

Male State Movement in Russia

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Mariya Yakhina

Abstract

This article gives a glimpse of the radical online movement that existed in Russia from 2016 to 2021 and harassed women, feminist activists, LGBT people, and people of color. It provides an analysis of how the movement was shaped, the main milestones in radicalization of the community, and the contents of its ideology, based on patriarchy and nationalism.

Keywords

men's rights, gender extremism, radicalization

Introduction

There are many political and social movements in Russia, existing both in the physical world and online, that advocate a variety of ideas ranging from protection from domestic violence to nationalism. However, gender-related movements receive special attention on the modern agenda: feminism and, as discussed in this article, masculism. Feminism is a fairly understandable term and movement that is present in many countries, in similar forms, with similar requirements for the state and society; it has already firmly established itself in the discourse and legal agenda.

For men, there is practically no such prominent movement to advocate ideas related to their position in society. This is partly done by some theories of feminism, but those ideas are not well known (Voronina 2004). One of the first works featuring a men's rights movement was the article *A World of Men's Rights*, written in 1856, which claimed that an unfair economic burden and responsibility for a woman were imposed on a man, in accordance with the laws of that time, as well as the enormous pressure of public opinion (Gynocentrism 2015).

Another important milestone in the men's rights movement was the organization America's Society of Divorced Men, created by Charles Metz in 1969, which advocated for men's rights in the division of property, guardianship over children after divorce, and refusing to pay alimony. Supporters of this organization believed that the existing legislation was tailored to women, since they are usually the ones to take care of children after divorce. They also believed that for a woman, divorce is a way to illegally get money and property (Lefkovitz 2018).

Some years later, in 1993, came Warren Farrell's book *The Myth of Male Power*, in which he wrote about the oppression of men through divorce, military duty, budget allocation in the family, and dangerous professions (Farrell 2001).

Similar ideas are also visible in the Male State Movement in Russia, which existed from 2016 to 2021. Because of its radicalized position, it is recognized by the Russian state as an extremist organization and at the moment its activities are officially banned.

A Brief History

This movement appeared on the Russian social network Vkontakte in 2016, on the initiative of Vladislav Pozdnyakov (Sinitsyna 2019), a fitness trainer and blogger who earned his money from plans for fitness nutrition, bodybuilding, and other media products. He later said in an interview with journalists that he created the Male State as a commercial project, but it is not possible to confirm the veracity of this claim (moloko plus 2020). His idea was to create an online community for memes and jokes about relationships, since in social networks this topic is always relevant and attracts a large audience; he planned to earn money by placing ads in this group (*Ibidem*). The topics of jokes in this community in 2016 were women, their “whims,” and relationship situations in general. This attracted a straight male audience to the community.

Pozdnyakov did not create the project alone. Other people worked with him, but after 2017 they decided to leave because there were many conflicts, and the community was authorized under Pozdnyakov’s leadership. This was one of the visible processes that led to the radicalization of the community (*Ibidem*). Gradually, its rhetoric began to include political ideas, nationalism, and discontent with the state. Members created their own manifesto and symbols. Local branches of the Male State appeared in cities; men gathered offline to spend time together and practice knife fighting and hand-to-hand fighting. Subsequently, in 2017, the community participated in anti-corruption protests which were organized by the popular liberal opposition politician Alexei Navalny (Sinitsyna 2019). They came out on March 26 with their flag (a white eagle on a black background and the letters MG [МГ in Russian])

in the middle). They distributed leaflets, for which they received a lot of attention in the mass Russian media and began to be seen not only as a group with memes and jokes, but as an ideological movement (moloko plus 2020).

In 2018, the movement began to gain even greater strength and popularity, as it began to harass girls who flirted with foreigners who came as fans to the soccer World Cup. Pozdnyakov urged his audience to take pictures of girls who behaved in a “depraved” fashion with people of another nationality and send them to him or post them to a group where commentators would discuss each situation (Bellingcat 2021). For these purposes, supporters of the Male State even made a separate group, “Buceta Rosa,” because of an incident with Portuguese football fans who surrounded a Russian woman and sang a song in Portuguese about the female genital organ (moloko plus 2020). Also in 2018, the leader of the community was convicted in court for actions aimed at humiliating human dignity in relation to women. He was sentenced to two years on probation, but the punishment was canceled due to the decriminalization of the offense (Torop 2019).

In 2019 and 2020, members of the movement actively engaged in the harassment of feminists, representatives of LGBT communities, and women in relationships with foreigners. Their main activities were writing threats in comments, searching for home addresses, and making threats and hateful statements in personal messages. Some members of the community were accused by a Russian court of organizing extremist groups in cities, but this did not concern the group itself on its social network (Bellingcat 2021). In 2020, a group on the Vkontakte social network was blocked for violent actions, and the community’s activities moved to Telegram. Overall, over the four years of the movement’s existence, about 150,000 people gathered on Vkontakte, and about 80,000 on Telegram (moloko plus 2020).

In 2021, the community was again in the headlines. The participants of the Male State united for raids on businesses that created advertising

with the participation of dark-skinned models (Leyzarenko 2021). There were calls in posts and comments to disrupt the logistical work of these companies by creating unpaid orders. The main targets were the sushi restaurant chain Tanuki and the producer of the drink Vaskin Kvass. After this, the movement was recognized as extremist by a Russian court (Baklanov 2021). At the time of writing, the official publications of the Male State are blocked on the Vkontakte social network, and the organization's activities are prohibited in Russia.

Radicalization Process

Before describing the process of radicalization of the participants of the Male State, it is necessary to define the concept of radicalization. Most definitions emphasize adopting extreme political, social, and religious beliefs, and an increasing trend toward their approval and participation in the group, justifying the use of violence for the purposes of the group's ideals (Borum 2011). In the Russian legal system, there is a definition of extremism that includes several aspects related to the state constitutional system, territory, and human rights. Among many definitions given by the law, extremism is labeled as "incitement of social, racial, national or religious conflicts," as well as "propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of a person on the basis of one's social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliation or attitude to religion" (Base.garant.ru. *no data*).

The process of radicalization of the movement for men's rights in Russia includes several aspects: rhetoric and symbolism, localization, authoritarian structure, exclusivity, active participation, and lack of alternatives. This case can be analyzed through several frameworks: structural theory, relative deprivation, social movement theory, and social psychology theory. Structural theory focuses on the society's structure and its conditions, where the groups could choose to pursue radical ideas and violence to reorder the system (Behr von, Reding, Edwards,

Gibbon 2013). Male State's goal was to change Russian society by recognizing inequality in the existing gender structure and by using violence online and, in the possible future, in the physical world.

Relative deprivation theory is crucial for understanding the motives of participants in a radical group. Through the prism of this theory, an individual feels deprived of something that they should have (*Ibidem*). In the case of Male State participants, they believed that they had fewer rights than women in Russia in divorce procedures, less protection from the state regarding safety at work, and no right to decide the future of the child in the case when a woman wants to have an abortion. They also considered themselves deprived, because of informal social norms, of the ability to spend money on themselves rather than on a woman's needs (Sinitsyna 2019). Also, in a study conducted on the followers of the community it was discovered that members often had unsuccessful personal stories with girls – breakups, situations with rejection, and divorces (Ivanov, Kozlov 2021). These also created a sense of deprivation and additional motivation to participate in the community's activities and believe in its ideals.

From the point of view of social movement theory, as with other theories, individuals join radical movements because they are not satisfied with the existing conditions and feel pressured by society's norms (Borum 2011). In the case of Russian society there is no prominent movement that would represent men's rights directly. The discourse created around feminism often repels straight men from educating themselves on the different waves, theories, and ideas of feminism as they view it as a "movement against men" and not the system (Sinitsyna 2019). One of the most noticeable movements on the Russian Internet is radical feminism, with communities on Vkontakte that contain content dedicated to hating men. Such content can include ideas like "men are useless," "all men are dumb," and so on. After not being able to find an

alternative, not having sufficient education on the gender issue, but feeling the injustice of the gender system, men are drawn into a movement that is accessible and understandable: Male State.

Framing theory, a part of social movement theory, is also relevant here in helping to understand the shaping of the ideology. What is important for the future mobilization process of a group is the alignment of the movement's ideals and its associates' view of reality (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008). Through the selection process, the "cleansing" of the community through blocking, and shifting the orientation of the community content to that to which the audience responded more actively (more likes and comments), an ideological consensus was reached.

This can be seen through the recruitment process – not everyone could enter the community, even though it was online. The group on the social network was closed: in order to access the content of the community, one needed to request a subscription. Although there were no special conditions for entry, this was how the process of expanding the number of members took place, and it created a feeling of exclusivity of membership. It cannot be considered fully as a recruitment process because followers of the group were not targeted directly; however, it was still an entry barrier. Even women could apply to join the community, but only with the condition of their silence: they were forbidden to comment on publications, and for violating this rule they were blocked (Ivanov 2018). In general, everyone who departed from the ideas of the movement was put on the "blacklist."

This was supported by the manifesto of the Male State, which was created in 2017 and is now unavailable for Internet users. The content and ideas were shaped by comparing engagement on the posts – more likes and comments appeared under posts featuring text messages with women who acted, in the opinion of members of the group, in a lecherous way. One of the most popular content items in the online group was "checking girlfriend's loyalty," in which one of the members of the Male State would text someone's girlfriend and check if she acted disloyally.

Afterwards, he would post the screenshots of the text messages for the participants to discuss the woman's answers (moloko plus 2020).

Social psychology in this case explains how the narrative and attitudes toward the community were formed. According to this theory, groups as a whole represent more extreme views than individuals by themselves, which results in a loss of rationality and critical thinking. Responsibility for the actions of the group is dissolved, and the idea of the presence of "us" and "others" is formed (Behr von, Reding, Edwards, Gribbon 2013). This is all observed in the Male State: through their "informational wars" (spamming and bullying people in comments and private messages), personal responsibility disappears because of the collectiveness of actions.

The behavior of participants was controlled by the community's norms. For example, one of its rules was the prohibition of legal marriages for the movement's participants as this was an act of support for the existing social structure. The leaders of the movement stated that they would exclude men who broke this rule (Ivanov 2018). This could also be observed in one of the last situations before the organization was banned: their harassment of the Tanuki sushi network for adverts featuring a dark-skinned man. Community members disrupted the work of the store by ordering food with cash payment after delivery; subsequently, they did not accept the order from the delivery person and did not pay for the services. They did this using the Yandex Food delivery service, however, after representatives of the delivery service negotiated with the community leader Pozdnyakov, he forbade his associates to use the application for the "informational war" with Tanuki (Kommersant 2021).

Another important process for constructing the integrity and distinctiveness of the group was the creation of their own rhetoric and meanings for words: *aleni* (English translation: "deers" – men who let women control them), *rusiki* (slightly modified word "Russians" to define a group of passive Russian men who do not fight for patriarchy), *Natashki*

and *Ivanushki* (“typical” women and men who are part of the existing gender structure), and *netakusi* (“not like others” – to refer to women who, in their opinion, are trying to look different and better than other women but are, in fact, the same) (moloko plus 2020).

Other words were used to create the narrative, aligned with the ideology, that can be traced in almost all posts, the manifesto, and comments. There was also a special style of writing the text of posts in the community: subscribers were treated as an army, and messages were filled with rather colorful and emotional descriptions in the form of storytelling. This style is typical for extremist communities, where the rhetoric is similar to propaganda (Behr von, Reding, Edwards, Gribbon 2013).

On V Kontakte, after creating an online community’s main picture, an “account avatar” can be added, as well as other design elements – active buttons, menus, banners, status, and other elements. Thus, the Male State quickly obtained its own symbols, which grew out of the main image of the online community: an eagle with the letters “MS” in the middle, which they later used at protests and comments on posts inside and outside of the community. In its “status,” the leaders put the text with the main ideas of the movement: “nationalism and patriarchy” (moloko plus 2020).

Localization of the movement played a huge role in uniting the members. People created additional groups on V Kontakte for their cities; these were named “Male State Headquarters,” together with the name of the city. Members of the movement started to meet in the physical world to spend time together, talk, discuss their relationships, and sometimes train for knife fights and hand-to-hand combat. An FSB agent infiltrated one of the groups in Khabarovsk, and later was the main informant in the case of the organization of the extremist community. The case went to court; two men were convicted for organizing the community and two for participation. Members of the Khabarovsk community learned how to cook and throw Molotov cocktails, wanted

to rob a *nasvai* merchant, learned to shoot air guns, and in their discussions admired the Third Reich and saw the figure of Hitler as a role model (Litavrin 2018).

While this community existed, almost all its activities took place online. It is therefore important to understand how the online format affects an extremist organization. Since the advent of the Internet, extremist groups have used it for networking and recruiting. This is an easier way to introduce ideology to followers through propaganda, plan online and offline activities, and coordinate them (Weimann 2004).

Also, online communities help more people to keep in touch with the community and, accordingly, to build an identity around it (Winter et al. 2020). All this was clearly observed in the Male State. Even though the project did not initially pursue the goal of becoming a movement, the online format greatly contributed to this in forming ideology, attracting active individuals, and spreading ideas. As Winter et al. describe, movements first create their own websites, then shift to forums, and eventually come to social media – Twitter, Vkontakte and others. In particular, they note the tendency to switch to Telegram for maximum privacy, a convenient format, and anonymity. The Male State was also initially created on Vkontakte, and then moved to Telegram.

Manifesto of the Male State

In 2017, Pozdnyakov posted the manifesto of the Male State on the Vkontakte page. This has now been deleted, but it contained the main ideas of the ideology of the community, which as a whole stood for patriarchy and nationalism.

In the members' opinion, matriarchy had been established in the post-Soviet countries, especially in Russia, as well as other European countries. They demonstrated this by the facts that in Russia, compulsory military service exists only for men, while during divorce children

often go to the woman, and the man is forced to pay alimony. They believed that men in general “bend” under a woman, her desires and whims, and society makes it normal for men to provide for the whole family, “indulging women” with nothing in return (Sinitsyna 2019). This is, in fact, a widespread model in Russia with its more traditional concepts of family. The division of tasks is based on the stereotypical gender roles: men are “providers” and women are housewives who provide childcare and housework. Often the budget of the family is administered by a woman because of her better understanding of what is needed for the children and house (Voronina 2004).

Researchers since the 1980s have found evidence of cases where women have equal or more power in the private life of housekeeping; however, they are still under institutional subordination (Temkina, Zdravomyslova 2015). For Male State members, the ideal relationships were found in families from the Caucasus, where men marry only women of their ethnicity and faith. They are the heads of the family, in their opinion, free and independent individuals; and even though men in this model are also the providers, the voices of men in budget division were believed to be stronger than those of women (moloko plus 2020). Male State members saw Russian men as passive, unable to stand up for their interests; they, therefore, opposed themselves to them (as was described earlier – passive Russian men were called *rusiki*).

Among other things, members put themselves in opposition to the state, because the state, in their opinion, supported the oppression of men through military service and laws and court practice connected with divorce. Even in rules in prisons, they saw more privileges for women because they are allowed to shower twice a week and men only once (moloko plus 2020). As for women, they considered most of them girls of easy virtue, acting on emotions, capricious, mercantile, and “spoiled.” In many of their posts, they engaged in Internet harassment of former porn actresses; feminists; girls married or in relationships

with foreigners, especially of another race; LGBT representatives; and others (Bellingcat 2021).

On top of all, they considered themselves adherents of Russian nationalism, and believed that Russians were being oppressed and repressed by the West. Gradually, the vision of an ideal political regime – the Third Reich – was added to their belief system, and the figure of Hitler became almost idealized, as an example of a strong, not passive man (Khazov-Kassia 2020).

The movement for men's rights always drew attention to the drawbacks of male gender role performing. The ideas of the Male State align with the theoretical understanding of constructing a hierarchy of masculinity. Masculinities are practices in the gender system imposed on individuals through social institutions, sexuality, and relationships in spheres of daily life (Connell 1995). The ideology of the Male State is based on an attempt to build hegemonic masculinity – that is, domination – which can be traced in all spheres of social life. This is symbolic domination, expressed in recognition of certain patterns of behavior for men as prestigious, and ideal images – for example, the allocation of some cultural pattern (in the case of the Male State, Hitler).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity includes domination over women and other types of masculinity, heterosexuality, attribution of special psychological qualities to men (brutality, rationality, aggressiveness), and other elements associated with building an order of domination and subordination in society in favor of hegemonic masculinity. Men who do not fall into these categories become lower in the hierarchy or even marginalized, depending on their race, class, and sexuality (Temkina, Zdravomyslova 2015). In the Male State, the hierarchy can be traced: “passive” Russian men were considered stupid and weak, homosexual men as examples of the decomposition of values, and men of another race were subjected to insults and harassment. In general, the hegemonic patterns of masculinity in Russia in recent years include power, success, and brutality, but the positions of these patterns are unstable.

This caused supporters of the Male State to see a need to build a patriarchy in Russian society.

The End of the Male State

On October 18, 2021, in Nizhny Novgorod, at the request of the Prosecutor's Office of the Novgorod region, a court recognized the Male State as an extremist organization and banned its activities throughout the territory of Russia (Baklanov 2021). Even before the court's decision, the groups on Telegram and V Kontakte were blocked by the networks' administrators. The reasons for the final ban on the organization's activities were their conflicts with businesses that used black people in their advertising, for which supporters of the Male State raided their pages on social networks and disrupted their work. Now there is a closed "Men's Legion" group on Telegram, which consists of about 45,000 people. It is considered the new place for the Male State movement, and continues to post in the same style as before, but no longer tracks people or harasses them directly. It is obvious that the gender conflict in Russia has not been resolved with the prohibition of this movement, but has only been postponed indefinitely. The problems in the structure of Russian society on which the ideology was built continue to exist and may soon emerge again, giving rise to a new round of gender conflict.

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About the book "The Virus of Radicalization":

"I regard this monograph as an example of high-quality academic craftsmanship. It is an important supplement to the literature on the phenomena and processes of radicalization and extremism (primarily those taking place in the Polish socio-political system, but not only). It will be interesting both for scientists, students and a wider audience interested in socio-political issues."

Associate Professor Mikołaj Cześnik, Ph.D., SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

"The volume is a collection of chapters on the topic of mostly right-wing political radicalization in Poland, Europe, and the world. (...) Excellent empirical case studies of particular cases of political radicalization in Poland and Europe are the bulk and the highlight of the volume. (...) Overall, the volume is a useful, well-written and well-conceived contribution to literature on political radicalism and crisis of liberal democracy."

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