UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Politics and the political in women's fashion magazines

Perspectives from India, Russia and the USA

Solomatina, I.

Publication date
2025

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Solomatina, I. (2025). *Politics and the political in women's fashion magazines: Perspectives from India, Russia and the USA*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:13 Nov 2026

CHAPTER THREE:

Traditional values versus 'new ethics.'

Politics and the political, as framed by Russian fashion magazines [7]

3.1 Introduction

A June 2020 episode of *Antiglyanetz*,[8] the Russian-language podcast that discusses the state of the fashion industry (both Russian and global), featured Masha Popova, former digital editor of *Vogue Russia*, who had been let go by the publication earlier that year. In the podcast, Popova claims that her political views had been the cause for her dismissal. Vocal in her critique of the then recent amendments to the Russian Constitution, the journalist had also given editorial support to persecuted LGBTQI+ activists. In the podcast, Popova criticises her colleagues and fellow media professionals who she argues seem to be more concerned with the civil rights movement that was unfolding in the US at the time, following the murder of George Floyd on the 25 May 2020, than the changes to Russia's basic laws that would further strengthen Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule (European Parliament Briefing, n.d.).

Whatever the actual motivation for the editor's dismissal – *Vogue Russia*'s self-censoring, Popova's political views or, simply, structural changes within the publishing house – the subsequent media speculations around it demonstrate

[7] Parts of this chapter are based on Solomatina, I. (2023). 'New ethics' in Russian fashion magazines: Discussing 'western-ness', Russian-ness and values. *International Journal of Fashion Studies, 10*(1), 3–18. https://doi.org/10.1386/infs_00084_1

[8] May be translated as 'anti-gloss'

that lifestyle journalism in the Russia of the early 2020s is heavily influenced by politics. The aforementioned case of *Antiglyanetz* points to several issues that this chapter aims to discuss in more detail. These are an ongoing tension between Western and Russian modernities (Neumann, 2006) but also the increasing relevance of global discourses on equality, diversity and inclusion within the context of Russian fashion and lifestyle media, and the local interpretations of those discourses (Sjovaag, 2016).

In this chapter, I would like to discuss the ways in which politics and the socio-political situation in Russia influence the country's fashion media. I will analyse how these media comment – directly or covertly – on the political situation in the country, and the implications of their political self-positioning. I am highly interested in how exactly the discourses on politics, human rights and society in the Russian media intersect with global discussions on equality, diversity, inclusion and democracy, and how certain sentiments associated with the West (such as post-feminism (Gill, 2017) or popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) are adopted, utilised, negotiated and repurposed within Russia's lifestyle media.

The chapter is divided into parts. It starts with a brief overview of the history of lifestyle and fashion media in Russia. It then goes on to address political discourses in Russian lifestyle and fashion magazines. Firstly, it looks into how the magazines construct the discourse on politics in relation to Russia's current political situation. It then looks at the discourse of the Russia / the West relationship and proceeds to analyse the matter of 'new ethics,' a Russian-language specific stand-in term for global ideas of empowerment, choice and freedom, adapting them to the country's socio-political environment, as well as how feminism and women's rights are articulated in Russian fashion magazines. Lastly, it addresses the impact of Russia' s invasion of Ukraine that was launched while this research was being conducted. The war that tragically upended the lives of millions of Ukrainian people and has led to thousands of casualties has also disrupted the fashion industry and fashion media in Russia. Though the disruptions caused by the war are not the focus of this chapter, I will still comment on some of the seminal changes it brought about.

This analysis draws on three women's lifestyle publications – *Vogue Russia*, *The Blueprint* and *Marie Claire Russia*. At the time of writing, *Vogue* and *Marie Claire Russia* are available in both print and digital formats, whereas *The Blueprint* is a digital-only publication. The chapter focuses on the magazines' content between January 2021 and February 2022 (the month when Russia invaded Ukraine), but in some cases it goes beyond that period of time. My analysis will look at both images and text from the three publications.

Vogue Russia, launched in 1998, in the midst of an economic crisis (Bartlett, 2006), is one of the titles published by the now disbanded Condé Nast Russia, a branch of the international publisher. Its media kit from the beginning of 2022 states that the magazine's print version had 662,000 subscribers, that 4.4 million people followed the magazine's accounts on social media, and that its website drew 3.3 million unique visitors on a monthly basis (Condè Nast Russia, 2022). Overall, *Vogue*'s monthly reach in the beginning of 2022 is 7,500,900. *Marie Claire*'s media kit estimates its audience at 7,993,400 readers, of which 116,450 people read its print version (Marie Claire Media Kit, 2022). According to the media kit of *The Blueprint*, the website attracts 1,500,000 unique visitors per month and its social media accounts attract up to 2,400,00 unique visitors (The Blueprint Media Kit, 2021). The information provided by the magazines indicates that their readers are mostly well-to-do professional women. Thus, women account for 80 percent of *Vogue*'s readership with 76 percent of those being 'wealthy,' 65 percent of *The Blueprint*'s audience have a 'high income,' 64 percent of *Marie Claire*'s readership are referred to as top managers, business owners and specialists (and, according to the magazine's media kit, 41 percent have a 'high income').

3.2 Fashion and lifestyle magazines in Russia: A brief history

The history of the fashion and lifestyle magazine in Russia is disparate and turbulent. A plethora of lifestyle, fashion and art publications that circulated in late-Imperial Russia were closed down during the first years of the Soviet Union (Pushkareva, 2017). The values that they had promoted and the fashions they had showcased were no longer aligned with the Soviet ideas of womanhood and consumption. During the early years of the Soviet Union, a set of radical reforms were

introduced aimed at ushering in gender equality and empowering the 'new Soviet woman' (Stephenson, 2007). This period saw the introduction of programmes for universal literacy and the establishment of the ideal of the working woman as well as a new-found disdain for all things *petites bourgeoises*. This attitude would go on to define the consumer culture of the Soviet Union for decades to come.

The early-Soviet image of the new woman as the perfect comrade was, however, abandoned in favour of state glorification of motherhood and the declaration that women's primary responsibility is motherhood (Rivkin-Fish, 2013). The imagery, cinema and media discourses from the time of the Second World War are particularly striking in their portrayal of womanhood as motherhood, exemplified by the imagery of the Motherland, presented as a woman in need of protection who is calling on the male saviour to thwart foreign aggression.

The end of the Second World War coincided with the launch of the main fashion magazine of the Soviet Union, called simply – *The Magazine of Fashions*. Different from contemporaneous glossy publications in the West, it contained images of fashionable clothes, sewing and knitting patterns and was mainly intended to be used by professional seamstresses – providers of fashionable clothing for most Soviet women. Sewing workshops and studios were sites of production and consumption of clothes, and they also served as places for disseminating knowledge about fashion. As Zacharova points out, 'even when a Soviet woman wasn't a subscriber to a fashion magazine, she would still be compelled to interact with it at the sewing studio, while choosing a design and placing an order' (Zacharova, 2007).

While the readership of *The Magazine of Fashions* was professional seamstresses, designers and women who sew, the audiences for the two most popular Soviet women's magazines *Krest'ianka* and *Rabotnitsa* were much wider. The titles, which translate as 'the peasant woman' and 'the working woman,' respectively, sought to address the main social and professional categories of Soviet women. *Rabotnitsa*, founded in 1914, had a pre-Soviet history and started out as a political magazine addressing working-class women in Russian and – subsequently – Soviet cities. *Krest'ianka*, was established in 1922 as *Rabotnitsa*'s counterpart targeting rural women. Both magazines retained their popularity throughout the existence of the

Soviet Union (Davidenko, 2018), providing both rural and urban Soviet women with lifestyle advice, information about culture, fashion and lifestyle recommendations, as well as sewing and knitting patterns. The inclusion of DIY patterns in women's magazines is a specific feature of the Soviet lifestyle media and allowed women to take more control over their own style and appearance. Soviet women's extensive use of DIY skills has led researchers to identify the specific DIY subculture as part of the Soviet fashion production and consumption culture (Bartlett, 2010).

It is only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that glossy fashion and lifestyle magazines arrived on the Russian market. New titles were being launched both by Russian and international publishing houses, the latter as newcomers to the recently opened market. Russia's first glossy lifestyle magazine, *Domovoi* (literally 'house spirit'), was launched in 1993 by the Moscow-based Kommersant Publishing House. In 1998, a plethora of international titles arrived with the establishment of the Hearst Shkulev publishing house. Hearst Shkulev was as a partnership between a Russian media company and the international publishing house Hearst, managing, among others, the Russian editions of *Elle*, *Elle Decor*, *Marie Claire* and *Psychologies*, all of which were launched in Russia in the late 1990s/early 2000s. The year 1998 marked the much-anticipated launch of the Russian edition of *Vogue*. The magazine was published by Condé Nast Russia until March 2022 along with other lifestyle and fashion titles – Russian editions of *Vogue*, *GQ*, *GQ Style*, *Tatler*, *Glamour* and *AD*, all established within the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Just as the socio-political situation in Russia was shifting, the lifestyle media, their portrayal of the Soviet (and later Russian) woman, and their take on fashion and culture were changing, too. As Saara Ratilanen (Ratilainen, 2015) remarks, in late Soviet times, magazines like *Krest'ianka* and *Rabotnitsa* sought to reconcile the professional and family identities of the Soviet woman. Representations of the Soviet woman as a mother and wife were juxtaposed with portrayals of the responsible professional. This approach exemplifies what Julie Hemment termed the 'double burden' that Soviet society imposed on the woman, demanding both familial and professional commitment (Hemment, 2007).

The 1990s represented a radical break from the Soviet era, affecting all spheres of society and inviting a re-evaluation of social and cultural norms. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought a break down of the social order, overturning the Soviet social hierarchy, and introducing new social classes. The post-Soviet privatisation reforms saw formerly state-owned enterprises and properties transition to private ownership. This process became a catalyst for a large-scale redistribution of wealth and created a new social class of the super-rich. At the same time, the obscurity of the the newly independent country's legal and political systems provided fertile ground for corruption and illegal activities, producing a category of the new rich, the provenance of whose wealth was more than dubious. For the classes that had enjoyed state funding and support in Soviet times, the 1990s transition was traumatising, as it withdrew the privileges and social security they had previously enjoyed. Working and middle classes (or *intelligentsia*) alike were forced to navigate the insecure and vague social circumstances of post-Soviet Russia with little or no support from the state.

Simultaneously, the opening of the Russian market in the 1990s satisfied Russians' desire for imported goods and shopping. The 1990s flooded the country with foreign-produced goods, spurring consumption. The newly available goods had an aura of Westernness, allowing once isolated and deprived Soviet consumers to enjoy access to the international market. Much like India, along with foreign goods, the country experienced an influx of Western culture. Television channels, such as MTV, became conduits of global popular culture in Russia, as did international titles such as Condé Nast's *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan*, which sought to educate their readers about international fashion and shopping etiquette (Bartlett, 2006).

The first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union presented the need for a whole new vocabulary to describe and explain the new reality. The period saw a cluster of new words emerge to define new social classes (such as 'new Russians,' a term coined to describe the *nouveau riches* of the 1990s. A whole new fashion vocabulary sprung up – notably, the word 'glamour,' which in the Russia of the 2000s, acquired rather negative connotations (Litovskaia & Shaburova, 2008). In post-Soviet society, with its experience of traumatic change, people had mixed feelings about the new consumerist reality, encapsulated by the word 'glamour.'

The lifestyle and fashion magazines of the 1990s navigated the new terrain, trying to help readers make sense of it. Thus, *Vogue Russia* was launched specifically to educate the newly rich about high fashion, to elevate their taste and teach them how to spend money (Bartlett, 2006). The older Soviet-era magazines *Krest'ianka* and *Rabotnitsa* also strove to make the changing reality more understandable for their readers (Ratilainen, 2015). They started promoting beauty and fashion consumption, while also renegotiating the meanings of gender and femininity in post-Soviet times. The titles foregrounded the familial roles of women, promoting the idea of femininity as soft, quiet and inferior in the family hierarchy (Davidenko, 2016). The publications thus repudiated the alleged gender equality in Soviet society.

Nostalgia was a characteristic feature of the 1990s lifestyle and fashion magazines. In order to better understand the present, fashion publications looked back at pre-Soviet Russia. They sought to identify and repurpose those values and customs of pre-revolutionary Russia that might apply to the reality of Russia after the Soviet Union. *Vogue Russia* drew inspiration from the imperial Tsarist era to showcase contemporary fashion, and it attempted to portray the new rich as heirs to the cultural legacy of the Russian aristocracy before the revolution (Bartlett, 2006). Elsewhere, *Krestyanka* was recasting the previously disgraced Orthodox Church and the traditional patriarchal values associated with it as an essential components of Russian culture (Ratilainen, 2015).

The lifestyle media of 1990s and early 2000s focused on explaining and making sense of emerging social structures, but the second half of the 2000s introduced more stability, both from a social and economic perspective. The early years of Vladimir Putin's regime (Putin first came to power in the year 2000) coincided with a global increase in oil prices that boosted Russia's economy, improving the well-being of the Russian people and strengthening the country's middle classes (Nissanov, 2017). More people could now afford consumer goods and had the opportunity to travel abroad, and younger people in particular were becoming more aware of global popular culture, more comfortable within the post-Soviet consumption culture, and developing a more positive attitude towards the West. Cosmopolitanism emerged as a distinctive feature of Russia's urban middle

classes, along with support of liberal values and increasing political consciousness.

The changes within Russian society sparked further developments in lifestyle and fashion media. By the mid-2000s, these publications were dealing with a more sophisticated readership who no longer needed education on the basics of consumerism, taste and style. Growing urban middle classes now constituted a new audience for the lifestyle and fashion magazines. Not only did the existing magazines need to shift their tone and vocabulary in order to incorporate this group in their readership, but new, often digital media were being launched that specifically targeted young urban middle classes. Among the lifestyle media that appeared throughout the late 2000s/early 2010s were niche publications *Afisha* and *Buro 24/7* which addressed young middle-class urban dwellers and presented themselves as viable alternatives to the established lifestyle media (Ratilainen, 2018). Notably, some prominent lifestyle and fashion media also discussed the political situation in the country. Thus, in December 2011, *Esquire Russia* published an issue that was sharply critical of the ruling United Russia party. The issue came out with a cover featuring a photograph of Russia's opposition politician Alexei Navalny and a quote from an interview with him, denouncing the United Russia party as 'The alliance of thieves and crooks.'

While the late 2000s/early 2010s invigorated political consciousness, the year 2012 marked the beginning of the third term of Vladimir Putin's presidency and with it a spate of reactionary measures aimed at curbing the freedom of speech and media in Russia (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018). This new phase of Putin's rule featured an increasingly anti-Western and anti-liberal rhetoric disseminated by the president and government officials, a tightening of governmental control of the media, and reinforcement of aggressive international politics. The latter culminated in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia's involvement in the war in Syria, where it has backed Bashar al-Assad's regime since 2015.

Since the beginning of Putin's third term, the regime has seen culture as an asset, a strategic resource that can be used to imbue people with patriotic zeal and a passion for 'traditional values' (Horvath, 2016). As Gulnaz Sharafutdinova notes in her analysis of Putin's third presidential term, after 2012, the state continuously engaged in 'morality politics,' seeking to portray Russia as the last bastion of

traditional values, as opposed to the 'corrupted West' (Sharafutdinova, 2014). The state began to establish a monopoly over moral judgement, adopting a number of laws against what it deemed to be 'Western' and non-traditional values. Thus, in 2012, the Russian parliament adopted the infamous law, prohibiting 'gay propaganda.' Eight years later, amendments to the Russian Constitution anchored the definition of a legal marriage as a 'union between a man and a woman.' By endorsing xenophobic and homophobic initiatives, the state sought to win the sympathies of the country's conservative majority, simultaneously ostracising the liberal opposition. The liberal creative classes were now portrayed as traitors and supporters of the West, itself now described in increasingly antagonistic terms. Many members of Russia's opposition as well as opposition media have been branded 'foreign agents,' a designation which complicates their work in Russia.

During this reactionary phase, a number of lifestyle publications shut down or changed owners and staff (including *Esquire*, for instance). This period is hardly a productive time for media in general and lifestyle media in particular. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in a massive shutdown of lifestyle titles and publishing houses in Russia, as well as the emigration of a large number of designers, journalists, editors and writers from Russia. Since this mass closure (the Russian branch of Condé Nast also closed), the realm of lifestyle publishing has changed significantly to conform to the demands of the current Russian political and cultural climate. In the face of mass closures of mainstream titles, some new print publications have sprung up, driven by former editors of international titles and with the aim of engaging upper middle-class urban readers in a context of strict censorship and amidst an ongoing war. The newly founded publication *WoL* (*Way of Living*) is one such example, highlighting the 'stories of the industry's insiders, artists and design professionals, who change the world around us' (Way of Living, n.d.).

3.3 Politics and the political in Russian lifestyle media

At the start of the 2020s, Russian fashion publications appear to be engaging with politics directly and openly. *Vogue Russia*'s media kit quotes its editor-in-chief:

'We are trying to support the fashion industry, we discuss the matters of sustainability and questions about sex, we are not afraid to talk politics, we give platform to the people who make our world better. *Vogue* [provides] all the most important information that a thinking person should know nowadays' (Condé Nast Russia. 2022).

Similarly, the News section on the website of *The Blueprint* offers an eclectic mix of reports on politics, fashion, culture and art, including reports on Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. *Marie Claire Russia*'s website features a section titled 'The Political Olympus,' which, besides news on the fashion choices of politicians and first ladies, includes sporadic coverage of actual political events. It mentions, among other things, protests against the arrest of Alexei Navalny (Tumerina, 2021) that took place in January 2021.

At the same time, the actual extent and nature of the publications' engagement with politics is more complex, and each publication has its own distinctive way of negotiating political and social life in Russia. While the magazines' media kits convey the idea that they all address the same category of Russian well-to-do, middle-class women, the publications' treatment of politics produces a sense that they all have very different 'imagined communities' of readers (McRobbie, 1999).

Thus, the December 2021 issue of *Marie Claire Russia* features an extensive, five-page interview with Elena Timchenko, the wife of the dubious billionaire Gennady Timchenko, a member of Putin's 'inner circle' who is currently subject to US sanctions for his involvement in Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 (Walker & Luhn, 2014; Harding, 2021). The interview portrays the ill-reputed billionaire couple as philanthropists, referring to the multiple charities they donate to ('big money means big responsibility,' muses Timchenko). Highlighting the humble origins of the couple ('I married a poor student,' 'we lived in a communal flat,' 'there were both Old Believers and Cossacks in my family'), the interview aims to show this super-rich, corrupt family as charitable and accessible people (Danilova, 2021). Strikingly, the interview dwells on the differences between Russians, described here as warm-hearted, open people, and 'foreigners.' 'In Russia, compassion is of more importance than justice,' says Timchenko, continuing, 'We have a lot of friends abroad. But I wouldn't call them in the middle of the night. Unlike my Russian friends.'

Marie Claire's website features a section entitled 'The Political Olympus,' showcasing 'presidents and first ladies from the past and present. The presidential style.' The section predominantly offers notes on the style and beauty tricks of politicians and presidents' first ladies, but its stance is far from neutral. There are clear favourites, with the section featuring frequent favourable articles on ex-president Trump and his wife, as well as various other members of the Trump family, while references to the Obamas are mostly negative (including speculation about the imminent divorce of the couple) (Demchenko, n.d.). This echoes the position of Russian state-owned media, who have been as supportive of Trump as they have been critical of Obama (Bykova, Gavra & Slutskiy, 2018). It is also striking that women politicians are virtually absent from the Political Olympus section. This creates the impression that the magazine sees the role of the 'first lady' as more appropriate and desirable for a woman in politics.

Vogue Russia, too, explores the sartorial choices of politicians, but its approach is different. One notable example of this is the article titled 'Why Russian politicians don't dress fashionably (and what can be done about it)' (Fedina, 2021 a). The article starts by praising the fashions and styles seen during Joe Biden's presidential inauguration: 'The whole fashion world watched the inauguration of the US president as if it were Oscars or the Superbowl […] Why was the ceremony so important? Why are the fashion choices of our politicians not as exciting? And how can this be fixed?' The article goes on to interpret the fashion of the presidential inauguration: 'The colour purple is not only the symbol of the Suffragette movement, but is also made of red and blue, symbolising the union between the Democrats and the Republicans.' The author proceeds to interpret the inauguration as a spectacle, but also as an event that might re-energise the US fashion industry. 'Politicians' fashion choices are of utmost importance on the visual, political and economic levels,' claims the author. Importantly, the article, while praising the Western politicians and their fashion choices, delivers scathing criticism of the style of their Russian counterparts:

> The look of a politician is more than just that, it is a message that the audience receive instantly, before he (sic!) even starts to speak. In the West, both politicians

> and designers understand that perfectly. So do our closest neighbours, such as Olena Zelenska, who enthusiastically sports clothes by Ukranian designers. Why then, whenever you search the Internet for "what do Russian politicians wear", the answer that you get is "watches"? (Fedina, 2021a).

The article not only unfavourably compares Russian politicians to their Western counterparts, but also attempts to identify the reasons for their poor fashion choices. Surprisingly, it concludes that this is down to Russia's faulty political system – 'we don't have a political system that requires politicians to openly compete for people's votes.' This statement appears to imply that, due to the failings of Russian democracy, Russian politicians do not need to work on creating their political brand (Ouellette, 2012), which would involve strategic use of fashion like in the US. The article also criticises the lack of women in Russian politics and the conspicuous absence of a Russian first lady. It connects the lack of women in politics and absence of political competition in Russia with what it considers the pitiful state of Russia's fashion industry. Remarkably, the only Russian political players mentioned favourably in the article are the opposition politician Alexei Navalny and his wife Yulia, whose memorable court appearance in 2021[9] is described as an example of a fashion statement which is a powerful political image at the same time. Thus, the article insists that dynamic fashion and dynamic political systems are inextricably connected, using the issue of fashionability to criticise Russian politics and contrast Russia's dysfunctional political system with the more effective Western (US) one. The article clearly expresses longing for a liberal, progressive and more diverse government, while, in glaring contrast to Russian state media, also praising the looks and politics of the Biden administration.

The piece is illustrated with stock photos of Hillary and Bill Clinton, Kamala Harris, Joe and Jill Biden, on the one hand, and pictures of Russian politicians, on the other. The pictures are meant to evoke the difference between the dynamic fashion-forward looks of the US American political elite and Russian statespeople, whose stiff poses and gaudy looks support the point made in the article. The argument is also reinforced by a collage, featuring the Spasskaya tower of the

[9] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/09/style/aleksei-navalny-red-supporters.html

Image quote: Vogue Russia May 2021
cover photographed by Emmie America.

Kremlin, the Balenciaga-clad Statue of Liberty and a Soviet (read: old-fashioned) woman holding a sign with a gigantic question mark, standing between the two. The image implies that Russia is facing an ideological choice in fashion and politics and needs to choose between progress and stagnation.

Criticism of Russia's politics, support of opposition politicians and favourable attitudes towards the West are some of the recurring themes in *Vogue Russia*. For instance, the magazine's May 2021 issue, dedicated to the importance of debate in the public sphere, features an essay on the importance of political dialogue, written by young fashion photographer Emmie America, who also shot the cover story for the issue. The cover photo depicts a pink-haired model inside a photo booth, seemingly screaming into the phone. The glass (or ice?) wall of the phone booth is shattered, revealing the imposing Russian Foreign Ministry building in the background. The words 'Dialogue. Freedom. Trust. Listen to us,' are plastered

across the cover. The ice (?) in the photograph could be read as a reminder of the Cold War, or as a reference to Russia's infamous 'coldness,' which, in combination with the Foreign Ministry building, evokes Russia's increasing isolation from the West.

In the essay, written in the first person, the photographer, also introduced by *Vogue* as a political activist, talks about her experience with political protest. She refers to taking part in the pro-Navalny rally when the politician was arrested in January 2021, and the importance of making political art. Emmie America (whose alias might be seen as indicative of her sympathies towards the West) relays her experience of studying in the US and then returning to Russia. The essay is accompanied by a fashion editorial that continues the themes suggested by the cover photo, telling the story of a schoolgirl (portrayed by model Simona Knust

Image quote: Vogue Russia May 2021, 'Hear us' photographed by Emmie America.

in the editorial) who takes part in a street rally only to be brutally arrested by the police. Both the essay and the editorial point to the generational gap between Russia's young people and its government, and they express the hope that the younger generation of Russians will be able to introduce change in the Russian political system. The editorial creates an ambiguous representation of the future for Russia's youth, as it features a coterie of young, fashionably dressed, seemingly bored or frustrated people, who appear reinvigorated by the protest, which they join only to be immediately arrested.

The editorial incorporates works by Russian street artists, some of which were created specifically for the occasion. For instance, street artist Kirill Kto created a piece of graffiti reading, 'Instead of trying to understand each other it's torture and a waste of each other's time' ('Vmesto popytki ponimaniya – pytka i vzaimnoe vremeni otnimaniye'). Following the publication of the editorial, *Vogue Russia* published a feature on its website about the artists, their works and their understanding of freedom (Fedina, 2021 b). The feature presents street art as a form of protest, further solidifying the idea of freedom as freedom of self-expression and freedom of protest.

Unlike *Marie Claire*, *Vogue Russia* does not only focus on the fashion choices of politicians, but also on the aesthetics of politics – political action and political protest are shown and explained through photography, art and aesthetic perception. Fashion is described as an important element of political visibility – in a feature about Sardana Avksentieva, the former mayor of the city of Yakutsk, for instance, fashion figures prominently.

> [When we meet,] Sardana is wearing a well-tailored blue men's shirt and neat pearl cufflinks, and has a perfect creamy French manicure, done in a panic after the generally routine question from a Vogue producer before the shoot, 'How is your manicure?' […]
>
> At the end of January, Sardana vaguely alluded on Instagram to the fact that she had been discharged from an oncology clinic in Yakutsk. And the first thing she did, as though following Vogue's instructions (and this was before our producer contacted her [with regard to the feature]) was to conduct a thorough wardrobe detox (Solovieva, 2021, n.p.).

Not only does the feature praise the former mayor's political acumen, but it

also devotes considerable attention to her personal style, commending her self-discipline and responsible attitude towards her looks as well as her behaviour at the fashion shoot, arranged by the magazine. The remark on the manicure done 'in a panic' in order to be presentable for the shoot or the notion of a 'wardrobe detox' as a necessary part of a post-hospitalisation experience align with the notion of femininity as labour (Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017). Here, however, Avksentieva's adherence to an aesthetic regimen is presented as a trait that demonstrates her reliability, resilience and strong personal discipline – the characteristics which also make her a good politician.

Among the media analysed, the digital publication *The Blueprint* seems to be the one that is most involved in Russian social and political life. On numerous occasions, it has shown solidarity with independent and dissident media in Russia – it has openly supported *Meduza*, an independent, bilingual online publication in English and Russian that is critical of the Russian government and, in April 2021, suffered a major blow after being labelled a 'foreign agent' by the Russian authorities.[10] *The Blueprint* reacted to the step with a spate of articles condemning the government's decision.[11]

In its News section, *The Blueprint* offers a mix of news and features on fashion, beauty and culture, but also politics. The news is generally focused on Russian politics, and *The Blueprint*'s tone remains consistently sympathetic towards Russia's opposition and critical of the Russian government. At the end of 2020, the website published an article titled 'Non-freedom: What kind of Russia will we live in?' (Smirnov, 2020), which presented perspectives from economists, sociologists and political scientists on the impact of the major events of the year 2020 on life in Russia (Smirnov, 2020). Radically diverging from the mainstream pro-government media discourse (Kazun, 2019), the article praised Alexei Navalny, portraying him as Russia's main opposition politician. The article also covered the anti-Kremlin

[10] Being assigned the status of a 'foreign agent' means media are subject to financial scrutiny and budget audits by the state. It also as limits opportunities to interview sources and access information.

[11] these articles, however, were removed after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and subsequent harder take on dissent by Russian authorities

protests in Russia's Khabarovsk in 2020/2021, which the mainstream media had largely ignored. Several experts interviewed for the article called for the Russian government to be more decentralised, opposing the official course towards centralisation. The website also features a report about the protests that took place in a number of Russian cities after the arrest of Alexei Navalny (the text has been removed).[12] Besides this, it highlighted and endorsed protests in neighbouring Belarus (Antsiperova, 2020), and conducted interviews with Russian opposition journalists (Strakhovskaia, 2020).

Like *Vogue Russia*, *The Blueprint* creates a discursive space where aesthetics, fashion and politics are intertwined. In its articles on Yulia Navalnaya, the publication focuses on her style as much as it does on her political position. A search of the website brings up a number of articles dedicated to Navalnaya that have been published over the past two years. One of these is unambiguously titled 'Why Yulia Navalnaya is the hero of our times' and calls her 'the real first lady,' likening the opposition politician's wife to Michelle Obama.

> The only person in the world I could probably compare her with is Michelle Obama. They both have this rare quality – self-awareness. For both of them, being a politician's wife is a matter of personal choice rather than just a coincidence. Their press appearances, their speeches and actions, and even their looks are all determined by their personal choice (Narinskaia, 2021).

This piece, penned by literary critic Anna Narinskaia, equates political agency to the agency involved in making unique style and fashion choices, while also drawing a comparison between Navalnaya and the ex-first lady of the US. Here, *The Blueprint* establishes a conceptual link between fashion and politics, the political and the aesthetic. In a similar article and as a sign of support for Navalnaya, who appeared at her husband's 2021 court hearing in a red hoodie (Friedman & Safronova, 2021), the website published a compilation of red clothes – the article '20 pieces in red, the most relevant colour in both fashion and politics,' used the genre of a fashion 'listicle' to make a political statement (Sotnik, 2021 a). Here – again – fashion is employed as a metaphor for politics.

[12] has been removed in violation of the 2023 decree, which proclaimed Alexei Navalny and his supporters extremist.

Among the three publications analysed, *Vogue Russia* and *The Blueprint* engage extensively and directly with politics. Having presented itself since its early days as an authority on style, fashion and taste (Bartlett, 2006), in the early 2020s, *Vogue Russia* re-positions itself as a cultural authority when discussing politics. In doing so, it claims its political views are fashionable, emphasising that its political beliefs are not just valid, reasonable and rational, but also trendy and forward-looking. *Vogue* cites fashion and politics in one breath, continuously linking politics and aesthetics. *The Blueprint* provides its readers more insight into politics by publishing politically themed interviews, analytical articles and by reprinting articles and features from other independent Russian media. Its choice of political coverage is pointedly critical of the Russian government. The publications' political views are also expressed through their articles on freedom, cultural inclusivity, diversity and feminism.

Marie Claire, in contrast, aligns itself more with the views of Russian state-controlled media. The magazine avoids writing about the Russian political opposition and favourably covers pro-state officials, which the other two publications do not. Obviously, fashion and lifestyle publications contribute to shaping the political brands of the personalities they feature as they forego neutrality in favour of openly endorsing political figures (Ouellette, 2019). In the case of *Marie Claire*, the political brand of the Timchenko couple revolves around them being 'close to the people,' their charity, and their distrust of foreigners and the West. *The Blueprint* and *Vogue Russia* choose to highlight quite different qualities in the political figures they endorse – these publications focus on progressiveness, openness to the world, energetic style and a good fashion sense. The politicians' attitudes to the West and Westernness, in particular, is also one of the aspects highlighted by the publications – from the caution and scepticism expressed by conservatives to enthusiasm on the part of opposition figures. In general, Westernness and the West serve as ideological factors in the publications' discussion of values and politics, something which becomes particularly apparent in their discourses on 'new ethics.'

3.4 'New ethics:' Discussing the 'West' and Russia

'New ethics:' The term

Among the three magazines analysed, *Vogue Russia* and *The Blueprint* broadly discuss the issues of diversity, sustainability, feminism and inclusivity, which together are sometimes referred to using the somewhat vague expression 'new ethics.' In *Marie Claire*, mentions of 'new ethics' are rare, which is why this part of the chapter mostly draws on examples from the first two publications. The majority of terms that fall under the collocation 'new ethics' are difficult or impossible to translate into Russian. 'Diversity,' 'inclusivity,' #MeToo, 'BLM,' 'body positivity,' 'sustainability' – these terms circulate in Russian media either in their transliterated versions (as English-language words written using the Cyrillic alphabet), or are simply inserted in English. The invention of the expression 'new ethics' in Russian reveals the complexities associated with translating the ideas, words, terms and initiatives that the phrase has come to encompass. Thus, the expression 'new ethics' serves as a comprehensible stand-in for a plethora of complex terms that are not readily translatable into Russian.

As Lawrence Venutti remarks, all translations are interpretative, and such interpretations point to cultural differences, exposing hierarchical relations between different cultures (Venuti, 2019). *Novaya etika* (the Russian for 'new ethics') does not have an equivalent in English, and in Russian, too, it acts as an interpretative term, encompassing a whole range of ideas, movements, beliefs and socio-cultural phenomena, while also revealing a stark cultural differences between the Russian-speaking and English-speaking realms.

The term 'new ethics' encapsulates two key ideas. Firstly, it means that movements and belief systems as diverse as #MeToo, anti-racism and sustainability are part of one coherent ethical regime. Secondly, it implies that the ethics underlying diversity and inclusivity initiatives, anti-racism or #MeToo are intrinsically new. Since these 'new ethics' are considered to be unprecedented and unfamiliar, fashion magazines strive to contextualise and explain them to readers. *The Blueprint* has published an article 'On TV shows and ethics' clarifying how 'new ethics' are changing contemporary television shows, making them more inclusive

and representative of minorities (the article is no longer available as it violates the state's ban of the 'LGBT propaganda' from 2022). *Vogue Russia* has covered how 'new ethics' are influencing the modelling business and increasing the respect for models and diversity on runways (Fedina, 2021c). Whenever the magazines seek to explain the 'new ethics,' they end up interpreting the term, using transliterated or English-language terms such as 'diversity,' #MeToo, 'inclusivity,' etc.

In explaining 'new ethics,' fashion publications do both translational and educational work, explaining what 'diversity,' 'sustainability' and other potentially confusing terms mean. Thus, to mark the end of the 2010s, *The Blueprint* published a glossary of terms that became relevant during and defined the decade (The Blueprint, 2019). The glossary includes the terms 'diversity,' 'body positivity,' 'gender' and, surprisingly, 'vagina.' 'Diversity' transliterated in Russian) is defined as follows:

> literally meaning "variety", it is one of the key words of the decade in pop culture, fashion and art. The activists and artists of the 2010s have made us realise that the world is much more diverse than advertising, magazine covers and Hollywood romcoms would have us believe (The Blueprint, 2019).

Mostly consisting of terms borrowed from English, the glossary explains the meanings of the terms and seeks to connect the ideas and phenomena with Russian reality and to contextualise it in Russia. The definition of #MeToo, for instance, says: '[the #MeToo movement] spread across social media [...] and even reached Russia, though it didn't achieve much here.'

Likewise, *Vogue Russia* translates, interprets and contextualises 'new ethics' and the related terms. Its March 2022 issue features a text by feminist writer and activist Lyolya Nordic, titled 'How feminism changes our attitudes towards the body,' which reads:

> Feminists of colour and queer women were the pioneers of body positivity in the US in the 1960s and 1970s. They addressed the issue of discrimination against fat people,' adding, 'the word "fat"' is used by Russian body positive activists without negative connotation and is considered to be a neutral way of describing the body (Nordic, 2022).

In this case, the article gives an insight into how the terminology is used by Russian feminists and provides additional information about how the body positive movement is contextualised in Russia.

Image quote: Vogue Russia May 2021, 'We are so different," photographed by Yan Yugay.

Vogue also ventures to discuss racism and inclusivity in the Russian context. Its December 2021 issue features an article by the Korean-Ossetian photographer Yan Yugay, who talks about his experiences with racism in Russia. The photographer challenges the notion that in Russia racism is harmless, since, according to a popular stereotype, it is not systemic and occurs mainly in interpersonal, everyday interactions. The article, titled 'Why there is no such thing as "healthy racism",' is structured as a first-person narrative. It is accompanied by a series of photographs by Yugay, featuring a diverse and multiracial cast of models, clad in nude-coloured, beige and brown clothes and photographed against skin-hued beige and brown backgrounds. Both the editorial and the article present Russia as a country where people of colour are overlooked, and respond by placing them centre stage, drawing attention to the racism that they experience (Yugay, 2021).

In their work on Russian liberals and dissidents, Jan Surman and Ella Rossman claim that the term 'new ethics' is mostly used pejoratively to indicate disdain for the ideas that it has come to encompass (Rossman & Surman, 2022). However, in *Vogue* and *The Blueprint*, the term largely has either neutral or positive connotations. The 'new ethics' emerge as a novel, overarching regime of thinking that indicates positive and constructive change. The association between 'new ethics' and positive change evokes Western neoliberal discourses, which reconfigure disenfranchisement as an opportunity for empowerment. In such discourses, identity

becomes a site of labour and visibility, and is celebrated through personal platformised visibility or consumption (Gill & Kanai, 2020). However, in the Russian context, the promissory capacity of the 'new ethics' to introduce positive change is fraught with ambiguity and sometimes also doubt. The latter encapsulates the perceived difference between Russia and the West and the wistfulness that fashion publications feel towards the West. While the 'new ethics' are believed to bring about significant shifts in the West, in Russia, while readily embraced, they are expected to encounter obstacles – in the form of legal limitations as well as cultural stereotypes.

The term 'new ethics' points to the complexity of the cultural exchange between Russia and the US and Europe. Operating as an umbrella term for a number of different socio-cultural phenomena, the term undermines the significance of each of the individual ethics it encompasses, obliterating differences between them and at least partially erasing their relevance as standalone ideas – the increasing relevance of sustainability discussions, public discourses around anti-racism and gender equality. At the same time, it enriches both the Russian language and Russian contemporary popular culture, providing a site for interpreting a number of multifaceted and distinct phenomena and ideas.

Russia and the West

The need for the term 'new ethics' in Russian also points to the unfamiliarity of the issues behind those 'new ethics.' In Russia, the term incorporates ideas and initiatives that require contextualisation and explanation. The usage of terms like 'diversity,' 'inclusivity,' 'sustainability,' #MeToo in their transliterated or English-language versions seems to indicate that fashion magazines perceive the ideas behind 'new ethics' as foreign and imported. The foreignness of these 'new ethics' has been at the core of the relevant discourse in Russia. One of the most notorious comments on the 'new ethics' in Russia was made by Russian theatre director Konstantin Bogomolov and published in the opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Bogomolov, considered to be one of Russia's liberal-leaning theatre directors, spoke out against the 'new ethics,' which he considered a sign of a cultural decline in the West. Published under the title 'The Rape of Europe 2.0,'

the article calls the 'new ethics' a 'new ethical Reich' that has replaced the totalitarian regime of national socialism and aims to eliminate 'the complex person,' 'previously described by Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche.' The article also expresses nostalgia for the times when 'eroticism was a subject of art and Sex [capitalised in the original version] was a sacred pleasure,' while a 'variety of ethical and value systems allowed one [...] to find the right environment.' Bogomolov concludes his contribution by expressing the hope that Russia will 'start building its own good old Europe' (Bogomolov, 2021).

According to the foreword to Bogomolov's essay, written by the editors of *Novaya Gazeta*, the newspaper decided to publish it to initiate a discussion. The essay was also accompanied by an editorial commentary, correcting some of the claims made by the author in his essay. 'The Rape of Europe 2.0' sparked a spate of objections across Russia's liberal and opposition media, but it was also met with considerable approval. The article tapped into a centuries-long discussion about the inherent difference between Russia and the West. Paradoxically, Bogomolov's description of the 'West' as a moral monolith ignores the fact that there, too, human rights movements, such as #MeToo, face criticism. After all, Bogomolov could have found a kindred spirit in John Hockenberry among others, an editor, who, in his piece for Harper's Bazaar US, likened #MeToo to the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution (Hockenberry, n.d.).

Writing about the discourse around 'Russia and the West,' Boris Groys notes that the difference between the two has been one of the central problems within Russian philosophical tradition, art and culture. In this discourse, the West has been presented as a 'sign of a universal, rational and compelling truth beyond all differences in actual life or cultural practice' (Groys, 1992: p. 186). The term 'Russia,' on the other hand, 'indicates the impossibility of such a truth and the necessity to search for unity and universality not at the level of thought, but of life' (Groys, 1992: p. 186). Therefore, in the Russian philosophical tradition, the discourse on the relationship between Russia and the West insists on the perceived superiority of Russian spirituality over Western rationality. Similarly, Bogomolov's article maintains that Russian culture is allegedly superior to 'Western' culture, declaring that Russia should build its 'own good old Europe.' The claim is paradoxical, as it sees Russia as an heir to European culture, yet at the same time asserts that

Russia's difference from the West.

Echoing this discourse of difference, Russian fashion magazines, too, continuously reiterate Russia's cultural distinction from the West. References to Western as foreign and different are ubiquitous, and the West is portrayed both as 'other' and aspirational. The West is believed to be at the forefront of culture, technology and science, but at the same time, it is seen as different and 'other' from a Russian perspective.

Thus, The *Blueprint* writes:

> Feminism, anti-racism, the Civil Rights movement have become mainstream in the West. It's the new norm [...]. In Russia, we are just entering the time when progressive parts of society are starting to take the issues of police violence and racial discrimination seriously (Surnina, 2019) .

In the aforementioned *Vogue* December 2021 issue, fashion photographer Emmie America shares how life in the UK and the US shaped her attitudes towards inclusivity and political protest, and how different they are from the Russian reality (which she calls 'our reality') (America, 2021). In an interview with *Vogue*, filmmaker Vera Krichevskaia proudly mentions that a number of Western professionals were involved in the making of her film, but she also adds that a 'Western viewer' would not be able to understand some parts of it (Solovieva, 2021b).

Evidently, in Russia, the West is either aspired to or viewed with suspicion. This ambiguity manifests itself in the fashion publications' portrayal of 'new ethics.' While the representation of 'new ethics' is overwhelmingly positive, it is at times imbued with irony and cynicism, and 'new ethics' are dismissed as a fad. Across its articles, *The Blueprint* repeatedly calls diversity one of 'the main Western trends of the moment' (Surnina, 2019), and *Vogue*, in its October 2021 issue, when analysing 'what sexiness means in the world of new ethics,' notes that Michael Kors 'supports the philanthropy and diversity trends' (Shilova, 2021, p. 185), suggesting that supporting diversity is a fleeting trend. In other instances, *The Blueprint* questions whether 'fashion designers have got tired of toying with diversity' (Sotnik, 2021c). And, 'Having been cleansed and purified by cancel culture and #MeToo, sexuality

is back in fashion, but now it's different,' is the playful introduction to an opinion piece titled 'I Want You' printed in *Vogue Russia*'s August 2021 issue (Lukina, 2021, n.p.).

This tendency to describe diversity and 'new ethics' as a whimsical trend contradicts the seriousness with which the magazines discuss and seek to contextualise them in Russia. Further, in her editor's letter for *Vogue Russia*'s special October 2021 issue, dedicated to cinema, the publication's editor-in-chief Ksenia Solovieva writes, 'Diversity is anything but a seasonal trend' (Solovieva, 2021c). Obviously, there is no single way of interpreting the 'new ethics' and the cultural phenomena encapsulated within the term, as fashion magazines and their interpretations range from celebratory to sceptical and mocking.

The description of 'new ethics' as a trend, as the ethics of now, as something unprecedented highlights the perceived novelty of 'new ethics.' This reading of 'new ethics' as novel clashes with the understanding of anti-racist, feminist and emancipatory initiatives as manifestations of reckoning that are long overdue. Writing about #MeToo, Amia Srinivasan argues that it is not that ethics have suddenly changed for men, it is just that #MeToo has compelled men to recognise their wrongdoings (Srinivasan, 2020). The same idea of reckoning underlies other feminist, anti-racist and sustainability initiatives. Russian magazines' description of such initiatives as 'new' further emphasises their remoteness from Russia and Russian politics.

As already noted, there is virtually no reference to these 'new ethics' in *Marie Claire Russia*. This absence is conspicuous, as it demonstrates that the discourse around this subject is considered irrelevant by the magazine and, by extension, also its readers. The little coverage it does have of the topics associated with the 'new ethics' is sceptical and mistrustful. When referring to #MeToo, the magazine focuses on the 'destroyed careers' of men rather than the stories of women, choosing topics that undermine the validity of the movement – including an article dedicated to Rose McGowan's critique of #MeToo, the title of which gleefully announces, '#MeToo has lost its main supporter' (Tumerina, 2018). Notably, between December 2020 and February 2022, the magazine did not include a single plus-sized model or a model of colour in any of its editorials. Its September

2021 issue sees it attempt a discussion of gender. The issue includes an interview with sociologist Elena Rozhdestveskaia and an editorial with a conspicuously androgynous model, whose short dyed green hair offers a dramatic contrast to the magazine's usual roster of slim, white models with long blonde hair. In the interview with Rozhdestvenskaia, *Marie Claire*'s writer poses questions such as, 'What is the difference between sex and gender?'; 'We used to survive without all this gender stuff, so what happened?'; 'Why have so many types of gender emerged right now?'; and 'Does it mean that you can just choose your gender depending on how you feel on a certain day?' (Murashkina, 2021, n.p.). The questions not only expose the writer's ignorance about the issue of gender, but also a deep-seated scepticism.

Image quote: Marie Claire Russia, September 2021, 'To be yourself," photographed by Chanelle Dosser.

The editorial, entitled 'To be yourself,' seemingly celebrates individuality and the power of the reader to be themselves, insinuating, through its focus on an androgynous, green-haired model, the right to gender representation. The empowering tone of the article's message, however, is undermined by the context of the magazine's coverage.

'New ethics': Views on LGBTQI+ and women's rights adopted by fashion magazines and the Russian state

Similarly, the politics of the Russian state could hardly contrast more with the 'new ethics' and the values that they represent. Over the past ten years, Russia has adopted a political course towards promoting the 'traditional family values' consistent with Orthodox Christianity, decrying 'radical feminism,' decriminalising domestic abuse and prohibiting what the state calls the 'propaganda' of LGBTQI+

– initially, in 2012, among minors, and then, in 2022, universally.

In this part of my study, I would like to focus on two themes as interpreted by the Russian state and negotiated in fashion and lifestyle publications. These are LGBTQI+ rights and women's rights. Both themes relate to diversity, inclusion and equality and are therefore consistent with the perceived values of 'new ethics.' In Russia, LGBTQI+ and women's rights have been marginalised and increasingly declared inconsistent with Russia's 'traditional values.'

Since 2006, the Russian state has sought to articulate the country's national identity through 'traditional values.' A vague term, 'traditional values' have been associated with heteronormativity, Orthodox Christianity and non-Westernness (Wilkinson, 2018) and have provided the basis for a number of discriminating laws and measures against Russia's LGBTQI+ community and women. In 2006, President Putin identified a decline in birth rates as a serious threat to the country's national security and initiating a series of measures aimed at strengthening the 'traditional' family and increasing birth rates (Erofeeva, 2013). 'Non-traditional' sexual orientation was identified as one of the obstacles to boosting birth rates. In 2009, Russia's regions began adopting laws against disseminating 'gay propaganda' among minors, and in 2012, a federal law introducing the same ban was passed. In 2015, the Russian Constitutional Court allowed noncompliance with European Court of Human Rights judgments in cases where they contradicted the Constitution of the Russian Federation. In 2017, as the global #MeToo movement was at its zenith, Russia decriminalised domestic violence.

When discussing both the 'anti-gay propaganda' law (as it is colloquially known) and the decriminalisation of domestic violence, state politicians and state-owned media employ anti-Western rhetoric. Lawmakers and pro-state activists have resorted to emphasising that European attitudes on queerness 'do not work' for Russia (Wilkinson, 2018), and the state media echo the sentiment. As Emil Persson shows, Russia's state media portray queerness and the LGBTQI+ community as affiliated with the West and as a threat to the Russian nation (Persson, 2015). According to the state media discourse, acceptance of homosexuality has morally corrupted the West, and Russia needs to defend itself and its 'traditional values' against 'destructive' Western tolerance.

Likewise, anti-Western sentiment permeates the state rhetoric around women's rights and domestic violence. In expressing their support for decriminalising domestic violence, lawmakers and state media alike ignored the widespread domestic violence against women in Russia, focusing instead on juvenile justice and condemning the West. State media, for instance, made frequent allegations that in the West, children can be removed from parents who 'spank' them, which is incompatible with Russian traditional values (Semukhina, 2020). Proponents of the law against domestic violence have been called 'foreign agents,' 'Russophobes,' accused of denouncing 'traditional values' (Andreeva, Nelaeva & Drozhashchikh, 2022). Similarly, representatives of the state referred to gender-based domestic violence as 'quite exaggerated.'

The Blueprint's and *Vogue Russia*'s coverage of topics related to the LGBTQI+ community and domestic violence presents perspectives that are starkly different from those offered by the state media. Prior to the law against LGBTQI+ 'propaganda,' passed in 2022, *The Blueprint* made frequent references to the LGBTQI+ community and queerness – the magazine wrote about queer sex parties, drag shows and voguing communities in Russia, and openly condemned discrimination against gay and queer people. *The Blueprint* has also run a series of Pride month articles on queer literature and cinema as well as discussing how fashion brands navigate Russian legislation to cater to queer communities in Russia – in 2024, as I am preparing a final edit of my manuscript, none of the aforementioned articles are available anymore, as they have been removed after the adoption of the anti-LGBT propaganda law. In 2021, prior to the ban of LGBTQI+ in Russia, *The Blueprint* openly acknowledges the repressive nature of the ban on 'gay propaganda,' stating '1 June marked the start of Pride Month. There will be no celebrations in Russia and now rainbow flags will grace government buildings, but life still makes its way through the wall of censorship. Both in art and the media' (The Blueprint, 2021).

In an interview with Russia's phenomenally popular Instagram and TikTok blogger Danya Milokhin, the *The Blueprint*'s journalist asserts her opinion, actively and decisively disagreeing with the blogger, as they discuss LGBTQI+ rights in Russia:

> *The Blueprint:* But you understand that you and I can choose whether to get married or not, and whether to have children, or not. But there are people who have been deprived of this choice.
>
> *Milokhin:* No, they can't choose because it's Russia – who am I to change the rules within Russia? There is absolutely no way I will become a protestor. I have my own goals, my own dreams. My aim is to help teenagers, to make them more open-minded.
>
> *The Blueprint:* How can you be open-minded when, in some aspects, you are just not allowed to?
>
> *Milokhin:* Just leave the country then – I don't mind. To be honest' I'm not interested in all this, that's not my thing. Most people talk about the same things – Putin, laws, rules… Why bother? Even if you're gay, you shouldn't care about all that (Sotnik, 2021).

Here, the blogger refers contradictorily to the discourse of choice, claiming, first, that one 'can't choose [to be openly queer] because it's Russia,' and then asserting that he chooses to have his 'own goals, [his] own dreams' and suggesting that one should just choose to leave the country if they disagree with its politics. The journalist actively chalenges Milokhin's claims, arguing that politics determines what one can choose ('How can you be open-minded when, in some aspects, you are just not allowed to?').

As it navigated the earlier, somewhat more relaxed 2012 ban on LGBT propaganda among minors, the publication mostly focused on various aspects of queer culture (cinema, voguing or literature), but rarely gave a voice to a queer person, allowing them to openly talk about their sexuality. One rare example is a feature dedicated to private sex parties in Moscow, which could only be accessed by readers over the age of 18. Here, a queer journalist talks about his experience at such a party in Moscow.

However, during the time span, analysed for this study, *The Blueprint* repeatedly asserts that Russia's LGBTQI+ community deserves to be acknowledged. In *Vogue Russia*, references to queerness are also frequent, but are mostly discussed in articles that have been translated from English and are featured in the 'Diversity' (written in English) section of the website. One such text, penned by designer Jonathan Anderson, was published during Pride Month in 2021 and reads,

'Fashion industry should stop discriminating against people because of gender' (Anderson, 2021).

Both publications covered the case of Yulia Tsvetkova, a feminist, artist and LGBTQI+ activist who was arrested in 2019 for her 'pornographic' drawings and accused of 'propagating non-traditional sexual relations among minors.' The drawings that the artist was arrested for, published on her personal social media account, were abstract depictions of the female body. *The Blueprint* (Vorslav, 2020) and *Vogue* (Vogue Russia, 2020) published articles explaining Tsvetkova's case and expressing their support for her.

Once again, *Marie Claire*'s stance is starkly different from the other two publications. Here, references to queerness and same-sex relationships are extremely rare, and sexuality is only discussed in the contexts of heterosexual and, preferably, marital relationships. This becomes particularly obvious in the relationship advice section on the magazine's website, which mainly instructs women how to please men. The publication's approach to relationships and sexuality evokes what Rosalind Gill aptly called post-feminist 'men-ology' (Gill, 2009). The 'men-ology' discourse demands that women provide affective and emotional labour to understand, sympathise with and cater to men's feelings in order to maintain functional heteronormative relationships. In its September 2021 issue, *Marie Claire* then attempts a look at the future of relationships:

> A 'marriage' to oneself, tandem and patchwork families, or maybe living together but apart? What relationships will people choose in the 21st century? Svetlana Kolchuk looks for answers in Berlin, one of Europe's most liberal cities.
>
> As you walk through Berlin (especially through one of its fashionable districts like Kreuzberg), where you see 'non-standard' relationships at every turn. Looking at many couples from behind, it's hard to tell the sex of the partners (Kolchuk, 2021, p. 36).

This quote frames non-heterosexual relationships as 'non-standard,' expressing the author's position that not being able to tell the biological sex of people who are in a relationship with each other is disconcerting and disorienting. The use of quotation marks is telling in relation to 'marriage' to oneself, or relationships described as 'non-standard,' emphasising the perceived strangeness of these 'new' types of relationship. The choice of the author and magazine to visit Berlin to

explore the subject also reinforces the idea that it is an alien and exotic concept for Russia, but has beennormalised in the West. Remarkably, the publication does not address the unsavoury aspects of the traditional heterosexual relationship, such as domestic violence, whichis a widespread phenomenon in Russia.

Both *Vogue* and *The Blueprint*, however, are vocal opponents of the decriminalisation of domestic violence in Russia, a step that was taken in 2017 and endorsed by the Orthodox church. Throughout the period from 2020 to 2022, *Vogue Russia* published a series of articles emphasising the need for a law that would protect women against domestic violence. One of these articles, titled 'Why Russia needs a law on domestic violence,' features the Russian feminists and women activists who are in favour of such a law. The article opens with the words, 'The fight against gender-based violence is on the rise all over the world, and our country is no exception' (Fedina, 2021d).

Image quote: vogue.ru, 2021, June 15, 'Why Russia needs a law on domestic violence," photographed by Pavel Kharatyan.

Activist Anna Rivina, one of the supporters of the law featured in *Vogue Russia*, is described as being 'dressed in an elegant green-hued jacket and a silk top.' She became 'involved with the issue of domestic violence' in Russia, 'after having studied Political Science in Israel.' The article is accompanied by a series of photographs, showing the activists dressed in dark-hued designer clothes and holding posters that read, 'Domestic violence is a crime, not a tradition,' and 'For some, women's rights aren't human rights.' The posters refer to – and criticise – the views expressed by Russian politicians and the media. Combining politicised messages and designer clothing, the editorial aestheticises a political issue in a popular feminist way, blending activism, fashion and visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). By employing fashion to address the issue of domestic violence, the magazine is integrating a highly politicised issue into the realm of topics that it has traditionally addressed. At the same time, it uses styling and photography to portray the activists as strong and united – they are shown standing in groups, their clothes elegant but sombre.

Moreover, the photographs of groups of women, all clad in black and unsmiling, not only evoke women's political collectivity, but also appear to reference the now-iconic cover of *Time* magazine from 2017. The cover and accompanying feature story celebrated the 'silence breakers' of the #MeToo movement – the women whose confessions launched the global conversation on pervasive sexual abuse and violence against women. This nod to *Time* magazine's coverage of #MeToo, almost certainly intentional, establishes a connection between violence against women in Russia and on a global level.

Notably, in their interviews, the activists insist that increased publicity around the decriminalisation of domestic violence in Russia is a sign of positive change in society and a profoundly new phenomenon for Russia: 'A generation of girls has grown up, who demand to be respected, who want to be independent and to have the same rights as men'; 'Today, [society] has a different approach to the problem – it is unethical to blame the victim, and [it is expected] that the state supports those who have been abused.' Here, references to an empowered 'generation of girls' and changes in Russian society evoke the post-feminist optimism which portrays young (privileged) girls as agents of change par excellence (Gill, 2016) who can counter structural issues through personal visibility and by claiming their

agency. These optimistic assertions are, however, undermined by the very reason for the article – an absence of legislation depriving women who face domestic violence of legal protection as well as ongoing murders of women in situations of domestic violence.

Remarkably, the magazines do not use the expression 'new ethics' to describe the issues of LGBTQI+ and women's rights in Russia. In addressing diversity, inclusion and women's rights in Russia, the magazines eschew the vagueness that 'new ethics' conveys, addressing specific local cases – like the arrest of Yulia Tsvetkova or the decriminalisation of domestic violence.

Nevertheless, *The Blueprint* and *Vogue* are definitely aligned with what the 'new ethics' represent – diversity, inclusion and women's rights. They also significantly diverge from Russian state media discourse which advocates 'traditional values.' In *Marie Claire*, there is virtually no discourse around 'new ethics,' references to Black Lives Matter protests and #MeToo are sceptical, and sexuality is only discussed in relation to heterosexual, preferably married couples. Such coverage demonstrates that *Marie Claire* is more aligned with the agenda of Russian state media. Unsurprisingly then, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent government restrictions on the freedom of speech in media have had least impact on the operation of this publication, while significantly limiting the editorial scope of *The Blueprint* and effectively shutting down *Vogue*.

3.5 After the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Russia's war on Ukraine, starting with the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, can be seen as a tragic culmination of the standoff between Putin's Russia and Western coalitions. During the first year of the war, as Ukraine was receiving consolidated support from the EU and the US, Russia's anti-Western rhetoric steadily escalated, both domestically and internationally. On 21 September 2022, when Putin announced a partial mobilisation, he also stated that the country was at war with 'the collective West.'

As the previous part of this chapter explains, the 'collective West' is a persistent construct in Russia, meant to signify a hostile entity that is everything Russia

is not. Russia's assault on Ukraine and its alleged struggle against the 'collective West,' coincided with an assault on everything that Putin's regime and supporters see as Western values. Since the beginning of the war, the Russian parliament has banned the promotion of the 'child-free' lifestyle, further limiting women's rights. It has also declared a slew of human rights and educational organisations and activists to be 'foreign agents' for their purported association with the 'West.' Further, in November 2022, the state introduced a general ban on LGBTQI+ 'propaganda.'

Most notably in the context of this study, however, Putin's regime, concerned about existing counter-narratives to its justifications of the war in Ukraine, conducted a fierce crackdown on what was left of Russia's independent and opposition media. The media crackdown started on the very first day of the war, when the state issued a ban on calling the conflict a 'war,' then went on to prohibit 'fakes' that 'discriminated against the Russian army,' effectively preventing any objective coverage of the actions of Russian soldiers in Ukraine (Reuters, 2022).

As already shown, before the war, some lifestyle and fashion magazines operated as sites of moderate dissent, championing 'Western' discourses and commenting on pressing human rights issues in the country. They, too, reacted to Russia's invasion – during the first days of the war, calls for peace were published on the homepages of *Vogue Russia* and *Elle Russia*, and *Vogue* issued an anti-war statement on its social media channels. *The Blueprint* published a series of anti-war articles as well as news on the state of media in Russia, open letters calling for a ceasefire, and articles highlighting and supporting Ukranian creative professionals. At the same time, the publication attempted to estimate the effect of the war and sanctions on Russian fashion. A number of other women's lifestyle and fashion publications refrained from printing articles about the war, yet covertly acknowledged the extraordinariness of the situation – *Glamour Russia*, woman.ru (Russia's largest online lifestyle resource for women, with more than 20 million followers) – published recommendations on how to cope with anxiety and bad news, although they did avoid making any direct reference to the war.

Immediately after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, publications noticeably slowed down their editorial output. Within the first ten days of the war, *The*

Blueprint published 36 articles, with only six of them not dedicated to the Russian invasion. One of them, titled 'Does Russia's fashion industry have a future?,' states, 'The fallout of Russia's 'special operation' (sic!) has gravely affected [the country's] economy and culture. A lot of Western companies – be it the fast-fashion retailer H&M or the high-fashion Hermès – are leaving Russia' (Vazhenina, 2022). Indeed, as Western states imposed sanctions on Russia, a number of companies committed to introducing their own sanctions, such as video streaming company Netflix and the majority of fashion brands that left Russia's market. *The Blueprint*'s op-ed piece reflects on whether the departure of Western fashion brands might lead to the development of a thriving homegrown fashion industry – but concludes that this would be impossible, since Russia neither has the necessary technologies for high-quality fashion production, nor the required materials.

Likewise, every fifth article on *Vogue Russia*'s website, published within the ten days since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, was dedicated to the current situation. There were features about Russian artists creating art for peace ('United by one hope, Russian artists draw the doves of peace' (Grigalashvili & Manucharyan, 2022)), about how skin reacts to stress (Vogue Russia, 2022), and about how to talk about politics with relatives whose political views are different from your own.

On the *Marie Claire Russia* website, however, there were no calls for peace, and the magazine's reaction to the war and sanctions seemed to be largely shaped by Russian state media. Two articles published on its website in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine are particularly illustrative. The first is titled 'The three fears everyone has right now – from sanctions to the Internet switch-off (and whether you really have to worry).' As the article suggests, these fears are, indeed, baseless. Addressing the fear of 'losing savings,' the article recommends trusting the official statement made by Russia's central bank, reassuring citizens that their savings are secure. Similarly, the article allays the fear that Russian travellers might get stranded abroad and criticises Western airlines for having recalled the planes that Russia had been leasing from them. The fear of the internet switch-off is linked to an allegedthreat from the US government and not the government's control of the internet amidst the chaotic censoring of independent online media (Demin, 2022).

The article titled 'How to leave Russia (and is it even safe)' (Umovskaia, 2022) provides a list of countries 'where you can go to take your mind off current events.' The article recommends going to a number of countries that allow Russians entry without a visa, but it discourages readers from leaving the country altogether: 'Under current conditions, many people are panicking. In this distressed state, they may decide to leave the country. **You can not do it this way** [bold in the original] […] The best thing you can do right now is to take a deep breath, wait for two or three days, and calm down. Not much can happen in this time that will make it impossible for you to leave.' This last statement, however, is contradicted by the events of the previous ten days that not only left millions of Ukrainians homeless and forced many to leave their country, but also drastically changed Russia's media landscape and economy.

Fast forward to 2024. While *Marie Claire* has managed to keep its tone upbeat, apparently remaining oblivious to the ongoing war, a number of fashion and lifestyle publications have shut down altogether. By the 9 March 2022, the publishing house Condé Nast had suspended its operations in Russia. In a memo, Condé Nast's CEO Roger Lynch cited Russia's recently introduced censorship laws as the main reason for suspending operations in the country (Condè Nast, 2022). The letter from *Vogue Russia*'s editorial team, published online on 9 March, announced a full suspension of all editorial activities, stating, 'We hope that this is not a farewell letter but rather just a pause and that we will soon be able to reunite with you' (Vogue Russia, 2022). Elsewhere, Hearst Inc. revoked partnership agreements with Russian publishers Shkulev and Independent Media, resulting in closures of *Elle Russia* and *Elle Girl*, *Harper's Bazaar Russia* and *Esquire Russia*.

The censorship laws introduced by the Russian government to paralyse the dissemination of information about the war and the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine have also affected progressive digital publications that have adopted an anti-war position, such as *The Blueprint* and the popular feminist lifestyle platform *Wonderzine*. Facing ever-stricter limitations, *The Blueprint* has still continued to publish news on politics, culture and the government's repressive measures, including the closures of dissident and independent cultural initiatives across the country. *The Blueprint* employs covert ways of responding to the political situation in Russia and the war. Thus, it printed quotes from Susan Sontag's 'Regarding the

pain of others' in response to the news of Russia's atrocities in Ukraine, and it has regularly published lists of nonprofit organisations in Russia and Ukraine that need support. The publication has retained its Instagram account, despite the ban on Instagram in Russia (it was condemned as an extremist organisation). It also continues to cover international news in culture and fashion, has written about events such as the Venice Biennale, the film festivals in Venice and Cannes and the Vogue World show. However, the magazine's coverage of Russian domestic brands has also grown. Over the months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, *The Blueprint* has written extensively on smaller, local brands. The increased coverage of domestic brands might also reflect the diminished presence of Western brands – after the beginning of the war, a number of high-street brands such as Zara, H&M and Uniqlo decided to cease operations in Russia. Some have seen the severance of ties between Russia and the West as a time of opportunity to develop homegrown brands and industries. Indeed, the two years that have passed since 2022 have seen launches of new fashion labels and even lifestyle magazines. Notably, in 2024, the French magazine *L'Officiel*, re-launched its Russian edition after a two-year break. It currently positions itself as 'the only international fashion magazine in Russia.' Then amidst sanction-induced restrictions, Russia's attempts to strengthen ties with China and intensifying political repression, fashion brands and media pander to a drastically changed economic and political climate, in which the players of the fashion industry consciously avoid criticising or engaging with political issues. These changes would merit a separate study.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview and analysis of Russian fashion media's engagement with politics and the political. Focusing on the print and online output from three publications for women – *The Blueprint*, *Vogue Russia* and *Marie Claire* – between December 2020 and February 2022, it has provided an insight into the recurring and relevant political themes and tropes within the publications. The three publications address politics and political themes differently, *The Blueprint* and *Vogue Russia* channel liberal ideas, opposing the policies of the Russian state, whereas *Marie Claire* manifest support for the ideology and policies of the state.

Significantly, this media's coverage of fashion exposes its political views and sympathies. Thus, *Vogue Russia* draws a parallel between fashionability and political prowess, positioning fashion as a tool of political communication and influence. Fashionability is equated to political progressiveness and political position – conservative politicians from Putin's establishment are criticised for bad fashion choices, which are presented as a symbol for their political backwardness. Similarly, *The Blueprint*'s celebration of Yulia Navalnaya's style appears to convey the media's political sympathies. *Marie Claire*, on a different note, praises politicians, affiliated with Putin, for being close to people, instead of their effective style or nuanced and fashionable self-presentation.

Across publications, Russia's relationship with the West emerges as a complex and loaded discourse. In *Vogue Russia* and *The Blueprint*, the West is viewed ambiguously as a realm of progress, on the one hand, where fashion and cultural trends originate, and as a puzzling other, on the other hand, *Marie Claire* seems to view the West with mistrust and hostility, as it is imagined to be different and hostile, as it threatens to undermine and subvert Russian values and culture. The West – an abstract entity that is never defined geographically but appears to be a composite of Europe and the USA or just the USA, it is presented less like a defined geographical area and more of an imagined realm of difference, which each publication interprets in its own way. The perceived relationship between Russia and the West the way it is negotiated within fashion magazines seems to continue the Russian literary and philosophical tradition, in which the two are portrayed as irreconcilably different (Groys, 1995).

Nevertheless, *Vogue Russia* and *The Blueprint* express curiosity about and thirst for the Western cultural trends, whereas the attitudes of *Marie Claire* are cautious and fearful. Such conflicted and contradictory attitudes to the West are most prominent in the discourse of the 'new ethics.' 'New ethics,' an umbrella term for a plethora of concepts, cultural phenomena and civic movements, proposes the idea that disparate notions such as inclusivity, diversity or sustainability and political movements like feminism or Black Lives Matter comprise a new ethical regime that seeks to establish new values and parameters of acceptability. Exclusively existing and circulating in Russian, 'new ethics' is associated with the cultural and socio-political changes in the West and communicates the cultural dominance of the West as it is perceived in Russia.

In the analysed media, the 'new ethics' is positioned ambiguously. *The Blueprint* and *Vogue* oscillate between championing and celebrating the 'new ethics' and expressions of mistrust and irony towards it. Whereas the phenomena and ideas, associated with the 'new ethics' are presented as predominantly positive and good and are explored in long and nuanced articles, at times, the publications wonder if the 'new ethics' might be just a fad. They expand on the themes of inclusivity and feminism, however, in articles on LGBTQI+ rights and domestic violence in Russia, connecting, thus, the values of 'new ethics' to the Russian context. This attempt to establish a connection between the Western and Russian discourses is most visible in *Vogue*'s photoshoot for an article about domestic violence that closely resembles the seminal *Time* magazine cover in the wake of #MeToo. *Marie Claire* does not address the 'new ethics' as often and with as much subtlety as the other two publications, and when it does, it views it with a lot of scepticism. It also expresses support for the 'traditional values' and 'family values,' as these have been articulated by the Russian state.

The discourse around 'new ethics' emerges as a discursive site for self-identification in relation to Russia and the West. Through the 'new ethics' discourse, *The Blueprint* and *Vogue*, on one hand, align themselves with what they perceive as 'Western' cultural trends and values, distancing themselves from 'traditional' values promoted by the Russian state. *Marie Claire*, on the other hand, eschews the 'new ethics' discourse, while criticising #MeToo and the Black Lives Matter protests. At the same time, the publication demonstrates its support for heteronormativity and 'traditional family,' and, through its relationship advice, promotes anti- and postfeminist ideals, channeling the patriarchal views that have been promoted by the Russian government.