Framing the Issue: the Complex Narrative of Feminism

★ Russian history and tradition has played a large role in shaping values, mores, and social norms.

★ An imperial history, an era of communism, and prevailing attitudes about the benefits of a strong state have supported strong governmental influence on Russian society - the individual’s freedom is curbed in order to serve state goals. Russians don’t view this negatively - patriotism and loyalty to the country are central to the modern Russian identity.

★ Russia is a hybrid regime, meaning that it incorporates both democratic and authoritarian elements. This impacts the formation and success of social movements. (We’ll get to that...)
Women in the Soviet Union: Exploitative Equality

★ The Soviet Union’s success depended on the economic productivity of its citizens; women and men were expected to contribute equally in the workforce.

★ The demand for labor led to an emphasis on childbearing; motherhood was treated as an obligation, not a choice. Gender roles were defined in terms of what the state required.

★ Women were expected to work a job and maintain the home, making them responsible for both “productive and reproductive labor” (Rivkin-Fish)

★ The government offered financial support to mothers, effectively dominating the familial power structure. “State paternalism” replaced the father as the head of the family.
The Post-Soviet Era & The New Feminism

★ The downfall of the Soviet Union prompted a return to traditional constructions of gender and family dynamics. Men came to dominate the newly-available positions of authority in politics and business.
★ The fall of Soviet restrictions on speech and press gave women who were frustrated by their second-class status a way to be heard. Scattered feminist activity and discourse arose.
★ Interaction with international feminists and feminist organizations assisted Russian feminists define their movement’s goals.
Post-Soviet Feminism, continued...

★ Introduction of international legal language into feminist manifestos gave the feminist movement a political and legal legitimacy in Russia; women’s rights were framed as human rights, and the deprivation of rights for women was framed as a violation of human rights.

★ Thus, feminists were able to establish a “rights frame” that drew on international influences and endowed the new feminist movement with legitimacy at the national level.
Feminism in Modern Russia

- Russia has become a “gendered regime,” attempting to appear “masculine” in order to show strength and political legitimacy.
- While there has remained a focus on gender equality, legal and social barriers to feminist organization and mobilization have caused a decline in tangible “feminist” activities and discourse.
- People tend shy away from gendered perspectives. Even activists who deal with women’s issues tend not to describe themselves as feminists and insist that their work is apolitical.
- Such barriers to feminist organization and discourse have caused the majority of feminist movements to become women’s movements - organization and mobilization by women that does not seek to achieve a “gendered” goal.
The Cultural Frame of Feminism

A variety of factors are invoked to frame the way that feminism is construed - and perceived - as a hostile (and even dangerous) phenomenon in Russia.

I call this the “cultural frame” of feminism: the way in which feminism is presented as a force that attacks or compromises the values, mores, and social norms that the Russian state and citizenry adhere to, thereby portraying feminism as a force to be resisted.

And these factors are...
Cultural Framing: Religion

★ Christian Orthodoxy is a powerful force in Russian society; estimates put 80%-90% of Russians as adherents to the Russian Orthodox faith.
★ The dominant role of men and submissive role of women is well-established in religion; this theological concept, combined with the political influence and legitimacy that the Orthodox Church enjoys in Russia, has lent itself to the promotion of traditional gender roles.
★ Early tsars referred to the Russian Empire as the “Third Rome,” exalting it as the center of true Christianity.
Patriarch Kirill: Feminism is dangerous because it assumes that there is a destiny for a woman beyond marriage and family.
Cultural Framing: (Superior) Russian Morality

★ Vladimir Putin calls Russia “the moral compass of the world.” Unlike the West - which invokes “genderless and infertile” tolerance of non-traditional values and lifestyles - Russia embodies proper morality.

○ Such language implies that the essential traditional values are gendered and fertile - leaving little room for gender norms to be challenged.

★ Homicide, prostitution, drug and alcohol use, and youth crime are higher in Russia than in the West; however, in this framing process, Russian morality is superior to Western morality because Russia embraces traditional values (which are inherently gendered).
Childbearing has become a politicized issue as fertility has become a source of political legitimacy. Russia’s aging population, high mortality rate, and low fertility rate has caused the state to promote family values in an attempt to increase the population.

Such an approach is reminiscent of Soviet construction of motherhood as an obligation of citizenship.
Cultural Framing: The Enemy

★ Historical and modern relationships between Russia, Europe, and the United States has led to a mutual distrust between Russia and the West.
★ 85% of Russians view the U.S. unfavorably.
★ Such a hostile relationship makes “western values” unappealing to many Russians, especially when such values are framed as being antithetical to their own.
★ There’s a view - echoed often by politicians - that the United States and Europe are promoting these values in order to cause the downfall of Russia.
★ Russia sees its culture, morality, and tradition as inherently different (and better) than culture found elsewhere in the world. In the Russian view, if westernized norms are introduced in Russian society, Russia will lose this distinctiveness and superiority.
Патриоты России
today at 1:18 pm

Родили 1 ребенка
Общество умирает

Родили 2 детей
Общество статично

Родили 3 детей
Общество развивается

Познавай и думай
The Opposition (Anti) Frame of Feminism

★ So, in Russia, there is a frame of anti-feminism that portrays feminism as a hostile force to be resisted.
★ Such a frame is an opposition or anti frame: it focuses on the supposed “enemy,” and while it does not necessarily identify solutions to the problem the enemy poses, it’s effective at unifying opponents of this enemy.
Legal Frame

...and one last frame.

A legal frame is invoked by both feminist movements and the forces that oppose them.

★ The feminist movement draws on the rights frame established in the post-Soviet period in order to frame the movement in legal terms.
★ The legitimacy given to gender equality by international institutions has allowed feminists to claim human rights as a legal basis for their movement - which provides a basis for challenging oppressive national laws.

And on the other side...

★ A rollback of civil liberties has hindered activism and social movements. The Russian government claims that such measures are necessary to protect the state, the society, and the citizens.
★ The Russian constitution declares that men and women are equal, but doesn’t prohibit gender discrimination.
★ Laws ensuring gender equality aren’t always enforced - there’s a large disconnect between the laws on the books and the laws that are actually invoked.
The Conflicting Legal Frames

...and so, on the one hand, feminists claim that their cause is supported by human rights laws and legislation.

On the other hand, the Russian government claims that their opposition to the feminist cause is necessary for the common good.

Murky territory regarding gender equality in Russia gives the state freedom to define and promote gender equality to further its own goals.
In an event that’s now infamous, the feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot performed a song in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

- The song called for the Mother of God to “drive Putin away” and become a feminist. They suggested that Russia needs a “feminist beating.”

The four members of the group were tried and convicted of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.

- The judge held that the women had “undermined the social order” and that their performance constituted blasphemy.
Also infamous is the feminist activist group FEMEN, which stages topless protests against sexism, corruption, religious institutions, homophobia, and fascism.

Founded in Ukraine, it’s now based in Paris - founder Inna Shevchenko applied for asylum in France after she experienced physical attacks and death threats.

FEMEN’S Russia-related moments include chopping down an Orthodox cross, defacing a wax figure of Vladimir Putin, posting photos showing Putin and Patriarch Kirill being attacked by a chainsaw, and ambushing the Russian president in Germany.

FEMEN’s manifesto claims that the organization “fights patriarchy in its three manifestations: sexual exploitation of women, dictatorship, and religion.”

To FEMEN, politics are gendered - and abuse of political power is male aggression.