Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe

Critical Essays on Knowledge, Inequality and Belonging

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10 Varieties of exceptionalism

A conversation

Selin Çağatay, Mia Liinason, and Olga Sasunkevich

Introduction

This conversation emerged from our research collaboration within the project *Spaces of Resistance* where we studied feminist and LGBTI+ activism in three different, yet overlapping, geopolitical contexts, namely Russia, the Scandinavian countries,[1] and Turkey.[2] Having attended the workshop on Nordic exceptionalism (EXCEPT 2019) in May 2019, we set out to extend the notion of exceptionalism beyond the Scandinavian countries. To us, the Scandinavian countries were notorious for manifesting a form of exceptionalism through hegemonic attempts of being forerunners at a global scale, producing a neocolonial narrative of being "secular, gender-equal and LGBTQI-tolerant," positioned as role models "for the rest of the world to follow" (Alm et al. 2020: 2; Habel 2012). We wanted to decouple exceptionalism from its attachment to certain national regimes and regional borders and use it as a heuristic device in relation to our research sites. In this chapter, we investigate the utility of exceptionalism as a transnationalising concept that allows us to exceed the boundaries of methodological nationalism as "the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 302). In our conversation, rather than comparing how feminist and LGBTI+ activists engage with the national state in all three contexts, we look at how they encounter challenges emerging through exceptionalist discourses. Although, as we argue further, the national state sustains the grounds and effects of exceptionalist discourses, it does so in relation to a global world order. We identify the postcolonial dynamics of 'victims' and 'leaders' in discourses of exceptionalism and explore how these might influence the language in which activists communicate with each other on a transnational arena. Used in this way, the concept of exceptionalism enables an analytical frame that underlines the multiplicity and multi-scalarity of institutions and discourses, including the national state, transnational organisations and donors, and local communities. Applying exceptionalism to contexts such as Russia and Turkey, we admit that their current positioning around secularity and gender equality is in stark contrast to the Scandinavian

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model. Yet, in all three contexts, exceptionalism works as a post-imperial and neocolonial discourse aimed at establishing one's regional and global dominance in a post-Cold War multipolar world.

Notes on methodology

This chapter is based on a semi-structured, tape-recorded conversation between three researchers working in different contexts in the same research project. Engaging with the available scholarship on exceptionalism in our respective contexts through the lens of our collaborative research and transnational methodology in *Spaces of resistance*, we designed the conversation around four themes that correspond to four sections in what follows: The first theme regards the dynamics, histories, and relations of exceptionalism in Turkey, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries and serves as an empirical backdrop to the following themes. The second theme offers a discussion on how the operative logics of exceptionalism are entangled with dominant discourses on gender equality in our contexts and transnationally. The third theme concerns how exceptionalism as a concept helps us better understand notions and activist practices of complicity and resistance. The final theme considers possible ways of addressing and going beyond exceptionalism through transnational solidarities in feminist and queer research and activism.

Transcribed into a text document, the recorded conversation was later revised and edited several times under the influence of our internal discussions and reviewers' comments. The introduction, notes on methodology, and conclusion were added later. However, the major line of conversation remains intact. Maintaining the original format of our dialogue, we wish to explicate how we implement a transnational methodology to highlight similarities and differences between respective national contexts that each of us study separately. In our work, we have been inspired by feminist and queer research where collective dialogue as a method of academic knowledge production and presentation of research ideas and findings have been fruitfully implemented (e.g. Brosi and Hooks 2012; Butler and Spivak 2007; Feminist Freedom Warriors Conversations Archive; Mohanty and Carty 2018; Mountz et al. 2015). Browne et al. (2017: 1,382) show that dialogues have a great potential for transnational feminist and queer praxis. They envision the dialogue as not just an object of scholarly analysis but as "analysis and knowledge creation in itself." The dialogue is a way to highlight linkages, parallels, and contradictions between different research contexts and overcome a strict comparative methodology that may reproduce hierarchies between the Global East/West and North/South (Browne et al. 2017). To maintain this strategy, we also apply a multi-scalar perspective on our respective contexts (Çağatay et al. 2022; Roy 2016), showing how exceptionalist discourses are produced at the intersection of activist practises, state-civil society relations, and global geopolitical challenges.

Our vision of exceptionalism in Russia, Turkey, and Scandinavia is informed by our variegated positionalities in relation to these contexts. As a Russian-speaking Belarusian, a subaltern position in relation to the Russian imperial legacy, Olga looks at Russia and the feminist and LGBTI+ activism there as an engaged outsider. While she does not have first-hand experience of living or doing activism in Russia, she shares a lot with her research partners due to their common belonging to feminist and queer struggles in postsocialist geographies, which Russia is a part of (Çağatay et al. 2022; Stella 2015). Selin's research concerns gender politics and equality struggles in Turkey where she focuses on the changing agendas, forms of organising, and political strategies of feminist and LGBTI+ activisms from historical and transnational perspectives. Located in Western academia and having a background in feminist activism in Turkey, Selin conducted participatory action research (PAR). Feminist PAR was a most suitable way of involving Selin's fellow activists as participants in her research and incorporating conflicting views and disagreements into processes of collective knowledge production while addressing how differences in power and privilege impact on research relationships (Cahill 2007; Reid and Gillberg 2014). Based in Sweden, a country in which politicians, journalists, teachers, and researchers alike contribute to upholding a myth of gender equality and homotolerance, Mia focuses on the Scandinavian countries both "from the outside in and from the inside out" (Hooks 1984: vii; Martinsson et al. 2016). Mia's positionality is informed by an ambition, anchored in critical race and queer knowledges, to examine the neocolonial, exclusionary, and hierarchical exceptionalisms exercised through such myths, which is not limited to the Swedish context, but stretching across Scandinavia, the wider Nordic region and beyond. Regardless of our different positionalities, our critical engagement with exceptionalist discourses is greatly informed by our conversations with activists themselves. Therefore, rather than treating exceptionalism merely as an analytical concept through which to investigate activist practices, we discuss the ways in which activists resist and/or maintain exceptionalist discourses depending on their agendas, affordances, and positionalities.

Coloniality and the dynamics of exceptionalism in Russia, Scandinavian countries, and Turkey

Mia: I can start with the relevance of exceptionalism for Scandinavian countries.[3] The Scandinavian model, which is an internationally established concept, has been used to explain economic policies or a democratic system where equality is declared as a core value (Bergqvist 1999). Based on this, the Scandinavian countries have been described as a cluster of nations characterised by a "harmonious process of modernization" (Dahl et al. 2016: 20) and "development aid, peacebuilding and cooperation" (Keskinen et al. 2009: 16). However, not only are such ideas of being a role

model imperialistic and exclusionary, but they also make struggles against hierarchies and inequalities less recognisable, more easily ignored and at times also demonised (Alm et al. 2020; Habel 2012). Postcolonial scholars critically point at the fact that the Scandinavian countries refrain from recognising that they have been, and still are, part of colonial and imperial processes (Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2016). Yet, they were involved in diverse colonial projects in the Caribbean, West Africa, India, and Greenland (Brimnes 2021), and from the 12th century and onwards, the colonisation of Sápmi resulted in an enforced assimilation into the Norwegian society, while in Sweden, it led to a marginalised form of segregation and an extraction of natural resources by the state (Sametinget 2021). In Denmark, the colonisation of Greenland involved several abuses of the Inuit people, for example in the mid-1900s when the authorities removed children from their Inuit families to become better integrated in Danish society. Throughout history, in the Scandinavian countries, the production of national identities has shaped the basis for exclusionary racisms and forms of subordinated inclusion of indigenous and minority populations and migrants (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014). The presence of xenophobic, anti-immigration and extreme right-wing parties in the parliaments of these countries is seen to constitute a structural fracture to the idea of human rights in Scandinavia (Keskinen et al. 2009). These parties and the social movements behind them seriously challenge the paradigmatic image of the Scandinavian countries; it is not viable anymore to refer to these countries as having some kind of particular equality.

Olga: In Russia the concept of exceptionalism refers to the country's liminal position between East and West without clearly belonging to either of them (Oskanian 2018). On the one hand, Russia has a legacy of the colonial empire. The Russian Empire colonised external territories but also non-Russian lands and people from the peripheries within the country (Etkind 2011). On the other hand, Russia is an orientalised Other for the West, its "mystic and mythic Orient" (Tlostanova 2008: 1). Russia is undeniably part of European modernity, but its eurocentrism is secondary – it both reflects and distorts "the western original in the Russian cultural and mental space" (Ibid.; see also Suchland 2018). The ambiguity of Russia in relation to European modernity can be defined as a "special path" – an idea that is popular in contemporary Russian political discourses (Umland 2012) where the imperial resurgence is clearly on the rise (Etkind 2011).

Selin: Similar to Russia, Turkey is a successor state to the Ottoman Empire. In the Turkish case, exceptionalist discourses gained popularity through the nationalist struggle that culminated in the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire happened through many wars, loss of significant territories in the Balkans and the Middle East, massacres and genocide, and population exchange. The remaining land was called Turkey and the remaining people Turkish; Turkish identity corresponded to what was left when most other ethnic and

religious identities were eradicated and/or forced into assimilation (Ülker 2008; Zürcher 2004). Following World War II, Turkish exceptionalism gained a new dimension as religion and tradition were re-incorporated in nation building processes (Brockett 2011). In the Cold War context, Turkey's national identity as at once secular and Muslim as well as its geopolitical position as bridging Europe and Asia was highlighted. In the current stage of Turkish exceptionalism, shaped by the two decade-long conservative-Islamist leadership, we see an embrace of characteristics such as tolerance and hospitality in relation to Turkey's assumed leadership position within the Muslim world. Yet, the exclusion of certain groups of people from the imagined Turkish community even when they are considered as Muslim such as in the case of Kurds, Syrian migrants or LGBTI+ communities indicate the continuation of nationalist and assimilatory qualities of Turkish exceptionalism.

In terms of foreign policy discourse, Turkish exceptionalism is framed based on a "pax-Ottomana" metaphor where Turkey, through a selective remembrance of history, serves as a middleman between the Middle East and Europe (Nymalm and Plagemann 2019: 28; Yanık 2011: 83, 87). Yet, in the post-9/11 context of war on terror and Islamophobia, Turkey's 'bridging' role goes beyond simply connecting Islam and the West, situating it as a "spokesperson for Islam" (Yanık 2009: 534). What I find interesting is that scholars writing on Turkish exceptionalism (Heper 1988; Mardin 2005; Nymalm and Plagemann 2019) have rarely done so from a postcolonial perspective despite the relevance of a postcolonial lens in understanding the Turkish case. The lack of a critical approach to Turkey's 'uniqueness' in social and historical sciences, Yanık (2009) argues, results in scholarly support for the ways in which policy makers and the media have imagined and employed metaphors that constructed Turkish exceptionalism.

From this part of the conversation, we found that all our contexts share a post-imperial position. As we recognised that exceptionalism is closely tied to nation building and the formation of the modern nation-state, we also noted that exceptionalist myths have deeper, geographical, and historical linkages to the post-imperial contexts that we analyse. For instance, the hybrid quality of exceptionalist discourses in Turkey and Russia are anchored in variegated liminal positions between the East and West, and exceptionalist discourses in Scandinavia carry a geopolitical tension between the core(s) and semi-peripheries of the world system. In all contexts, exceptionalism manifests through exclusionary narratives of imagined shared identity, history, and future, where the violence of assimilation, suppression and eradication of diverse ethnic and religious identities have been normalised, concealed, pushed to the margins or subsumed.

Olga: Despite the seeming similarity between Turkey and Russia with regard to exceptionalism accompanying the break from the Empire, according to Oskanian (2018), Russia's hybrid exceptionalism has been continuous throughout history. Tracing this idea back to the Romanov

Empire and through the Soviet Union to post-socialist Russia, the author scrutinises the role of Russian Orthodox Christianity. In Tsarist Russia, under the Romanovs, Orthodox Christianity was the discourse that laid the foundation for Russian civilising claims as being superior to the East and yet distinctive from the West due to non-Western denomination (Oskanian 2018: 31). After the October Revolution of 1917 and the dissolution of the Russian Empire, Russia's hybrid exceptionalism was maintained through the ideology of Marxism-Leninism as "a product of the Western Enlightenment, while simultaneously providing an element of radical difference from the capitalist […] West" (Oskanian 2018: 35). Being part of Western modernity, the ideology of Marxism-Leninism justified Russia's civilising mission in Central Asia. In contemporary Russia, according to Oskanian, hybrid exceptionalism relies on the partial adaptation of Western liberal values such as (neo)liberal economic rationality and international legality, on the one hand, and an explicit anti-Western stance when it comes to the ideological construction of Russia's national identity on the other (Oskanian 2018: 42–43). Today, the strong political presence of anti-gender sentiments and state homophobia maintains Russia's distinctive position from the West, in a context where Western values and approaches dominate in the geopolitical space (Edenborg 2021; Moss 2017).

Conceptualising exceptionalism through discourses of gender equality

Mia: In the Scandinavian countries, the current state of exceptionalism dates to the early 20th century, where the need or willingness to modernise the countries – together with the development of the Folkhem (People's home) – became the basis for the Scandinavian welfare states. Equality was made the key concept for the Folkhem that would modernise the country; through equal rights and duties, these countries would become modernised and move into the future. The recognition of these countries as having a particular kind of (gender) equality was integrated into the notion of the exceptionality of these countries. As a particular form of equality, based on a binary notion of gender complementarity, gender equality was shaped as a norm in the Scandinavian countries, accommodating many other norms regarding citizenship, sexuality, whiteness, secularity, able-bodiedness, and so on (Martinsson et al. 2016). The ideas around equality and rights are conditioned today and were also historically conditioned on national belonging and a notion of gender difference as complementary. Women and men were given central, but distinct roles for reproducing the nation by caring for the family (women) and protecting the borders of the nation (men) (Eduards 2007). Towards the 1960s, women's emancipation became more strongly tied to paid labour. Due to the increased need of (female) labour power in the expanding public sector, a gender divide became reflected in

the segregated labour market. The historical narrative about women's emancipation through paid labour and the emergence of the Scandinavian welfare state simultaneously marginalised 'Other' actors and contributions. For example, the key role of migrant and working-class women for building the industry that shaped the basis for the wealth of these countries was rarely recognised (Knocke 1981; Kyle 1979). Yet, migrant labour force was imported to the Scandinavian countries, with the first agreements between Sweden and Italy and Hungary in 1947 (Kyle 1979). Migrant women's presence in the industrial sector from the 1950s until the 1980s (Knocke 1981; Salimi 2004) allowed the Scandinavian-born workers to shift to more attractive service jobs (Schierup 2006). As these dynamics continued to emerge, the labour market in these welfare states took up an ethnically segmented, hierarchical character with migrant workers from Finland, Southern Europe, former Yugoslavia, and Turkey in the least attractive divisions of industry and service jobs, like for instance cleaning and in restaurants (Schierup and Ålund 1987).

Olga: The example of the Scandinavian countries can be useful when understanding and conceptualising exceptionalism as a discursive tool to achieve certain political goals; one draws on exceptionalism for certain political steps, for example, to achieve or maintain a certain level of welfare, as in the case of Sweden where the idea of gender equality as an attribute of Swedishness serves the political purpose of engaging non-Western women in the labour market, or to achieve a certain position in the geopolitical arena, as in the case of Russia's political investments in the international agenda of "traditional values" as a way to claim global anti-Western leadership (Edenborg 2021).

Mia: Yes. When we take a closer look, exceptionalism is characterised by an urgency to act which, in turn, is motivated by an ambition to keep or retain exceptionality itself.

This is evident in the Scandinavian discussion of gender equality. The type of gender equality that is carried forward through exceptionalist discourses sustains several cross-cutting hierarchies between women. In this discussion, gender equality is made to something particularly Scandinavian, as a specific national trait of these countries, which also in all these countries is produced as a national value. While gender equality as political tool shapes normalisation processes based on certain notions of gender and sexuality, a hierarchically differentiating discourse emerges, within which differences between groups of women, for example in terms of ethnic, national, or religious belonging, allow hegemonic subjects to exercise a kind of moral authority over non-Scandinavian and/or non-secular women, i.e. migrant, racialised, religious, and/or non-Western subjects whose voices or experiences lack legitimacy because they are not born and raised in the Scandinavian countries, or they do not reinforce the type of gender equality promoted in these countries. This perpetuates an exclusionary form of gender equality based on secular, ethnic/racial, and national belonging.

One example is the rescue narrative produced by established women's organisations in these countries, about the need to 'save' practising religious or veiled women, who are seen as victims of an oppressive religion or culture (Liinason 2017). Yet, at a closer look, these narratives serve to sustain specific notions about equality, freedom, and oppression, typically promoted by these women's organisations and the Scandinavian governments.

SELIN: Listening to how differences between women are maintained through discourses of gender equality in the Scandinavian context; this is very similar to how Kemalist women – who have been the dominant group in gender equality activism in Turkey – dealt with differences between women for many decades. At the same time, I relate a lot to what you say about the Russian context, Olga. "We in Turkey are not fully Western," Kemalist women thought; "but there are a lot of authentically good things about us that the West doesn't have" (Çağatay 2017). Kemalist modernisers embraced gender equality as a founding principle of Turkish modernisation. By inventing gender equality as an authentically 'Turkish' tradition (Gökalp 1976), they have included women as active participants in nation-building processes while governing differences and hierarchies between women in novel ways. Kemalist women assumed the role of educating and thereby de-traditionalising various groups of women such as Kurdish women or pious women with headscarves to include them in the modern public sphere. Today, the Kemalist hegemony in Turkey has been replaced by that of Turkish-Sunni Islamism, but the 'modernising mission' of middle-class women continues alongside local and global inequalities. Islamist women, previously the targets of Kemalists' modernising mission but now part of the ruling class, employ similar strategies of public inclusion towards migrant women from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran, while contributing to the ethnic segmentation of the labour market, similar to the case in Scandinavia, where migrant workers disproportionately take up precarious and informal jobs (Sevinin 2022).

MIA: Indeed, when we approach exceptionalism from such a postcolonial and multi-scalar lens, one thing is that, in modernisation processes where gender equality is made a tool to modernise the population, linkages and connections are drawn between the idea of gender equality and a political project of producing the nation. Categories like 'us' and 'them' are shaped as a result of such efforts. For example, in the Scandinavian countries today, gender equality is seen to realise a particular national value. Simultaneously, on a supra-national level, beyond the national borders, a discourse about these countries as having a particular kind of equality serves to sustain geopolitical power hierarchies since gender equality is promoted as the way forward by various international actors and supranational organs, locating these countries at the forefront of global development. However, on subnational levels, the exceptionalist discourse of gender equality obscures the various ways in which the everyday lives of people in these countries are experienced.

Olga: Yes, I agree with this. Speaking of gender equality and how it became instrumentalised in geopolitical struggles, I think it plays a very tricky role in so-called non-Western societies or – as Russia is described – societies that are placed outside of "the consensus on normalcy" because they are not part of the hegemonic West (Oskanian 2018: 41). I think this perception overshadows local struggles and achievements in gender equality. It has its roots not only in the political discourse that constructs patriarchal values as traditionally Russian but also in how gender studies and grassroots feminist activism has been developing in Russia after the Cold War (e.g. Hemment 2007). Western academia and Western donors played a very important role in this process, solidifying the strong association between feminism and the West (Cope et al. 2017; Gapova 2016). Local histories of feminist struggles before and after the October Revolution in 1917 remained under-explored and under-recognised outside of the professional academic circles. Recently, however, there is increased awareness about and interest in the history of struggles for gender equality and sexual liberties in Russia among activists and academics (Klots 2018; Roldugina 2018; Vasiakina et al. 2020).

Ambivalences of exceptionalism in activist practises

Selin: The point you make about local histories of feminist struggles, Olga, links to the issue of selective remembering of the past, which looks like a logic inscribed in exceptionalist modes of thinking passed on from one hegemonic bloc to another in a given national context. In the Turkish case, even though the political groups that governed the country, i.e. Kemalist and Islamists, have been at odds with each other, when it comes to the denial of past violences done to non-Turkish and non-Sunni Muslim communities throughout (and prior to) the republican period, the discourses of these groups overlap. This makes me think that exceptionalism has to do with state formation and regime formation, and therefore it might be very difficult to challenge and transform for historically marginalised groups.

Olga: This opens another dimension of our conversation – how do research participants in our *Spaces of Resistance* project, feminist and LGBTI+ activists from Russia, Turkey and Scandinavian countries, deal with exceptionalism? How does exceptionalism shape activists' work in our respective contexts?

Mia: Given that Scandinavian exceptionalism is created through hierarchically differentiating discourses of equality based on national, ethnic/racial, and secular belongings, certain discourses can be deployed by actors to inscribe themselves into this national exceptionalist idea to become part of it and become more credible and trustworthy subjects. As an example, I am thinking of LGBTI+ visibility. Existing research (Akin 2017; Shakhsari 2014) shows that some LGBTI+ asylum seekers fight for becoming not only legible but also desirable prospective citizens who will benefit the

host society in the long run. For example in Norway, scholars illuminate, notions of "the genuine LGBTI+ refugee" (Akin 2018) frames mobilisation around LGBTI+ refugees as stigmatised or vulnerable, genuinely in need of protection.[4] In such a way, LGBTI+ refugees can add credibility to their claims of asylum by referring to what is understood in the context of 'authentic' or 'proper' forms of gender and sexuality, that is, expressions that harmonise with the ideals of gender equality and homotolerance, meanwhile a deeply problematic discourse around the 'right kind of queer' emerges (Kehl 2018). Within these dynamics, it is crucial to recognise the powerful and problematic role of the state, as LGBTI+ asylum seekers in these contexts are more or less coerced by the state(s) to present themselves in such a way (Shakhsari 2014), creating a certain condition of vulnerability, which is important to attend carefully.

I also think of the theoretical consequences of this. For me, it shows that exceptionalism works not only as a prohibiting but also as an enabling discourse, understood within a conception of a Foucauldian productive power (Foucault 1978). It demonstrates how discourses of exceptionalism facilitate the biopolitical governance of the population as an economic and political possibility for the governing group (Foucault 2008). It can also be deployed as a possibility for people to take advantage of, in complex and problematic ways. This means that marginalised groups can pick up exceptionalist discourses as a tactic to become part of the mainstream. This might look like complicity at a first glance. However, if we problematise the complicity vs. resistance binary, such acts can be perceived as tactics of resistance, as an ambivalent engagement with regulatory discourses for opening possibilities of life chances. For example, I am thinking of the strategic deployments of homonationalism among queer and gender activists in the Global South and East, whose engagement with the "'requirements' and 'languages'" of development institutions in the Global North expresses a challenge of the asymmetrical logics of development and a critique of Nordic/Western normativities, as brought to light by Christine M. Klapeer (2017: 43). Such dynamics highlight the complex politics involved in inhabiting the impossible position of not being able to "not want rights" (Rao 2020), shedding light on the agentive experience of marginalised and less powerful actors whose tactics of resistance may otherwise remain unrecognised (Liinason 2022). It also reminds us that resistance is not universal but context-specific, that it depends on, adjusts to, and reproduces existing relations of power (Abu-Lughod 1990), bringing attention to the relevance of a multi-scalar analysis of resistance which acknowledges that resistance occurs on various levels.

Selin: I want to expand on this last thesis. Within the framework of *Spaces of resistance*, I worked with activists who were marginalised by the Turkish state. They were, at the same time, quite aware of anti-gender mobilisations as a global phenomenon and that their experience with the state was not unique to Turkey. This facilitated various forms of collaboration with activists located elsewhere who, similar to the ones in Turkey, were interested

in de-exceptionalising their respective contexts and building transnational solidarity. For activists who participated in my research, Turkish exceptionalism did not function as an enabling discourse. Yet, this should be understood as a contingent strategy. Some 15–20 years ago, one could come across similar groups of activists participating in lobbying and decision-making processes in the state and thus subscribing to exceptionalist discourses to become part of the mainstream as in the Scandinavian context. For example, in the early 2000s, during the time of the EU accession-oriented legal reform period (Müftüler-Baç 2012), different activist groups appealed to the idea of Turkey being 'the only Muslim country with secular law' to lobby for gender egalitarian legislation, instrumentalising Turkish exceptionalism to achieve their goal. This means that what kind of exceptionalism you subscribe to, if at all, also depends on where you stand in relation to the state and other sources of power.

Mia: The point about positionality in relation to the state is important. Being vulnerable in relation to the state, LGBTI+ asylum seekers may use exceptionalism as a tactic of survival. Yet, depending on positionality, certain LGBTI+ actors may be able to challenge the expectation from the nation on narratives that reproduce such exceptional identity, for example by refusing to play into mainstream agendas. I could see examples of dissident action as you describe, Selin, in my research too, in cases where an instrumentalisation of exceptionalist discourses entangled with intersections of race, ethnicity, age, and gender (Liinason 2022). For example, within Scandinavian contexts of homonationalism, the promotion of trans and gay rights as national projects remains double-edged. On the one hand, such discourses may result in obstacles for trans or queer people, who refuse to reiterate these exclusionary tropes and experience difficulties in mobilising attention from the 'trans- or gay-friendly' state (Ticktin 2008). On the other hand, when gender and sexuality are made key elements to guard the borders of the modern nation of the Global North, homonationalist discourses of gender and sexuality may be used to redraw the "material and symbolic belongings" to the nation-state (Bracke 2011).

Olga: We also try to unpack here how activists working on a grassroots level are affected by exceptionalist thinking. When I entered this field in 2017, it was a moment when Russia appeared in international media as a state hostile to sexual rights and gender equality. On March 8, 2017, the police acted brutally against participants of the March 8 demonstration in St. Petersburg. Around the same time, the story of brutal violence against LGBTI+ people in Chechnya also started unfolding in international media (Brock and Edenborg 2021; Smirnova 2020). There was a wave of transnational support of LGBTI+ community in Russia (Çağatay et al. 2022) but simultaneously such hypervisibility (Brock and Edenborg 2021) contributed to orientalising discourses in relation to Russia and especially the North Caucasus to where Chechnya belongs (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2020). I see two challenges here which Russian activists had to deal with in their work.

On the one hand, they worked in an environment where homophobia was sanctioned by the state in its aspiration to promote Russia's "special path" and "traditional values." Their resources to combat this reality often came from outside of the country, i.e. from donors, international organisations, and foreign NGOs. To attract these resources, they describe the situation in Russia as unbearable and violent, unintentionally contributing to orientalisation of Russia (or particular, non-Russian, regions of the Russian Federation such as Chechnya) as exceptionally abnormal.

In the situation when activists need to act urgently, they rely on discursive resources that are available to them even though such discursive resources may reinforce an exceptionalist stance. You either think of a communication strategy or act immediately to help people in need without considering symbolic implications of your actions. Thus, the circumstances and timing of when particular exceptionalist discourses are produced also matter. However, when this time of emergency passes, there is a need to evaluate the results and consequences of transnational support.

There is an important critique in activist circles in relation to Nordic/Western solidarity in the Chechnya case – that this solidarity was often symbolic and discursive, but it did not transform into important political actions such as providing persecuted people with asylum protection. I think this example raises the question of how solidarity is shaped by discourses of exceptionalism. Symbolic solidarity in (social) media is indeed important but it may have negative consequences especially if it requires a high level of visibility (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2020). So, I am thinking how urgent circumstances influence the way activists instrumentalise exceptionalism but also the consequences that this instrumentalisation has for their position in the transnational civil society (see Çağatay et al. 2022: 177). In a group interview with two regional LGBTI+ organisations who worked in the same region and in close collaboration with each other, interview participants were quite critical about the objectification of their position and focus of transnational organisations on the negative aspects of LGBTI+ lives in Russia. As they reflected, the consequence of such exceptionalist thinking was that Russian LGBTI+ activists were not perceived as agentive subjects and fully capable partners but rather as people-in-need, i.e. recipients of donor help who, in turn, can dictate the focus and instruments of activist work.

Mia: I wonder how this works in relation to what kind of exceptionalism activists reproduce. Is the suffering under Russian exceptionalism reproduced while simultaneously contributing to exceptionalist narratives of other countries?

Olga: Yes, the power imbalance between Russian activists and Western donors may also unwittingly contribute to other sorts of exceptionalism, strengthening the positive national and geopolitical identity of countries who promote themselves as more gender equal, more democratic and, generally, more advanced than Russia. At the same time, I found that not

many activists were aware of Scandinavian exceptionalist discourses and did not relate their work to other countries or how they are seen outside of Russia all the time. I think this is also important; to analyse how these different exceptionalisms (Russian, Turkish, Scandinavian/Nordic) overlap or interact with each other. What kind of subjectivities are produced in these interactions?

Selin: This brings us to the idea of a global co-construction of 'leaders' and 'victims,' which might be one of the most significant aspects of problematising exceptionalism for our collaborative work. We question in our own contexts what kind of exceptionalist discourses our research partners refer to and whether we find parallels or complimentary arguments between our respective contexts in terms of 'leaders' in gender equality and gender-based victimhood. I am thinking of activists who look for funding to develop integration-oriented programmes for Syrian refugees, for example. I don't necessarily see those activists separating their realities from their discursive strategies; in this case they overlap. But in other cases, activists might use exceptionalism as a discursive strategy to gain access to the resources they need without necessarily considering themselves as exceptionally oppressed. For example, one of the groups I worked with wanted to organise a large-scale women's gathering but did not have the necessary financial means to do so. Group members decided to apply for funding provided by a foreign donor, but they had to frame their aim as an urgent action against a threat of human rights' violation. And so, they did! This isn't to say that women's human rights are not under attack in Turkey; they indeed are, but in the case of this funding application, the 'urgency' was rather a discursive strategy of activists who temporarily positioned themselves as the target group of the foreign donor.

Does transnational solidarity challenge exceptionalist modes of thinking?

Mia: At this point, I want to turn to the relations between transnational solidarity and exceptionalism. Questioning the production of new inequalities between 'victims' and 'leaders' through exceptionalism would be a way of problematising transnational solidarity.

Olga: From my discussions with research partners, I found that there is a growing understanding that there are things people/activists share, notwithstanding their location or national belonging. Scholars (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Liinason 2021) tend to criticise international organisations such as ILGA, for example, for reproducing global hierarchies between activists but at the same time ILGA does provide a space where people can come together and learn from each other and see that there are similarities in what they encounter. These encounters allow activists to see that certain conditions of their work are transnational and not just an attribute of their particularly repressive national context. I can see this change during the last

ten years in Russia, and I also think that digital technologies play a very big role here.

SELIN: I wonder, in this regard, if activist circles in Russia are interested in hosting transnational gatherings, i.e. inviting other people from abroad instead of participating in an event organised elsewhere? I think it is very important in the context of transnational solidarity as a way beyond exceptionalism – what positions different activists occupy in transnational mobilisation; how agentive their position is. Activists who previously have been in the position of 'recipients' (of knowledge, money, or assistance) in the Turkish context now consider themselves more as equal constituents and are more invested in transnational dialogue. For example, upon Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, activists in Turkey organised many, online and offline, gatherings that brought together activists from countries where the Convention was contested by governments in power. Do you, Olga, observe such a tendency in the Russian context?

OLGA: Yes, in one group interview that I have already referred to above, this is a very proclaimed topic – what Russian activists can teach others. They talk about different programmes which allow them to travel to Prague or other European cities, but they also ask why no one is supporting the travel to their organisations in remote areas of Russia because they can also teach people innovative and thought-provoking activist practises. I think this example shows that activists begin to understand that they are not obliged to accept things as they are in their collaboration with foreign partners, donors, and politicians, and that they can do more than just receive help, they can also offer something in return or initiate something. But the current tendency is also to stress the importance of solidarity and collaboration within Russian which is a diverse, geographically spread, and heterogeneous country. So, I'd say they currently prioritise their internal collaborations over transnational encounters.

MIA: There are also many different positions in relation to exceptionalism in the Scandinavian context. The main divider, I think, is positionality in relation to the state that we have discussed before. Activists who depend on this relationship do tap into or support the exceptionalist stance because it's useful for them. They can draw on Scandinavian exceptionalism to expand women's rights or LGBTI+ rights, whereas other groups cannot because they are the Other of this exceptionalist narrative who need to change to fit in. The question about who learns from whom is relevant in this context. For example, we spoke about ILGA before. In an interview with a staff member of ILGA Europe, I asked whether they learn something in the exchange with others. And the reaction was: "What do you mean?" The person could not give any meaningful example of mutuality in their exchange. It was quite remarkable – Who is the producer of exceptionalism? Who is producing the exceptionalist stance?

OLGA: Some transnational organisations do acknowledge that this exchange could be more egalitarian, based on mutuality. Especially when

employees of such organisations originate from the post-Soviet region and have first-hand experience of grassroots activism there before being employed in a transnational organisation, as it is the case with some of my research partners. When such people start working in a donor organisation, they can be more sensitive and perceptive of local activists' needs and concerns. Yet, such individual interventions do not automatically lead to structural changes if the proper organisational support, which would allow the transformation of individual reflections into a policy, is absent. One of my research partners with a long experience of working with transnational organisations providing support to Russian LGBTI+ activists felt quite disappointed about her lack of potential to change the established practices.

Selin: Going beyond exceptionalism therefore is not necessarily liberating because you can go beyond exceptionalism at one level and still maintain unequal power relations, internalised inequalities at another level. Being globally connected opens the possibility of transforming exceptionalist modes of thinking but does not guarantee overthrowing power relations. In this sense, one should avoid jumping to the easy conclusion that increased connectivity and technological possibilities of learning from other contexts automatically dismantle exceptionalisms.

Olga: Another important question is whether investments in transnational collaborations are always beneficial for the communities that activists represent/work with. While Russian activists may start occupying more agentive positions in their relations with international donors and partners, to which extent does their agency extend to those people whom they represent? I see these concerns in some interviews when research partners ask self-reflexive questions about their own position and their activist practises; to which extent and how transnational human rights discourses and approaches they learn from their international partners benefit their own community in Russia. As a solution, some organisations search for alternative modes of funding that come from the community itself or from initiatives/organisations/philanthropists located within the country (see Çağatay et al. 2022: Ch. 3).

Conclusion

This conversation has offered exceptionalism as a concept to think with in transnational feminist and queer research and activism. Problematising exceptionalist modes of thinking in three research contexts – Russia, Turkey, and the Scandinavian countries – we have shown that this sort of intervention can be useful in framing conceptually contextual differences embedded in past and present geopolitics but also linkages and connections determined by the globalisation of gender equality and sexual rights agendas. As we decoupled exceptionalism from its attachment to particular national and regional regimes, in this chapter, we approached exceptionalism as a heuristic device and a transnationalising concept in relation to our research sites.

As such, the concept allowed us to exceed national boundaries and gave us a possibility to discuss the systemic dynamics involved without missing the points that make our cases historically specific. It enabled us to keep a balance between national specificities and the global embeddedness of the activist practises we investigate, as well as to pay attention to regional variation within national contexts. Thus, we consider exceptionalism as a fruitful analytical tool for transnational feminist theorising that helps researchers to develop methodologies alternative to methodological nationalism. Using dialogue as a knowledge production method, we also aspired to reveal how transnational research based on empirical data from three different contexts could work in practice.

By situating our points of departure in the dynamics, histories, and relations of exceptionalism in Russia, Turkey, and Scandinavian countries, our conversation illuminated the powerful stance of exceptionalism in all these contexts in overlapping and different ways. While the attempts at linking gender equality to projects of modernisation and nation-building highlighted similarities between Scandinavian and Turkish-Kemalist struggles for gender equality, an idea of exceptionality as imperial legacy seems to have been preserved in both Turkey and Russia, while a denial of imperialism and coloniality is more characteristic of exceptionalism in the Scandinavian countries. The specific ways in which exceptionalism is employed allow all our contexts to occupy a particular positioning in the global world order, either by self-identifying as not entirely the West or the East – but superior to both – in Turkey and Russia, or by presenting oneself as being at the forefront of global development, as in the Scandinavian countries.

Through our conversation, it was clear how exceptionalism is entangled with colonisation, coloniality, with the notion of empire in post- and neo-imperial contexts and the formation of the modern nation-state. With this, our conversation moved to explore how the logics of exceptionalism are entangled with dominant discourses on gender equality in our contexts and transnationally. It showed that exceptionalism produces very contradictory outcomes, depending on where and how it is exercised. Indeed, while in one context – in our conversation, the Scandinavian countries – exceptionalism can work to locate gender equality in a particular place, in another context – in our discussion, Russia – such exceptional discourses may overshadow historical achievements of gender equality. Clearly, to have such a powerful function in shaping different discourses geopolitically, exceptionalism is no coherent or unified discourse but should rather be seen as ambiguous, hybrid, and varied.

As we considered various ways to go beyond exceptionalism through transnational solidarities in feminist and queer research and activism, in the final section, we identified several important questions for further research. One of these was to analyse how different exceptionalisms overlap or interact with each other, and what kind of subjectivities are produced in these interactions. This question emerged from our insights into how our

problematisation of exceptionalism through a transnational, multi-scalar lens brought to light a global co-construction of 'leaders' and 'victims' in discourses of gender equality and women's and LGBTI+ rights. Some questions to address in this area could be: How may urgent circumstances influence the ways in which activists instrumentalise such exceptionalist discourses? What is the space for manoeuvre within such discourses? What kind of subjects are allowed to take up a critical stance in relation to exceptionalism? And for whom would such a critical stance influence the recognition of them as legitimate rights-claimants? What type of claims would such critical stances consist of? These questions, we suggest, may help feminist and queer researchers to address whether and how transnational solidarities can challenge, reproduce, or dismantle exceptionalist modes of thinking that are often deeply inscribed in many activist settings.

Notes

1 Geographically, the term Scandinavia is used to cover Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic, in contrast, covers a wider geo-political area and includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, the Faroes and Greenland (former colony of Denmark, self-governing since 2009), and Åland, a self-governing part of the Finnish Republic. Sápmi, the territory of the indigenous Sami population, stretches across the north of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and north-east Russia. While we understand the Scandinavian countries as distinct and diverse, we also recognise that these countries share significant features in relation to gender equality and LGBTI+ rights, as they are all keen to position themselves at the forefront of global progress for women and LGBTI+ people (Keskinen et al. 2009; Liinason 2018). To highlight the existence of shared features across national borders, we refer to the Scandinavian context when similar phenomena appear in all three countries. In return, when a phenomenon takes place in only one of these countries, we refer to that single country.

2 *Spaces of resistance* was a collaborative research project that united four researchers – Mia Liinason (PI), Hülya Arik, Selin Çağatay and Olga Sasunkevich who conducted ethnographic research feminist and LGBTI+ activists in Russia (Olga), Scandinavian countries (Mia) and Turkey (Hülya and Selin) during 2016–2021. We included in our research different activist groups – from large-scale and well-established transnational and national organisations to grassroots initiatives and artistic collectives. We analysed their work through transnational lenses looking at differences but also overlaps across the three contexts (Arik et al. 2022; Çağatay et al. 2022). This conversation is largely informed by our empirical material and theoretical work within this project. More information about the project is available at: https://sites.google.com/view/spacesofresistance/project-description?authuser=0.

3 For a presentation of how we approach the Scandinavian countries as geography and terminology, see note 1. Scholars have questioned whether the Scandinavian countries represent a distinctive development at all. For example, Mary Hilson argues that the traits of these countries are "typical of wider patterns in contemporary Europe" (2008: 75). Nonetheless, although there is nothing distinctive about the Scandinavian countries, the region takes shape as an imagined community, providing its citizens with another layer of belonging in addition to their specific national belongings. Yet, this is not a harmonious or conflict-free

relationship. Scholars have also shown how exclusionary notions of normality were central for the modernising projects of these countries (Fahlgren et al. 2011).

4 Notably, this is not only the case with LGBTI+ asylum seekers but emerges as a more general aspect for people who migrate to countries in the global north, as identified by migration scholars (Anderson et al. 2011; Ticktin 2011).

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