

Unsettling the political: conceptualizing the political in feminist and LGBTI+ activism across Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Turkey

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Unsettling the political: conceptualizing the political in feminist and LGBTI+ activism across Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to expand the ongoing theoretical debate on the broadened and context-specific notion of politics by offering an empirically nuanced conceptualization of the political based on the study of feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) activism in Russia, Turkey, and the Scandinavian countries. We use a multi-scalar transnational approach to foreground connectivities across regions to challenge nation-bound and state-centric perspectives on politics and reveal the various formulations beyond the formal/informal divide. Case studies from feminist and LGBTI+ activists and minority organizations demonstrate context-specific ways of inhabiting or distancing from politics. Drawing on interdisciplinary feminist scholarship and a Gramscian approach to civil society, we challenge the narrow articulation of politics either as antagonism or contestation. In doing so, we highlight the political expressions that do not neatly fit into the expected forms of politics, yet are motivated by a commitment to shaping new ways of living together.

Аннотация

Авторы статьи предлагают свой вклад в феминистскую теоретическую дискуссию о расширенном и контекстуализированном понимании политического. В своем теоретизировании исследовательницы опираются на эмпирический материал, собранный в результате этнографического исследования феминистского и ЛГБТ+-активизма в России, Скандинавских странах и Турции. Они применяют подход транснационального многоуровневого масштабирования – от локального к национальному и глобальному, – чтобы показать связи и пересечения между феминистским и ЛГБТ+-активизмами в трех таких разных по отношению друг к другу контекстах, как Норвегия, Россия и Турция. Предложенная методология позволяет вывести понятие о политическом за пределы аналитического

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уровня государства, или нации, который доминирует в политической теории, включая ее феминистскую традицию. Опираясь на эту традицию, но также дополняя ее граммшианской концептуализацией отношений между гражданским обществом и государством, статья сосредотачивается на активистских действиях и стратегиях, которые часто воспринимаются как «аполитичные», потому что они осуществляются за пределами традиционных политических институтов и практик. В статье рассматривается, как т.н. «сервисный» активизм, спорт и развлечения обретают политическое значение в нарративах самих активист_ок, но также в их взаимодействии с другими участниками гражданского общества, государством и транснациональными организациями, включая доноров. Таким образом, статья предлагает расширенное понятие политического как стремление создавать новые, более справедливые, формы социальной жизни.

ÖZET

Bu makalede Rusya, Türkiye ve İskandinav ülkelerindeki feminist ve lezbijen, gey, biseksüel, trans ve intersex (LGBTI+) hareketlerden örnekler ışığında siyasal olanın ampirik veriden yola çıkan, bağlama dayalı ve geniş kapsamlı kavramsallaştırılmasına yönelik süregelen teorik tartışmalara katkıda bulunmayı amaçlıyoruz. Çok ölçekli ve ulusaşırı bir yaklaşım benimseyerek, ulusa dayalı ve devlet odaklı bir siyaset anlayışı yerine, siyasal olana dair bölgeler arası bağlantıları ve formel-enformel ayrımının ötesine geçen ifadeleri öne çıkarıyoruz. Feminist ve LGBTI+ aktivistler ve azınlıkların kurduğu LGBTI+ örgütlenmelerle yaptığımız çalışmalardan yola çıkarak, feminist ve kuir mücadelelerde yer alan kişilerin kendilerini siyasal olana göre konumlandırış biçimlerine odaklanıyoruz. Disiplinler arası feminist literatürden ve Gramşici sivil toplum kuramından beslenerek, siyasetin karşıtlık veya çekişmeye dayalı, dar kapsamlı bir şekilde tanımlanmasına karşı çıkıyoruz. Bunun yerine, alışlagelmiş siyaset tanımlarına tam olarak denk düşmeyen ancak kolektif yaşamın yeni biçimlerini araştıran siyasal pratiklerin önemini vurguluyoruz.

KEYWORDS Transnational feminism; the political; state–civil-society relations; feminist and LGBTI+ activism; hegemony/counter-hegemony

Ключевые слова Транснациональный феминизм; политическое; отношения между государством и гражданским обществом; феминистский и ЛГБТИ+ активизм; гегемония/контр-гегемония

ANAHTAR KELİMELE Ulusaşırı feminizm; siyasal; devlet–sivil toplum ilişkileri; feminist ve LGBTI+ aktivizm; hegemonya/karşı-hegemonya

Introduction

Rooted in the rich genealogies of feminist, postcolonial, and queer interventions in the concept of the political, this article aims to bring ethnographic detail to expand the ongoing theoretical debate on the broadened and context-specific notion of politics. Through a transnationally informed ethnographic investigation of how feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) activists in Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Turkey conceptualize their work in relation to politics and how the political reveals itself in activist practices and strategies that are deemed “apolitical” at first

glance, we argue for the need to firmly ground the notion of the political in empirical research. In contrast to a narrow articulation of politics as antagonism or contestation (Mouffe 2005), we consider the political as situated, relational, and historically anchored (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Lock Swarr and Nagar 2010), existing beyond the boundaries of formal and institutional realms (Jones and Jónasdóttir 1988; Waylen et al. 2013) and belonging to presumably apolitical spheres such as culture (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998), sports (Davidson 2013), and entertainment (Sundén and Paasonen 2020). Consequently, we look for the political in all realms of human activity, enabling an approach to politics that is derived from concrete social relations and practices of resistance that can “give rise to a ‘political’ of a completely different type” (Thomas 2009a, 35).

Guided by the ambition to expand contemporary understandings of the political, we aspire to conceptualize as political those expressions that take unfamiliar or unexpected forms. While the idea of politics as conflict or antagonism has become popular in critical social theory (Kapoor 2002; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Tally 2007), less attention has been directed to exploring how hegemonic struggles are sustained by a broad-based agreement between actors in civil society and the state around what constitutes the political in the first place. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship on politics and with a Gramscian perspective on civil society, in this article, we develop an approach to politics that derives from concrete social relations and practices. We do so by adopting a multi-scalar methodology that focuses on both “finer” and “coarser” frames of analysis (Hyndman 2001). Our scholarship is informed by a transnational approach that foregrounds the “discursive frames and organizational and political practices that are inspired, (re)affirmed, or reinforced ... by their engagement with other actors beyond national borders ... both virtual and ‘real’” (Alvarez 2000, 30).

As we explore how the political reveals itself in seemingly apolitical activist actions and spheres, we highlight three features of the political that contribute to theorizing politics from a transnational feminist perspective. First, we illuminate how different spaces in and outside the nation-state variously shape political practices, and how similar activist practices are understood as political or apolitical depending on their positioning vis-à-vis state-civil-society relations. Second, we discuss the different ways in which actors might occupy hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positions within civil society in a way that is historically contingent upon how their agendas interact with those of the state. Finally, we unpack how our contextualized cases are simultaneously embedded in national histories and local constraints and influenced by global connections, creating tensions and tendencies in civil society that remain unnoticed in nationally bounded methodologies.

In the following sections, drawing on interdisciplinary feminist scholarship and a Gramscian approach to civil society, we first propose an inclusive

definition of the political on which our case presentations rest. Next, we introduce the multi-scalar transnational methodology that informs our research and gives coherence to our analyses across the Scandinavian context,¹ Turkey, and Russia. We then present our ethnographic case studies and empirically suggest various ways in which the political can be conceptualized. We conclude our contribution with reflections on the meanings and limits of the political as explored through transnational feminist and queer praxes.

Interdisciplinary perspectives on the political

The concept of the political and its relation to gender has been extensively discussed in feminist theory (Butler and Scott 1992; Dean 1997). Scholars of gender and politics and feminist historians, as well as Black, queer, and post-colonial feminist scholars, have addressed the conditional inclusion of women and people of color in the modern public sphere. Their unequal access to citizenship rights often means that their political activity is located outside the field of formal politics. The widespread perception of women's activism as a continuation of the tasks that they perform in the private sphere renders their political agency invisible. At the same time, for many women, community-oriented activism offers an "apolitical" public presence that is immune to male interference and serves as a source of resistance and empowerment (Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999). Simultaneously, postcolonial, Indigenous, and Black, feminist, and queer activists create spaces where women and queers of color can feel a sense of belonging by challenging gendered and racial divisions between the private and the public (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Smith 2013). For a comprehensive account of women's political participation, feminist scholars have thus called for an inclusive definition that recognizes the politically motivated engagements of women and people of color outside the field of conventional politics, political institutions, and histories (hooks and McKinnon 1996; Jones and Jónasdóttir 1988; Waylen et al. 2013).

Other contributions to the concept of the political have come from feminist political geographers and feminist institutionalists. Feminist geographers have critiqued masculinist traditions in political science for their "chessboard" and "domino-effect" approaches to "geopolitics" (Enloe 2000; Koopman 2011; Staeheli, Kofman, and Peake 2004). In doing so, they have problematized the rigid differentiation between "P"olitics and "p"olitics that situate politics respectively in the realms of state institutions and foreign relations versus the non-traditional realms of the personal, the cultural, and civil society (Flint 2003), and the perception of politics and "geopolitics" through pre-given categories and macro-level interactions by elite actors in formal and institutional spheres (Staeheli, Kofman, and Peake 2004). Scholars writing from the perspective of feminist institutionalism have exposed the power dynamics behind what counts as an institution and how unwritten "rules of

the game” curtail access for women and other marginalized groups to institutional resources and locate their political activity outside the formal sphere of politics (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Waylen 2017).

We find a Gramscian approach to civil society and its implications for the production of the political useful for an inclusive definition of the political with theoretical depth. A Gramscian understanding posits a symbiotic relationship between civil society and the state. Unlike liberal approaches that clearly demarcate civil society from the state as an autonomous realm that challenges state power, the Gramscian approach rejects this distinction by naming it methodological but not organic – that is, as not really existing (Gramsci 1971/1999, 371; Texier 1979). According to this approach, the state is inclusive of civil society, or rather there is a “dialectical unity of civil society and political society” (Bobbio 1979, 41).

Concepts developed by Gramsci such as “hegemony” and the “integral state” are particularly important in understanding the state and civil society as co-constructed entities. Hegemony describes the processes through which the political practices of a certain class or group lead that class or group to seize state power and thereby define the nature of politics (Thomas 2009a). Civil society is understood here as the apparatus used by the ruling class to obtain consent for its moral and intellectual leadership (Texier 1979). The integral state, in turn, describes the relationship between civil society (social interests and the relations between them) and the state (political society and the state apparatus) (Thomas 2009b). It implies that there must be an attempt to forge political hegemony before seizing state power or domination. Civil society emerges as the terrain where social groups compete for hegemony, and political society is where such hegemony is guaranteed by the “legal monopoly of violence embodied in its institutions” (Thomas 2009b, 137). In our thinking around the meanings and limits of the political, Gramscian conceptualizations of the integral state allow us to grasp how organizations, such as social movements or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), become incorporated within the structures of politics insofar as they build organic ties with the state, reproducing the idea that social change occurs through these channels rather than through their transformation.

With its Gramscian approach to civil society, this article also addresses a particular global tendency in feminist scholarship – namely, the privileging of a liberal notion of civil society in pursuing a gender equality agenda and a disproportionate analytical focus on the state–civil-society global-governance framework as the main site of politics (Krook and Childs 2010; McBride and Mazur 2010). This tendency risks excluding from discussions not only counter-hegemonic struggles that emerge from the discrepancy between civil society’s liberal rhetoric and people’s lived experience (Miliband 1990) but also actors who, at first glance, are deemed insignificant or marginal in terms of their political involvement.

While we challenge the overemphasis on state–civil-society global-governance relations in feminist scholarship, we still recognize the importance of the state. As D’Alisa and Kallis (2016) underline, Gramsci’s theory of the integral state can be challenging to scholars who dismiss the state as a hierarchical, exclusionary, and distant entity. For Gramsci, the state is indeed a space of coercion or enforcement, yet it is simultaneously a reflection of hegemony created by the ruling class in civil society. Thus, when considering a broadened concept of the political, we continue to discuss the ways in which the state serves as an expression of social struggle. Similarly, when foregrounding counter-hegemonic struggles, we destabilize a binary division between hegemony and counter-hegemony by highlighting how hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices and aspirations are contingent upon actors’ positioning vis-à-vis state–civil-society relations.

We acknowledge that the conditions in which civil society functions in the three geopolitical contexts that inform our conceptualization of the political are distinct and differently affected by state policies on gender equality and sexual rights. In particular, civil society in the Turkish and Russian contexts experiences more direct pressure from their governments than in the Scandinavian countries (Doyle 2018; Skokova, Pape, and Krasnopolskaya 2018). Furthermore, Russia and Turkey, on the one hand, and the Scandinavian countries, on the other, occupy different positionalities in terms of gender equality and sexual rights. While the Scandinavian countries are famous for presenting themselves as gender-equal and homotolerant nations (Martinsson, Griffin, and Nygren 2016), Turkey and Russia, pioneers in promoting gender equality in the early twentieth century, have drifted toward leadership that has embarked on anti-gender campaigns since the 2010s (Dogangün 2019; Edenborg 2021; Özkazanç 2020).

We take a critical distance from the taken-for-granted counter-positioning of Turkey and Russia vis-à-vis the Scandinavian countries in the geopolitical arena. Using these three seemingly distant contexts as our case studies, we highlight how local feminist and queer struggles are framed by factors that extend beyond the national scale. Russia and Turkey use anti-gender campaigns and state homophobia as part of a broader strategy to challenge Western human rights discourses that are perceived to be incompatible with traditional values and aspirations of non-Western or not-so-Western societies (Edenborg 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2018). By contrast, discourses of human rights and gender equality are employed by Scandinavian governments and civil-society organizations as a geopolitical strategy to position themselves globally as the “civilized” and “civilizing” West (Liinason 2018b) in relation to seemingly less gender-equal or homotolerant countries or regions.

As queer international relations scholars note, contestations around sexuality and gender (in)equality are a fundamental part of domestic and

international power struggles (Weber 2016, 4); they are seen as “a barometer of a nation’s fitness for sovereignty, a new element in the contemporary standard of civilization in international relations” (Rao 2020, 11). Thus, our research addresses the structural realignment of the sovereign nation-state in facing simultaneous challenges from above – from supranational entities and global capitalist markets – and from below – from grassroots movements that make reference to international law and human rights (Barker 2017). We suggest that the geopolitical struggles pursued by governments in Turkey, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries around gender and sexuality touch upon “the very frames of reference for doing politics and for doing justice in the first place” (Barker 2017, 443).

Methodology

As we aspire to develop more nuanced understandings of the political, we employ a multi-scalar transnational approach (Lock Swarr and Nagar 2010; Nash and Browne 2015). To bring a stronger ethnographic sensitivity to geographic contexts, we move beyond the centrality of the nation-state and re-center power relations, practices, and sites of struggle written outside “P”olitical scripts. This enables us to illuminate convergences and divergences within and between contexts and across multiple scales. The empirical data for this article were collected through ethnographic fieldwork with the ambition of engaging with dispersed and diffused practices and understanding politics outside the usual places. To support our claims, we have picked specific case studies from a larger empirical dataset collected over four years of ethnographic research (from 2017 to 2021) across Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Turkey (Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich 2021).

The Scandinavian case in this article draws on interviews with queer and feminist activists from the LGBTI+ movement and community actors from an organization that works to empower LGBTI+ minorities in a Norwegian context. In Norway, and in Scandinavia more broadly, notions of gender equality and sexual rights are seen as national values, forming a key discourse that works to define and delimit national belonging, and is exercised through a series of biopolitical measures that equip nation-born citizens with a form of moral authority over “others” (Akin 2017; Liinason 2018a). This case study illuminates the multiple dilemmas that appear as a result of the contradictory discourses around LGBTI+ rights, how they affect understandings of the political, their impact on possibilities to claim rights and act politically within this context, and how enactments in response to these, in turn, make visible ambiguities between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic positionings.

The Russian case study covers the work of two Moscow-based community-oriented LGBTI+ organizations, one of which is also feminist in its ideology. In 2013, the Russian government adopted the so-called “anti-gay propaganda”

law, which forbids the dissemination among minors of information about “non-traditional sexualities.” The law has made Russia internationally infamous for its state-supported homophobia but has also enabled resistance through the development in Russia of a recognizable and diverse field of LGBTI+ activism (Buyantueva 2018). Much of this activism functions in the space of counter-hegemonic struggles. As many LGBTI+ organizations and grassroots initiatives are community oriented, they neither challenge the state directly nor subversively employ state resources for their needs. The Russian case study highlights how activists make political sense of their work when their direct influence on “P”olitics is restricted by state homophobia.

Finally, the case of Turkey offers a discussion of two public events organized by feminist and LGBTI+ activists in Istanbul, namely the Feminist Night March and the Queer Olympix, as exemplary of broader counter-hegemonic struggles for gender equality and sexual rights. Activists involved in our study participate in both institutional and informal politics and view state-oriented and community-oriented practices as similarly political and complementary. While feminist and LGBTI+ movements in Turkey engage in varying degrees of alliance and collaboration, activists featured here identify as members of both simultaneously. The Turkish case study focuses on activists’ struggles in a context in which they face marginalization and criminalization by the state following the authoritarian-populist turn of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Doyle 2018; Esen and Gümüşçü 2016). In so doing, the case study shows how the political expands to include spaces that were previously considered apolitical, such as sports and entertainment.

In what follows, we present our cases using examples from in-depth interviews with representatives of feminist and LGBTI+ organizations in Scandinavia, Russia, and Turkey.² We employ a thematic reading of our cases and highlight both the different ways in which the political appears in each context and the similarities between seemingly different contexts. In keeping with our multi-scalar transnational methodology, we approach these spaces as place *based* but not place *bound* (Bell 1999; Ifekwunigwe 2016) and foreground the importance of context for activist struggles without framing those contexts as “discrete units of analysis to be compared” (Browne et al. 2017, 1377).

Multiple meanings of the political in activist practices across Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Turkey

Politics with a small “p”

In our research material from studies conducted in Russia and the Scandinavian countries, we encountered a recurrent theme: some activists are hesitant to label themselves as such or to acknowledge that the work that they do has

a political meaning. This tendency is especially pronounced in interviews with members of service- or community-oriented organizations who have difficulty taking the notion of the political for granted in their work. As Solovey (2018, 117) argues, the dichotomy between contentious (protest-based) and community-oriented activism, where the former is given more political value than the latter, has its roots in the mainstream understanding of politics and social movements as aimed at putting pressure on the state in the struggle for social justice.

In the Russian case, the imposition of this dichotomous thinking comes from both within and outside activist circles. On the one hand, contentious politics are highly valued by activists themselves (Solovey 2021). On the other hand, the expectation that activists should engage in contentious politics or at least make claims to the state comes from Western-based donors who favor initiatives that are aimed at advocacy and lobbying for change to the Russian legislation that violates the rights of LGBTI+ people (Buyantueva 2018; Johnson 2015). In the Scandinavian case, this dichotomy is upheld structurally, as service- or community-oriented LGBTI+ organizations are encouraged to leave negotiations with the state to the mainstream, nationwide lobbying or advocacy organizations. The division is also reproduced discursively in expectations of how the rights-giving state should be addressed in claims for rights and of the subject who makes such claims or on whose behalf the claims are made.

During our fieldwork in Russia, we noticed that this dominant expectation of the form of proper activism pushed some people to reconsider their own activities and reconceptualize their dominant, state-centric notion of politics. This is where the notion of politics with a small “p” is a useful heuristic device to claim that community-based work is political but in a way distinct from challenges to the state in the realm of “P”olitics. Reflecting on her own activist path, Elena, a Moscow-based LGBTI+--activist, explained that she shifted her focus from street protests to community-oriented activities due to insecurity and emotional stress. Understanding the significance of activist work for the community and herself, she tried to find other forms of activist participation. As a result, she and her partner founded a community center aimed at providing the members of the LGBTI+ community with psychological and social help. She does not consider their work as explicitly political, yet, after some hesitation, she said:

Well, what we do is, of course, activism. But it is not political activism. Although, I would say, there is a deep question within a narrative practice about, let's say, politics with a small “p” ... What is important for me is to help a person to take an active position in relation to their own life. Not to transmit some political ideology or opinions but to make a person understand that they can influence their own life. And this is about politics. It is probably the most important form of the political in Russia today.

This statement implies that what does not seem political at first glance may have important political meaning in the long run. Moreover, it also suggests that the notion of the political is context specific; what might not seem political in some geographic and historical contexts can be perceived differently in others. In other discussions, feminist and LGBTI+ activists admitted that the expectation of some donors that Russian activists should work with or against the state in changing state policies is naive. Some activists prefer not to use their limited resources for engagement with the state since they see this work as useless in the current climate. Instead, they find it more meaningful to contribute to their community and to develop political consciousness from below. Moreover, some activists, including Elena, think that those who direct their work only toward critiquing the state sometimes lose their connection with the broader LGBTI+ community and cease to understand their needs. In our conversation with her, another community center director questioned the strict dichotomy between advocacy/legislation and community-oriented work. She said that she did not see much sense in challenging the restrictive and conservative state politics at the moment; however, she admitted that if and when the circumstances change, the work and connections with the community will become an important resource to build an informed advocacy strategy on behalf of the community.

The distinction between advocacy- and community-oriented activism is an example of how activists' local work is informed by transnational donor politics that impose certain expectations on activists' national strategies and actions. Analyzing trans activism in Russia, Kirey-Sitnikova (2020, 784) highlights the conflict between "trans-activists' desire to provide services to trans people and donors' refusal to fund services unless they are related in some ways to advocacy." Though, as we argue above, activists subvert these expectations in their practices, their decisions are still influenced by a transnational discursive frame of "proper" political work that is aimed at appealing to state and legislative bodies to improve the lives of queer persons. Importantly, the understanding of community-oriented or service work as apolitical is echoed in other contexts, as shown in the analysis of the example from Norway below.

The "involuntary political"

Engagement in politics with a small "p" does not mean that activists are unaffected by politics with a capital "P." Russia's repressive legislation in relation to LGBTI+ people, as well as the atmosphere of violence and hate provoked by that legislation (Kondakov 2021), can easily politicize community-oriented work. Some regional community centers admitted that their work has become more politicized and organized since the Russian "anti-gay propaganda" law was accepted. Even though some LGBTI+ organizations

distance themselves from “P”olitics, they still fall within the wider state agenda in which LGBTI+ people are constructed as a threat to traditional family values and conservative political trends.

For example, a Moscow-based resource center organizes annual conferences about LGBTI+ families. The conference content may seem apolitical as it deals with such issues as psychological approaches to conflict and family relations. However, in 2017, some volunteers involved in the conference organization were physically attacked and injured. In 2018, the conference was relocated to the online space at the last minute due to security threats. Different actors may be behind these attacks, and they are not necessarily directly connected to the state. Yet, their actions appear to be driven by the general atmosphere of Russian “P”olitics, where sexual rights and gender equality are politicized and framed as opposed to Russian national ideals and values (Buyantueva 2018). Different scales of the political – community based (local) and national – overlap here.

In the Scandinavian countries, contextually embedded expectations of the subject who claims rights and of how the state should be addressed in such claims create difficulties for, among others, LGBTI+ asylum seekers. Here, as scholars show (Akin 2017; Sager 2018), asylum-seeking LGBTI+ people are not only expected to provide a narrative of violence, threat, and fear in respect of their country or family of origin but must also express a desire to live openly as gay in order to produce a rights claim that is intelligible and legitimate for the Scandinavian authorities (Akin and Svendsen 2018). The figure of the “involuntary political” encapsulates the dynamics surrounding queer asylum seekers; they are expected to construct a narrative of themselves as queer migrants who are victims of an oppressive regime in the Global South or East, and of the state in the Global North or West as a benefactor. It is a figure that becomes the object of demands for rights in society or in politics, though the asylum seekers may not themselves be interested in conventional political work.

Describing his lack of political interest, Abu, who came to Norway from Iran, said that in Norway, he “just wants to be with [his] partner.” He did not flee Iran because he is gay, though he underlined that it was dangerous for him to live there as homosexual. Nikki, who came to Norway from Syria, stated: “If I am not open about being gay, it means that I am ashamed of it – and that is the one thing I am not ashamed of!” Neither Abu nor Nikki has a political interest, yet despite their unambiguous attitudes on this point, their responses appear deeply political at a global level, shaped by homophobia as well as homonationalism (Rao 2020; Weber 2016). In this context, the figure of the involuntary political illuminates how the everyday lives of gay people such as Abu and Nikki become political in particular places. Neither Abu nor Nikki sees themselves as political actors, and both explicitly stated that

they have no interest in making political claims or struggling for change. However, as a result of their outspoken desires to live openly as gay, their narratives serve to sustain and strengthen homonational agendas in which gender and sexuality are instrumentalized as tools to achieve state recognition and influence on a global scale (Wiedlack, Shoshanova, and Godovannaya 2019). Such a politicization suggests that sexual actions and statements become incorporated into geopolitical relationships (Browne and Nash 2020; Haritaworn 2015). Within these dynamics, the status of Abu and Nikki as political actors is, to a significant degree, located outside their capacity to decide; they are “made” political within a broader multi-scalar politics of gay identity, visibility, and tolerance.

Struggling to be recognized as political

Within this politicized culture surrounding queer people, Scandinavian LGBTI+ organizations are situated in a complex dynamic. LGBTI Forum is a Norwegian organization working for non-heterosexual and trans people of minority backgrounds. Dana, who is a staff member of the organization and of minority background herself, said that she needs to manage the expectations of the public and politicians in respect of victim narratives in the media. Unlike privileged persons, who can present a report and appear as experts in the media by the force of their assumed competence, minority LGBTI+ people are expected to provide a narrative of victimization. As Dana described:

They [the media] produce victims in order to reach out. I find this very problematic. Come here and meet with them! They are not victims. To the extent that they would be victims, they would be so due to structural factors: [because] their application of asylum is rejected, [because] they are not fitting in to a normative vision [of queer life], or don't have enough cultural competence on the Norwegian way of being LGBT.

Dana wants to create systemic change without relying on these victim narratives, which are shaped not only by the media but also by mainstream LGBTI+ organizations (Bolsø 2008). Such an approach to change is motivated by the care and love that she feels for the people whom she meets in her work – feelings and relationships on which she wants to build to achieve change. Though LGBTI Forum see themselves as a political organization, Dana said that they need to be better at “being political,” but it is difficult. Other LGBTI+ organizations encourage LGBTI Forum to focus entirely on service provision or social work and to leave the political negotiations to them. In addition, longer-established LGBTI+ organizations protect their positions in negotiation with politicians:

We have spent a lot of time [finding] the right [political] shape ... One of the first things I heard when I began in LGBTI Forum, [another LGBTI+

organization] was saying to us that they could manage the political negotiations if we could focus on the social issues. I was so offended! Here someone from the majority population should speak on behalf of us... Social movements in Norway are led by people with close bonds to the big parties. A clear alliance. These are old, white, gay men. They have been keeping up their lobby work for 40 years... We are quite far away from thinking that we [could have such bonds].

Dana's narrative illuminates how the political channels have been dominated by the long-established, mainstream LGBTI+ organizations who do not want to lose their position in negotiations with the state. Her description makes visible the multiple ways in which LGBTI Forum are excluded from that space through the demarcation of boundaries between proper spheres (political versus social), subject positions (experts versus victims), and positions in relation to the state (nation born versus migrant, white versus person of color). Yet, Dana's description of the need to find the "right [political] shape" complicates a simplistic binary understanding of hegemonic versus counter-hegemonic positions. While she disagreed with the expectation that the political message should fulfill certain stereotypes about LGBTI+ migrants who are victims of oppressive regimes and about the Norwegian state as a benefactor, she simultaneously expressed a desire to adjust to a kind of politics that is directed toward the state. The struggles to be recognized as political in LGBTI Forum suggest that the space between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles in civil society is ambiguous (Räthzel et al. 2015). Considering these struggles allows us to develop more nuanced insights into how counter-hegemonic actors – those excluded from the integral state – uphold complex positionings in relation to processes of inclusion/exclusion as they aspire to bring about systemic change and reshape established institutions.

Members of LGBTI Forum note that, because of the challenges that they encounter, transnational connections with similar networks and initiatives within and across Denmark, Russia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, and other places have been important. Indeed, as Dana explained, the very vision of LGBTI Forum to bring about an intersectional shift in the queer movement in Norway was made possible through transnational connections. Such connections, Dana said, have given them support, inspiration, and know-how. Juno, a member of the organization, explained how such transnational connections are crucial means of building strength and sharing insights. "In Norway," Juno said,

we don't even have a translation for queer people of color. When I say "rasifierade,"³ people ask me what it means. In July, I will travel to Berlin to attend the CuTie.BIPoC festival.⁴ This festival gives space for exchanges you cannot have in other places, to reach depth in the conversation, and to build competence.

The connections highlighted by Juno and Dana illustrate how transnational relations can foreground border-crossing histories of queer people of color and migrants who learn from each other and gain strength within and outside the realm of particular nations (Ayoub 2019). Counteracting the marginalization experienced in national contexts, such transnational points of inspiration empower and bring knowledge to struggles (Roy 2016) and reveal new “cartographies of connectivity” beyond regions and nations (Gopinath 2018, 18).

Our fieldwork in Russia and the Scandinavian countries demonstrates that activists in different contexts distance themselves from the dominant notion of politics for various reasons. Some of them, as the Russian case reveals, do so consciously since a direct involvement with the state is currently considered too risky or non-productive. Others may be excluded from the political against their own will, as in the example from Norway, where the strong connection between the state and civil society limits opportunities for community-oriented activists to claim their work as political.

In both contexts, community-oriented work is seldom seen as political since the political has become synonymous with juridical claims directed toward the state. Yet, activists do not take the established notion of the political for granted and continue their struggles despite being disregarded by more powerful civil-society actors, international donors, or state governments. Our fieldwork also shows that LGBTI+ people can be involuntarily drawn into politics with a capital “P,” when gender equality and sexual rights are politicized by diversely positioned state actors. Such dynamics of politicization, as we discuss, play out differently in different contexts and across multiple scales – transnationally, nationally, and locally (at the community level).

Politics leaking into “apolitical” spaces

Shifting our focus to the Turkish case study, we show how counter-hegemonic politics are shaped in parallel to the shifts in state–civil-society relations. In Turkey, two interrelated developments motivated feminist and LGBTI+ activists to expand their political space in new directions and to include more “subtle” or “unconventional” modes of political action. First, counter-hegemonic struggles for gender equality and sexual rights were marginalized and criminalized by the state; for example, Pride-related events were banned, and significant squares and streets were closed to public protest. Second, interference in identities, lifestyles, and cultural practices by the state apparatus further politicized all spheres of life – public and private – including the arts, civil service, sports, entertainment, and digital media. These developments encouraged activists to relocate their efforts to

build solidarity and community to spaces in which they could continue pursuing politics but with less state interference.

One such space is sports. In recent years, feminist and LGBTI+ activists have been involved in forming sports teams that provide opportunities for socialization free from misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and state surveillance. Alaz, who has been active in the soccer team *Atletik Dildoa*, described sports

as a space where we can breathe ... not [just] in terms of having fun but also politically ... It serves as a space of socialization. When we gather more than three people [in the street], they [the police] tear-gas us; here [on the soccer field], we can bring together 11–12 people at once.

Alaz considers the soccer field a space for activism. For her, simply playing next to groups of men is a political statement since they are puzzled by the sheer presence of women and queer people on the field.

Since 2017, the Istanbul-based *Atletik Dildoa* has hosted the *Queer Olympix*, a sporting event that brings together teams and participants from a number of cities in Turkey. Alongside sports matches, there are workshops, film screenings, and public panels organized with a focus on LGBTI+ politics. Seen only from the perspective of “P”olitics, it is plausible to perceive the emergence of the *Queer Olympix* as a response to state oppression and the closure of public space to LGBTI+ visibility, including the ban on organizing Pride events. Binnaz, one of the organizers of the *Queer Olympix*, argued, however, that the commonly made connection between the *Queer Olympix* and the state ban on the *Pride March* is misleading.

Binnaz had been playing soccer with fellow activists for several years before the ban on the *Pride March*. She agreed that the *Queer Olympix* has a political claim in adopting the slogan: “If we can’t march, we run!” This slogan refers to the ban on the *Pride March* in Istanbul in 2016. Upon hearing about the planned ban, the *Pride Week* organizers came up with the idea of not gathering in *Taksim Square* (the starting point of the *Pride March* for the preceding 13 years) where the crowd would face state violence but, instead, dispersing along the nearby *Istiklal Avenue* and through the surrounding *Beyoğlu* neighborhood. With this move, the organizers declared: “Instead of living a life that is imposed on [us], a life that normalizes violence, oppression, and denial, we are living the life we choose, the life in which we exist with pride and honor” (*LGBTI Equal Rights Association 2016*).

While acknowledging the affinity between the *Queer Olympix* and *Pride*, Binnaz maintained that the initial motivation for establishing sports teams was “not due to the tear-gassing of the police but socializing and community building.” She admitted that the ban might have directed the attention of *Pride* participants to alternative events such as the *Queer Olympix* and that “there is continuity between the two [spaces]; if you [the state] close off

the streets, we have this [other] space.” The continuity that Binnaz pointed out overlaps with that between “P”olitics and “p”olitics.

By its third year, the Queer Olympix had grown into an event funded by transnational donors and with international participants as well as refugee football teams. Despite the original emphasis on community building, the organizers’ focus on body politics and public visibility increasingly made the sports sphere a part of the political. In parallel, the Queer Olympix began to attract the state’s attention.

In 2019, when the Queer Olympix organizers arrived at the event’s venue – a popular park in a central district of Istanbul – they saw anti-riot police and water-cannon vehicles lined up outside the park. Even though the event had been formally registered and approved by the district municipality, the organizers were told by the police that they could not hold it. The reasons given were that it was named “Olympix” without being registered with an official sports federation, that there was a participating soccer team from Armenia, and that participants had queer uniforms and carried LGBTI+ flags. For the police department, this was thus not “just a sports event” (*Deutsche Welle* 2019).

Having no room for negotiation with the police, but also unwilling to give up on the entire event, the Queer Olympix organizers switched to indoor games. The first day was spent in bowling halls and video game arcades, and the organizers booked a private soccer field for the next day’s events where participants could play without police intervention. In moments such as these, as Butler (2015, 71) argues,

politics is not defined as taking place exclusively in the public sphere, distinct from the private one, but it crosses those lines again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighborhood.

A similar politicization can be seen in the sphere of entertainment with the proliferation of feminist and queer parties. Organized by activists, these parties provide safe spaces for women and LGBTI+ people to socialize around their politics opposing patriarchy and heterosexism. According to Ceren, a long-term organizer of the Feminist Night March in Istanbul, the reason for the increasing number of young women participating in counter-hegemonic feminism is because “it is a form of doing opposition[al politics] that makes you smile.” Celebratory events such as the Feminist Night March generate popular enthusiasm, and this is precisely what makes these events political:

Feminism is angry, but it is also committed to laughter. Therefore, we don’t compromise on partying, no matter what ... because it’s part of the feminist struggle! ... I think this form of opposition is very important for people,

especially in these times [of violence and state oppression]. It's like an oasis in a desert.

Many activists experience "having fun" as a form of resistance and a mode of being political because they perceive community building as integral to their struggle. Yet, there is another layer of politicization that has to do with the state's response to activist practices. On March 8, 2019, police intervention at the Feminist Night March further blurred the boundary between street protest and entertainment and perpetuated the idea that having fun is a form of resistance. The March 8 party, organized at a venue several blocks from Taksim Square, where the intervention happened, was accessible only through a dense police barricade. Activists who joined the party following the protest were heavily tear-gassed by the police; they then brought the tear gas into the party on their clothes and bodies, and it diffused around the venue and hung in the air as a reminder of the state violence in response to the public visibility of feminist and queer struggles. At the party, people danced and sang but also coughed and sneezed due to the tear gas through the night, once again highlighting the overlap between "P"olitics and "p"olitics and the continuity between spheres of politics and spaces of resistance.

These examples of counter-hegemonic struggles in Turkey have several implications for our reconsideration of the political. With profound changes in state-civil-society relations, politics leak into previously apolitical spheres, creating spaces of resistance that activists start to consider as similarly political. The politicization of private gatherings destabilizes the public/private binary by showing how, in the case of marginalized groups, the political can become personalized. At the same time, even when activists do not primarily address the state, it is still an important mediator in "everyday battles ... about perceived infringements on citizens' freedom in determining the way they choose to conduct their lives" (Kandiyoti 2012, 522).

The above examples also suggest how the transnational can be embedded in the local. In many instances, feminist and queer struggles draw inspiration from activists' transnational encounters. Increased connectivity between different locales, thanks to technological developments as well as cheaper options for traveling, enables activists to learn from each other different ways of community building that are then considered to be political or apolitical either by activists themselves or by the state, depending on the local context.

The activists involved in the Turkish study have traveled abroad for occasions such as queer feminist summer camps (France), activist gatherings (multiple locales in Europe and beyond), or self-defense trainings (Germany). They have also been to European capitals such as Berlin or London for leisure, where they have familiarized themselves with feminist and LGBTI+ visibility in

the sphere of entertainment. In their local contexts, these activists engage in similar community-building practices regardless of the state's response to their visibility in the public sphere. Yet, when they do so, this is often understood solely as a reaction to the marginalization and criminalization of activists by the state. In our view, looking for transnational dynamics in local activist practices as a way of conceptualizing the political destabilizes the binary understanding of the state and civil society (where civil-society actors have the state as their main point of reference). It also shows how "the immobile, those who do not or cannot cross borders, may nonetheless participate in [transnational] politics" (Sassen 2010, 2) through engaging in feminist and queer struggles in their locales.

Conclusion

Through a transnational ethnography of feminist and LGBTI+ activism across Russia, Turkey, and the Scandinavian countries, this article has examined how the political reveals itself in supposedly apolitical spaces and practices such as community-based activism, cultural events, entertainment, and sports. As our case studies illustrate, established notions of the political rely on divisions between spheres such as those between the social, the cultural, and the political, and demarcations between public (for example, the street) and private (for example, the party). Notably, in all of the contexts studied, activists are affected by a transnational discursive frame of proper political work directed to the state and legislative bodies, while other forms of activist engagements, such as community-oriented actions, are marked as more or less political.

Reading our nationally bounded case studies through a multi-scalar transnational lens, we discovered that activists across the three contexts engage in similar struggles. In many instances, the political character of their work is not taken for granted by other activists, states, or transnational actors. Within a broader frame of globally circulating ideas about what the political is and changing conditions of gender and sexual politics on multiple scales, we found that activists in different contexts distance themselves from the hegemonic sphere of politics. They do so for various reasons, whether to consciously avoid the repressive state, as in Russia and Turkey, or as the result of being excluded from relations with the state by hegemonic NGOs, as in Norway.

An important outcome of our study would be that other researchers are encouraged to look deeper into why certain forms of feminist and LGBTI+ activism are persistently deemed apolitical. Our article has begun unpacking this problem by acknowledging the influence of donor politics, state regulations, and the internal struggles among civil-society actors depending on their position on the state–civil-society global-governance axis. The process

of (re)defining certain work as political or apolitical is part of struggles for hegemony. Our findings recognize the importance of “p”olitics and its transformative potential, which may unsettle conventional political actors who sense the real threat to established hegemonic relations coming from more marginalized and unnoticed civil-society actors.

Notes

1. Scandinavia comprises Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In this article, the case study located in Norway is informed by ethnographic research also conducted in cities in Sweden and Denmark. While we understand that the Scandinavian countries are distinct and diverse, we also recognize that they have commonalities in their efforts to position themselves at the forefront of global progress for women and LGBTI+ people (Keskinen et al. 2009; Liinason 2018a; Martinsson, Griffin, and Nygren 2016). We refer to the Scandinavian context when similar phenomena appear in all three countries; when a phenomenon is evident in only one of these countries, we refer to that specific country.
2. The names of all interviewees are anonymized throughout the article. In the case of Russia and Norway, names of organizations and institutions are also anonymized. We avoid referencing public information (such as media articles) about some events or occurrences that are discussed here as this information might expose and harm our research participants. The empirical data were collected in Russia by Olga Sasunkevich, in Turkey by Selin Çağatay, and in the Scandinavian countries by Mia Liinason.
3. Juno spoke Norwegian in our conversation, and here they use the Swedish word for “racialized.” Juno emphasized the fact that in Norwegian, such a word does not yet exist. Their point highlights an erasure of race and processes of racialization at a linguistic and discursive level in Norway. For a related discussion, see Svendsen (2014).
4. CuTie.BIPoC is a festival by and for queer trans* inter* Black, Indigenous, and people of color. See CuTie.BIPoC (nd).

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