

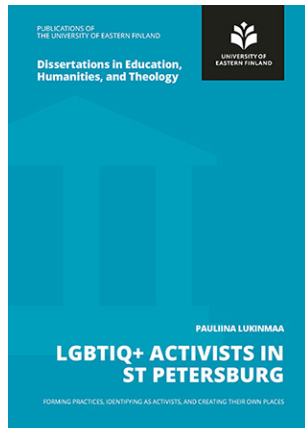
St Petersburg LGBTIQ+ Activists Acquire, Develop and Apply Various Tactics in Tense and Oppressive Atmosphere

Pauliina Lukinmaa

SQS
2/2022

61

Lectio
Praecursoria



The doctoral dissertation of Pauliina Lukinmaa, M.Sc., entitled *LGBTIQ+ Activists in St Petersburg: Forming Practices, Identifying as Activists, and Creating Their Own Places* was examined on September 23rd, 2022, in the Philosophical Faculty, University of Eastern Finland. Docent Olga Tkach (University of Helsinki) and University Lecturer Riikka Taavetti (University of Turku) acted as opponents in the public examination.

The Custodian was Professor Jaana Vuori (University of Eastern Finland).

Pauliina Lukinmaa. 2022. *LGBTIQ+ Activists in St Petersburg: Forming Practices, Identifying as Activists, and Creating Their Own Places*. Publications of the University of Eastern Finland. Dissertations in Education, Humanities, and Theology 188. ISBN: 978-952-61-4604-1, ISSN: 1798-5633. Joensuu: University of Eastern Finland.

Julkaisun pysyvä osoite:
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-4604-1>

I am delighted that you have gathered here, both physically and virtually, for the defence of my doctoral dissertation *LGBTIQ+ activists in St Petersburg: Forming Practices, Identifying as Activists, and creating their own places*. The alphabet here refers to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, intersex, and queers. At times research participants used this abbreviation as an umbrella term and at other times specified terms from it.

To bring their activities in St Petersburg tangible for you, I selected a couple of illustrations shown here (Images 1.–3.). They are drawn by a St Petersburg artist Kimkino. It is such a lovely surprise that she is here with us today, considering the troubled visa policies and border controls caused by the war in Ukraine.

One August afternoon in 2019 Emiliia and I are on our way to the opening of Sasha's (who uses the singular gender-nonbinary pronoun they/them) art exhibition. It is held in a large formerly state-owned communal apartment, a *kommunalka*, which is today rented by four grassroots activist artists. Occasionally, like this evening, their home serves as an art exhibition and event space that is open to their friends and extended social circles.

Carrying bottles of wine with us, we hurry to the metro. As the rails screech, Emiliia almost screams out her latest news to me about the

Pauliina
Lukinmaa

activist scene again facing the absurdities of the Russian regime. Emiliia manifests her adrenaline surge and frustration as her voice gets even louder when she speaks of the latest turns in the court case of the convicted young Khachaturian sisters. The three sisters killed their father, probably in self-defence. Emiliia, with others in the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements, has organized a demonstration in support of the sisters.

Suddenly I realize that participating in public activism may generate negative reactions, and scan fast the carriage. However, I see that other passengers seem to be focusing on the usual things people do in the St Petersburg metro: reading their e-books or softcovers, listening to music, but also, like Emiliia, sometimes grabbing the hand of their friend, leaning on them, and shouting into their ear. Some passengers close their eyes during the long journey home to the suburbs.

Inside the exhibition space, the long corridor of the former kommunalka apartment is covered with Sasha's illustrations, alongside excerpts from Sasha's diary. The exhibition deals with the time of Sasha's emigration to the US in the 2000s. Some activist friends have already arrived, greeting us as we walk through the corridor to the crowded tiny kitchen. Small groups are quietly conferring in the four bedrooms along the corridor. I don't know them, but I can tell by their appearance that they are also 'our people'.

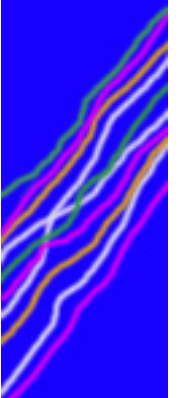
Sasha soon invites us into the corridor, where a group stands in front of an illustration, apparently depicting Sasha selling fruit in a market. Sasha explains that when they were an illegal immigrant in the US, there were limited opportunities to earn steady money, and in any case, to gain access to education in the US, Sasha managed to take free art classes under a friend's name. During these years of

turmoil, Sasha came out as a lesbian, in their words an unimaginable thing to do in Russia.

Sasha's experiences speak of estrangement from the surrounding society. They resonate with many of those listening. They also want to share their experiences. Some explain that they have moved from provincial towns to St Petersburg, others their struggles in coming out to their parents and friends. Such migration, whether from Russia to the US, a provincial town to St Petersburg, or from their families of origin also helped them come out to themselves and discover new identities. Many are currently searching for their place within work and a study environment that coincides with their values and goals, which have likewise become clearer during their migration processes. The new social circles have enabled them to explore themselves further – both by detaching themselves from their backgrounds and in turn rediscovering them, while grounding themselves in activist circles by badging themselves as different, yet this time on their own terms. In other words, they discuss in the exhibition who they were, are, and could be.

My research analyses the tactics that LGBTIQ+ activists employ in their activism in St Petersburg, in a socio-political atmosphere that is tense and oppressive for minorities. More in detail, I studied how they construct and organize their activities in St Petersburg; how they identify with and name themselves as activists in St Petersburg, and how they create their own places in St Petersburg.

I approached my topic with an ethnographic research method, which enabled me to explore research participants' activities in their own surroundings. I participated and observed the activists in St Petersburg during the years 2017–2019; their coming and goings, activities in groups, participation in festivals and other events, as well as organizing their own



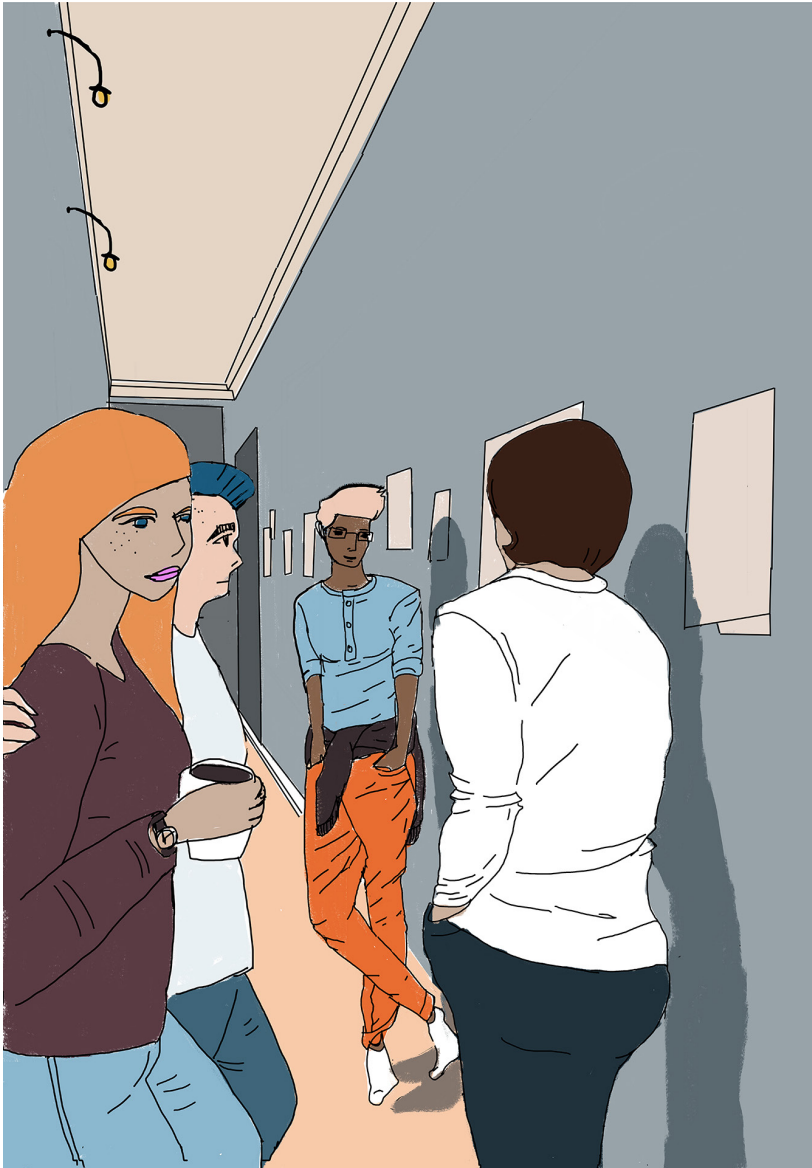


Image 1. A group of activists rents an old kommunalka flat with four bedrooms, where they organize events like art exhibitions for their extended social networks. Here Sasha tells about their illustrations and biographic excerpts, shown on the walls. Illustration: @kimkino (2019), modified from Pauliina Lukinmaa's photo.

gatherings and initiatives on various topics, both long-term and ad hoc. And yet, not everything was open to me, such as peer support groups for LGBT parents, transgender people and people living with HIV. Thus, this study depicts a fragment of the activities and discussions taking place within the movement in a limited time frame.

My theoretical framework is interdisciplinary, drawing mainly on Gender, Russian, and Cultural Studies, as well as Anthropology. I placed my case study within the varied temporal, ideological and geographical frameworks in St Petersburg, Russian, Soviet societies and transnational LGBTIQ+ activist movements.

My first contact with some of the protagonists of this thesis occurred already in the spring of 2013. I then took a chance to do a university internship at an LGBT organization in St Petersburg. Not knowing much about the situation of the LGBTIQ+ people in Russia aside from the international media coverage, I soon realized that having at least a vague understanding of the complex and rapidly changing surroundings for LGBTIQ+ activism would demand much more time than those three months of internship I had in my hands.

Aside from the data gathered through observations and participation, my monograph PhD dissertation also consists of interviews with 45 activists. Some of them I interviewed several times and with the majority, I had also casual chats both offline and online. I have also used other related materials such as statistics dealing with Russian citizens' attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ people, LGBT organizations' publications, and activists' offline and online texts. Not all research participants were in St Petersburg during the research project: some had emigrated elsewhere for various reasons such as for studies, work, asylum, or love. Some had recently returned to Russia, to discover it anew as LGBTIQ+ activists. Others emigrated during my fieldwork or after it. The movement was in constant forming upon activists searching for ways to elude the Russian regime's discerning eye.

The specific way of framing the community action and activists in each context matters a great deal. What is activism? Who is an activist? These terms are both historical constructions burdened with complex transnational baggage and marked by the dominant epistemic and geopolitical hierarchies of the post-socialist period. Not all protagonists of the research described themselves as activists, although they indeed were active participants and even organizers of various LGBTIQ+ events. Yet, some stated to be first and foremost activists, which prompted their interest also in participating in the research.

The complexity revolving around activism in Russia reveals that activism is stratified with the interplay of cultural, political, and societal settings and histories, reflected manifoldly in everyday lives. Omnipresent police and civic surveillance push the movement to invent new ways of activism. Approaching Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira (2019), I consider here that activism cannot be found only in heroism and the extraordinary. Unlike public protests, everyday acts of resistance aren't necessarily meant to garner extensive media attention. Instead, these repetitive actions in public and more private spaces, are designed to appeal directly to various publics (Butler 2014). Yet, as Bonnie Honig (2016, 78, 81–82) argues, I consider that there is no essential self that “wait[s] for a discovery and realization through public action”.

Activism manifests itself in manifold ways. It can be public campaigning for political and societal change, inscribed in its simultaneous institutionalization and professionalization (Lang 2013; Paternotte 2013, referred to in Ayoub & Paternotte 2014, 15). In other words, activism can be activists' spatial presence in publicity. Following this line of thought, activism may appropriate spaces in the city that may therefore be slowly identified with gay or LGBT communities (Misgav & Hartal 2019, 3; Nash 2015). Activism may also be, as Judith Butler (2014, 99) describes, manifested in the expression of a desire to change something meaningful

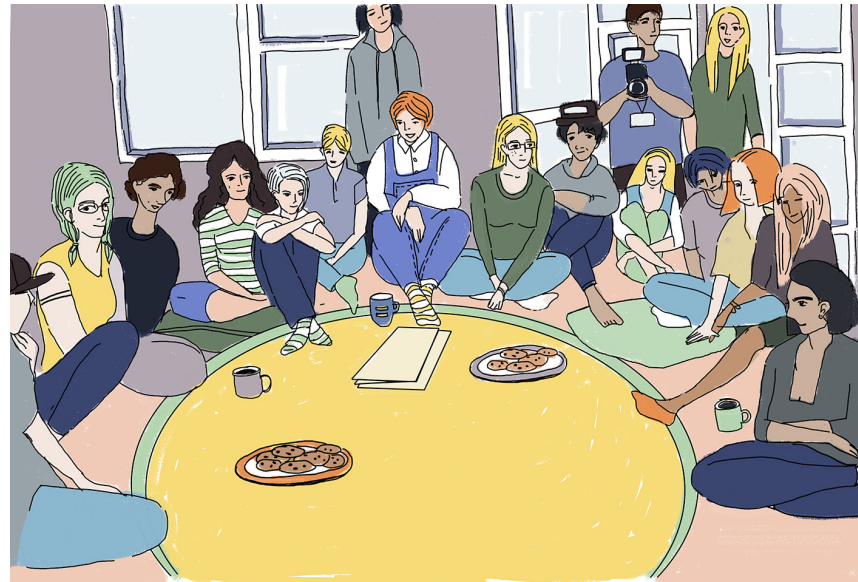


Image 2. In several grassroots groups, participants gather in a circle to share their feelings, discuss practices or poetry, and have a break over tea and snacks. Events often take place in more private settings, such as at someone's home, but at times also in publicity, like over a picnic at a park amongst other park-goers. @kimkino (2019), based on Pauliina Lukinmaa's photo.

in one's physical surroundings. The latter perspective recognizes everyday activities as possible forms of activism. It may take place in one's circle of friends in mundane moments, as I showed in my excerpt above.

In my research, I do not exclude one or another activist standpoint. Instead, I consider them to offer possible analytical viewpoints for studying LGBTIQ+ activists in St Petersburg. As activists, the research participants attempt to change something in their surroundings in relation to LGBTIQ+ issues, which I consider the starting point for being an activist.

Activists' practices reflect dialogue and debate about liberation and conservatism in Russian society. Sometimes these debates were internal.

Elizaveta, one research participant describes it as follows:

My grandparents brought me up in Soviet times. And I read many books about the revolution, about Reds and Whites. This mood – it's still absorbed [in me]. The barricades are somewhere in my subconscious, which is one part of me. Moreover, the second part – it [revolution] is trying to call me to humanism and resolve issues peacefully. I understood that I didn't... well, I didn't allow a revolution for myself.

Alina, who has moved to the US in the early 1990s yet has recently visited Russia and Ukraine for LGBTIQ+ activism and various art therapy forms for marginalized people, recalls her experiences:

What I discovered two years ago – I don't know what happened to the country, or me but – I was like, 'these amazing people and they're so open, and they're so curious!' They really have the language for knowing what to do, and how to move forward from this oppressive society that has been stuck in our DNA for so long. It was like these endless possibilities for doing all these things. And I felt so connected to them!

However, during the 2010s, authorities increasingly attempted to control LGBTIQ+ activists in Russia. Nevertheless, as Alina described, they have continued their activities, mobilized, and created spaces for themselves in St Petersburg – at least momentarily and for selected audiences. Activists explored cracks in otherwise controlled public spaces to conduct their practices, albeit many times this resembled a harsh cat-and-mouse game. They conducted improvised one-person protests and this way momentarily accommodated public spaces. They also carefully planned indoor events, such as festivals and theatre plays. These practices show that activists generate spaces of appearance within spaces that could otherwise be spaces of surveillance.

My ethnographic data also reflects how resulting from these tense socio-political surroundings, the movement forms itself through wide networks of various actors, in a horizontal structure. In the research, I consider that the movement consists of organizations, grassroots groups, and individual activists with various useful resources, whom I call influencers. Through employing the concept of the rhizome, developed by Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1987), I show that the movement is characterized by being in a constant state of flux where new connections are built, and old ones reformed both within the city, across Russia and transnationally. This makes the movement resilient to changes and difficult for the authorities to control.



Image 3. LGBTIQ+ activism takes different forms in various spaces in the St Petersburg cityscape. At times this occurs involuntarily due to their hypervisibility and increased civil vigilantism, justified by vaguely defined legislation. Illustration: @kimkino (2019).

Today, my research is already history. On Wednesday (Sep 21st 2022) we woke up to the news of partial military mobilization in Russia. Earlier this year, the legislation in Russia furthermore forbids open discussion, in increasingly various ways aiming to construct an adaptable citizen who would be ready to comply with the regime's needs.

Even though LGBTIQ+ activists in Russia have experience in operating under repression, the situation is now more difficult because of the financial hardships caused by the war, increased patriarchal public discourse, sweeping censure and police surveillance that covers also social media platforms that act as an important alternative public space. In this situation, along with many others, several LGBTIQ+ activists with sufficient resources and networks have crossed the state borders to work, study, or seek asylum.

References

- Ayoub, Phillip & Paternotte, David. 2014. Introduction. In Phillip Ayoub and David Paternotte (eds.) *LGBT Activism and the Making of Rainbow Europe?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–29.
- Butler, Judith. 2014. Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions, and Street Politics. *Critical Studies* 37(1), 97–119.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix. 1987. *Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Revelations.
- Gomes Pereira, Pedro Paulo 2019. Reflecting on Decolonial Queer. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 25(3), 403–429.
- Honig, Bonnie. 2016. *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Lang, Sabine. 2013. *NGOs, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Misgav, Chen & Hartal, Gilly. 2019. Queer Urban Movements from the Margin(s) – Activism, Politics, Space: An Editorial Introduction. *Geography Research Forum. Queer Urban Movements from the Margin(s): Activism, Politics, Space* 39(1), 1–19.

Paternotte, David. 2013. Article 13 and the NGOisation of ILGA-Europe. Paper presented at the European Sociological Association Conference, Turin, Italy.