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## St. Petersburg LGBTQI+ Activists Negotiating Financial and Symbolic Resources

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*Who are we: a tree without any roots, or a part of centuries-long resistance  
against artificial normalization of bodies, sexualities, and self-expression?  
How do we experience the intersection of LGBTI identities and our  
religions and traditions?*

—(QueerFest 2018, St. Petersburg, author's translation)

The quotation above was published on a web page of QueerFest,<sup>1</sup> an international human rights festival dedicated to consolidating the LGBTQI+<sup>2</sup> community, bringing visibility to and celebrating “otherness,” and promoting queer rights through culture and the arts. The event, organized by the local civic initiative group *Vykhod* (“Coming out”) in St. Petersburg, Russia, has taken place annually at the end of September since 2009. Over the years, it has attracted thousands of participants to art exhibitions, theatrical performances, music concerts, discussions, film viewings, etc. In 2018, the

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theme of the festival was “*Ia gorzhus’ moei kul’turoi*” (“I am proud of my culture”), challenging the common perception of LGBTQI+ activism as “a rootless tree” that is external, even alien, to Russian society at large. Such a view has been imposed by the state-supported homophobia and bigotry manifested in legislation—normative acts that target LGBTQI+ activism directly<sup>3</sup> or indirectly as part of an overall crackdown on civil society<sup>4</sup>—and reflected in individual hate crimes and detention camps (Kondakov, 2013, 2019a, 2019b).

Like other parts of civil society, lesbian and gay activism in Russia emerged on the wave of democratization and liberalization of the late 1980s and early 1990s, often with strong international support. “Getting out of the closet and into the streets” has long been central to Western LGBTQI+ identity politics (Kulpa & Mizelińska, 2011; Stella, 2012), reflecting an almost evolutionistic and chronological path for an identarian emancipation of LGBTQI+ people. The development of the LGBTQI+ movement in Russia tells a different story. The post-Soviet civil rights movement that advocated the decriminalization of homosexuality openly criticized the Soviet practices of imprisonment and coercive commitment to mental institutions; it also brought attention to LGBTQI+ people as a forgotten “other Russia” and as a violated minority (Baer, 2009, p. 11; Roldugina, 2018). At the same time, the regime-led panic over sexual citizens resulted in the topic remaining relatively closed (Baer, 2009; Essig, 1999; Gradskaia, 2020; Horne et al., 2009; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Verbilovich, 2020).

The post-Soviet society’s “inability to find proper verbal signifiers for new reality and practices” (Forrester et al., 2014, p. 6) was challenged by the collective coming out of LGBTQI+ activists as they rejected the external and highly stigmatizing terms for non-heterosexuals that had originated in Soviet prison slang. Reflecting the hierarchy of convicts, non-heterosexuals were still referred to as *opushchenyi* (degraded ones)—those at the lowest stratum in prisons (Baer, 2009; Essig, 1999; Kuntsman, 2008). Public demonstrations increased in popularity and frequency in Russia and were supported by Euro-American gay movements; the LGBTQI+ activist movement began to employ verbal signifiers from Euro-American gay movements. In addition, in the summer of 1991, a group of gay and lesbian Americans visited Moscow and St. Petersburg;

together with their local counterparts, they organized the first Pride demonstrations, film festivals, discussions and even visits to a prison in attempts to dismantle the Soviet sodomy law (121.1) (Essig, 1999; Franeta, 2004). Participation in transnational networks has remained an important resource, both financial and symbolic, especially when the (often imagined) realities of LGBTQI+ people in the global West were compared to Russian experiences (Baer, 2009; Healey, 2018). At the same time, in the context of a hostile and repressive national framework, such support was available only to a relatively small group of actors. LGBT organizations' ability to build resources (Gagyí & Ivancheva, 2019; Henderson, 2011) resulted in their achieving elite status in the Russian LGBTQI+ movement, evidencing a prioritization of the role of expertise in civil society organizations (Henderson, 2002). In other cases, foreign funders were unable to recognize forms of activism that lacked professional organizing or familiar goals.

Contextual specificities and local needs and desires may be difficult for foreign donors to grasp, and this has been shown to hinder recognition of local activities and, thus, funding (Bogdanova et al., 2018; Clément, 2008). In addition, registering an organization is a complex process and may attract unwanted government attention; an unregistered initiative, however, possesses no bank account and is therefore unable to receive even foreign funding. Research has also shown that organizations receiving financial resources from transnational sponsors may experience tension between internal accountability and accountability to the external funders (Bickham Mendez & Wolf, 2001, p. 726). This reflects how ideas and methods for activism presented by transnational actors may not sufficiently bridge the gap between transnational practicalities and local needs. Against this background, the aim of this chapter is to examine what constitutes the contemporary narrative of LGBTQI+ culture and belonging in St. Petersburg, how it developed, and how it can be used as a foundation for organizing in a decidedly hostile institutional context.

Data for this study come from a larger ethnographic study conducted during approximately seven months between 2017 and 2019 in St. Petersburg, Russia. The study focused on LGBT organizations, initiative groups, and activists in the city as well as those living abroad. The analysis in this chapter draws on interviews and participant observations with

nine subjects who were residing in St. Petersburg and working in both organizations and self-organized groups at the time of the fieldwork. The research participants presented in this text vary in terms of age and background as well as gender and sexual identification. Contacts with the informants were facilitated by my taking part in events organized by their organizations as well as my participation in and volunteer work for self-organizing activist groups. For the sake of informants' safety and the ethical integrity of the research, I do not identify individuals, groups or organizations.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to note that three of the interviewees worked as executive or well-known public figures in the three most prominent locally established and transnationally recognized organizations in St. Petersburg. These organizations have approximately three to five full-time employees and two to four part-time or project-based staff members, as well as numerous volunteers who assist on an as-needed basis at different events and projects. The organizations provide various types of support to the LGBTQI+ community (and members of other risk groups, e.g., sex workers) in St. Petersburg and other regions, especially the nearby Leningrad Oblast. Services offered include psychological support, social services to individuals with disabilities, legal aid, and help obtaining access to medical care for people with HIV. The other four interviewees were members of informal initiative groups focusing on art, creativity, and well-being, often relying on less institutional forms of activities and organizing. One interviewee was an active member of a group that focused mostly on public actions. Although I distinguish between organizational employees and self-organizing group participants in this chapter, I do so to consider and compare their processes of acquiring, employing, forming, and sharing resources.

The chapter is organized as follows. I begin by depicting the sources and the role of financial resources within the St. Petersburg LGBTQI+ activist movement. From there I move to present my approach to symbolic resources and their role in studying the movement with an ethnographic research method. I further explore what symbolic resources emerge; examine how they are developed through the hybrid, temporal, and liminal acquisition of different resources; and describe the processes of their development, usage, exchange, and occasional debate by different actors within the St. Petersburg LGBTQI+ movement.

## Resources and Transnational LGBTQI+ Networks: Conceptual Framework

Although LGBTQI+ activists and organizations are an important part of transnational human rights advocacy networks, they have scarcely been studied in Russia (for exceptions, see Andreevskikh, 2018; Buyantueva, 2020; Healey, 2018; Kondakov, 2013). Studies have mostly focused on the top-down impacts of anti-gay legislation (e.g., Wilkinson, 2014; Zhabenko, 2019) and often on formally registered civil society organizations (Henderson, 2011; Johnson & Saarinen, 2011; Salmenniemi, 2005). However, in response to scrutiny and restrictions, other organizational forms proliferate in the LGBTQI+ movement, including media and online activism (Andreevskikh, 2018; Gabowitsch, 2016; Johnson & Saarinen, 2011). In the context of increasing informal organizing (see Bederson & Semenov, Chap. 7 in this volume), it is an especially important scientific endeavor to understand the shaping of the exchange, adaptation, negotiation, and contestation of different resources within the LGBTQI+ movement and between the movement and its environment. I argue here that the interplay between economic and symbolic resources plays a vital role in these processes.

As mentioned above, the crackdown on Russian civil society in general and state-led discrimination against LGBTQI+ activists and organizations in particular have resulted in a depletion of financial resources over the last two decades. In this context, immaterial resources, such as symbols of solidarity and/or belonging, discourses, myths, identities, and knowledge remain available as they still travel across borders rather easily (Cohen, 1986; Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011). Activists' transnationality is established through personal contacts with foreign and mobile Russian activists (Lukinmaa & Berezkin, 2019) but also via different sources of information available online. These have encouraged St. Petersburg activists to develop skills in generating new resources to pursue their goals locally. In this study, I approach the concept of symbolic resources as an example of the hybridization process of cultures and identities (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011; Morozov & Rumelili, 2012) and consider its role within the dynamics of the movement in St. Petersburg. Symbolic

resources hold particular significance locally (Cohen, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Wagner, 1975). Pierre Bourdieu defined symbolic capital as a credit, as power granted to those who have “obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 23). Activists employ ideas that come from people who hold symbolic capital and consider them an inspiration for their activism as well as for growing their own symbolic resources in the long term.

Different types of capital (economic, cultural, social, political) may (to different degrees) hold symbolic importance as long as they receive explicit or practical recognition (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 242) among the collectives. Cultural capital is particularly likely to evolve into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 245). An example of a symbolic resource may be a collective reading and discussion of texts by Russian-speaking queer authors who hold symbolic capital within the collectives and even in the society. Well-known queer poets such as Sophia Parnok, Marina Tsvetaeva, Mikhail Kuzmin, and Zinaida Gippius, as well as their social circles, provide cultural inspiration for forming symbolic resources. The lively salon culture of these poets, with its attendant debates, helps activists to consider LGBTQI+ activism as something taking place in semi-public surroundings as well as in the streets. Activists may opt to structure their activities as *kvartirniki*,<sup>6</sup> a familiar form of semi-public gathering in existence since the times of monarchist Russia. These link LGBTQI+ activists to the strong literary culture and the long history of dissident and queer collectives in Russia and the Soviet Union (Ekonen, 2014; Roldugina, 2018); they also connect them to the transnational queer activists for whom creating safe spaces for sharing, possible emancipation, and momentous world-making is often considered vital (Kyrölä, 2018; Muñoz, 1999).

Analysis of these symbols aids in the recognition of certain types of organizational texture that, while immaterial, are functionally essential for civil activities that may not have or even need typical resources such as offices, staff, printed materials, and the like. A few important empirical studies on LGBTQI+ subjects in various locations in Russia have focused on localized knowledge and practices among people who share rather similar sociohistorical backgrounds and current operating environments (Andreevskikh, 2018; Horne et al., 2009; Roldugina, 2018; Stella, 2012;

Stella & Nartova, 2015). Nevertheless, the development and usage of both transnational and local resources have not yet been studied in detail. I consider ethnographic research aiming for a close view of local subjects' navigation within the movement and its symbols to be crucial in this attempt. My ethnographic analysis develops my assertion that the rather restricted operating environment may enable new approaches to LGBTQI+ activism that can destabilize (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Morozov & Rumelili, 2012; Wiedlack, 2017) the West-centrism of current transnational LGBTQI+ activism (Kulpa & Mizieleńska, 2011; Suchland, 2011) and create symbolically important resources for the movement both locally and transnationally. Subsequently, I introduce the organizations and self-organized activist groups depicted in this chapter through ethnographic material collected during my observation of and participation in several activities with the activists.

## **The Puzzle of Local Legislation, Activism, and Foreign Funding: Creating New Tactics**

The shrinking space for LGBTQI+ activism in contemporary Russia has meant restricted financial resources from transnational advocacy networks. Due to the hardships of a repressive context and the difficulty of acquiring financial support, the possible boundaries between formal LGBT organizations and informal groups in St. Petersburg are being crossed with increasing frequency. The interviews showed that when organizations and groups were still receiving transnational funding, they did not publicly share their donors' names, the amounts received, or other financial details. This firstly indicates the tense nature of the operating environment. It may also reveal a sense of loyalty to the donors, a long-term commitment, or at least a wish to build such a commitment on the part of the recipient organizations. Furthermore, revealing such information could risk essential sources of financial aid or the donors themselves and could even lead to an organization's labeling as "undesirable" [*nezhelatel'nye NKO*] (cf. Bederson & Semenov, Chap. 7 in this volume). Ivan, coordinator of one of the few initiatives that received

direct funding from foreign donors, described the sensitivity of the transnational cooperation and the current culture of fear surrounding it:

- Ivan: And we worked with XX [supranational organ] of course and XY [another supranational organ], but XY asked us not to mention in open research that they help [a specific LGBTQI+ group] in Russia. Because they are trying to show that they work only on educational issues in Russia.
- Pauliina: What does that mean in practice?
- Ivan: It means that they help with some educational exchange programs, but the other side is that they provide financial support for LGBTQI+ groups.
- Pauliina: So not directly?
- Ivan: Yes, not directly. So [officially] they supported us with some courses, and with some brochures. (Ivan, 6 April 2018)

According to both activists and representatives of formal organizations, donors often have a certain amount of funding earmarked for self-organized local groups. Nevertheless, access to funding is not easy to obtain and is, moreover, susceptible to the geopolitical situation. This further increases the vulnerability of the groups' funding. Another interlocutor, Olesya, expressed her frustration about the inequality of access to financial resources combined with the inconsistency of legislative amendments:

Laws are changing on a daily basis, undesirable NGOs, they put Soros on the list. Soros was funding really all NGOs, those who were working on civil society. And that of course increases the competition between the NGOs for the funding that is still available. And you can't get the state funding. It goes to the pseudo or nationalist groups, conservative ones, or the Orthodox Church, which get huge grants from the state. (Olesya, 30 July 2017)

Despite her group's being privileged to receive rather steady foreign financial funding, unlike Ivan's group, Olesya's comment reflects the discrepancy in funding opportunities for different civil society organizations in Russia. One instance is the growing role of the Presidential Grants as a

sponsor or even funder of certain civil society organizations in Russia, which excludes LGBTQI+-focused as well as many other human rights-focused organizations (Skokova & Fröhlich, Chap. 3 in this volume). The restrictions on accessing financial resources and the constant concern about possibly being under surveillance have created a culture of suspicion among the local organizations and their supporters. In addition, both organizations and groups are currently developing new forms of fundraising online and even offline in Russia.

Some organizations have also officially ceased to exist as organizations in Russia. They are now registered in different forms, for example, as for-profits. Olesya, director of an LGBT organization, describes the situation as follows:

We don't have an NGO anymore; it has closed down. Many NGOs have closed down. People are being funded in different ways, have different legal statuses in order to get around these legal frames, the foreign agent law. Some escape completely, go to other sectors, mostly to business. Some NGOs have closed down but reopened in different forms. Some people work individually. The climate strongly influences what's happening. [...] [I]t's slowing progress down. Of course, on a professional level, it's difficult to find professional people, like a PR person. If there is someone talented, they prefer to go to business, where they are better paid. (Olesya, 30 July 2017)

Olesya's organization is no longer registered as one, although its long-term activities did not change considerably after it was labeled a "foreign agent." Moreover, its role within the movement continues to be remarkable: it still organizes one of the biggest internationally acknowledged LGBT-themed events in Russia. However, the overall situation is far from easy, and the group's activities and advocacy efforts directed toward possible stakeholders are more restricted than before. Due to its long-term cooperation with international sponsors and the mutual trust that it has managed to build, the change of its legal status has had a relatively minor impact on its funding from international donors. Due to restrictive legislation and suspicion from officials, registration is out of the question for many civil activists. The boundaries between the criteria for civil society

organizations and initiatives have thus become increasingly fluid (see Bederson & Semenov, Chap. 7 in this volume).

The organization where Olga worked was using its position to offer funding for initiatives and organizations in regions that share their goals in LGBTQI+ activism. Here, too, the negotiations over symbolic resources are the most vivid:

You probably know that LGBT initiatives aren't legal entities. So they cannot get money directly. We are kind of a hub this way. We have a special program; activists from the regions can make applications. So, for example, if someone wants to do training or publish something, we provide money for that. (Olga, 22 November 2017)

Operating in a repressive legislative environment has further mobilized organizations and groups, increased their expertise, and encouraged them to interrogate their symbolic resources. Likewise, it has helped to bring them closer to the broader local civil society.

At that time [in 2008 upon forming the organization] it was all quite isolated, because civil society did not really accept us [LGBTQI+ activists]. We couldn't go to any general human rights events. The organizer of these events, the Human Rights Council of St. Petersburg, didn't particularly welcome us either. And only in 2013, when the campaign on the draft law [national legislation of the 'anti-gay propaganda law'] began, then—in a way because of it—the [local] human rights community began to get seriously involved and support us. (Oksana, 30 August 2017)

The process that Oksana described forced the movement to reconsider its local approach to advocating for LGBTQI+ issues. When LGBTQI+ activists' isolation from civil society became a public and governmental topic for negotiation, it also touched upon something symbolically valuable within civil society. Today, organizations and activists engage increasingly in dialogue with representatives of organizations and activists from other spheres as well as with journalists from the local media. The skills and knowledge gained in this challenging context have been put to use and recognized, at least by the other civil society actors and a limited

number of other actors. Interestingly, as is further elaborated upon in the next section, this use and recognition also opened up possibilities for activists and the surrounding society to relate to each other by means of locally constructed symbolic resources.

## Developing Symbolic Resources

The present-day situation for LGBTQI+ people and activism in Russia has made coming-out initiatives such as street protests truly dangerous. It is also important to remember that these events continue to take place at the moment of the writing of this chapter, though the activists are generally very aware of legislation and the possibility of violence. Many activists have spent several days together, reflecting and supporting each other after the profound experiences of aggression that were commonplace during the period from 2011 to 2015. They continue to take care of each other, though some have fled the country. For example, those who remain take food and other supplies to their friends being held in police custody. Oksana described her experiences of recent twists and turns for the movement as follows:

When the events around the legislation, the law on propaganda took place, and then immediately the foreign agent law appeared, as well as a list of undesirable organizations [...] It all happened like in a dream. We just worked, worked; went to the actions; prepared new actions; worked with volunteers, with the guys who barely survived several forms of aggression; helped the families. (Oksana, 30 August 2017)

In this situation, the activists in St. Petersburg turned inward to what is perceived as a domestic tradition of self-expression and solidarity (Shlapentokh, 1990). In addition to offline activities, online discussions took place along with expressions of support and solidarity. These discussions increasingly centered on the well-being of the activists and aimed to create temporary safe spaces for reflection on what had happened, how they were feeling, and what the future would hold. This, in turn, activated the discussion of symbolic resources. As the streets were not open

for the activists as they had been before, new ideas were created. As a result, activists created self-organized groups, also offline, that would be specially by them and for them, freeing them from accountability to anyone outside the community. Safety and sensitivity to personal space became a symbolic resource within these groups as well as a symbolic boundary between their sense of similarity to difference and the dominant coming-out narrative of the global LGBTQI+ movement (Cohen, 1986).

The concept of an “Open Space” for the abovementioned annual QueerFest manifested, in a way, the organizers’ recognition of this change in 2014. Open Space invited independent activists and groups, both local and from other Russian regions, and, since 2016, Russian-speaking activists and groups located in other former Soviet countries. The QueerFest organizers selected participants by means of an open competition with an online format. This call may have been initiated due to the festival’s financial limitations; nevertheless, it managed to successfully increase the festival’s inclusivity of new identifications, activities, discussions, initiatives, and self-organized groups. In return, the locally, nationally, and internationally recognized QueerFest provided space and visibility for them, thus aiding in the development of various new collectives. According to my observations during the event, the Open Space activities were very popular and were valued by activists. They brought new, relatable, and at times refreshing utopian discussions and approaches to LGBTQI+ issues, activism, and their relationships to the surrounding society. These topics did not become part of organizations’ activities, but they were often picked up by local activists. They were often organized by their fellow activists, motivated by genuine interest and mostly without financial support. Today, it seems questionable to depict these sub-events in the frame of Open Space when, in fact, these external initiators present a majority of the QueerFest program.

References to and the use of context-specific discourses is often combined with global symbols and attributes of the global LGBTQI+ movement. QueerFest still includes itself in the global network of Pride parade organizers, relying on the concept of European Pride and LGBTQI+ movements, and does not challenge the Pride concept.

The concept of QueerFest lies in European Prides: cultural and human rights events lasting for a week and culminating with a demonstration. In the Russian context, however, instead of a march, there is a concert in support of the LGBT+ communities in Russia. (QueerFest 2019)

The local context made it necessary for the organizers to specify the event and employ different symbolisms and forms. This similarly reveals the pitfall of the dominant transnational and abstracted traveling concepts, methods, and ideas for LGBTQI+ activism: they may be unsuitable for certain locations, and some forms of LGBTQI+ activities are not recognized (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011; Stella, 2012). Skillful navigation within these challenges and possibilities could be enhanced as a symbolic resource and refer to the need for diverse methods of activism grounded in the context of specific locations (Lotman, 2009). Inessa, who coordinates her own initiative, expressed her contentedness with the diversifying movement as reflected in self-organized groups:

Today there are so many small groups, which is absolutely great, actually. And many of them are not looking to become institutionalized organizations. They just get together and do whatever they want, and then maybe decide not to do it anymore, and that's it. And this is a really healthy attitude. (Inessa, 17 July 2017)

The activists' groups and collectives organize several activities ranging from dance therapy, queer poetry, queer hip-hop, and queer rap to master classes in art and so on. Inga [they/them] has several gender-nonconforming art projects. During the last year, they have been invited to do performances both around and outside Russia. Currently, Inga organizes different art-focused activities in St. Petersburg and abroad.

I have a movement, I express my kind of energy, expression, aggression, anger, all this. And for this, hip-hop is a good style. And I think that maybe it's not bad, even if white people use hip-hop, because you do your own hip-hop. Your hip-hop. For me, you know, we have such a situation [the silencing of LGBTQI+ people] in Russia. That's how it is. I am in such a situation, you know, and my friends too. I can just take it and translate it into rap. (Inga, 2 December 2018)

Inga tried volunteering for one of the local LGBT organizations; however, they found that the activities were not inclusive enough. According to Inga, there is a demand for spaces that allow and encourage the articulation of shared identities and experiences within safe boundaries (Stella, 2012, p. 1843). Similar ideas of grassroots community-building are visible in gender-non-binary activist Ivy's comment:

We kind of have disagreements about that [place to gather], because different people prefer different types of interaction. Some people are comfortable at the office of [local LGBT organization] because there are no other people. There is also no danger of being disclosed, while other people feel that the office is too official, and they can't totally relax there. [...] People want to be freer. And we also want to have parties, like *kvarturniki*. But not everybody is so comfortable going to these parties. So, we are trying to use different formats so that people can come, well, perhaps not every time, but when they are comfortable with the format. (Ivy, 24 March 2018)

Activists' artistic engagements also include poetry, both related to LGBTQI+ experiences and written by people outside the community. Moreover, classic Russian and Soviet authors can also be included in poetry readings, as Ivy explains:

[A]t first we had solely queer or at least lesbian poems, but now people choose the poems that speak to them despite the fact that they may not exactly be poems by queers or lesbians. They read poems from the Silver Age, but also from late Soviet literature—poems that speak to queer and gender non-conforming people. Participants write and publish their own poems online. (Ivy, 3 December 2018)

Experimentation with language and the search for forms of expression that do not comply with heteronormativity have led to the introduction of linguistic forms widely used in the international LGBTQI+ movement. For instance, some of the poets' group participants apply the singular pronoun "they" [*oni*] in their own writing and use poetry as a means for normalizing this practice, demonstrating that what to some people may sound "complicated and unfamiliar" does not "sound bad, because it actually sounds good." Moreover, re-translation (and reinterpretation)

of previously translated works of poetry become a part of the mission of overcoming heteronormative censorship and coming closer to the original authors' intentions (cf. Baer, 2011). This way, they tie the works to the surrounding society while also encouraging society to move in a direction that might also welcome them.

Some initiatives use creative tactics for open resistance and, in this way, take an active part in local discussions. One of their activists described their tactics as follows:

We just do not have the resources, for example, for some advertising that costs money. We do not have the means to publish books. And we are trying to use cheap ways. Cheap in the sense that, for example, we communicate with the press through some interesting actions. And then the press writes about you. And therefore...we have some very provocative things like [the demonstration *Gei za Putina*]. (Igor, 8 April 2018)

Igor refers to a tongue-in-cheek LGBTQI+ demonstration, *Gei za Putina*, that began as a response to a homophobic presidential campaign ad in early 2018 and aimed at drawing attention both to discrimination against the LGBTQI+ community and to civil rights violations in general. At the time of the interview, Igor was organizing several street actions with his peers, selecting current discussions from the government-sponsored mass media and traveling around the country to raise awareness of the LGBTQI+ issues among the public. Igor and his peers were also taking part in other actions with their rainbow flags and other LGBTQI+ symbols. They do this because “no one else [in the movement] does this” and because “we like to do them [street actions].” Igor considers that local LGBTQI+ groups exaggerate the aggression taking place in the streets. According to him, passers-by generally “do not care—because there are so many social and economic problems, and because LGBTQI+ issues are not interesting to most” (Igor, 8 April 2018). It was also for this reason that Igor wished to do something bold, to make people aware that among them live Russian LGBTQI+ citizens who care about and stand for varied topics, not only LGBTQI+ rights.

Furthermore, many activists have migrated to St. Petersburg from the provinces. Some were already active in their hometowns and have

experience with LGBTQI+ activism in different surroundings as well as with attempts to mobilize local LGBTQI+ people. For them, it is important to include those LGBTQI+ people who are willing to mobilize in the provinces. Some have formed groups that organize both online and offline activities; some, like Igor, have visited different towns to conduct workshops and other activities. The issue of the representation of experiences from locations other than major metropolitan areas is an important motivation for activists coming from more peripheral geographical areas.

Even though many of these creative engagements are perceived to be necessitated by the lack of other resources, they become a valuable resource in their own right. When meeting with their partners from foreign LGBTQI+ and other organizations, Russian activists no longer accept the status of learners. They consider their own context-specific expertise and experience to be as relevant to broader transnational advocacy networks as that of their foreign partners, although it may not be necessarily recognized as such by those partners. For instance, Oleg organizes activists' trips to Pride Weeks around Europe and argues:

If earlier those organizations could teach [us] something new, now, well, at least, according to my experience, we [the organization that Oleg represents] can already share our experience and train others. (Oleg, 2 August 2017)

The varied, experimental, and creative activities planned by the organizations and especially the grassroots, self-organized groups discussed in this chapter show both the solid status of the movement in St. Petersburg and the developing symbolic resources of the city's LGBTQI+ activists. Due to the multiple challenges imposed by the controversialities of local and transnational resources and approaches, the activists have developed new forms of activism and new skills for carrying it out. These collectively recognized, symbolically important immaterial resources have changed the relationships between and the roles of the organizations and groups within the movement. Such negotiations and changes may also enable activists to become recognized as transnationally visible, resourceful civil society actors.

## Symbolic Resources Negotiated

Against the background of recent years' restricted operating environment for LGBTQI+ activism in Russia, I argue in this chapter that activists' entrepreneurial creation of new approaches and tactics to create symbolically important resources has led St. Petersburg's LGBTQI+ activists to develop a more locally grounded, coherent, and solid movement. In this environment, the activists have turned to resources rarely associated with civil society organizing, such as those traditionally associated with the visual arts, literature, and dance, and recontextualized them as instruments for social mobilization, providing content and organizational form for activities.

Most foreign financial resources are available to organizations that operate according to the same types of practices and principles that their sponsors do. LGBTQI+ organizations that receive steady foreign funding from such institutionalized partners as ILGA reflect their belonging to the transnational queer movement through their practices, formats, and symbols. Their activities are also planned long-term and are aimed at attracting possible (though at the moment scarce) allies in Russia, a practice familiar in transnational activist movements. At the same time, the number of self-organizing informal groups is growing due to the local hardships facing those who wish to form registered organizations. Apart from transnational symbols, these groups seek and employ somewhat unusual resources for LGBTQI+ activism. Moreover, publicity is not necessarily important for their activism; they develop activities by and for themselves. At times, this may also involve radical public activism. These practices reflect their confidence on having at least temporary symbolic resources. Criticism of both local and transnational activist movements is common in these groups. At the same time, these grassroots groups' practices may end up being or may intentionally be short-term, making their approaches more experimental and even utopian. The importance of such approaches is increasingly acknowledged by the organizations, reflecting the growing exchange of different resources between them.

Thanks to local negotiations during these times of hardship, transnational resources have not simply been accepted as unidirectional, moving

from “advanced” Western civil society actors toward “backward” Eastern Europe (Boatcă, 2006; Kangas & Salmenniemi, 2016; Kulpa & Mizelińska, 2011). Rather, liminal processes have emerged in which different groups negotiate and debate the transnationally imposed symbols carried by resources while localizing and domesticating them. Transnational queer symbols and practices are used by the activists, but more importantly, they are negotiated and translated in order to relate them more closely to local features and even convert them into fundraising opportunities, either through crowdfunding platforms or social media campaigns and spot donation requests. Such approaches are especially frequently used by the self-organizing groups. Similar processes have also been taking place with more local resources. The symbolic resources of successful LGBTQI+ activism offer very valuable information for local organizations as well as resources both for reciprocal discussion with the surrounding society and for transnational advocacy networks and movement donors.

Alongside forms of practices and spaces, different skills such as writing and other means of artistic expression also hold symbolic value in the activist movement. Russian activists have been educated at schools and, in some cases, universities in a country with a powerful literary culture. Famous Russian works of literature have thematized the dream of liberation from various authoritarian political regimes—regimes that are as unavoidable as “bad Russian weather” (Boym, 2010, p. 81). In addition to transnational queer symbols, activists turn to varied symbols that have been employed by dissidents over decades, if not centuries, of Russian history. These resources can refer to practices such as forming groups for thematic discussions and communities of debates, solidarity, and sharing. Such practices take place in various semi-public settings such as the salons of the Silver Age or the *kvartirniks* held from Soviet times to the present day. They are based on the familiar Soviet principle of relying on trusted personal circles. At the same time, this principle has become familiar to the activists from the transnational queer movements in the format of safe spaces. The St. Petersburg LGBTQI+ movement organizes itself through multiple layers of networks, and as in previous eras, the information and personal experiences shared in activists’ *kvartirniks* are not to be spread beyond the walls of those spaces and social circles.

These various symbolic resources are also sources of identification and belonging for the activists. The acquiring, employing, forming, and exchanging of those resources reflect the fact that the culture of the LGBTQI+ movement does not form a bounded spatial territory. Rather, different boundaries pass through it at many points, rendering the culture a border zone with multiple layers of networks rather than a closed, self-sufficient system. In the long run, St. Petersburg LGBTQI+ activists' symbolic resources may be useful as an asset on a transnational level. Hopefully, this can form a basis for discussions around the decentralization of West-centric transnational LGBTQI+ activism and efforts to effect it (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Morozov & Rumelili, 2012; Suchland, 2011; Wiedlack, 2017). In so doing, activists may reveal the constant intersection between the local and the global, simultaneously permitting local culture to flourish (Lotman, 2009) and activists to carve a space for themselves within it.

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## Notes

1. <https://queerfest.ru/en/>
2. I use the acronym LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex) to refer to the broader movement in which the research participants were active, although individual groups might identify with different acronyms. I am aware that the simple “+” is far from resolving the challenge of the othered gender and sexual minorities and the problems of homonormativity, transphobia, and biphobia which also exist within LGBTQI+ movements. In referring to specific organizations, I follow their selected acronym, which for the moment is “LGBT.” I have not changed the acronyms that the research participants used in the interviews.
3. Federal Law No. 135-FZ “On amendments to Article 5 of the federal law ‘On protecting children from information harmful to their health and development’ and separate legislative acts of the Russian Federation with

- the purpose of protecting children from information advocating rejection of traditional family values.”
4. Federal Law No. 121-FZ “On amendments to specific legal acts of the Russian Federation with regard to regulation of activities of nonprofit organizations performing functions of ‘foreign agents,’” 20 June 2012 (see Bederson & Semenov, Chap. 7 in this volume for more details). Federal Law No. 54-FZ “On gatherings, rallies, demonstrations, marches and picketing,” 19 June 2004.
  5. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity of all interviewees. Upon request by the interviewee, I also mention the person’s gender identification (e.g., Inga uses a gendered name while identifying as gender non-conforming, in this case using the pronouns “they/them”). Interviewees who were more active in self-organizing groups, initiatives, are pseudonymized with names starting with the letter “I” (Inessa, Inga, Igor, and Ivy). Those who were working for organizations at the moment of interview are referred to with pseudonyms beginning with the letter “O” (Oksana, Oleg, Olesya, and Olga).
  6. The term *kvartirnik* does not have a direct English equivalent. It refers to a gathering of a mutually trusted and more or less like-minded group of people at the home of one or several members of the collective in order to create a somewhat private yet communal event.

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