

**Global Feminisms
Comparative Case Studies of
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

RUSSIA

Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Voronina

Interviewed by Natalia L'vovna Pushkareva

Translated by Olga Greco

Russia

May 2016

**University of Michigan
Institute for Research on Women and Gender
1136 Lane Hall Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290**

Tel: (734) 764-9537

E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu

Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glbfem>

© Regents of the University of Michigan, 2017

The Global Feminisms Project is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborator in Russia is Dr. Natalia L. Pushkareva, who gathered a diverse group of feminist scholar-activists and colleagues for the Russia portion of the Global Feminisms Project and conducted the majority of the interviews. Our work in Russia was supported by a Collaborative Planning Grant from University of Michigan's Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

Ol'ga Voronina is a professor of philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her professional activities and personal interests are feminist and gender studies, education, and women's movements. She is an independent expert of a number of Russian and international organization dealing with gender equality.

Ol'ga Voronina was one of the first researchers who in the early 1980s began to study the theory and the movement of feminism, which were, prior to that time, unknown and unpopular in Russia. In 1987-1990 she was a member of a grassroots group Lotus, which openly identified itself as feminist. More recently she was one of the organizers of the First (1991) and Second (1992) Independent Women's Forum in Dubna, which served as an impetus for the development of a women's movement independent of the Russian state.

In 1990 Ol'ga Voronina together with other colleagues founded the Moscow Center for Gender Studies (MCGS), and in 1994-2015 she was MCGS Executive Director. During those years she managed the many collective research and educational projects of MCGS, which were supported by the J. and K. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Soros Foundation (Russia). MCGS is a resource center for researchers, teachers, women's activists, and journalists. In the MCGS educational and research activities have involved students and teachers from 80 universities in Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine (for details see the MCGS website www.gender.ru).

Ol'ga Voronina has lectured on feminist and gender theory in various Moscow universities and as a visiting professor in West Berlin, at the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Iowa.

Ol'ga Voronina is an independent expert of the Russian State Duma Commission on Women's, Family, and Children Issues (2004 – present); Member of the Interministry Commission on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women of the Russian Federation (2006 – present). In recent years she has been a Member of the Commission under the President of Russian Federation on Women, Family, and Population Issues (1994–2000); a national gender expert for the World Bank (2004); Chair of the Board at the Network Women's Program under the Open Society Institute Russia/Soros Foundation (2001–2002); and Gender Expert for the UNDP-Russia (United Nations Development Program) (2012).

Ol'ga Voronina is the author of three monographs and more than 180 articles published in scientific journals and popular media in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Estonian, Bulgarian, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek. She is also the editor of 17 collections of papers, which presented the results of MCGS researches, as well as a number of textbooks on feminist theory and gender studies.

Ol'ga Voronina participated and presented papers at many important international and Russian congresses, conferences, and meetings. Among the most important are: All-Russian Conference "Gender Problems in Modern Russia" (Moscow, Russia, 2008; International Conference "Gender Studies in the NIS (Newly Independent States)" (Istanbul, Turkey, 2005); XX World Congress of Philosophy. Philosophy and Gender Section (Boston, USA, 1998); IV World UN Conference on the Status of Women and NGO Forum on Women (Beijing, China, 1995,); 39th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and NGO Consultation Meeting (New-York, U.S.A., 1995); "Women's Role in Political and Public Life", a meeting of experts of the Division for the Advancement of Women of the Department of Social Problems of the United Nations (Vienna, Austria, 1991).

Natalia Lvovna Pushkareva was born on September 23rd, 1959 in Moscow, Russia. She is currently a Professor, Chief Research Fellow, and the Head of the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her fields of interest include gender history, history of family relations, the social anthropology of the academic community, as well as the history of sexuality in medieval, modern, and contemporary Russia. The chief editor of the yearbook *Sotsial'naiia istoriia (Social History)*, she also serves as president of the Russian Association for Research in Women's History. From 1981 to 2016, she has edited more than thirty essay collections, published dozens of articles for both academic and non-academic magazines, and written dictionary and encyclopedia entries as well as monographs. Pushkareva is considered to be a principal founder of the field of women's studies in Russia.

Natalia L'vovna Pushkareva: Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Voronina, PhD, is Head Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences; she was one of the founders of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies.

Ol'ga Aleksandrovna, Thank you very much for taking part in our project. Our first question is about your professional work. Tell us about yourself. Where are you now in in life? How did the topic of women first appear in your research, and how has it influenced your future professional interests. Or maybe, vice versa, how has participation in the women's movement led you to study the topic of women? In other words, please tell us a little about yourself.

Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Voronina: Thank you for inviting me to participate in the project. It's quite an interesting topic, especially since now very few people—both in Russia and abroad—are interested in the topic of women and gender studies. I remember there was a lot of interest, especially from the West, in the '90s, during Perestroika.¹ Now they've forgotten us a little, even just in a historical sense. As far as my own perception, to be honest, I'm fairly dismayed these days. It probably has to do with the political situation in our country as well as the attitude toward questions of gender. Because it's not just that it's an unpopular topic; it is also getting a lot of pushback. But maybe we can talk about that in more detail later so that we don't have to start on a sad note. So... As for my own life, I think I've lived a good one. I hope it's still too early for me to draw conclusions. I hope to live and do more. I have switched from the more general women-related political topics, which I worked on for the past twenty, twenty-five years, to more academic aspects of these issues. Given that I am a member of the Academy of Sciences,² it's probably more in line with my academic specialization. How did I come to study this topic... No, I can't say that taking part in the women's movement motivated my academic interest. It was probably the opposite. I came to the movement, or maybe even to cofound this movement, its rebirth in Russia, because I was already studying the topic. But, first of all, I think there is a lot of woman in me, so I was always interested in the status of women, even in school, even in college.

When I began writing my dissertation—I graduated from the faculty of philosophy,³ but I was always more inclined not toward abstract discourse, but toward living actions, and in fact, my major was sociology. But in the Soviet period, sociology was very formal – the sociology of the village, the sociology of labor. I thought that the sociology of the family is

¹Perestroika, literally translated as "restructuring," describes a collection of economic and political reforms and a general intellectual atmosphere that advocated for higher standards of living and greater socialist self-governance. The term was first introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the USSR in 1985. (Historyguide.org. Accessed December 02, 2017. <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/lecture16.html#perestroika>.)

² The Russian Academy of Sciences was established in 1724 and is a civil, self-governed, non-commercial organization chartered by the Government of Russia, headquartered in Moscow. The Academy consists of the national academy of Russia, a network of scientific research institutes, and additional social units. (In Russian: About Us, The Russian Academy of Sciences, <http://www.ras.ru/about.aspx>, accessed August 2017). ("The Russian Academy of Sciences")

³ Throughout this interview, "faculty" refers to a grouping of departments (similar to "college" in, e.g., "College of Arts and Sciences").

probably something more interesting, more relevant both to human life in general and to women's life in particular. I can't say that it was somehow connected to some particular inclination toward marriage and family on my part. I think that's an important part of men and women's life, but I want to note right away that my interest in the sociology of the family had nothing to do with the desire to find out what it's all about, i.e. to later have a successful marriage and so on. But when I started writing and reading sociology materials as a graduate student in Moscow University's Department of Philosophy, I again ran into the Soviet official drivel. According to that, the Soviet family was a unit of society, a woman is a combination of two functions—things like that. I decided, "well, let me take a look at what's happening in the West," and I took an interest in the American approach. I have to say that at the time, Russian libraries were well-stocked with Western literature, especially the Moscow libraries, naturally the Lenin Library,⁴ the Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences (it is the specialized library of the Russian Academy of Sciences), so I can't say that we had no access and couldn't read. It was probably worse in other cities, but here we had the materials. I read a lot of articles, short-form works, in the beginning. It was around 1977-1978. And they kept mentioning Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*.⁵ It wasn't available in Russia, so I ordered it using an international subscription. And that was it; it just blew my mind, turned everything upside down. And I began studying feminism and the topic of women. At the time, gender studies as such didn't exist. But this new work remained within the scope of my academic work in the philosophy department. But really everywhere in philosophy there are different kinds of people, sometimes somewhat crazy people. So my interest in feminism was accepted as a kind of madness that didn't harm anyone. I had no problem defending a philosophy dissertation in 1981. Then a bit later I began working at the Institute of Philosophy, where I worked on different topics that were already approved, that were assigned to me, but no one cared that I was reading about something else as well.

But, of course, I had to make a bit of a pause in my academic work – I was reading some things, but just for my own sake. I didn't present anything publicly, didn't write articles, didn't give talks; it just didn't work out. And then came Perestroika, and it all aligned with the time—well, it wasn't exactly at the same time, a little later, 1975-1985—that they declared the decade of the woman,⁶ and in Russia, during the entire Soviet period, prestige was very important.

⁴ The Russian State Library is the national library of Russia, located in Moscow. It is the largest in the country and the fourth largest in the world in terms of its collection of print materials. It was named the V.I. Lenin State Library of the USSR from 1925 until 1992, when it was renamed to the Russian State Library. ("Russian State Library." Wikipedia. November 14, 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_State_Library.)

⁵ *The Feminine Mystique* is a book written by Betty Friedan which is widely credited with sparking the beginning of second-wave feminism in the United States. In 1957, Friedan was asked to conduct a survey of her former Smith College classmates for their 15th anniversary reunion; the results, in which she found that many of them were unhappy with their lives as housewives, prompted her to begin research for *The Feminine Mystique*, conducting interviews with other suburban housewives, as well as researching psychology, media, and advertising. ("The Feminine Mystique." Wikipedia. November 13, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Feminine_Mystique.)

⁶ During this period, the women's movement gained momentum as Russian politics and culture shifted during Perestroika. Some women's organizations even had support from government bodies and

Oh, I want to pause and relate one remarkable story. When I finished my dissertation—well you’re going to cut and edit anyways—on American feminism, it of course had a great impact on me, so I went to see the only women’s organization that existed then, the Committee of Soviet Women.⁷ I wanted to tell them that there are other perspectives on this topic. Though, of course, “went” is not quite accurate. You couldn’t just go there. My mother-in-law got me in. My father-in-law was an ambassador, and during that time as an ambassador’s wife, my mother-in-law hosted someone from the committee, so she called them and they allowed me in. Otherwise I wouldn’t have made it past the policeman at the entrance. I was met by a lovely woman—unfortunately I can’t recall her name now. I told her: you know, I learned these things, I really want to tell people about them, for free, I don’t need any money—I was very passionate. She looked at me and said, “My dear girl, we have no need for that, we deal with very different things.” And I understood that yes, that’s the kind of representative organization it is. But five or six years later, they began to invite Western feminists. And they remembered me and began inviting me. In the name of pluralism. They had some sort of... I don’t quite remember, they probably didn’t have religious organizations, but they had these typical researchers, they had these rough, solid weavers and cooks who wrote, and some women who talked. But at some point one of the usual leaders of all these meetings and roundtables would make a grand gesture toward me and say, “And here we even have a feminist.” And Ol’ga Voronina would take on the role of the feminist. Of course, they all looked at me with fright in their eyes, but maybe something was deposited in the back of their minds. Later Americans often told me, “Listen, you were the only sane one there, the only one with whom we could talk at all.” There were many conferences that occurred under the banner of this UN decade and the USSR’s participation in it. One of them was a conference sometime in the 1980s—unfortunately, I can’t remember more precisely at the moment—at the Academy of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the USSR.⁸ It was a very substantial event. They invited all sorts of people, and I kept listening to things about the combination of two roles, the production role and the family role, sometimes they would say “two functions,” about the help of the Party and the government, which wasn’t enough but still good to have, about the achievements of the Soviet... Well, all of that was the case, but they’d been talking about it for thirty years without adding anything new. I couldn’t take it anymore and said something different in my own presentation. There was one more woman there who said something different than what they were saying there, and a third one who said something as well. I don’t remember in what order we spoke; I think I was the first, I was very active, so I probably managed to get an early spot. The second woman was Valentina Konstantinova, and the

demonstrated exemplary leadership before the fall of the USSR. (Rule, Wilma, and Norma C. Noonan. *Russian women in politics and society*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996.)

⁷ The Committee of Soviet Women (previously known as the Antifascist Committee of Soviet Women) was founded in September 1941 to unify women of the USSR and other countries to fight together for peace and security. (“Committee of Soviet Women.” *The Free Dictionary*. Accessed December 02, 2017. [https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Committee of Soviet Women.](https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Committee+of+Soviet+Women))

⁸ The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR was the highest governing body of the Party and ultimately, the country. (“Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.” *Wikipedia*. November 26, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Committee_of_the_Communist_Party_of_the_Soviet_Union.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_Committee_of_the_Communist_Party_of_the_Soviet_Union))

third was Natal'ia Zakharova.⁹ We met during a break and talked for a long time. And decided to keep meeting up and discussing questions that interested us. We usually met at Natal'ia Zakharova's apartment and talked about what we'd read: new books, new films – I mean documentary films; there were a lot of them at the time. There was a very amusing situation when the show *Vzgliad* ("Perspective") visited Natal'ia Zakharova to tape the meeting of the feminists, and then the episode somehow didn't come out.¹⁰ Then they decided to tape me, invited me—it was a very progressive show, very progressive people—they invited me to some studio to talk about feminism. I spoke about it for a long time. Then there was a preview for the episode (and by the way, the whole country watched that show). Of course, I told some of my acquaintances. On the day it was supposed to air, I got a called from Kazakhstan—at the time, it was still a separate country... err, at the time it was still one of our republics—from Tselinograd, which is now Astana.¹¹ One of our acquaintances called and said, "Ol'ga, I saw you, it was so interesting, so great, you spoke so well, and were great in front of the camera." They were in a different time zone and saw it three hours earlier. So my husband and I put our child to bed and then sat down to watch the show. They didn't air the segment in Moscow. They substituted a special about some wonderful Georgian woman who made excellent coffee in Sukhumi. I'm very happy for that woman, it was lovely, but they didn't show my talk. And it was then that I understood that here—even during the period of Glasnost',¹² Perestroika, the opening of the archives—that that topic would be difficult to pursue. I called the editor, he didn't answer – so in the end, it was just forgotten. The three of us kept meeting, then Anastasia Posadskaia joined us.¹³ Later on, Tat'iana Klimenkova would also stop by.¹⁴ And at some point, our group was commissioned by the Ministry of

⁹ Valentina Konstantinova is a women's rights activist and former senior fellow at the Moscow Center for Gender Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

(Erlanger, Steven. "Russian 'Women's Day': Condensing Candy." *The New York Times*. March 08, 1992. Accessed December 15, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/09/world/russian-women-s-day-condensing-candy.html>.)

Natal'ia Zakharova is a women's rights activist and one of the founders of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies.

(Smorodinskaya, Tatiana. *Encyclopedia of contemporary Russian culture*. London: Routledge, 2008.)

¹⁰ *Vzgliad* was a Russian television program that aired from 1987 to 2001 during the Perestroika era. The program was popular among the younger generations and often showed hosts in casual clothing and in a very informal manner. *Vzgliad* was considered to embody the change that young people in Russia wanted to see at that point in history. ("Vzglyad (Russian TV program)." Wikipedia. October 23, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vzglyad_\(Russian_TV_program\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vzglyad_(Russian_TV_program)).)

¹¹ And which was renamed to Nur-Sultan March 23, 2019 in honor of the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who resigned from the presidency on March 19, 2019.

¹² Glasnost is a Soviet Government policy of open discussion of political and social issues, instituted in the late 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev ("Glasnost." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/glasnost> (Accessed January 6, 2020).)

¹³ Anastasia Posadskaia is a women's rights activist and also one of the founders of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies.

(Smorodinskaya, Tatiana. *Encyclopedia of contemporary Russian culture*. London: Routledge, 2008.)

¹⁴ Tat'iana Klimenkova was a member and activist at the Moscow Center for Gender Studies. (MOSCOW CENTER FOR GENDER STUDIES. Accessed December 15, 2017.

<http://www.owl.ru/eng/women/aiwo/mcgi.htm>.)

Labor or Social Development,¹⁵ I don't remember which, to develop—it was one of the groups, there were many others who worked on the concept of the development of marriage and family in the USSR—somehow we came to their attention. Probably it was due to a confluence of circumstances, we came to the forefront, and some sort of positions materialized, and a small work group was formed at the Institute of Social and Economic Studies of Population. And around it...

NP: Where Zakharova was working at that time?

OV: Zakharova worked there for a year, but then left to work for the UN, the Department for the Advancement of Women. But the rest of us stayed, Posadskaia, Konstantinova, and I. And then other people started joining us. At first it was a small group, and a circle of active people formed around us. And I have to say that this period at the end of the 1980s was very strange.¹⁶ I don't know whether others remember it, but I remember it very well. It seemed—again, at least in Moscow—as though people had suddenly awakened, and everyone suddenly wanted changes. It didn't matter what kind of changes. Many didn't even know what kind. So there were all these little seminars, little groups; they could gather in factories, in academic institutes, of course, in museums, some sort of artistic platforms—Natal'ia Kamenetskaia probably talked about this—even in private apartments.¹⁷ I remember that every week I was in some kind of a new situation, where we were discussing something. Sometimes people were completely indifferent to our female themes, and they just looked at us, perplexed – these were incidental gatherings. But in any case, the enthusiasm was there. And eventually, as they say in Russia, this butter was whipped up around us; there was a certain crowd of people who came to see specifically us because they were interested in this topic. And at first there were just the academic seminars at the institute because at the time we didn't have fees, you didn't need to apply for a pass in order to get into the institute, you didn't have to think about various other contemporary considerations—if you want to meet, go ahead, stay until midnight if you want. And for a long time we conducted seminars, and then we got to the First Independent Women's Forum,¹⁸ about which I'll talk maybe next time, maybe others have already talked about it. Depends on whether you want to hear it or not.

¹⁵ The Ministry of Health and Social Development was divided into two parts in 2012 under Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev; the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which is responsible for labour relations as well as a variety of other social systems that support people, such as social security ("Ministry of Health [Russia]." Wikipedia. Accessed January 8, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Health_\(Russia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Health_(Russia)))

¹⁶ The period of time between the 1980's and early 90's in Russia was characterized by policy and leadership changes in the communist regime. Mikhail Gorbachev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985 and began to enact a series of changes creating more social and political freedoms including Glasnost' which was a metonym for the new freedom of public discourse that Gorbachev wished to encourage. The Soviet government began to collapse as a result of the devolution of power brought on by Glasnost' and Perestroika and was officially dissolved in 1991. ("History of the Soviet Union (1982–91)." Wikipedia. December 02, 2017. Accessed December 03, 2017. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Soviet_Union_\(1982%E2%80%9391\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Soviet_Union_(1982%E2%80%9391))).

¹⁷ The Global Feminisms Project has an interview with Natal'ia Kamenetskaia on the Russia Interview site.

¹⁸ The Center for Gender Studies at the Institute for the Socioeconomic Study of Population of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow organized the first and second Independent Women's Forums in Dubna in March 1991 and November 1992. This historical event brought together two-hundred women from

NP: So now we have seamlessly approached the topic of your work, the connection between these professional interests and the women's movement, per se. Can we say that those who attended the women's forum in 1991 were primarily members of the academic circles?¹⁹

OV: No, no. There were all sorts of people there.

NP: So who was there?

OV: Unfortunately, I couldn't say for sure now... there were 250 people there, that's a lot. Of course, it was mostly people with higher education. Of course, there were researchers, instructors...

NP: Of what age?

OV: **OV** Artists—I'll tell you in a second—and journalists. There was a delegate from the previous Congress of People's Deputies, Natal'ia Saptina, or Svetlana, I'm not sure, from the Kuznetsk Basin region.²⁰ She was a very high-ranking woman, and she came as well. There were some district activists, maybe engineers, maybe engineers and technicians – it was a very diverse audience.

NP: And who issues the call to meet?

OV: It was probably Anastasia Posadskaia, who was the one with the most initiative in our group. She was very active, very charged when it came to social action.

NP: So the representative of the Academy of Sciences?

OV: Yes, representatives of the Academy of Sciences. But not only. By that time, we were already collaborating fairly closely with the group SAFO, for one.²¹ You've probably already talked with its representatives. If not, they included Ol'ga Lipovskaia and Natal'ia Abubikirova. Also, the group of female artists – I don't remember how we found Dubna, they probably found us.²²

forty-eight different women's groups as well as twenty-five guests from Western Countries for three days (Racioppi, Linda, and Katherine O'Sullivan See. "Organizing Women before and after the Fall: Women's Politics in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia." *Signs*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1995, pp. 818–850. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3174884. Accessed 8 Jan. 2020)

¹⁹ Starting around 1991-1992, women met at the Independent Women's Forum to network with other women and organizations that supported the development of an interconnected social infrastructure. (Information Center of Independent Women's Forum, Moscow. Accessed December 05, 2017. <http://www.owl.ru/eng/women/aiwo/iciwf.htm>.)

²⁰ Created in 1988, the Congress of People's Deputies was an elected, authoritative body of the USSR. ("Congress of People's Deputies." Oxford Reference. June 16, 2017. Accessed December 05, 2017. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095632105>.)

²¹ SAFO, named for the Greek poet Sappho who often serves in Western cultures as a symbol for female homoerotic desire, was a women's organization in Russia that supported lesbian rights and sponsored activities and lectures for the lesbian community. (Noonan, Norma Corigliano, and Carol Nechemias, eds. *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.)

²² Dubna is a town outside the Russian capital of Moscow. (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Dubna." Encyclopædia Britannica. December 09, 2011. Accessed December 05, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Dubna>.)

**NP: Was Riznichenko in charge of the Association of Women in Education?²³
Because now Dubna is associated with the Association of Women in Science and Education.**

OV: No, it was mainly Genrietta Savina. She was the chairwoman of the women's council of Dubna. Dubna is mostly a university town; it has the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research of the countries that were part of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.²⁴ So there really were progressive people there, in the sense that they often traveled abroad, there were people who worked in those countries, and they discussed a lot of things. In particular, I can give an example of how because of the efforts of the people who didn't want the forum to take place – we were nearly prevented from organizing it. The director of the Dubna institute, who was Czech, was coming back from a business trip and arrived practically the night before the forum. We all had already arrived but didn't know whether we would be allowed to hold the forum in their culture center. Those complaining told him, "Can you imagine?! There is a gathering of feminists, gays, lesbians; it's a nightmare! HIV, AIDS, and other insanity." He said, "I don't see... well, you're probably exaggerating about AIDS, and gays, lesbians, and feminists don't bother me. It's accepted in Czech society and will be here as well." He just exerted his will and made the decision. Though when we opened the forum, there were 70 KGB agents among the 250 women of the forum. I wouldn't have even been able to recognize them, but first of all, they were men whom we hadn't invited and second, they were... well, the locals knew them. For some reason we... I don't know, maybe someone remembers it better, I can't remember anymore, things were really crazy.

NP: Was it summer?

OV: No, it was March. We had made the announcement after the New Year. There was of course no Internet in Russia at the time, so we sent out faxes to people who had contacted us with various requests. Fortunately, we were able to use the fax of the Institute of Social and Economic Studies of Population. There were faxes, phone calls, and there was a sort of what you would call a "network," an informal one; it was really a grassroots initiative. Because we made the announcement that it was happening, we announced that we had a venue where we could hold the event, that we will be fed, but there was no money to pay for transportation, so everyone paid their own way out of pocket. It was 1991, so the economic situation was very difficult. Very difficult. Salary payments were already inconsistent and so on. It might be interesting to find the people and find out how they managed to find money. But somehow they did. The audience, of course, wasn't made up of young girls; they were women around thirty or forty, maybe some in their fifties. Mostly between thirty and forty. They were very different. Of course, they were mostly

²³ This most likely refers to the Association of Women in Education that was established in the early 1900's. This organization advocated for women's rights for nearly a century in Russia. (NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education." Taylor and Francis Online. Accessed December 05, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1940-7890.1002>.)

²⁴ The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance was created in 1949 to encourage the economic development of countries included in the Soviet Bloc. (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Comecon." Encyclopædia Britannica. May 05, 2017. Accessed December 16, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comecon>"<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comecon>.)

from the regions, beaten down by life. They, of course, wanted change, both for women and for the country. But the topic of feminism at first was met with hostility. Simply because they didn't know anything about it. And at the time, the press was already beginning its anti-feminist campaign. And things are funny here when it comes to feminism. After the October Revolution,²⁵ they started calling feminism a bourgeois current, not a proletarian one²⁶; but when the situation changed, when we had the reforms, the rejection of the planned economy and socialism, the turn toward capitalism, they started calling feminism "the belch of socialism," because it spoke of things like equality, equal rights, and the word "equality" was unfashionable then. They labeled it a socialist current - "we don't need this, we're fed up with feminism and socialism." Feminism was blamed for women being overworked. If not for feminism, women would sit at home looking pretty, dressed up, wearing makeup, with their kids, and they would have nannies, who were also women, but somehow that didn't matter, no one talked about that. But because of this socialism, now women have to go to work. And, of course, the idea of feminists all being sexually unsatisfied... you know, that whole set of notions. And these women at first responded with hostility, but then I, on the very first day, led a discussion, not even a lecture. I have the document summarizing the first forum; I could even scan and send it. I think we also have it on our website. I led a discussion, where I began with a basic introduction of who feminists are and what they do. I was honest that, yes, there are some lesbian currents, and some extremist currents, radical ones; that's true of any political movement, there are always radical elements. But there are also those who are in favor of the family, there is already a move back from radicalism. And in general, girls, you just have to sort it all out. Most of all, they liked the words that I quoted then. An American, I don't recall her name, unfortunately, said in early nineteenth-twentieth century, "I myself have never been able to find out what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat."²⁷ This reconciled them with feminism. And the atmosphere changed. Of course, they were also other questions discussed, but on the whole, I think that this event became the foundation for the development of some sort of a movement in the regions. Maybe not for everyone - we couldn't keep an eye on everyone and see how things developed. Though we did keep in touch with some, there were some who managed to find us and who were active. But we couldn't keep track of everyone, unfortunately. But I think that even if these people, these women, didn't take up the topic of women and the women's movement, they were probably still socially active. Maybe they joined youth,

²⁵ The October Revolution, also known as the Bolshevik Revolution, took place on October 24th and 25th of 1917. It was the last phase of the 1917 Russian Revolution, after which the Bolshevik Party took control in Russia and began the Soviet Regime ("October Revolution." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/October-Revolution-Russian-history>)

²⁶ In reference to Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, in which he describes the struggle throughout history between the bourgeois, or property-owning class and the proletarian, or industrial working class ("The Communist Manifesto - Bourgeoisie and Proletariat." British Library. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/utopia/methods1/bourgeoisie1/bourgeoisie.html>)

²⁷ This quotation comes from Rebecca West, a twentieth century British author and journalist known for her feminist principles. The quotation appears in the November 14, 1913 issue of *The Clarion*, in West's article titled "Mr. Chesterton in Hysterics" ("Rebecca West." Wikiquote. Accessed January 6, 2020. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rebecca_West)

ecological, or even family movements. But I think that their attendance helped them stay away from completely patriarchal ideas, that woman means family and family means woman. That's what I think, what I hope.

NP: How many days did the forum last?

OV: Three.

NP: And what did the forum resolve? To meet again a year later to discuss the situation?

OV: Yes, yes.

NP: With what did you conclude?

OV: We concluded with the creation of a document with a summary of the proceedings, where we noted discrimination against women, gender inequality, the need to overcome these. It was fairly bold because no one these statistics hadn't been tracked publicly before. even Sociologists had spoken of them, but only in purely academic publications. And we decided to keep in contact, to hold some sort of activist seminars, and to meet again in a year. And we actually did meet a year later, but then, fortunately...

NP: The same two hundred people?

OV: No, there were way more people this time, closer to 1,500, and fortunately, we managed to get financial support this time.

NP: Who was part of this organizational committee? For the second forum, I mean.

OV: For the second forum, mostly the same people who were already part of the committee. Posadskaia, Voronina, Konstantinova, Klimenkova, Abubikirova, Lipovskaia, some others. Natalia Zakharova wasn't there anymore. I would have to look at the records. There were about ten people in total.

NP: Did the Moscow Center for Gender Studies already exist then?

OV: We existed as a self-titled organization. There was no need to register at the time, so we just existed as a public organization.

NP: Were you already referring to it as such by then?

OV: Yes, we were.

NP: So when you gave presentations, you would say that you represent the Moscow Center for Gender Studies?

OV: We were actually already, by 1991, saying that we represent the Moscow Center for Gender Studies, it's a public organization, and no one demanded anything from us.

NP: What other centers existed back then that might have put "gender studies" in their name? Were there any of those?

OV: I don't remember. I know that there was a women's organization called *Preobrazhenie* ("Transfiguration"). There were a lot of women's councils, and the one at

Dubna, for instance, wasn't fundamentalist-patriarchal at all. There was an organization called SAFO. I know I'm missing something... something in the Central Aerohydrodynamic State Institute (TsAGI). I forgot how the organization in TsAGI was called.²⁸

NP: So the term “gender studies” appeared later?

OV: Yes, the term appeared significantly later. It was much later that it entered first the academic lexicon and then a sort of popular one, because when we held our seminars, we maybe talked about gender and gender studies, but this term led to vehement debates both in academic circles and, even more so, in public ones. We tried not to use it at all in front of general audiences because it was very hard to understand. Because gender doesn't have a straightforward, linear definition. But then I again have to go back to the end of the '80s. No, of course not the end of the '80s, it has to be the first half of the '90s. Again, there was a seminar in that same Academy of Social Sciences. Well, not a seminar, it was a large conference, called “Gender Studies... something something.... in the World.” I remember that a lot of representatives from European academia came with these foundational presentations. There was a Greek woman, a German one, there were British presenters—it was a very big pool of presenters—there were Italians, Spaniards. It was then that the term “gender” became actively emphasized and entered usage; it became accepted by academics. Because there was still a Soviet mindset and the mention of some Moscow Center of Gender Studies didn't mean very much, but the fact that this took place at the Academy of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—it was still called that—that prompted them to write about these topics. And I remember that by the time that the first summer school for gender studies took place, in '96 or so, there were already some scholarly publications that could be called pseudo-gender studies. That is, people were writing within the framework of the traditional sociosexual or even biological approach, but had decided that now instead of the word “sex,” it was more fashionable to use the word “gender”: “What's the difference?” So this process of parasitism had started.

NP: What were the next stages of development after the first two forums, those of 1991 and 1992? You said that later there appeared summer schools that brought knowledge about gender to younger members of the women's movement. What can we say about subsequent milestones in the history of these kinds of conferences, meetings, and so on? Were there no all-Russian meetings among specialists in the field of gender studies and participants in the women's movement between 1992 and 2008, until the Second Women's Congress?²⁹

²⁸ Elena Kochkina, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Social and Economic Studies of Population, notes in her interview for the Global Feminisms Project that TsAGI, which she likens to NASA, contained a particularly active women's council (*zhensovet*) that played a key role in the organization of the First Forum in 1991.

²⁹ The Second All-Russian Women's Congress took place in 2008, one hundred years after the historical First All-Russian Women's Congress in 1908 in the pre-Soviet era. This congress was organized under the leadership of Vladimir Putin and brought together over a thousand Russian women's organizations to promote unity and community support of women's rights. (Sperling, Valerie. *Sex, politics, and Putin: political legitimacy in Russia*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=kmjDBAAAQBAJ&pg=PA214&lpg=PA214&dq=all+russia+second+women%27s+congress+2008&source=bl&ots=RVgel9hH74&sig=YU2T1y5l8SDEvZIOfGXEsp5tcUI&hl=en&>

OV: No. The thing is that the government never actually supported this topic. At best, it didn't interfere. Here's what this means. In Soviet times, if an academic topic was approved by the Academy of Sciences or another institution, that meant that there was funding devoted to it, including, from time to time, funding for organizing conferences. We still remember how large and lavish the Academy of Sciences conferences were when there was funding for expenses, for transit, and people could come from everywhere, even places like Vladivostok.³⁰ But this didn't happen when it came to gender studies. The only thing I can remember is that in 1987 there was...

NP: Do you mean in '97?

OV: In '87 there was a World Congress of Women that took place in Moscow within the framework of the anniversary of the UN... or something like that. It was the last large forum that the USSR organized. It was held at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses, Gorbachev attended it, even gave a talk.³¹ I have a photo of him sitting in the Presidium.³² Of course, Tereshkova³³ was there, representatives of the UN, there were several thousand women from all over the world who were hosted at state expense. It was a socio-political forum, not an academic one, but there was a lot of money allotted to it. But in terms of support for academic events, such as conferences, in the field of gender studies, there was nothing. Nothing at all. So if an institute could organize a conference, it was generally just within a particular city. Though we did hold a couple of conferences before 2008 using grant money. The Moscow Center for Gender Studies organized several conferences before the summer schools, or together with the schools, or in parallel with the schools, and thanks to financial support, we could give some money, pay travel expenses for participants. Of course, it wasn't a lot, it wasn't Vladivostok. But still, sometimes 200 or even 300 people came. We had conferences like that. There were also publications, which was good, right away. Sometimes, because it was already the period when we had to maneuver carefully, we had a number of faces, but they weren't masks, they were our real faces, because sometimes we were a public organization in terms of legal status, after we had already registered.

NP: What year did you register?

OV: Our official registration was in '94. It meant we had the legal status of a "public organization," and the status of a "scientific organization," because we were, after all,

sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj407Soyr7ZAhWm8oMKHQ9cCFEQ6AEIXjAE#v=onepage&q=all%20russia%20second%20women's%20congress%202008&f=false)

³⁰ Vladivostok is a Russian Pacific port city near the borders of China and North Korea.

³¹ Mikhail Gorbachev was the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991, and the president of the Soviet Union from 1990-1991 ("Mikhail Gorbachev." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mikhail-Gorbachev>)

³² A presidium is "a permanent executive committee selected especially in Communist countries to act for a larger body" ("presidium." Merriam-Webster. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/presidium>)

³³ Valentina Vladimirovna Tereshkova (1937-) was the first female Soviet cosmonaut and the first woman in space. She completed her first and only flight in 1963. She served as a deputy in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 1966 to 1989 and as a deputy in the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet from 1974 to 1989. In 2011 she was elected to the Russian Duma.

called the Moscow Center of Gender Studies rather than of Social Activism, and our charter document included both research and educational activities, and participation in the women's movement. We wrote it to be as broad as possible to be able to do a lot of different things.

NP: Other than you, who participated in writing the charter?

OV: I'll tell you in a moment. Because we had to maneuver, we often held conferences and schools either together with some universities, which was encouraged then, or together with the Academy of Sciences. This allowed people who wanted to attend the conferences to get an invitation from us and get funding from their university to attend our events as an official work trip. It always conveyed a certain status – in the Academy of Sciences and so on. And that also worked to our advantage.

There was an attorney involved with the writing of the charter, but only on a very formal level. We wrote it ourselves. It was possible at the time. We wrote it ourselves and put what we wanted to in there. When we came to register it, there was some staff attorney at the Department of... Justice, I don't remember where we had to register it. I have the documents, so I can check, I just don't remember right now. That attorney added some legalisms, and that was it. No one changed the content or tried to object.

NP: You can characterize the '90s, on the one hand, as a period in which appeared the first center for women's and gender studies or just gender studies or the laboratory of gender studies at various universities. And, on the other hand, at this time there was still probably a grassroots women's movement, which sent its first representatives to the forum in Dubna in 1991 and later worked with the help of Western foundations and without them. So my question is this: what kind of a relationship did the MCGS [Moscow Center for Gender Studies] have with women's organizations that weren't educational or academic? And this is precisely a question of the relationship between theory and practice, of theoretical understanding and practical women's activism.

OV: At first we had a really great relationship. Because the people who were trying to do something at the grassroots level, they understood early on that we, and other centers of gender research—by the way, I don't remember which appeared first, I think the Tver³⁴ one, as a result of the school, then the Samara³⁵ one. Then some...

NP: Liudmila Nikolaevna Popkova.³⁶

³⁴ A city in western Russia. ("Tver." Wikipedia. February 15, 2018. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tver>.)

³⁵ A city in southeastern Russia. ("Samara." Wikipedia. February 15, 2018. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samara>.)

³⁶ Associate professor of World History, International Relations and Documentation at Samara State University in Samara, Russia ("Liudmila Nikolaevna Popkova." Samara State University. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://ssau.ru/staff/518654-popkova-lyudmila-nikolaevna>)

OV: Yes, and Irina Tartakovskaia³⁷, but I think she was there later, the first was Popkova. The women's movement at first listened very closely to what we were saying, because it was a sort of a theoretical base, it was information, books, it was informal assistance even in writing proposals for grants, if that was a possibility, or articles, manifestos. But at some point this relationship began to go bad. At least that's what happened to us, in Moscow.

NP: When was this?

OV: I don't remember for sure. I think it was after the Beijing conference³⁸, after '95. At the time we were all united by a shared impulse because it was a very large delegation of NGOers, that is to say, activists. But it really was a delegation, because it was very difficult to travel there from Russia, sometimes impossible, visas and all the rest. Some people got grants, some got support of local authorities. It was 250 people in total.

I should note that, of course, we're not talking about Anastasia Posadskaia. You probably won't be able to talk with her because we can't get a hold of her. I know where she works, but I just can't get a hold of her. But anyways, she was some sort a *perpetuum mobile*, I sometimes envied her energy,³⁹ I would disappear somewhere to rest, but she could... I mean, she would come to the Center at eight in the morning and could stay until ten or eleven at night, and have never-ending meetings, never-ending discussions, plus the international experts, activists, journalists, graduate students, who came en masse. She always met with everyone, never turned anyone away. Whereas I could say, "I can't, I'm tired, I'm going home," Anastasia would force a smile and talk to them. It would be really great to find her somehow... but oh well.

So until 1995 everything was going great, but then somehow the situation started changing. I have a rather base hypothesis. I don't want to believe it's true. I hope that I am wrong in thinking this, that I just haven't quite understood something. It seems to me that when it became all about grants—and you could only exist on grants—it was already the period when it was very difficult to use any existing resources. First of all, they ran out already back in Soviet times, the faxes were broken, there were no computers, and so on. Venues were closing, there were few resources, and I think this led to a competition for resources.

NP: From the mid-1990s?

³⁷ Irina Naumovna Tartakovskaia is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences. She is the author of many articles in Russian, French, and English; as well as the textbook *The Sociology of Gender*. Moscow: Variant, 2005 ("Person Information." Institute of Sociology of the Federal Research Sociological Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Accessed February 27, 2020. https://www.isras.ru/pers_about.html?id=411)

³⁸ A reference to the The United Nations Fourth Annual World Conference on Women which took place in Beijing in 1995. ("Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995." United Nations. Accessed February 15, 2018. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/fwcwn.html>.)

³⁹ *Perpetuum mobile* is a Latin phrase meaning a perpetually moving thing ("Perpetuum mobile." Merriam-Webster. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perpetuum%20mobile>)

OV: From the mid-1990s. It wounded me a lot – I won't name this woman, but what she did was very hurtful. She came to our seminars for many years, never missed any of them, was an active participant, but one day during a seminar, she said, "All right. We are very grateful to you, researchers, but now we already know everything. So you keep working on you research, and we'll handle the women's movement." And we sort of gave up a little, the MCGS I mean. First, Anastasia left. Second, we had our own personal problems: family, health, and I would say also a kind of weariness.

NP: Did anyone move to America other than Anastasia Posadskaia?

OV: Natal'a and Anastasia. The two of them. Zakharova left to work there. Anastasia first left to be a visiting scholar and then got married and got a job there. Two other women from the women's movement left as well. One left and disappeared entirely, the second also left and also more or less disappeared. Apparently, their...

NP: They didn't continue their work on women's issues there?

OV: No, no, no, no. They left the field. One of them completely. So none of them continued. And after that it turned into something like, "You want it? You can do it yourselves." We switched to these summer schools, Internet ones – we already had a few of these Internet-based schools and training programs. And the women's movement started doing its own thing, but, like a song by Vysotskii⁴⁰ goes, it seems "the truly disturbed ones are few, so they had no leaders." It somehow continued, at least in Moscow, but not very actively; all the activity somehow began turning into repetition. The same topics, the same people – like sweeping the desert. One good thing about academic activity is that it gives people a sense of what's been done, what hasn't been done, what is impossible to do, what should be given priority. And we are willing to continue cooperating, because unlike many other centers, we at the Moscow Center for Gender Studies were from the beginning aiming to change the situation in Russia. Everyone has their own specialty. For instance, Irina Zherebkina's Center, a woman whom I love and respect, has a very different specialization, a certain academicism—a somewhat esoteric, postmodern academicism. But our Center always wanted to change the situation here. Whether we were successful... By the way, I can tell you what I think we did wrong.

NP: That is very important. And, in general, the connection between research and theoretical feminism and practical activity is important for everyone, because I think there is this global question of how to get out of the ivory tower in which the members of the scholarly community arrogantly shut themselves.⁴¹ How can we get out of this tower? How can we begin talking to activists? How can we bring our knowledge to those for whom, ultimately, we study the women's movement, women's history, and the topic of women in general?

⁴⁰ Vladimir Semenovich Vysotskii (1938-1980) was a Soviet poet, actor, and singer-songwriter—known as a "bard" in Russian—whose music remains popular across the former Soviet Union.

⁴¹ "The ivory tower" is an expression that originates in the Biblical Song of Solomon, and since the 19th century has been used to describe academic environments and intellectual goals that are disconnected with the practical concerns of everyday life. (Definition, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ivory%20tower>, accessed August 2017)

OV: I think that it's probably harder to talk to today's youth. They really are different, in a lot of ways. But I think at the time I had no trouble talking about women's and gender issues to people of absolutely any level. At least, I could always find the right language to speak about it with a doctor, a nurse, a janitor, a stranger during a commute, a neighbor, and so on. No, finding the right words isn't a problem. You don't have to say "gender," you can use other vocabulary. When you do academic work, it's important to keep to specific terminology in order to be understood. But when you're talking to other people, you can just take one aspect of a gender and discuss it without specifying that it is a construct. There's no need for that, you can do without. I think the problem was that we had very few people, even within the academy, who were willing to work on this topic. And to encompass such an enormous country as—not even the USSR—Russia, with its firmly patriarchal way of thinking... because it's terribly ingrained in women, and the problem is not that they don't understand what you are saying, but that they actively resist it. And the situation keeps getting worse, because—it's an entirely different topic and we can discuss it later, but for now I won't get into it—because the entirety of mass culture, in Russia at least, supports this glamorous bourgeois ideal of femininity, of a woman who can paint her nails and do nothing else while her husband must provide for her, and if that didn't work out, that's a problem. Of course, there is a good solution – you can go on the show *The Fashion Verdict*.⁴² They will dress you properly, and everything will be good, you'll find a husband, things will turn out great. There are very few of us, maybe also because those of us who are involved in academic work distanced themselves a little from the women's movement because we were tired. None of us get rent or have this blessed husband to support us, so we have to work to earn a living. And we just started getting tired. This "out" is tied, on the one hand, to the social situation, and, on the other hand, to the personal one. I can say about myself that I'm almost burned out. On the inside. I'm just burned out.

NP: Doing women's-studies work?

OV: Overcoming resistance. Maybe this wouldn't have happened if not for the events of recent years. Because—again, returning to the Moscow Center for Gender Studies—we've worked in many...

NP: Areas.

OV: Areas, right. I wanted to say "on many fronts," but "areas" is better. Because on the one hand, there was the academic work, where you always have to learn something new. You have to read, you have to do research, or you won't have anything to analyze and discuss, there won't be anything interesting. That's one thing. The second thing is pedagogy. In addition to our Center courses, many of us were also teaching at various universities. There was also the women's movement, which we never abandoned. Endless calls, letters, requests for consultations – we never turned them down. And, of course, the most difficult thing: working with journalists, with government agencies. At least for the MCGS, the situation was very difficult. We were in Moscow, nearby. There was no need to

⁴² *The Fashion Verdict* is a Channel One Russia TV program created by Tatyana Shestopalova in 2007 ("Modnyy prigovor." IMDBtv. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2439928/>)

travel. It was easy to grab someone to teach something or do something. Or, the opposite, send something through channels—it happened then and still happens that the leadership delegates something down to the presidium, the presidium passes it down to the institute, the institute passes it to us. Write the memos. Or they just contacted us directly. Oh, how many of these parliamentary cases did we attend, how many many expert examinations of laws did we write, for free, of course, informally, and in addition to everything else. How many times did these laws fail to pass. How many times did we write them again. And then, at some point, the government turned away from us and our topics...

NP: That was already in the 2000s?

OV: This was already in the 2000s, late 2000s.⁴³ This of course is upsetting as well. And since I began talking about the government, I'll tell you about a thought I have, which is probably not shared by everyone. Of course, we were young feminists, in the intellectual sense. Spontaneous feminism is one thing, and belonging to a political or intellectual tradition is another. And we plunged into the sea of "academic feminism," jumped into it with no background—we had no courses in "feminine studies," we didn't even have any decent women's history—I mean within the humanities—we had no gender studies within philosophy, or within political science. We didn't have anything like that. We were on our own in this sea. And maybe because of our Soviet past, maybe because of some other intellectual circumstances, we put a lot of stock in working with the government. Because...

NP: From the very beginning.

OV: From the very beginning. The women's movement was... that is, there was no women's movement, if I can... I can be quite honest about things – I've said it before and I am disliked for it. I think there is no women's movement in Russia. And there never was. At least in Soviet times, in the Soviet times I lived in. It wasn't there. There were individual women's organizations. There were individual initiatives. They could be very substantial, and maybe in some regions they managed to accomplish something, something like opening shelters or getting more subsidies for kindergartens. But we did not, and probably could not, have a movement that would unite all the organizations, or even the organizations within a single region, that would set concrete political goals and speak about them openly, that would develop strategies for accomplishing these goals. Probably because we are still a very Soviet country. One that is very strictly controlled by the structures of government. There are still some... if not fears, then concerns or an unwillingness, or a desire to flee, to stop working on this. So on the one hand, we are a women's movement, but then, here is the government. At some point it seemed that the government was reasonable. They went abroad, they attended the UN forums, the CEDAW Convention was ratified—of course, for a long time it wasn't very well known, but it was still ratified.⁴⁴ There were reports from time to time in the Soviet period and

⁴³ In March of 2000, Vladimir Putin was elected for his first presidential term in Russia. ("Russia profile - Timeline." BBC News. May 18, 2017. Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840446>.)

⁴⁴ CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) was a UN forum which recognized the rights of women to have equal opportunity in political, social, and public

even in the early post-Soviet period. And it seemed like there was some sort of progress, some sort of a national mechanism forming, some laws. And it seems like the government was reasonable, like you could talk to them. And then suddenly, just because something got flipped there, everything changed, everything vanished. And the gamble we had made, counting on the dialogue with the government, didn't pay off. I don't know what the young feminists will accomplish. I can't manage to develop a dialogue with them. I don't know why. Only with Natal'ia Bitten.⁴⁵ But she is not that young, she's already written a dissertation, she was a scholar at our Center's library. She is around forty, so she is closer to our generation. But the very young girls, they come, they check out the books, they listen. And then they don't call or write again. Maybe I am too bourgeois for them, maybe just too old, or maybe they become too intimidated to talk to me on equal terms and feel uncomfortable and leave the conversation – I don't know. I won't try to dig through these questions, to look for answers. They are placing their bet on something else: they are working with self-awareness, with consciousness, language, lifestyle, and that is great, but I think that it is a sort of local, ghetto-ized strategy, because whoever made their way there and settled there, they continue to live to there. And in general, they don't leave. In that sense, we were more active, we wrote, gave talks, spoke in public, including a lot of TV and radio appearances.

NP: I want to come back to the topic of recognizing mistakes and miscalculations. Because, as far as I understand, one of the mistakes was that we believed—perhaps, because the entire country was then looking to the West—that our dialogue with the government would change something in the higher echelons and help, and we believed that the government itself wanted to change and that we would be the ones to tell them how to do it. Is it possible to identify certain points that could be taken into account by the next generation of girls who are creating women's organizations so that they don't step on the same rakes that we did and avoid our mistakes?

OV: I will answer in a moment. I wanted to add something else about your first point. Partially our mistake wasn't in working with the government – because we had to work with it. Our mistake was placing too much trust in it. Because we could never influence it. And it wasn't so much a mistake as it was a misfortune, because there were no mechanisms in our political system for influencing the government. There weren't and still aren't. And this is very important because the women's movement can only influence the government within a developed political structure, in a developed political culture, where there are mechanisms to present women's interests alongside the interests of other social groups formed on the basis of economic, political, ethnic factors. It doesn't matter which factors; the most important thing is that these mechanisms need to exist. I come to my representative, I request something, demand something. That did not and

areas of life. States which took part in the CEDAW treaty honored and respected the notion of women's equality. ("Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women." United Nations. Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>.)

⁴⁵ Natal'ia Bitten is a feminist activist and journalist. She is one of the founders of the For Feminism initiative group and the Sexist of the Year award ("Natalya Bitten." Echo Moscow. Accessed March 10, 2020. <https://echo.msk.ru/guests/826275-echo/>)

does not exist, and I am afraid that it won't happen in the future. So I think there is only one piece of advice I can give to young girls: if there is no way to influence the government politically, let's at least influence society's consciousness culturally. That is possible. In other words, we have to hold more seminars, workshops, to write more, to present ourselves to the world more. We shouldn't sequester ourselves in these little groups. Of course, it is great that—one of the Petersburg girls told me about this—they are planning to publish “zines,” handwritten journals. That's great, but in the age of the Internet, it's silly. How many copies can you write and publish, even if you somehow Xerox them later? I think they are too localized and too closed off, even more than we are, within their circles.

NP: How do your research and the women's movement intersect now? Are there still intersections? Or did you, after you defended your dissertation...

OV: No, it wasn't the dissertation. I defended the dissertation fairly late, in 2004, and there were still some intersections because—maybe not personal, but economic problems got in the way then—different people could participate in our courses through the Internet, not only academic researchers or instructors, but also activists, who would say, “I have a small women's organization.” It could be registered or not, and maybe it would just be on the level of personal consultations and contacts, but still, all of that was there. Now, the situation with the women's movement is bad also in the sense that the government, having banned Western foundations from providing financial support not only to women's but to any social initiatives, does not support them either. They claim that they give out grants, but these grants go only to servile organizations, toward topics that only the government is interested in, not topics that are interesting to society. There are no competitions, and in general everything is predetermined. Now the Orthodox women's movement is actively expanding, though I don't even know if it's a movement or just various one-time actions.⁴⁶ But, in any case, there are letters and appeals, about banning abortions, about banning the use of the word “gender,” From...

NP: From the Association of Orthodox Women?

OV: Yes, yes, or even from a series of women's organization, sometimes called parent organizations, but of course you know how it is, there are a lot of resources going toward that, and there are probably some people in charge who tell them what to write and what to do.

NP: Here is a question that we ask everyone taking part in this project, though it seems like it could be especially important to a philosopher. Can you define what feminism is to you? To your everyday life – not for the purpose of teaching, but just for your personal use. Did the fact that you were connected to women's topics, the

⁴⁶ The Union of Orthodox Women is an initiative that began in 2010 by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church to promote “traditional” roles for women in society and anti-abortion advocacy (“About Us.” Union of Orthodox Women. Accessed March 10, 2020. <http://xn--80aafbpfcowwcbdbmqnh4f3dsb6c.xn--p1ai/>)

women's movement, have an effect on your professional life and circumstances in general or no? If yes, how?

OV: If it did affect me, it was probably primarily in terms of my self-perception, though maybe that's something that I already had since I was a child. I think—based on what I remember—that I was always an independent child. And a very self-sufficient one. I have some evidence to support that. For example, when I was arguing with my father—whom I loved and love a lot; he died, unfortunately—about social or political topics, we maintained different positions. I could argue with him when I was in sixth grade, in fifth grade, and so on. I myself chose where to study—they didn't want me to join a philosophy department, naturally—who would wish that upon a child, especially a woman? There were several decisions I made that seemed crazy. I left a well-paid and very prestigious job that was killing me and accepted a position at the Academy of Sciences that had a tiny salary – this was even before I became familiar with feminism. I think I got involved in feminism—this might seem like I'm bragging, but I feel it's really the case—precisely because I was internally ready for it, and I was free. I never let anyone control me and my life. Though this doesn't mean that I'm a radical in my private life. It's just that I had a rather contradictory upbringing. In particular, I had one grandmother who was a priest's daughter and who was brought up conservatively. I don't know whether she was a believer during Soviet times; we never talked about it. I found out very late that my grandfather had been a priest – we had to hide it at the time, you could get arrested.⁴⁷ Unfortunately—I was about to say fortunately—he died before the revolution, so that saved them. But she had a very traditional upbringing and tried to raise me the same way. We didn't live together, but when I went to visit her – I loved her a lot and she went about this very gently, so there is some traditionalism in me. For instance, if I have to choose between making dinner for my family and writing an article, I will first make the dinner and then write. That's not feminist behavior. But I think that in my personal life, I can choose behaviors, values, and actions that make sense to me. I think this too is part of feminism. I can easily make concessions to my husband. I can go against my own inclinations for the sake of my child. My daughter had a very difficult, very stormy, adolescence, sometimes I was ready to kill her. But I always told myself, "Ol'ga, the most important thing is not to lose contact with your child." And I virtually twisted myself into a knot to keep myself from yelling, from kicking her out, in order not to lose that contact.

NP: Does your daughter share your views?

O.A.: Yes. She is not at all an academic person, she will never argue a point, foaming at the mouth, but I am proud of the fact that internally she is a feminist, an anti-racist, a person with free, liberal, democratic views. Though she loves to dress up – she is a young girl, what do you expect? She can look a certain way, but if the need arises, she will set her friends straight. She will explain why you shouldn't use slurs when talking about migrant workers, why you shouldn't hate Jews, why you shouldn't hate people based on their race,

⁴⁷ This most likely refers to the period right before the Bolshevik revolution. After the revolution, the atheist and communist powers in government seized Orthodox church property and executed over 1,000 priests in an attempt to eradicate religious beliefs and institutions. ("What Happened to Religion During the Communist Rule of Russia?" Synonym. Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://classroom.synonym.com/happened-religion-during-communist-rule-russia-8352.html>.)

national origin, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. She herself is heterosexual, but the other alternatives don't scare her. And I think that this is my accomplishment – my and my husband's, because without his support I wouldn't be able to keep the family together. I may be a feminist, but...

NP: He too shares your views and approaches, fully or partially?

OV: Of course. He did so from the start. He probably never put those views into a specific formulation, but he is an intelligent and educated person, a philosopher, so to him it's all very strange. So it happens from time to time that he has to say something to our colleagues—we work in the same institute—when they make a sexist joke during a conversation. Or—he is a gentle person, he doesn't fight—sometimes he tells me that it's so strange, the things people say. And he always comes to my talks. And when I had work trips, I could leave our daughter with him for a few days. Everyone at the institute looked at us with some confusion. We've come to terms with that, but of course I am a strange bird. As is he, probably. Our last name comes from the word "crow," so we are the two white crows.

NP: I want to return to the history of the Moscow Center for Gender Studies. This question has to do with the turn of the century and those changes which the aughts ushered in. I think it's obvious that there has been a conservative turn in politics, which has brought about changes in status for many non-profits. How did the Center survive in those times, and when there still were schools and meet-ups. In other words, what were its milestones or stages in the last ten years?

OV: Until 2009, probably, when all this began... Am I right?

NP: Aha.

OV: Oh my, how time flies. So during that time we switched to educational and research activities. We had a few projects, including one that looked at national mechanisms in different countries. Thanks to a MacArthur grant I could order reports and presentations about the development of governmental policies, national policies, in practically all the former Soviet republics, now independent states.⁴⁸ But there were different situations. For instance, I never got a response from the Baltics⁴⁹, they didn't want to have anything to do with us, while in Uzbekistan a woman wrote an incredible report but asked to remain anonymous. And she was an anonymous author in the book that we published—she was afraid of persecution and she ended up leaving the country later.

NP: You're not talking about Svetlana, are you?

⁴⁸ The MacArthur Foundation is an international nonprofit organization that funds people and organizations in a variety of fields working to address a broad range of social issues ("Information for Grantseekers." MacArthur Foundation. Accessed January 10, 2020. <https://www.macfound.org/info-grantseekers/>)

⁴⁹ The Baltic States, or the Baltics, is a geopolitical term referring to three sovereign states in Northern Europe bordering the Baltic Sea-- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania ("Baltic states." Wikipedia. Accessed January 10, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltic_states)

OV: No, no. This isn't Kazakhstan I'm talking about, it's Uzbekistan. So anyways, it ended up being a very good book, it was popular among our politicians even in 2009. We brought 150 copies to the Duma for some hearings of theirs. And there was a demand for them. Besides that, we had publications about changes in the education system, the labor market, health care – also research, but of a practical rather than theoretical nature. All of these were very popular as well. There were remote conferences, personal meetings...

NP: And contact with the government.

OV: And contact with the government. Absolutely. But things changed around 2010-2011.⁵⁰ And it's not even the fact that the foundations left Russia – of course that was damaging, it was one in a series of events like that, but there was still hope that we could survive and somehow sustain ourselves using Russian grants. But, unfortunately, we never received a single grant, even though we submitted applications. Some grants, as I understand it, went to the organizations working with the problem of violence toward women. I think it's a very important problem, but we ourselves never worked on that.

NP: Grants from Russian foundations?

OV: Yes, from Russian foundations. They got grants from the Civic Chamber⁵¹; the Consortium⁵² was one of them, it changed its—you'll excuse me, but I call things as I see them—they were a public organization, a women's organization, a politicized one. They didn't do a lot of their own research. But at some point, they started working on the problem of violence. That is probably a good thing, because this problem is bottomless and there is a lot to do there. But we decided that we weren't going to do that. And we got no money for the problems that we did want to study and discuss. So for a while we managed to keep existing, and then I managed to convince a foundation and the foundation decided to give us a parting treat as it left Russia, and we got a very small grant to redo our website.

NP: Which foundation was that?

OV: The MacArthur Foundation.

NP: Ah, and finally they were... Was this before they were banished?⁵³

⁵⁰ OV may be referencing the period of time when Vladimir Putin was accused of using Western funds to support his political campaign. As a result, sanctions were placed on international funds coming into Russia, and this may have had an impact on foundations in Russia. (Grove, Thomas. "Analysis: Putin critics hit back over charge of Western funding." Reuters. December 13, 2011. Accessed February 15, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-financing/analysis-putin-critics-hit-back-over-charge-of-western-funding-idUSTRE7BC0ZZ20111213>.)

⁵¹ The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation is a Russian civil society institution created in 2005 and works like an oversight committee for legislation and parliament, with consultative powers ("Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation." Wikipedia. Accessed January 6, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_Chamber_of_the_Russian_Federation)

⁵² She is likely referring to the Consortium of Women's Nongovernmental Associations (*Konsortsiium zhenskikh nepravitel'stvennykh ob"edinenii*)

⁵³ In May 2015, Russia adopted a law allowing the prosecutor's office to ban "undesirable" foreign or international organizations in the name of Russian security and constitutional order. The MacArthur

OV: Practically, yes, before they were banished.

NP: Or did you contact them in Chicago?

OV: No, no, no, no. No, we received the money here, officially, they sent it to our account, as before. And we used it to make our website more modern. To preserve all the information we had and add some new things. It became less of a website and more of an academic portal with some publications. It was a big undertaking.

NP: Is it still getting updated and expanded?

OV: Now, no. There are no means to do that now. For a few years, no, months—unfortunately, I can't do it myself. We had someone on staff before...

NP: This was a new generation of feminists who did this?

OV: No, we had a specialist who.... we needed a whole new program, to take everything down and re-upload it, sometimes changing the formats. It was a big, two-year project. We were hoping we could somehow continue it, but we couldn't get support from the MacArthur Foundation and the Russian foundations didn't respond. You can still visit the site, get the materials, but, as they say, "the patient is more dead than alive."

NP: So there isn't a new generation that could replace you and continue organizing schools and conferences?

OV: No, that never came to be. And again, with the new generation - just renting a venue requires a lot of money. And everything else does too. Even putting aside the fact that people should get at least some compensation for their efforts. Maybe I could put in the work as a volunteer, for free, but everything else requires money as well. And when we were already finishing the grant and didn't have any more money, we, of course, got accused of being foreign agents. This was in the summer of 2011, it was terrible.

NP: How did it happen? Did you get a letter from the prosecutor's office?

OV: Yes, we got an email from the Lenin District's prosecutor's office, because our legal address was in that district. It said, "We ask that you come in tomorrow (it was in the evening) with all of your charter documents and bank statements (they wanted two years' worth of activities)." Naturally, I said, "I'm sorry, but that's not possible." They gave us a week, we made some document copies, even though we were an official organization. An official organization registered with the Ministry of Justice.⁵⁴ All of our financial transactions went through Sberbank.⁵⁵ Everything was transparent, you could request and receive all records. The woman, the young woman, who was the prosecutor

Foundation was included in a list of organizations for investigation, and soon after the foundation discontinued their funding in Russia ("Russia: Open Society Foundation Banned." Human Rights Watch. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/01/russia-open-society-foundation-banned>)

⁵⁴ The Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation is responsible for the legal and penal system of Russia ("Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation." The Russian Government. Accessed January 10, 2020. <http://government.ru/en/department/99/events/>)

⁵⁵ Sberbank, short for *sbergatel'nyi bank* (Savings Bank), is a state-run bank.

interviewing us initially, was lovely. She was even sympathetic, but she was just a hired employee following instructions, and she didn't even understand at first what she was supposed to ask us about.

NP: Who else was there besides you?

OV: The accountant and I were there.

NP: To hold you back.

OV: Yes, yes. So I was there as the director, and the accountant as a signing authority. Several times we brought over some photocopies, stacks of documents. But this is the same story, down to the last detail, that anyone who's gone through this would tell you. So the problem was that we were engaged in political activity using foreign money. And the problem was that the law does not define what "political" means. So everyone could interpret it however they wanted. Even our—I am not sure what her status was, the prosecutor's assistant—she said, "So you present your ideas and thus influence people's perceptions, so that means you are engaged in political activity." And I said, "But you see, in that case every teacher is engaged in political activity." "But you are getting money for it." We talked about it with her for a very long time, but I think the deciding factor in the end wasn't that, but the fact that—I never do this, but in this case I decided I had to—I gathered (of course, I had written to the Parliament but never heard back) some papers that they sent us at various times: New Year's greetings, Women's Day greetings, invitations to events, requests for books, some thank-you notes. I brazenly made copies of all of them and put them on top of other papers in every folder. I was very embarrassed to do this, but what can you do?! Really, what can you do?! At some point the young woman said it again. We had gone through everything and suddenly she said, "You had political scientists involved in your project as well?" And I said, "we did, yes." And this was after she already looked through everything five times. And then I had to write some sort of an explanatory note. I kept having to explain something, and that was the worst, because how do you explain something that is already clear. She said, "Let's not write it." Okay, let's not, even though the whole program is up on the website. Then this question came up: "So you had representatives of local government at your conference in Samara?" I said, "Yes, that's the aim of our work." "That is unacceptable, you can't do that, it's political influence, and so on." I said, "I'm sorry, but how did I influence them? They came, heard the talks, left. They didn't even eat lunch with us. I didn't pay them. I don't know what they got out of what they heard. I didn't ask for reports. How did I influence them?" "Still, that's influence." But you know, then Mizulina also—the chair of the Committee on the Affairs of Women, Family and Children, a doctor of law—doesn't know what she is doing because she is always sending us invitations.⁵⁶ I am a member of the council of experts. We go to parliament and give presentations in the Duma too. This was of course

⁵⁶ Yelena Mizulina is a politician who served in the Russian Parliament from 1995-2003 and passed a number of controversial laws including bills that prevented women from obtaining a higher education before having children and decriminalizing 1st-time domestic violence offenders. She has switched political parties, as she used to work with the Communists and liberal Yobloko party. ("Yelena Mizulina." Wikipedia. March 03, 2018. Accessed March 09, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yelena_Mizulina.)

the decisive blow. I think our conversation was recorded. Then some young man came in to check our financial documents. He kept looking, looking, flipping through them. He was remarkable too. He came in, sat down facing away from me. I said to his back, "Hello, my name is Ol'ga Aleksandrovna Voronina." He muttered something. Then he said: "Ol'ga." I said, "My name is Ol'ga Aleksandrovna." "Our president introduces himself as Vladimir Putin." I told him, "That's the president's business. I go by Ol'ga Aleksandrovna." Ok, fine. So he asked, "What is RAGS? Is it some other foundation that you failed to mention?" I said, "No, it's the Russian Academy of Government Service under the President of the Russian Federation. We organized a seminar there. We paid them, by the way, with foreign money, though converted into rubles. But it came from the grant. You can see here: lunch, coffee, overnight stay." So in the end they left us alone. But they didn't bother to write us anything. After a few frantic months, they left us alone. I think only because I had played all my trump cards and apparently they decided, "Why bother?" There are others to go after. It had a big impact on me; I wouldn't want to go through that again. I don't know...

NP: Had the foreign funding stopped by that time? By 2011?

OV: Yes, it had. Yes. But they were checking the ten...

NP: Previous years.

OV: Previous years. In 2010 we had pennies in our account. But by this time a lot of organizations were going through it and getting...

NP: Was it based on exceeding some amount? That small sums were okay but not large ones?

OV: No, no, no, no, no. It was based on the idea that all organizations that received foreign funding and were engaged in what they considered to be political activities were foreign agents. For example, social policy work was considered politics. But what is politics in the health-care sphere? The thing is that the people who were conducting the investigation had no idea what they were doing. They weren't political scientists, they weren't even prosecutor's assistants who had sat through some educational lectures, at least about how the terms "politics" and "political activity" should be interpreted according to the new law and its amendments that'd been passed. Imagine if someone sent me, someone with no medical knowledge, as an expert to investigate some medical operation. And they tell me, "It was done for the good of the patient, but he died just a little while after it, but we wanted to do the best thing for him." And I say, "But he died anyway, and you had no right to begin with." And they tell me, "No, without us, he would've died even faster." A totally absurd situation. But there was nothing you could do about it.

NP: And after 2010 you no longer maintained contact with international organizations? Or did the contact go on with the help of the internet? And we are now talking not about funding, but specifically about the relationships that were maintained over many years?

OV: Well, the thing is that it's very difficult to maintain contact. Sometimes I exchange messages through Facebook or sometimes email with the MacArthur Foundation; after

all, we've had a long-term relationship and the officials in Chicago sort of know our Center and me. But, for instance, it's been a long time since I interacted with the Ford Foundation. The Soros Foundation has been labelled an odious entity, so we haven't had any contact for a long time.

NP: What about the Global Fund for Women?⁵⁷ Maybe not in the US, but in Germany, or some French organizations?

OV: I haven't tried. First of all, the Global Fund gives very small grants and primarily only to new organizations just trying to establish themselves. It seems inappropriate for us to ask them for money. And second, there are no mechanisms for receiving this money in Russia legally. And I don't want to operate illegally. And there is no legal way. That is, sure, they can transfer the money to our account, but then I'll be called in again and labelled a foreign agent. And there is also a different kind of accounting that has to be done. I'll tell you what kind. Every quarter, once every three months, you have to do all the accounting... that is, you'll just be working to produce the reports. And without any guarantee that you'll be able to live in peace. We are in such a state... we are not closing, but we are in an uncertain state.

NP: Is it possible to say that international women's organizations have somehow affected your work over the last quarter of a century?

OV: Of course, because some of them...

NP: Not just financially, I mean.

OV: Of course. Partially because of the exchange of experience and ideas. They came here very often, we traveled to Germany a lot. The "Green" party had all sorts of events.

NP: What is the difference between Western organizations and Russian ones? Is there something clearly different here that doesn't allow Western organizations to work in Russia the same way that they work with their own women's electorate, population, and so on?

OV: I don't think it's a difference in the type of organizations in the West and here. I think it's the difference in the entire social, cultural, and political context in which our respective organizations function. Because in the West, women's organizations are full participants in civic society and in some places even in the political process. So no one would think to call them foreign spies or agents because they receive foreign funding. There are many foundations... they are also suffering from the recession, there is less funding now... but still, there are many foundations they can turn to. And, again, it's not considered a financial crime. They can have contact with the Union, and Alliance, and different political parties and forces... (text omitted for privacy).

NP: But she doesn't use the word "feminism"?

⁵⁷ The Global Fund for Women was founded in 1987 in California. The organization directly funds grassroots, women-led movements ("Mission & History." Global Fund for Women. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/about/mission-history/>)

OV: Naturally. Well, okay, when there are no cameras, when we run into each other in small seminars... [text omitted for privacy] She greeted me like we were family. I was quite surprised.

NP: So do you look toward the future with optimism? Or did we accomplish everything we could accomplish back in the '90s and now there isn't much else to hope for?

OV: I think that if the political situation changes, if the country comes to its senses a little bit and stop going... Well, not the country, if the government stops going down this path of conservatism and isolation, this return to a kind of patriarchal middle ages, if this happens, there will be women's organizations and enthusiastic people from our and the younger generations who will want to talk about these things. It's possible that the younger generation is just... often young women and men, at least the educated, urban ones, do not share these patriarchal sexist views. They just think that everything they have—free access to work, to education—is a given. But for them, it really is a given, so if someone starts infringing on these things, they will resist. So far we don't have anti-abortion demonstrations, but I think if the situation worsens, they might start. It's very possible. There might be some form of quiet sabotage or there might be something else. So I think in principle there is some potential, but since there is currently this active brainwashing in favor of things like isolationism, Russia's special path, that we aren't bound by human rights, we have no need for this gender stuff or juvenile justice, "he beats because he loves" – in this situation, I don't think there is a possibility to make a turn, especially since Moscow is one thing, and the rest of the country is something else. I don't know what effect these things have there.

NP: But we still remain researchers in the end. We don't just consider ourselves members of the women's movement, we can also see it all from a distance, as researchers, study it. Maybe that is our task given the path that we have traveled. Can we say... Do you think that your daughter, who shares your beliefs, could support, for instance, anti-abortion demonstrations and the anti-patriarchal⁵⁸ ideas that are in the air in connection with the topics of contraception and pronatalism, because the state is, of course, interested in increasing the number of women giving birth, not the number of women with heightened self-awareness and so on. Let me clarify my question: To what extent will our children and students, those we raised and educated, be prepared to keep transmitting the ideas that we taught them to their friends, their generation, maybe the next generation? Maybe we've done our work and that's the end of it, they won't continue it?

OV: My own daughter will continue speaking about these things. The generation as a whole... I don't know, it's a difficult question, because they are, of course, more free than we were, but they are also very much in the grip of economic constraints, because any sort of public activity can affect their ability to work and earn money. And, of course, maybe they are not revolutionaries because they grew up in the years of stormy reforms

⁵⁸ NP misspeaks here. She means to say "patriarchal," not "anti-patriarchal."

and tragedies and sacrifices of a physical kind. We all remember 1991 and 1993.⁵⁹ But on the other hand, there was then a very, what they call, “fat” period. Good oil prices, a lot of entertainment options, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Life was swirling and there was no particular desire to become involved in politics. But it does offer some hope that when there are demonstrations in Moscow—let’s say oppositional demonstrations, though they don’t try to position themselves that way—there are a lot of young people, including women and men with children. Yes, they didn’t erect barricades, but they still came out here. But there is also another tendency. You can see in the streets these baby strollers—I saw them recently, around the time of the Victory celebrations—and the stroller shades have this military look and they are decorated with St. George’s ribbons, which now have a certain political connotation.⁶⁰ As to our life and the possibility of studying all this... I hope we get this opportunity. But yesterday I, as a member of the competition committee, received the new regulation that the Federal Agency for Scientific Organizations⁶¹ is discussing with us, which deals with the effective contract and all that. Will my gender topics be written into the contract? Yours? I’m not sure.

NP: I think I can only hope that the Sector will keep its name, because they already hinted at that. They say that because ethnography is a descriptive science, we won’t lose anything if there is an ethnography of the family.

⁵⁹ In 1991 the Soviet Union fell and a series of historical political events occur over the next few years under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency. One of the major occurrences of the early 1990’s was the implementation of economic reforms by acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar that drove many Russian people into poverty and drastically impaired the Russian economy. In 1993, Russia endured a number of attacks on parliament resulting in drastic changes to the constitution that gave the president more power. (“Russia timeline.” BBC News. March 06, 2012. Accessed February 24, 2018. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1113655.stm.)

⁶⁰ Victory Day in Russia occurs on May 9th, and commemorates the Soviet Army’s victory over Nazi Germany and end to the European theater of World War II, which the Soviet Union and now Russian dubs “the Great Patriotic War.” The St. George ribbon, since 2005, has been a symbol of remembrance on this holiday. (Sharkov, Damien. “Victory Day: Why is May 9 so important to Russia?” Newsweek. May 22, 2017. Accessed February 24, 2018.) <http://www.newsweek.com/what-may-ninth-and-why-it-so-important-russia-605639>.)

When OV mentions the “certain political connotation,” she is most likely referring to the heated debates around the St. George’s ribbon that have tagged it as a symbol of the resurgence of Russian nationalism, chauvinism, and neoimperialism in post-Soviet space. In places like Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, the distribution of the ribbon is seen, rightfully so, as part of a larger attempt to put a Russian nationalist stamp on what was previously often perceived as a victory of the multinational Soviet state over fascism. See “Ukraine Bans the St. George’s Ribbon as a ‘Symbol of Russian Aggression’ | Euromaidan Press |,” Euromaidan Press, May 18, 2017, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/05/18/ukraine-bans-the-st-georges-ribbon/>; Alexander Kim, “St. George’s Ribbons and Their Dubious Symbolism in Post-Soviet Central Asia,” Jamestown, May 7, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/st-georges-ribbons-and-their-dubious-symbolism-in-post-soviet-central-asia/>.

⁶¹ The Federal Agency of Scientific Organizations sets federal regulations for organizations related to science, education, and agriculture. (FASO Russia | ФАНО России. Accessed February 24, 2018. <http://fano.gov.ru/en/>.)

OV: Oh yes, of course. Of course. And I had... I don't know if you've talked to the Ivanovo colleagues and our colleagues from different cities.⁶² Last year I had a, what would you call her, a bachelor's student? No, she was a master's student, a master's student from England, a very active girl. And she visited the Ivanovo Center for Gender Studies. And their situation is very sad, because the number of courses is decreasing and there is a recommendation not to use the word "gender." They continue to call themselves the Ivanovo Center for Gender Studies, but I don't know... They tried to fire the center's director, Ol'ga Shnyrova, then she went to court and got the job back. Maybe she is teaching these courses. But I think...

NP: Probably not about the history of feminism anymore, but...

OV: Yes, yes, certainly something else. Either about women or I don't know. But in general, of course, you could probably find some way to deal with it, use a different word keeping the same content, assuming that leadership—academic or educational—will go along with it. Actually, Natal'ia, I don't know if this will make it to the interview or not, but I was feeling very badly and am now starting to crawl out of that state. I really wasn't doing well, especially when Natal'ia Rimashevskaja told us... that is, not her, but the director told us to get out.⁶³ This was two years ago, around the end of May. We were told to leave the building within a month. And we weren't even really there as the Center of Gender Studies anymore. A few years earlier they cut off all landlines to there. Rimashevskaja's laboratory is there. Of gender topics. Her laboratory is located in that building. There is no Center for Gender Studies. We have a legal address, but no one knows where it is. We don't get letters here anymore, we don't get our own Internet line, we set it up ourselves with these modems. We hid ourselves as best we could. But the director told us to leave within a month. To leave the building. I tried to go see her. She said, "It should've been shut down long ago. Who needs this now?" There is no money; that means no one needs it. I took our library to Moscow State University, they just now started unpacking it. I took it to the public administration department. But I don't know what will happen with their dean and gender studies. And when I was trying to find a home for the library – I understand there is no space for it at the State Library or at the Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences⁶⁴; the books would just lie somewhere in the hallway and

⁶² The Ivanovo Center for Gender Studies was founded as a subdivision for research at Ivanovo State University in 1996 and obtained the status of an NGO in 1997 ("About Us." Ivanovo Center for Gender Studies. Accessed January 6, 2020. <http://icgs.ru/en/about-uss/about-us>)

⁶³ Natal'ia Rimashevskaja was the director of the Academy of Sciences Institute for Socio-Economic Problems of the Population, which advocates for a more egalitarian approach to relations between men and women (Marsh, Rosalind. "Anastasiia Posadskaia, the Dubna Forum, the independent women's movement," Women in Russia and Ukraine. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁶⁴ The Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences, INION RAN is a research center for social studies and humanities, created in 1969 and located in Moscow, Russia ("The Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences of the Russian Academy of Sciences." Wikipedia. Accessed January 6, 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_of_Scientific_Information_on_Social_Sciences_of_the_Russian_Academy_of_Sciences)

burn.⁶⁵ No one came to help. I called a meeting and all of our staff said, “Yes, let’s close down.” When it was time to load up the library, I used the remaining grant money to hire movers, and otherwise it was me and the accountant. We moved all of it. And no one cares anymore. No one from the... I tried to count, during our schools and conferences, we had representatives from about seventy Russian universities. I don’t remember exactly how many people, but it was a few thousand who went through some sort of training. But we don’t even get New Year’s or birthday or Paris Commune Day greetings anymore.⁶⁶ I used to do large mailings. I would get replies. New Year’s greetings – maybe just formalities, but still. I used to do mailings to two hundred addresses. One year I stopped writing, and Tania Barchunova⁶⁷ wrote to me:

NP: From Novosibirsk.⁶⁸

OV: “Where is the president’s message?” That’s it. I just don’t know. In any event...

NP: But still, it wasn’t for nothing, right? Your Center did so much for the propagation of the idea, the very word “gender,” and feminism.

OV: And for the approach.

NP: And approaches, and so on – no one else comes close. Of course, everyone tells a similar story, no center right now can boast that they are continuing their work despite the change in the social and political context and the complete lack of funding. In part, this was also our shortcoming, in the sense that we hadn’t thought about what would happen if the grants stopped or the relationships soured. Of course, no one knew that there would be a war with Ukraine, sanctions, and so on. You couldn’t imagine it in your worst nightmare. We believed that we were forever integrated into European society.

OV: Yes. Really yes.

NP: And that there was no other path and there would never be a different history. But now, when we are returning to Aesopian language and the need to speak in a special way, like we had to in Soviet times, about the questions that concern us – these stories are, naturally, common to all of us.

OV: It is terribly painful that—I can’t say there is no continuity, there is continuity—the continuity isn’t obvious and, maybe, not significant enough, if you will. I have to boast

⁶⁵ OV is referring to the 2015 fire in this library. See Vladimir Pokrovsky, “Fire Devastates Russian Academy Library | Science | AAAS,” Science, February 2, 2015, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2015/02/fire-devastates-russian-academy-library>.

⁶⁶ Paris Commune Day is celebrated on March 18 by the working class to commemorate the 1871 victory of the first proletarian revolution (“Paris Commune Day.” Calend.Ru. Accessed March 10, 2020. <https://www.calend.ru/holidays/0/0/964/>)

⁶⁷ Tat’iana Vladimirovna Barchunova is faculty in the Novosibirsk State University’s Philosophy Department where she specializes in Gender Studies (“Tatiana Barchunova.” Academia. Accessed March 10, 2020. <https://nsu-ru.academia.edu/TatianaBarchunova>)

⁶⁸ Novosibirsk is a city in Siberia.

about one episode, though it's not so much boasting, just a story about one path where the ideas were transmitted successfully. During one of the last conferences of the Soros Foundation I met a woman from Uzbekistan.⁶⁹ At the time she was a Fulbright recipient, she was teaching there.⁷⁰ We had a great, long talk, and at some point she told me, "Of course you couldn't have remembered me." I said, "I'm sorry." In 1987, I was in Andijan, it had to do with social studies.⁷¹ My topic was something like the problem of happiness and the meaning of life. But sometimes they asked me to talk about the Soviet family. I lectured on the Soviet family, plus Soviet women, plus non-Soviet women. Mixed in some feminism. And she told me, "I heard your lecture in '87." Andijan is a hole, frankly. A tiny, tiny settlement, not even a city. And since then she started working on this topic. It's all there, regardless. And the books, the articles, the libraries are still there. I myself personally sent a hundred books on gender and feminism to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, from the Center and from my personal library. They didn't burn them. They are still there. I don't know if they still read Russian books, but I think someone does. We left some imprints in various other places where we spoke, lectured. I don't think that all of that disappeared. Though, of course, at a certain point in life, you start taking stock, and you wish for more recognition—not even honor, just recognition, because you want to get a treat or even some support, for someone to say, "That was really great, that was wonderful." But there is nothing. And the fact that the media is silent, and the government is silent, and even the colleagues are sometimes silent, that does sting. But you are still continuing your heroic efforts.

NP: Thank you, Ol'ga Aleksandrovna, for everything you told us. Maybe I haven't asked all the questions and there is still more to say, but in the first place I want to say thank you, because if we don't preserve the memory thanks to those who participated in these first women's forums and the creation of the first women's organizations, I'm afraid there won't be a paper record in the archives the way there would be if they were official organizations rather than commercial partnerships or noncommercial organizations and so on. Of course, we all have our charter documents, but we don't send them out, don't put together complete archival files in order for our descendants to learn about us. So I think if we don't preserve the memory through oral histories, oral women's histories, I would say,

⁶⁹George Soros, founder of the Open Society Foundations, is one of the world's most notable philanthropists and investors. His organization supports individuals and groups fighting against discrimination and inequality, including many women's rights issues. ("George Soros." Open Society Foundations. Accessed February 14, 2018. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/people/george-soros>.)

⁷⁰The Fulbright U.S. Student Program provides research, study, and teaching opportunities to recent graduates, as well as graduate students, in over 140 different countries ("Fulbright U.S. Student Program." Fulbright. Accessed January 10, 2020. <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/about>)

⁷¹Andijan is a city in Uzbekistan.

and autogynographies,⁷² they will never find out about us. Thank you for agreeing to tell us about everything.

OV: Thank you for inviting me, and thank you for this project, because it really is very important to preserve the memory so that no one can later say, “What are you talking about, Russia has always been a backward country. They’ve always beat their women, and the women, I don’t know, bore fifteen children and didn’t know anything else in life.” They knew, and they will know more.

NP: Thank you very much, Ol’ga Aleksandrovna.

⁷² Autogynography is a term first used in 1987 by Domna Stanton to identify works of female autobiography historically neglected in the genre (“Autogynography.” Scribd. Accessed January 6, 2020. <https://www.scribd.com/document/50969040/AUTOGYNOGRAPHY>).