous Russian model Natalya Vodianova with the word *WAT??* [8], jokingly implying that a good-looking woman would have zero knowledge or understanding of scientific issues (PostNauka, 2015)[9].

When Vodyanova commented on the post asking why her photo was used in such context, the official answer was that she was 'the best known and the most influential model'. This reply showed that the authors of the post, even when confronted, did not understand that it misrepresented women and contributed to gender stereotypes.

3.2 Standards for Women

Another area of gender politics deals with the workplace, career and professionalism – the area which, too, is full of gender-based stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination (Connell and Pearse, 2015). One recent example of how media channel these stereotypes would be the case of a famous Russian sports journalist Vasiliy Utkin who announced that he was soon opening a journalist school for training football commentators (Buribaev, 2016). The catch, however, was that only men were allowed to apply. After the mostly negative online reaction, Utkin stated that 'he knows only one woman who covers football topics in Russia' and that he has never seen girls playing football outdoors. While there is no evidence to argue that women make worse football commentators than men, Utkin perpetuated a common myth regarding male and female professions and 'natural' inclinations (Gill, 2007).

It appears that women's images are judged and evaluated by men's perceptions and expectations in the workplace, too. Discriminatory practices Russian women are still subjected to could be demonstrated by the following vacancy advertisement published on Facebook. In it, a recruitment manager wrote that the candidate should be a blond girl with 'a luxurious smile' and light eyes, whose face should not have 'any traces of feminism', cunningness, independence and pride. Furthermore, an ideal candidate' smile should be '*soft, Slavic looking (when she is smiling, one should only see her upper teeth, it is unacceptable if lower teeth are showing even a little); non-American (a provoking, sexy, shining and commercial-like smile is unacceptable); a must: when she is smiling, her upper lip should look full and wide; the corners of the smile should not look sharp*' (Trusova, 2016).

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[8] 'WAT' -- a popular Internet meme that derived from the word 'what' and, combined with someone's photo, serves to illustrate confusion, lack of understanding or surprise.

[9] See Appendix D.

Whilst women's appearance may be judged harshly, professional standards for women are often lowered, as they are traditionally thought to be less professional and capable than men (Barrett, 1980). In the autumn of 2016, a well-known Russian screenwriter and theatre professor Arkadiy Inin said that most of his currents students in a theatre college were women and he 'cannot find the words to describe what will happen to the cinema [because of this]' (he originally used a derogatory word for women *ba-by* -- '*бабы*') (Khokhryakova, 2016). He continued,

> *'We should not have let you out of the kitchen. And now that we've let you out, women ('baby') have become unstoppable'.*

While men like Inin may feel threatened when their power position is channelled (Connell and Pearse, 2015), women themselves might not be aware of the true nature of their position. As discussed above, members of the oppressed group often tend to accept their ascribed inferiority and partake in the process of consolidating the current order (Millett, 1970). To support this point with contextual evidence, a case of a personal coach for women Yulia Pechyorskaya may be reviewed, as her lectures that could be found online attracted a lot of media attention in 2015 (Makarova, 2016). Her seminars, addressed at women 'who seek success and happiness', consisted of a set of instructions on how to get the right man and how to keep him. Her YouTube videos receive hundreds of thousands views, which to some extent demonstrates the demand among Russian women. In Pechyorskaya's view, a relationship between a man and a woman was an agreement that first considered man's status and salary – thus retranslating a patriarchal gender order where a woman marries a man according to his social status and fortune and becomes his sexual property (Barrett, 1980; Corrin, 1999).

> *'To sleep with a man who earns less than 50 000 rubles*[10] *is a danger to your life. No, they are perhaps good people, soulful and interesting conversationalists, but you are forbidden to date or sleep with them'* (Makarova, 2016).

Additionally, Pechyorskaya's understandings of men's roles as assertive and rational breadwinners contribute to a long-lived dichotomy of 'real' or 'normal' men and the rest. This shows that the view of hegemonic masculinity by which men are measured is still common in Russia (Connell, 1987).

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[10] It is roughly 700 GBP, which is still more than an average salary in Russia.

Arguably, the highest concentration of gender stereotypes that mirror the current gender order in Russia could be found in the 2015 New-Year's Eve commercial on Domashnii TV channel[11] (*Домашний*) (TV channel Domashnii, 2015). The video called '*Because you have been a good girl'* features a woman who wakes up wearing an expensive fur coat in the room full of 'woman's' presents -- dresses, lingerie, shoes, jewellery, etc. The clip also features an eroticised version of a man available to fulfil her wishes – an image that has become standard for mainstream depictions of men (Gill, 2007). At the end of the commercial, we hear a slogan -- 'because you have been a good girl'. On Facebook, where the video has been watched almost four million times, one commentator summed it up, 'a woman must be a queen, beautiful and rich' (Domashnii, 2015).

Often, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of gender roles by media or members of society show how complex and multifaceted gender politics are. In particular, the question of authority becomes especially important, or, in other words, to who or what people refer to support their ideas. One argument seems especially frequent: it is a notion that Russia should defend its culture, traditions, and the general order of things from the West. In 2016, Valery Zorkin, the president of Russia's constitutional court, mentioned unspecified western laws that 'declare untraditional models of behaviour of sexual and gender minorities as being within the law, trying to equate men and women whilst ignoring their natural biological differences' (Coalson, 2016). Bringing the West into the discussion about gender politics shows a long-existing Russia-West dichotomy, which, according to social constructivists, is rooted in the perception of the Self and the Other (Wendt, 1999; Tsygankov, 2016). This is perhaps where antipathy to a 'western' idea of gender equality in Russia comes from. It should be mentioned that Zorkin's statement contradicts Article 19 of the Russian Constitution which guarantees equal rights and liberties for men and women as well as equal opportunities to exercise them (The Constitution of the Russian Federation, n.d.).

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[11] 'Domashnii' means 'homey' in Russian.

4. Empirical Research Findings

4.1 Discourses in the Articles

This dissertation would not be complete without a discussion of the original articles that were the reason for online commentary in the first place. Without further ado, I would like to begin with an analysis of the discourses within the *Meduza* article, followed by the *W-O-S* story, and closing with the *Kommersant* piece, all published in 2015.

Meduza

The article was titled '*How not to be sexist in Russia'* and written in the form of questions and answers (Meduza, 2015a). It consisted of ten questions that were meant to be a helpful guide to anyone who does not want 'to be sexist in Russia', but in fact, they turned out to be a set of oddly picked pieces of advice on how to behave in the presence of women:

> *Do you need to shake hands with women?*
> *How can you tell jokes about dumb blondes without offending women?*
> *Who should pay for a meal at the restaurant?*
> *Should a man offer a woman his seat on the bus?*

The article mentioned different gender roles and expectations that men and women bear in the society, but it failed to explain why or how this gender order was formed. Moreover, the authors of the piece did not even mention feminism or any other movements regarding equality. Whilst it is understandable that this is a mainstream publication and not an academic article (therefore it could not cover all political, cultural, historical, and social prerequisites of gender politics), it did not even attempt to show that sexism is a more complex problem than just men not shaking hands with women. Moreover, the overall message of the article contradicted the title. First of all, nine out of ten questions were addressed to men and provided instructions to them on how not to be sexist. It was my impression that the focus on men as the only readers of this article made this piece disproportional, dividing, and exclusive. Additionally, the tone of the article appears to be both condescending and a bit sarcastic.

However, it is not the article itself that sparked debates on social media but *Meduza's* tweet with the link to this article. The tweet said, *'Lads, here's the instruction on how not to offend tyolkas (heifers)'* (Meduza, 2015b). First, just like the publication, the tweet was

addressed to men and excluded women who might want to learn about the topic of sexism. It is thus not surprising that men's comments to this article were often aggressive: they might have felt lectured to or accused of being sexist in advance -- why else would journalists publish an article with such advice for them? Second, the tweet contained the word 'tyolka' (a derogatory name for women), thus contradicting the message of the original article.

That being said, I believe that *Meduza's* initial intention to educate people about sexism was good (considering that they consulted a number of well-known feminists and human rights activists when writing this article), but, perhaps, they did not carry it out so well and oversimplified the subject. After *Meduza's* tweet had attracted a lot of attention online, the experts who had helped *Meduza* were outraged and publicly condemned the article. One of these experts, famous Russian feminist Bella Rapoport wrote a column where she called Meduza's post 'ordinary sexism' and accused the journalists of spreading non-progressive views (Rapoport, 2015). Her article, written in a formal style with academic terms and concepts, was ridiculed by *Meduza's* staff on Twitter where they wrote, 'Lads*, look, our tweet inspired a tyolka to write a column'* (Meduza, 2015c). Meanwhile, the heated debates continued on Facebook, and yet another well-known journalist Mikhail Fishman wrote a column for *Slon* (now *Republic*) where he discussed political correctness and resistance with which Russian society reacts to ideas of gender equality (Fishman, 2015). Finally, to illustrate the scale of the online discussion, even the Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny commented on the topic: he tweeted jokingly that *'the word 'tyolka' will now be banned because of the silly Meduza*', implying that he likes this word (Navalny, 2015).

Six days after Meduza's tweet and a large number of Facebook posts and comments that followed, alongside columns like Rapoport's and Fishman's, the editorial staff of Meduza issued an apology on Twitter where they admitted that the tweet was rude and 'a mistake' and that they apologise to everyone who was offended (Meduza, 2015d).

W-O-S

The article called *'Your true face. One domestic violence story'* was written by Anna Zhavnerovich and soon became one of the most read articles in the history of W-O-S (Zhavnerovich, 2015). As discussed above, domestic violence has long been a taboo topic in Russia (and many other countries) because people often feel guilty, scared, ashamed, and inadequate to tell their story (Johnson, 2009). Thus, it is possible that Anna's story resonated with many people simply because it is still rare to find a personal and detailed story of domestic violence in mainstream media. Another reason could be because the victim / the author of the

story comes from an intellectual circle of journalists and writers, which disrupted the stereotype that victims of domestic violence are dependent women from poor, abusive backgrounds (Harrison and Esqueda, 1999).

The piece was arranged in the form of diary entries, where Anna, an editor at W-O-S, tells a very personal story of how she was emotionally abused and then severely beaten by her then boyfriend. According to her, the beating started after the couple agreed to break up because they did not see a future together. After a couple of dozen punches in the face that resulted in heavy bleeding and bruises, the man allegedly stopped and said that now it was Anna's true face (hence the title of the article). Anna writes that the next day the man was sorry but refused to let her leave the flat or call the doctor. Instead, he offered to go to a drug store and get some medicine for her. Whilst he was away, Anna managed to call her colleague who then helped her to leave the flat.

A few days later, Anna went to the police and recorded the beatings with the Accident and Emergency department. The police, however, refused to start a legal case because Anna needed to go to a magistrates' court to file an offence and not to the police[12]. Because Anna did not explain these legal procedures in the first, highly emotional, article, whilst mentioning that no case had been taken against the man, many readers understood it as yet another example of how corrupt the justice system in Russia is when it comes to domestic violence. Along with the article, Anna published a few photos of her face taken after the beating -- with shocking grazes, bruises, and other injuries. Arguably, the photos were a bigger trigger for the online discussion than the text itself, as it was harder to ignore graphic images and dismiss the article for the lack of evidence.

Anna's story was retold by many mainstream media outlets in Russia, and one could find many debates on the topic on various social media (MediaLeaks, 2015a). It came as a shock to many who knew Anna's boyfriend that this could have happened. Whilst some people insisted on boycotting the man both socially and professionally, he did not lose his job. Nor did he get a significant sentence. As *Wonderzine* reported a few months later, the man pleaded guilty at the very beginning, and the court did not impose a penalty due to the 70th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. He was only to pay 30 000 rubles (around 400 GBP) to Anna instead of initial 300 000 (Savina, 2015). In defending himself, he stated many times on Facebook that Anna was promiscuous, used drugs and blackmailed him after the beating. Nevertheless, he admitted that he made a big mistake (Medialeaks, 2015b).

Kommersant

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[12] She talks about her legal endeavours in the second part of the article that was published five months later.

The article titled *'Obscurantism is now coming from a regional maternity welfare clinic'* was written by a *Kommersant* editor Yuri Lvov who told the story of his female friend (Lvov, 2015). According to her, she recently got a leaflet from a maternity clinic with highly unusual advice for wives and future mothers. Even though he did not publish any photos of the brochure as proof, it is necessary to note that *Kommersant* is a well-known business newspaper with a good reputation, which leaves little space to doubts that Lvov would have made the story up.

 Without much elaborating on it, the author quoted a few recommendations from these leaflets that told women how to keep the family together, how a wife should behave in front of a husband and general dos and don'ts for a woman expecting a child. The tone of the advice was highly unapologetic: *'A woman should not bring out the beast in a man',* or *'Every husband wishes to be the head of the family because it is his destiny from God'*.

The *Kommersant* editor openly criticised the leaflet for its being insulting to women who attend a state clinic. He compared the advice to that from the Domostroi book, a 16th-century Russian set of household rules, among which were patriarchal instructions on domestic and family matters of the Russian society (Potapova, 2001)[13]. His comparison was not far-fetched, considering that a reprint of the Domostroi was one of the most purchased books in the early 1990s (Johnson, 2009). However, some of Lvov's criticisms appeared to be a bit odd considering the general tone of the column. For instance, the journalist wrote that such leaflets might be upsetting for single mothers-to-be because they do not have a husband and thus cannot follow the rules mentioned in the leaflet.

Lvov (2015) also discussed the topic of feminism which he previously thought was a concocted movement because 'our women have long had all the rights', which corresponds to a long-lived sceptical attitude to feminism and gender equality in Russia (Hansson et al., 1983; Tartakovskaya, 2000). The journalist opposed the health department that 'decided to send women back to the kitchen', thus showing that the line between the private sphere and the public domain is quite thin. This type of state interference into women's lives even made Lvov want to become a feminist.

4.2 Readers' Responses

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[13] For instance, one piece of advice goes like that: first, a man must punish a woman by fear. If it does not work, he should punish her with a lash. As Potapova (2001) pointed out, Domostroi illustrates how the state did not take any responsibility for the private (the family), giving this responsibility to the head of the man.

In this section, I use a grounded theory approach to analyse audience responses to three mainstream media articles about women. Due to the specifics of this research method, I had not had a hypothesis before I started coding the comments to the chosen articles (Charmaz, 2014). However, I had a set of research questions that guided me but at the same time did not restrict me. As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, the initial sub-questions proved to be sufficient to answer the main research question: How are contemporary gender politics in Russia reflected in audience responses?

The outline of this section corresponds with the questions posed at the beginning of the dissertation and will be as follows. I first examine commentators' views and opinions on gender, gender order, and inequality, which covers my second research question about the key terms. After this, I go on to discussing political aspects of the comments that include people's understandings and relations with the state, the legal system, and the church. These three actors were chosen due to the frequency with which users mentioned them and due to their power holding position in the context of gender politics. This sub-section provides me with the answers to the third research question on political context. Finally, I move on to the communicational aspects of the comments and examine how people interact with each other. Users' attitude to each other, their argumentation, and linguistic devices help me to answer my last question on politics of online communication.

4.2.1 Views on the Gender Order and Authority

To begin with, various components of the gender order such as masculinity and femininity traits, relationships among the sexes, gender norms, roles and obligations were often discussed (especially in the comments to the *Kommersant* and *Meduza* articles). The majority of users readily shared their opinions on men's and women's roles, positions in the society and within the family, their 'natural' qualities and the right (traditional) order of things. What unites different comments is the unapologetic way in which these ideas were expressed. Many postings about men's and women's behavioural patterns contained phrases like 'must' and 'is supposed to'. Users rarely explained why they thought anybody 'must' do anything, but when they did, they referred to the qualities that are 'natural' or 'normal' to men and women and thus should define their choices and roles:

'Husband must[14] provide for and protect his wife.'

'Aggression is a normal component of men's emotional spectrum.'

'A woman must be responsible for the household, for cosiness. Women are very emotional, and even the smartest ones sometimes cannot control their emotions. Men are logical and rational, more reserved. Indeed, men must be decision makers.'

'Woman's place is in the kitchen. This is right. We must make soups and give birth to children.'

Curiously, some users condemned this 'must' attitude but at the same time supported the gender order within which man is by default superior to woman. As one commentator wrote,

'I often hear that he must do this for her, he must do that for her. Everyone must do something for them only because they are women. Then I ask her, why must he do anything for you? What about you? Have you washed his socks once? She turns silent and confused.'

When people tried to justify their opinions, they usually referred to 'traditional values' and the order of things that should not be disturbed because 'it has always been like this'. This thinking corresponds with the findings from a number of studies on the gender order in Russia and USSR (Hansson et al., 1983; Ashwin and Lytkina, 2004). Additionally, some comments mentioned obscure greater (religious) purposes for men's and women's creation and existence. The last point is summed up in the following remark:

'A woman was intended to be like this -- a man's helper. She must obey him and fulfil his wishes as long as there is no sin in them.'

Additionally, some users mentioned religion and God as the primary source of authority for their opinions: *'According to the laws of this world, laws of God, whether she wants it or not -- she must be married'*. In Russian, to be married literally means 'to be behind the husband' -- 'zamuzhem', so what this user meant is that a woman's role to come second after her husband is destined and even reflected in the language. I will elaborate on the role of church and religion in Russia in the next section, as it also falls into a political category, i.e. holders of power.

Finally, upbringing and social norms that people learn at a young age were also a recurring theme. Many wrote that gender roles are taught and acquired through family examples.

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[14] Hereinafter the emphasis (underlining) is mine.

The tone of such comments was often pessimistic and hopeless because people assumed it was impossible to break away from the imposed norms of behaviour:

'From childhood, they teach us to get used to supporting (second) roles', a female user wrote.

'...From childhood, we, men, are taught that we have to provide for the wife, give her all our money, and in case of divorce, you'll find yourself living on the street.'

4.2.2 Gender Roles in Marriage and Relationships

Relationships and marriage (always heterosexual), were one of the most popular discussion topics among users. A special focus was often given to women's behaviour: what they must and must not do, how they should behave and how they can make marriage/relationship work. The idea that marriage and family constitute a big part of women's identity and are more important for women than men has been a part of a popular discourse for decades if not centuries (Kosterina, 2012). Moreover, online discussions on women's romantic and family roles correspond with the idea that women are allocated to the private and therefore hold more responsibility there (Millett, 1970).

More often than not, both men and women supported the role division and power relationship between spouses and referred to it as a norm. Some users insisted that the hierarchy between wife and husband should not be disrupted. For example, a wife should be very respectful to her husband and not bother him when he comes home from work (*'Such behaviour is very irritating, and it's a pity not all women understand this'*). The same user even recalled a Soviet book of advice for women, which instructed a wife to meet her husband after work wearing an apron and to stay quiet whilst he is eating his dinner. Anything that comes into a clash with this image, for instance, woman's orientation towards professional or creative success, is the basic source of conflict between women and men (Kotovskaia and Shalygina, 1996).

In response to the *Kommersant* article, many people said that the leaflets contained 'recommendations' and 'advice' for women and if somebody did not like them, they did not have to follow them. This argument gives an illusion of choice people can make with regard to the gender order. In fact, a choice is rarely an option because any retreat from normative codes and traditional system of sex-role behaviour leads a person into a conflict with society and themselves (ibid.). As various scholars who studied social and political construction of gender pointed out, gender order leaves most people little room to negotiate the concept of gender,

where most categories, including relationships between men and women, are effects of normative culture rather than nature (Connell, 1987; Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

When some female users called for an equal relationship, they were met with a condescending attitude: '*If a woman is yelling about her rights, it means she hasn't been with a normal man*'. Pointing out women's lack of fulfilment because they have not met 'normal men' also shows how men are divided into different categories, i.e. 'normal' and 'abnormal' groups. The former group consists of conventionally 'manly' men, or as Connell (1987) proposes, men that achieved 'hegemonic masculinity' which oppresses 'marginalised masculinities' because it is socially more valued and culturally powerful (Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Gill, 2007).

4.2.3 Power in Relationships

Commentators usually perceived the relationship between man and woman as a power relationship. The concept of power, which is central to (gender) politics, was not brought up often but it was implied as an underlying principle (Randall, 1998; Corrin, 1999; Squires, 1999). One user mentioned that 'controlling a husband is killing him', and since control is about power, women seem to be deprived of this right. Unlike women, men are entitled to this right, according to some users, and can exploit it in any way possible. Many people argued that the current gender order had been formed long ago and proved to be useful. Moreover, cavemen references and mentions of the past were not at all rare (*'Baba stays at home, man kills -- it has always been like this'*). Or, as one user put it,

'Hit females on the head with a club and drag them <u>to the cave</u>.'

Whilst I cannot be certain whether such comments were serious or sarcastic, my assumption is that these people's beliefs are rooted in the principle of continuity: if traditional gender order worked up until today, then it must be the way to live. Similar ideas were shared by the Soviet women interviewed for the book 'Moscow women' who opposed fundamental changes (Hansson et al., 1983).

It appears that some users viewed power as a finite resource that can be distributed and redistributed, or to put it simply, when someone gains power (for instance, a woman), another loses it (a man). This is, however, a narrow view of the nature of power that chooses the 'power over' rather than the 'power to' approach which feminists have been long advocating for (Squires, 1999). Some commentators suggested that neither men nor women are completely

powerless: in some situations and social occasions, they have more power than in others. For instance, one user proposed that women compensate their lack of opportunity in the social sphere by taking control of the private which has traditionally been a woman's realm (Waylen, 1998; Corrin, 1999). Even though women indeed tend to make more decisions for the family (Malysheva, 2001), it does not explain how this retreat to the private empowers them as citizens. Another interesting point is how some users linked the level of power ('the power over' type) to the level of happiness:

'If a woman wants to live by different rules, to be in command of her husband ... she will have to pay a high price for such whims -- the price is her happiness, family happiness, her children's happiness'.

Some users touched on the nature of power, suggesting that it is not homogeneous and man's power is different from woman's power. As some suggested, being a woman has many advantages in certain situations. For instance, a few users discussed female privileges in the traditionally male domains, such as engineering or programming departments at universities. One of these privileges was thought to be that it is easier for women to get good grades without studying hard, as they can simply say *'I am a girl, I cannot programme'* and teachers would pity them.[15] Different physical criteria for men and women when they want to enter police academies were, too, considered as an illustration of men being less privileged. Male commentators also mentioned women's good looks as a source of power, which is yet another example on how women's lives are regulated by and perceived through their sexuality (Connell, 1987; Corrin, 1999). It was suggested that beautiful women get things more easily and, what is more, they enjoy being treated differently and not needing to study/work hard (*'It is very convenient'*). As one user put it,

'Girls are often lazy, and they like to use their sex to succeed in something that they are not interested in or don't need.'

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[15] It has to do with the fact that exams in Russian universities are very often oral exams and can get very subjective when a student is talking to a professor one on one.

4.2.4 Double Standards and Discrimination

Discrimination experienced by men was a frequent argument to prove that women are not the only ones suffering from the current gender order. Despite the fact that this view ignores the root of the problem -- social, cultural, and political factors that shape the gender order (Barrett, 1980; Connell, 1987; Vogel, 1998), many commentators presented their opinions as if they wished to get even with women by stressing that men are discriminated too. Among the most common examples was military service obligatory for all men in Russia, bread-winning role in the family that puts a lot of pressure on men, later retirement age, lower chances to get custody in case of divorce, alimony, etc. In many situations, men's discrimination or lack of rights was blamed not on the state but on women. This brings me to another recurrent theme – women's fault in various problems, including men's alcoholism (bad wives), stressful relationships (women failed to make them happy), conflicts in a relationship (woman was not sensitive enough), men's bad temper or domestic violence (she provoked him), and even wars (*'All wars are caused by babas'*).[16] I would like to elaborate on one important point from this list, that is domestic violence and the image of a woman who happened to be in an abusive situation.

In response to the *W-O-S* article, many commentators wondered what the author of the article, Anna, must have said or done that the man responded so violently. Entrenching widespread beliefs about women being responsible for the acts of violence they were subjected to (Gill, 2007), a number of readers suggested that Anna had provoked the man, had driven him crazy -- or both -- and that she is not telling the whole truth. Similar findings can be found in Janet Johnson's book 'Gender violence in Russia' (2009) where the scholar, among other things, discussed news coverage in the 1990s that often repeated the myths about women provoking domestic violence. The culture of victim-blaming was accurately summed up in the following comment,

> *'Even if they kill you, the chance is that the fault will likely to be yours.'*

Anna's mentioning of cheating on the man was also taken as a red flag (even though she stressed that he also cheated on her) and this was added to the victim's accountability. In popular discourses, it is more acceptable for men to cheat because it is said to be their 'need' or 'the course of nature' to want more sex (Kay, 2006), or, as Attwood (1996, p.101) put it, 'women

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[16] Nancy Berns (2001) described the discourse of domestic violence as the process of 'degendering the problem and gendering the blame' (i.e. holding women responsible for any shortcomings of men). I suggest that the same approach can be used in other social and private situations.

have material instincts; men have sexual instincts'. This argument falls into a larger category of a sexual double standard which is often a part of a traditional gender order. Sexual needs and practices, cheating, the whore-Madonna dichotomy are just a few aspects that divide men and women in the public eye (Corrin, 1999). In the Soviet years, whilst male sexual desire was tacitly acknowledged, the idea that young women might be interested in sex was improbable in the public discourse. The Ministry of Health went as far as to state that it had been 'scientifically established' that there is no such thing as adolescent female sexuality (Roth-Ey, 2004, p.88).

With the spotlight being always on the victim, the majority of users failed to discuss the image of the man, which could be the result of perceiving male as a norm that does not need to be challenged and female as a deviation from it (Millett, 1970). In some cases, commentators refused to talk about the man at all (*'Don't change the topic. It's about the victim. It's her who's washing her dirty knickers in public'*). Comparing domestic violence to washing dirty linen in public illustrates a conventional view on domestic violence and rape in Russia that has long been a taboo topic (Rimashevskaya et al., 1999). As some commentators observed, the culture of victim-blaming in Russia is very distorted and widely supported by the cultural and linguistic references (for example, there are famous Russian proverbs like *'B'yot znachit lyubit'* which roughly means 'He doesn't love you unless he beats you' or *'Ne vynosi sor iz izby'* which literally means 'Don't take the rubbish out of the house'). A few users mentioned these or similar proverbs when responding to the W-O-S article.

4.3 Agents of Power within Gender Politics

Having discussed people's understandings of the gender order and their views on inequality, I would like to move to the political aspect of the online discussion, which will help me to answer one of my research questions. As suggested in the theoretical chapters, the political realm deals with the notion of power and its distribution (Randall, 1987; Waylen, 1998), therefore, in this section I will focus on the agents of power that came up regularly in the commentary on gender politics. They were the state (and its adversaries), the legislation system (police and courts), and the church (alongside religion).

4.3.1 The State

The idea of the state, sometimes being interchangeable with society and the people, was present in many comments both directly and indirectly. First and foremost, its image was

conflicted and contradictory. It was common for men to say that the state is always on women's side: women do not have to do military service, it is easier for them to get custody in case of divorce, single mothers have many privileges, women can frame men for rape or abuse and the court would be on their side, etc., thus repeating all the themes that are still frequent in news reporting around the world (Gill, 2007). At the same time, women were confident that the state is against them and supports men's supremacy – idea which is shared by most gender scholars (Connell, 1987). Whilst both men and women did have fair points about how the state controls and oppresses people on the basis of gender, nobody addressed a larger issue -- the state as a source of gender politics (Corrin, 1999).

Some discussions among users covered the nature of the state. It was argued that states develop naturally from patriarchal regimes because matriarchal societies are not sustainable in the long run (history and today's countries were used to justify such an opinion). This view is not entirely wrong. However, it is a mistake to suggest that the states developed 'naturally' and were not historically constructed as patriarchal (Connell, 1987). One user was certain that matriarchy is not 'natural' because this order makes men so weak that they are unable to resist patriarchal societies that come to invade them. This point is interesting because it deals with the notion of violence and its consequences such as invasions and enslavements. According to Connell (1987), the control of the means of violence by men rather than women and general militarism are among central prerequisites for the building of patriarchy. However, there is no evidence to suggest that violence, power, and patriarchal rule are 'natural', as the commentator claimed.

Contrary to my expectations, change and continuity were not brought up often, and only a few people discussed how Russia inherited certain problems from the Soviet Union (one of them was said to be domestic violence). However, many users commented on another popular trend in Russia today – the rise of theocracy and the interweaving of the state and the Church. Whilst some users supported this tendency, others were enraged that the state shares its power over people with the Church when it has to protect them from its interference. Interestingly enough, angry commentators were more likely to discuss the fact that the Church interfered with people's private lives rather than the aspects of this intervention, such as family roles and motherhood the Church tried to control. As one commentator enquired,

'Who [what authority] gave them [the Church] permission to write this nonsense and Domostroi ideas in the official medical document?'

In the commentary, users discussed various roles of the Russian state relating to the gender order. One of them was the keeper and defender of traditional values from unnatural western 'tendencies', such as feminism and homosexuality (Attwood, 1996). Previous studies on how the West is portrayed in the Russian media confirm these findings: there is a general fear that Russian culture and traditions can be destructed by the West and thus should be defended from its influences (Vanhala-Aniszewski, 2007). A similar attitude to the 'dangerous' West was prevalent in the 1980s when 'gender equality' was sometimes understood as an extra burden, for the Soviet version of equality meant forcing women to enter workforce whilst taking care of their children (Hansson et al., 1983). These views of the West can be better understood through constructivist concepts of the Self and the Other concerning states' identities. Because the West has long been Russia's adversary, western values and traditions also acquire alien and harmful connotations (Tsygankov, 2016). Instead of arguing why the order of the West is 'wrong' (including feminism and homosexuality), most commentators assumed it was bad only because it came from the West. Negative attitudes toward Europe and the USA can be seen in the following sarcastic comments to the *Kommersant* article:

> *'I guess Europe, with its progressive orientation towards buggery, appeals to the author more.'*
> *'You go to Europe; everything is permitted there, there is tolerance there. Although it will soon become an Arab colony.'*

Nevertheless, some people did not share this view and believed that issues of equality were discussed and taken more seriously in the West and that Russia should follow its example.

> *'Sigh, we are no America. Otherwise, the head of the department that issued such leaflets [for pregnant women] would have been sued already.'*

Not only was Russia compared to the West (and said to be either better -- because it keeps traditions – or worse – because it is not yet progressive enough), it was to some extent defined through this comparison. From the social constructivists' point of view, Russia is continually shaping and redefining its Self-identity in relation to the West depending on the changing international environment (Mankoff, 2012). Among negative features that commentators attributed to the Russian state were Russia's backwardness, lack of progress and 'uncivilised' culture (as compared to the West). One of the recurrent themes was an argument that Russia has not changed much since the Soviet times or even further back in history. The most

common comparison was a reference to the Middle Ages and the order of things at those times. As one commentator elaborated on this bigger picture,

'We don't understand why others treat our country this way; we don't understand why for many years we've been not a developed country but a developing country. How can the country go forward when the majority of the population reside in a humiliated state?'

Interestingly enough, the same argument about the level of civilisation was used by the users who did not share feminist ideas and quite crudely opposed the movement. In their view, the world (and presumably Russia) is so developed and civilised that feminism is not necessary anymore (*'Feminists are dumb. There is no need for them in the 21st century'*). The same argument was used against one commentator who mentioned a few matriarchal tribes that are still functioning in India and Africa. The user was laughed at because she listed such 'uncivilised' countries compared to Russia.

4.3.2. Legal System

As I attempted to show in the previous section, the idea of backwardness is attributed to the whole of the state and transcends onto its institutions and components, including the gender politics.. Therefore, it is expected that another crucial part of the state -- its legal system -- would also be described in such terms. As one user wrote in response to the *Kommersant* articles about the leaflets, *'In any civilised country you could sue lots of governmental officials for this',* implying a causal relationship: because Russia is uncivilised, those officials could not be brought to court. The following comment can illustrate this idea:

'Nobody wants to deal with the court system because we live in the lawless country'.[17]

Many commentators appeared to have strong opinions on the topic: people described their experiences with courts, prosecutors and law enforcement officers, claiming that the system was uncivilised, rigid, and unfair and desperately needed reformation. When Anna, the author of

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[17] I understand that this is a topic of a much larger discussion on corruption and the rule of law in Russia (or the lack thereof) but my argument nonetheless shows interconnection of different branches of power and institutions within the state.

the *W-O-S* article, was talking about her experience, many wished for her to defeat 'the system'. The system, in this case, represents a state machine that does not function properly and harms people rather than helps them (*'I wish for you to break the system with its bureaucratic merry-go-round'*).

The legal system was almost always portrayed as the enemy which people had to fight, defeat, or find their way around. Some users blamed real people (i.e. officials) who were the enemy in their eyes (*'We've got great laws, the problem is in executing them'*). The same applies to topics about corruption and bribery: it was suggested that is not the whole system that is corrupt, it is just some corrupt people. The legal system was never discussed as neutral: it was always on the side of someone who is against you. For instance, many male commentators believed that the court always takes a woman's side when it comes to rape or abuse cases (*'They wouldn't even ask for evidence in court'*). Others argued that the system is designed in a way that humiliates men if they want to seek justice when they had been raped or abused (*'Do you know what a man has to go through?'*). Despite this legitimate argument, commentators still failed to address an institutional problem and a necessity to reform the legal system alongside cultural norms. With regard to women's view of the legal system, many commentators were certain that it was difficult to seek justice and that the system was so rigid that it would not let them file against an abuser.

As can be seen from a few comments above, the concept of justice in Russia is very conflicted. Most commentators were of the opinion that the state and the legal system fail to help people punish the guilty. Therefore, victims together with friends and family have to seek justice on their own, including alternative types of punishment upon perpetrators. In the comments to the *W-O-S* article, some users suggested a physical punishment for the man who had beaten Anna, such as beating him in return on a dark street or breaking his legs and arms. Other people mentioned the ideas of cosmic, karmic, universal justice or special punishment in hell for the abusers. Finally, boycotting (socially and professionally) was also suggested as a means of punishment. I argue that these ideas of alternative punishment instead of legal measures mostly show people's hopelessness and powerlessness.

4.3.3 Church and Religion

Alongside the state and its legal system, albeit with less frequency, some commentators discussed the role of the Church and religion in Russia today. As Malysheva (2001) demonstrates, Orthodox beliefs affect the way Russians perceive and build relationships between

men and women. A union of a man and a woman always seems to be hierarchal which allocates more power to men. The scholar noticed that unlike western countries, in Russia people are more likely to follow blindly religious principles that would guide their views. This set of beliefs was depicted in a number of comments where people saw men's and women's roles not as culturally or socially constructed but as predetermined by God (*'Husband wishes to be the head of the family because it is his destiny designed by God', 'A woman was conceived to be this way by God'*). Both male and female commentators argued that woman's role in marriage and childbirth are God's gifts and she should accept them willingly. In general, woman's behaviour was discussed more often than men's: for instance, 'modern women' in Russia, who pursue career and success, were held accountable for ruined families, men's alcoholism, and even homosexuality. In other words, these modern women threatened their partner's (hegemonic) masculinity and disrupted the right order of things, hence the consequences (Millet, 1970; Connell, 1987).

> *'Modern woman has left the soulful world and entered the man's, material world. Why do you think men are looking for consolation at the bottom of the glass or in partners of the same sex?'*

Not all commentators shared religious principles and respect for the Church, and this group of people was very vocal about their anger at the Church interfering with private lives of the citizens:

> *'I live in a SECULAR country, and I do not wish to see this rubbish about God and husband's control in official medical documents*', one reader wrote in response to the *Kommersant* article.

A few commentators argued that the Church's growing interference in the state and civil affairs is now a tendency that could lead to worrying consequences where the Church would have as much power as the government. The rise of theocracy was also linked to the political agenda of the Putin's regime (*'If the tendency continues, in 20 years a day at school would start with a prayer for the well-being of the tsar')*. Some perceived this theocratic tendency as a path away from civilisation and towards authoritarianism where power is given by God. For a few users, this was an example of brainwashing and state propaganda that used religion to 'unite' people. Finally, some commentators drew a parallel with Muslim countries where women's rights and political freedoms are fairly low.

'This is brilliant. Next step is to give women a nicab', one commentator wrote sarcastically after reading the *Kommersant* article.

As seen from such comments, people who wish the country to be more secular think that the Church is inseparable from the political domain, meaning that the more religious the country is, the less democratic it becomes. I suggest that this aspect of the online discussion is a rare example of when commentators perceive gender politics as a political topic. It appeared that the users who were against the control of the Church saw it as a violation of human rights and not just women's rights (Millett, 1970).

4.4 Communication Among the Commentators

This section helps me answer my last research question on users' interaction with each other. However, as I realised in the process of coding, this question should not be limited to only communication between the commentators because many postings discussed the author of the article and the news site where the article was published. Therefore in this section I first see how people communicated with each other, then I look at their attitude to the author and the news site, and finally, I examine linguistic aspects of the comments and what they can tell us about the gender politics.

It was not an objective of my research to collect personal data on the commentators; nevertheless, I kept track of the commentator's sex to see how men and women communicated with each other. It was interesting to see the divisions that the commentators set for themselves: real/normal men versus not real men, true women versus not true women, and of course, the most persistent one -- men versus women (Millett, 1970). Many users considered men and women as two opposing homogeneous groups, disregarding possible differences among members of the group. When one female user was angry at another man's derogatory remarks, she replied, *'Thanks for making it clear one more time that it is better to stay away from male human beings'.* What is important is that many people did not see a possibility for a constructive dialogue between men and women, not to mention understanding or empathy. As one female commentator put it simply, *'As a man, you would not be able to understand this'.*

The idea that men and women are two opposing homogeneous groups also results in users trying to distance themselves from the group, especially when the whole group is criticised (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Commentators acting defensively proved to be another recurring

theme in the responses, but it was particularly obvious in the article about domestic violence and anti-sexist instructions. Many men felt offended because female users put all men in the same category (*'All men are the same'*, *'Men would never understand'*, *'The world would be a better place if there were no men')* and tried to explain that it is wrong to draw conclusions based on just one abusive man. As one user put it,

> *'The story is horrible, I feel sorry for Anna, but it is not correct to talk angrily about men's violence and throw feminist slogans just after one article'.*

Just like the binary division men versus women was taken for granted, the power relationship between these groups was a big part of the discourse. As the literature suggests, this usually happens because gender inequalities tend to divide men and women into two groups: one that defends an unequal gender order and the other that tries to end it (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Such antagonism results in the popular discourse that equal relationship between man and woman is often seen impossible (Kay, 2006). Likewise, my findings show that men, trying to prove and maintain their power position in the public eye, often posed as intellectually superior members of the discussion compared to less educated and inferior female commentators -- thus retranslating hierarchal modes of interaction between men and women in the online world (Ross, 2010). One commentator wrote, *'Let me explain this to you in a simple way'*, assuming that the female user would not be able to understand it in a 'normal' way. The superior attitude was also clear from phrases like *'It's stupid to say/think that...'* (without explaining why it is stupid) or *'I avoid stupid people/ discussions'* (again, giving no explanation as if his point is self-evident). When they were directly asked for proof that would support their argument, they would jokingly reply *'Trust my word'* or *'I just know from experience'*. There is a great deal of evidence to propose that 'men use talk to dominate, and women are dominated by talk', but the reason behind it is unclear: maybe women lack control in conversation because they lack social power, or perhaps they lack social power because they do not have control of language (Crawford, 1997, p.7).

Another recurring feature in responses was when men addressed like-minded men and highlighted their belonging to a larger group of 'the right men'. The brotherly and cheering-on attitude could be seen in comments like *'Come on! Finish her!'* (meaning -- finish the argument, prove the woman wrong) or *'Go to bed, brother, you are not fighting alone in this war'*, where the war means a discussion with feminists, which corresponds with the fact that 45 per cent of Russian men find 'feminists' repulsive (gtmarket.ru, 2012). The latter example also illustrates the point I addressed above: men and women constitute two opposing camps that are meant to

disagree with and fight each other. Regarding the attitude to each other among men, the level of tolerance towards male users with opposing opinions was also much higher than towards disagreeing women. One commentator politely suggested that another man was perhaps 'not serious and only joking' just because he happened to support feminism.

Condescending attitudes could be observed in men's comments regardless of their opinion. For example, one man 'diagnosed' a woman who supports patriarchy with a Stockholm syndrome, addressing to her as 'lady'. Another man of an opposing view mockingly referred to women who try to fight for equal rights as 'our poor women'. During a textual exchange, female users were often called 'touchy' and 'emotional' – features which have long been seen as traditionally female as opposed to male rationality and assertiveness (Millett, 1970). Some commentators went as far as to compare women to grenades: *'Will you blow up if I pull the safety clip?';* and explosives: *'Whoa, I can see smoke coming from you already'.* Irrationality and inconsistency as natural for women's conversation patterns (Cameron, 2008) was also a recurring argument:

> *'I only see meaningless phrases and avoiding the topic by speaking abstractly.'*
> *'This is the most typical way for women ('babas') to take part in a dialogue.'*

When women questioned gender roles in these discussions, many men felt obliged to defend their power position, often by diminishing and insulting women. Whilst it was crucial for men to establish their intellectual superiority in a discussion, women were often positioning themselves as more cultural and civilised people. Thus, such remarks towards men as '*You are a savage'; 'You have a Middle Age mentality'; 'You are uncivilised'* were common arguments for female users.

Another way for men to establish a power position in an online discussion was to use the idea of marriage as a tool with which to punish or reward female opponents. When the latter were vocal about discrimination women are facing today, a few male commentators jokingly replied that they would not marry them because they did not like feminists. At the same time, they would happily marry women who supported traditional gender roles. Even though such messages were undoubtedly humorous and ironic, they show a) that a woman may feel insulted when a man would not like to marry her; b) that men believe it is a genuine wish for any woman to get married; c) that it is a man who initiates marriage (active gender role), whilst a woman accepts his offer (passive gender role). Such notions would fall into a traditional gender order where marriage is a pre-established hierarchal order within which women are objects, rather than subjects of a power relationship (Vogel, 1998; Corrin, 1999).

For female commentators, a defence strategy included them putting 'good men' in the 'real men' group and insulting 'bad men' by hinting that they might be gay. In this sense, just like the concept of marriage was used to define and evaluate women, (homo)sexuality was used to doubt manliness and, more broadly, men's power position. This is not unexpected, considering that homosexuality is a marginalised and thus less powerful masculinity, according to Connell (1987). Female users also received sexual remarks from men during a heated discussion. In some cases, sexual hints were replaced with flirtatious postings, not to mention the use of smiley faces that set the mood. Even the author of the *W-O-S* article was not exempt from this attitude: together with words of support and advice, she received a polite message from a man who invited her to his place, as he 'makes good coffee'. Overall, flirting (always initiated by men) was not extremely common but a few cases seem to be symptomatic of men disregarding women as serious opponents.

4.5 Author and news site

The authors of the articles and the news sites were, too, topics for discussion, and are important for my work because media serve as channels for gender politics (Gill, 2007). A large number of commentators expressed their opinions on such issues as author's motivation, their trustworthiness, site's reputation and credibility, to name a few.

Attitude toward the author of the article, if expressed openly, was either positive (supportive, grateful for publishing the story) or negative (insulting, doubtful, suspicious). What is curious in the latter group is that such users usually posted offensive comments or comments questioning the author's credibility but never presented any arguments to prove that the journalists were lying. All three articles received criticism from some users who believed that the site was not to be trusted anymore or that this article about women's roles and rights ruined the reputation of a quality news site forever.

According to a Levada centre poll (2016), 42 per cent of Russians do not trust or only partially trust information published on the internet, and my findings support these results. For instance, many commentators expressed doubts about the authenticity of the leaflet retold by the *Kommersant* journalist and called the publication fake, a lie, a provocation and delirium. As one commentator put it,

'Kommersant, you seemed to be something better than a rag that writes about anything. Why are you publishing such gibberish? To compromise yourself? Publishing such articles is what real obscurantism is about.'

Meduza also received rude comments regarding its reputation and credibility. Some users were 'surprised' to see the story about sexism on the website and wondered if *Meduza* was losing its quality. This also shows that, according to the readers, discrimination and feminism are not suitable topics for 'serious' quality news sites (*'It can't be a serious article'; 'I expected better from Meduza'; 'Is this really Meduza, not W-O-S?'*). This view is not unexpected, as most news has always been 'a cultural product that reflects the dominant cultural assumptions about who and what is important', meaning that it is designed for, about and by men (Gill, 2007, p. 114). Not only is feminism viewed as a niche and minor topic, it annoys people: according to recent polls, most men and women react negatively to the word 'feminism' in online discussions (Levinson and Borusyak, 2016).

The *W-O-S* article received the least amount of criticism regarding the reputation of the news site. However, all sorts of doubts were expressed regarding the authenticity of Anna's experience. Despite photos and documents presented in the article, a few commentators still questioned the credibility of the story (someone even suggested that the bruises were self-inflicted so the author could frame the man). Additionally, the author was treated similarly to the female commentators who engaged in discussions with men (as mentioned earlier, men often labelled women emotional and touchy). A few male commentators pointed out that the author overreacted and should not have published the article or even gone to the police when trying to seek justice. Another man claimed that the writer made a few legal mistakes and, seeming both annoyed and amused by the story development, suggested that someone should educate the author or else, *'she will write to the Hague tribunal'*. Another man commented o Anna's not consulting a lawyer first, saying, *'Do you also operate on yourself without hiring doctors? Ah, come on!'*. And another commentator posted a link to a legal advice website and suggested the author reads *'until enlightenment'*.

However, not all comments about the author were negative. In fact, if I exclude users who wanted more punishment/beating for Anna because she had cheated on her partner, the vast majority of users expressed their sympathy, support, and admiration towards the author. What it seems intriguing, however, is that these feelings were put into extremely gendered words. Many commentators attributed Anna's endurance to masculine qualities that she happened to possess: *'You lived through this like a real man'* (which also divides men into 'real' and 'not real' categories); *'Let me shake your hand'* (traditionally male gesture to show respect and/or

approval). Author's courage (*мужество*) was also complemented and, interestingly, the word has masculine roots (*'муж'* meaning *'man, husband'*). [18]

4.6 Language

Since this dissertation largely focuses on verbal responses, it is important to look at various linguistic devices that, as evidence suggests, may create social and cultural realities (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). The key feature of the language use would be the notion of power because it has been noted that power positions allow people to impose their styles and metaphors (ibid.). Furthermore, 'there is no neutral discourse: whenever we speak, we have to choose between different systems of meaning, different sets of values' (Coates, 1998, p.302). According to Crawford (1997), it has long been assumed that 'women's language is inferior to 'neutral' (men's language) and Crawford explains this by the fact that men are awarded more public, official power. However, it would be wrong to say that everything about language is gendered. As Cameron (2008) suggests, gender differences in speech are not always the result of language being a symbol of the speakers' gender; often they show their other social allegiances. In this section I first discuss how gendered language was used to establish a power position, offend, diminish, and humiliate users. Then, I look at 'indirect' forms of language use such as sarcasm, jokes, and puns.

To begin with, a significant portion of derogatory words was directed at women. Rude words that are synonymous with the word 'woman' were used in abundance in online discussions. Among these degrading names were already mentioned 'baba' and 'tyolka' as well as 'tyotka' (usually uncultured and unattractive woman), 'samka' (the word that is used to describe a female animal), 'shkura' (literally means 'skin' in Russian, used figuratively to describe a woman whose only purpose is to provide sexual pleasure, usually 'shkura' enjoys sex which is also used against her), 'shalava' (promiscuous woman), 'dyrka' (literally means 'hole' and hints at female genitalia, used as a metonym to degrade and objectify women) and others. The last four words from this list clearly contain a sexual connotation and equate women with their sexual function. Existing findings in the field of gender and language demonstrate that young men reportedly use more degrading sexual language in reference to women's bodies and more aggressive language than women to talk about sex (Murnen, 2000). The reasons for this are still unclear but the scholar names 'gender intimidation' (making women seem less likeable and intelligent and thus having a lower status) and promotion of male bonding and male status. Likewise, Crawford

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[18] There are a few gender neutral Russian words for 'courage', for example 'смелость', 'храбрость', 'отвага'.

(1997) mentions that boys, unlike girls, are taught to establish their dominant status with the help of words. Additionally, derogatory words used by commentators fit the whore/ virgin paradigm – women who are available for sex, have sex and maybe even enjoy it fall into the whore category and thus should be despised and humiliated on this basis – as reflected in the online commentary.

It was my impression that many users did not pay much attention to the words they used to address women and, more importantly, did not think that language reinforces a hierarchy which exists between women and men (Ross, 2010). When one commentator pointed out derogatory connotations of the word 'tyolka', another (male) user replied that men should not care about it and went on explaining his choice of words:

'I call almost everyone 'baba'. If someone has a problem with it, like, it's "disrespectful to women", then they should be told to bugger off.'

Regarding the way users expressed themselves, sarcasm turned out to the most common tool regardless of the topic. Sarcasm is a part of conversational humour, which is most often gendered in its nature (Crawford, 1997). Among the purposes of sarcastic comments were:
- to diminish the importance of the subject;
- to avoid confrontation;
- to show superiority;
- to mock other people's views;
- to use as a defence mechanism in order to cope with injustice/ stress/ hopelessness.

Puns were mostly common in responses to *Meduza* article because of the word 'tyolka' meaning 'heifer'. Thus, a few commentators demonstrated their wit by playing on the literal meaning: *'So, are these instructions on how to treat a cow?'; 'Will there be instructions on how to treat a male horse?'*, *'How to treat a tyolka? Caress her udder and give a sugar cube'.*

5. Conclusions

This dissertation is the first known study that uses readers' online responses to the news articles about women to examine main features of and agents of power in gender politics in Russia. Taking into consideration general negative attitude toward feminism and gender equality in online discussions (Levinson and Borusyak, 2016), many commentators assumed that quality news sites should not publish articles about women's rights and gender-based discrimination because these topics damage their reputation. The overall tone of online discussions was often heated and sometimes uncivil.

In the course of the research, the underlying principles of gender politics and their formation in Russia were studied alongside people's understandings of these politics, as expressed in online comments to popular news articles. The findings suggest that online discussions about men's and women's roles in society and family, their rights and obligations as well as traditional gender stereotypes correspond with the existing literature on the gender order in Russia.

First, gender order in Russia, including ideas around masculinity and femininity and man-woman relationships, was unapologetically perceived by online commentators as a natural order of things that had been formed long ago. Most frequent arguments about the nature of the gender order included religious, historical and biological references, all of which demonstrated that most people oppose social, cultural and, to some extent, political changes. The fear of transformation appeared to be rooted in accepting gender politics as they are due to the nature of the normative culture that leaves little room to negotiate gender and gender order (Connell, 1987; Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

Further findings showed that online interaction among commentators appeared to be an accurate representation of the traditional gender order in Russia with its hierarchal structure and male supremacy. As could be seen from textual exchanges, male commentators tended to position themselves as intellectually superior members of the discussion compared to less educated female commentators. Such power position was usually taken for granted and resulted in a number of condescending remarks about women being stereotypically emotional and irrational opponents (Cameron, 2008). These findings were also supported by the male commentators' use of language that reinforced a hierarchy between women and men (Ross, 2010). Derogatory and even obscene words with sexual connotations were frequently directed at women.

Second, the comments reflected the contradictory nature of traditional gender order. Perceiving males and females as two homogeneous groups, commentators discussed qualities and roles of each member of the group as if they were universal for everyone. Any deviations from behavioural norms of the group were met with disbelief, scepticism and sometimes ridicule. This binary division of men versus women also resulted in a discussion on double standards of the patriarchal nature experienced by both men and women. One of the biggest debates revolved around men's and women's sexuality and its application in family life and social situations.

The notion of power – the leitmotif of this dissertation -- was a recurring theme in online discussions regardless of the topic. It appeared that people's understandings of power were similar to those of natural resources: power is finite and power relationships are usually a zero-sum scenario, meaning that whatever is gained by one said is lost by the other. Egalitarian relationships thus were thought to be non-existent: if a woman became more active in decision making, she then was in control of the man and family. Intriguingly, it was almost always women who directly interacted with power – either they were gaining it or losing it, whilst men's possession of power was taken for granted. The findings also suggest that in the traditional gender order, power and happiness are linked, in particular for women. As soon as they gain more power either in the family or society, women become unhappy because they disrupt the power play (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Moreover, women's acknowledged lack of social opportunity could also be explained by the power as a resource theory: some commentators argued that women compensate any social lack of power by taking control of the private, which is already a female realm (Corrin, 1999).

Other findings show that women's behaviour, roles and rights were scrutinised and discussed by the commentators more often than men's. Perhaps, this is because female has long been seen as a deviation from a male norm (Millett, 1970). For instance, many debates revolved around defining qualities and characteristics of 'good' girlfriends, wives and mothers – parts of women's identities that have long been suggested to be essential for them (Kosterina, 2012).

The operation of power inevitably brings the agents of power, such as the state and the church, into a discussion. According to the findings, the nature of the state seems to be conflicted, as both men and women saw it as their adversary. Male commentators suggested that the state acted unfairly to men by exploiting masculinity myths that put more pressure on them, whilst female readers believed that the state perpetuated male supremacy. One idea was however absent from people's view: it is that the state is not a neutral third party but a primary source of gender politics (Corrin, 1999).

Whilst all comments can be seen as political because they deal with the concept of power, the conventional political context was also present in the instances when the Russian state

was compared to and even defined through the West. The definition, however, depended on the commentator's views: if they were pro-Western, then Russia and its politics were described as uncivilised and backward. If they were anti-Western, then Russia was seen as a defender of traditional values that are threatened by western 'tendencies' like feminism and same-sex relationships.

Police and courts constituted another agent of power that plays a significant role in shaping and perpetuating gender politics. Similar to people's views on the state, the legal system in Russia was also perceived as a force that tries to punish rather than help. Because of this, the notion of justice also became contorted, which made many people express their wish to seek alternative types of punishment for the guilty. Finally, online comments often mentioned church and religion as sources of authority. Whilst some opposed its interference in people's private lives, others used religious dogmas to justify traditionally ascribed men's and women's roles and hierarchal relationships between the sexes. Growing influence of the church, however, was often linked to Vladimir Putin's regime and portrayed as an additional threat to democracy.

The power of online discussions and its implications should not be underestimated: multiple studies have shown that online comments left to articles influence readers' attitudes and even behaviours regarding the topic of the publication (Anderson et al.,2013; Sung and Lee, 2014). Therefore, I believe that assessment of the findings presented in this dissertation will be invaluable to researchers, journalists, and women's advocates, should they aim to raise public awareness, change or shift norms, and potentially affect policy making (Leung, 2009). Moreover, this study can be used as a foundation for further research, particularly with a focus on agents of power, such as the state and the church, that shape gender politics. Additionally, these research findings may encourage further exploration into the nature of the causal relationship between state politics and its gender order, as I did in the case of Russia's assertive foreign policy and Putin's macho image linked to the masculinisation of Russia

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Appendices

Appendix A
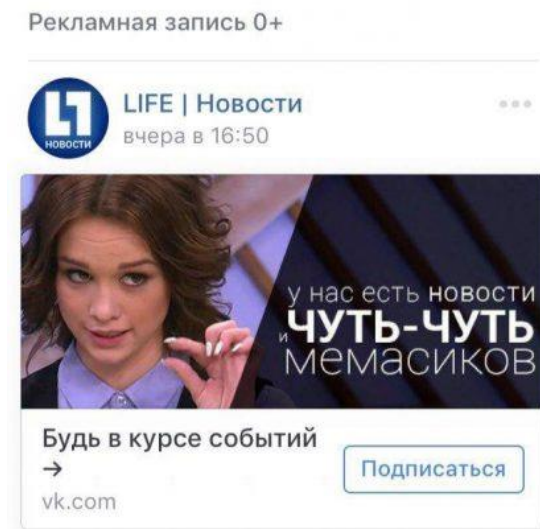
*This is the photo of Diana Shurygina that went viral and turned into a meme. Life news advertised its VKonatkte page by using her photo and stating 'We have news and **a little bit** of memes'.*

Burger King used the same image that shows Diana's gesture 'a little bit'. The poster says, 'The second Big King is free' -- the promotion will work for 'a little bit'.

Appendix B

[In Russian] 'Smoked Sausages. Can also be used as food'.

[In Russian] 'Suck enough to afford a summer house'.

Appendix C

Appendix D

[In Russian] 'Why can't a standard model explain the presence of dark energy?'