

## THE #ЯНЕБОЮСЬСКАЗАТЬ (#IAMNOTSCAREDTO SPEAK) CAMPAIGN OF JULY 2016 IN FACEBOOK'S RUSSIAN SPEAKING COMMUNITY: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** Digital or hashtag activism in social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has gained popularity around the globe. Campaigns such as #MeToo and #YesAllWomen have drawn much needed attention to the problems of gender based violence and misogyny. This article is dedicated to a similar, but unique, campaign – #ЯнеБоюсьСказать (#IamNotScaredToSpeak) – that took place in Facebook's Russian speaking community in July 2016. (It followed an identical campaign started in Ukraine, which subsequently crossed over into other former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan.) The objective of this article is twofold. First, utilizing Discourse Analysis, I analyze posts associated with #IamNotScaredToSpeak, and argue that the campaign raised the visibility of the problem of sexual violence largely as a result of women's active participation in it. A number of women who decided to reveal their personal experiences and others who stood with them against rape culture, helped increase the significance of women's linguistic agency and made #IamNotScaredToSpeak the first large-scale feminist movement in Russia to date. Second, I will examine the specificity of the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign and argue that it was predominantly of a grass-roots nature with the self-organization and participation of ordinary people being crucial to the movement. By way of comparison, the #MeToo campaign, operating in the western context, was largely initiated and led by celebrities.

**Keywords:** feminist movements, gender based violence in Russia, #IamNotScaredToSpeak, digital activism

## Introduction

The campaign – #ЯНеБоюсьСказать (in English: #IamNotScaredToSpeak) – began on Russian language Facebook on July 5, 2016.<sup>1</sup> The hashtag initially appeared on Facebook in Ukrainian, when activist Anastasia Melnychenko encouraged women to fight against misogyny and the attitude of victim blaming in Ukrainian society by speaking about the sexual assaults they experienced during their lifetime (Melnychenko 2016). The post gained widespread popularity very rapidly and within less than 24 hours a similar campaign was created by women in Russia by altering the original hashtag (by changing one letter) to Russian (Bondareva 2016).

During the entire month of July 2016, thousands of Russian women shared their stories on social media while others joined the discussion and expanded it to traditional media, including Russian TV channels. From the perspective of Structuration Theory (Giddens 1986), one can argue that the campaign drew much attention and challenged feminist discourse in Russia. Being the first large-scale manifestation of women’s solidarity in modern Russia, the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign, opposed *Structure*, the “recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available” (Barker and Jane 2016, 448). Giddens sees *structure* as “a »virtual order« of transformative relations;” i.e., “social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have »structures« but rather exhibit »structural properties« and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” (1986, 17).

Studying the Russian women’s movement from the perspective of a discursive approach helps identify this kind of activism’s potential and the opportunities it offers for women’s solidarity at the level of language and consciousness and for collective identity building. Discursive patterns that permeated the public Facebook posts related to #IamNotScaredToSpeak touched upon various aspects of sexual violence and made social interactions more explicit in terms of issues concerning gender equality problems.

This paper poses the following questions:

- to what extent was women’s agency the crucial component of the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign (i.e., “the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices” (Barker and Jane 2016, 448);
- how did this movement affect women’s mobilizations within Russia;
- to what extent could the campaign be recognized as feminist in its nature.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation of #ЯНеБоюсьСказать as #IamNotScaredToSpeak, is taken from *The Guardian* newspaper (Walker 2016). Other English-language media have proposed different translations; for instance, GlobalVoices.org uses #IamNotAfraidToSayIt (Global Voices 2016). I believe that the first translation is better suited to the victims’ posts owing to its more narrative nature.

Crucial to answering these questions is a reflection on whether #IamNotScaredToSpeak was the entry point for discussing the previously taboo topic of gender-based violence in Russia.

The objective of this article is twofold. First, applying Discourse Analysis, I analyze posts associated with #IamNotScaredToSpeak and argue that the campaign successfully increased the visibility of the problem of sexual violence largely through the active participation of women. A number of women who decided to reveal their experiences and others who stood with them against rape culture contributed to raising the significance of women's linguistic agency and made #IamNotScaredToSpeak the first large-scale feminist movement in Russia to date. Second, I will examine the specificity of the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign and argue that it was predominantly of a grass-roots nature where self-organization and participation of ordinary people were crucial to it. I further argue, that it differed from the #MeToo campaign which exploded after *The New York Times* published allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein in October of 2017. The latter campaign, operating in the western context, was largely initiated and led by celebrities.

## **Patriarchal culture in Russia. Feminist understanding of violence against women**

Feminist theorists have shown that violence is gendered, and that most violent acts are committed by men and therefore cannot be observed outside the concept of gender (Connell 2009; Scully 1994; Hearn 1996). Connell defines "Gender" as "the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes" (2009, 31). "Genders" are socially constructed in terms of features and behaviors and are considered masculine and feminine. In many patriarchal cultural contexts, masculinity is associated with strength and dominance, femininity with weakness. According to The World Health Organization (WHO 2017), gender-based violence against women is one of the most important global problems as of 2017: "Global estimates published by WHO indicate that about 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime."

In Russian society, as in many others, patriarchy links gender to the issue of power (Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985). In her book, *The Manifesto of the Feminist Movement of Russia* (*Манифест феминистского движения России*), Dr. Olgerta Kharitonova states that "men make women culturally invisible and use their social power to create a wall of silence around those who are in pain, around women whom they use" (Kharitonova 2015, 61). In the past, the Soviet Union preached that it was a society that had achieved the complete equality of women and

men. While this may be true with regards to some areas of social life, e.g. women's employment, various scholars have argued that the extent of emancipation during the Soviet reign was in fact not as large as was proclaimed (Posadskaya, 1994). "The Soviet state promoted and institutionalised a distinctive »gender order« which has had a lasting impact on gender relations and gender identities in post-Soviet Russia" (Ashwin 2012, 329).

This is what Giddens sees as "memory traces" and argues that *Structure* only exists as such (1986, 377). According to him, "memory traces" can be seen in three ways: as Domination, Signification and Legitimation rules (Giddens 1986, 29). "The 1990s constituted a rupture in policy terms but not in the behaviour of men and women, which continued to be structured by Soviet gender norms" (Ashwin 2012, 329). Some authors, such as Ekaterina Kochkina, consequently argue that so-called gender equality triumphs in the Soviet period were actually myths (Kochkina, 2003).

Contemporary statistics on violence related crimes against women in Russia, including domestic violence, are imprecise. According to Russian Government Statistics, 3,900 women were raped in 2016 and 5,400 were subjected to violent sexual acts (Laikam 2016, 185). Oddly, Russian statistics indicate that it had fewer rapes than Sweden, a country almost 15 times smaller in population (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention). In addition, the UN Secretary-General's report on all forms of violence against women cautions that police reports worldwide are unreliable because of significant underreporting.

Various sources note that it is difficult to assess the real scale of the situation since, according to unofficial data, only every seventh rape victim reports it to the police (NGO Krizisnyj centr dlya zhenshchin 2018). Russian laws do not encourage reporting of sexual abuse to police. Women who do so are often subjected to additional stress and pressure owing to an unsympathetic police force in a society wherein victim blaming is common (Ibidem). Even people who personally experienced sexual violence sometimes manifest such feelings. Lerner calls them "justice-driven fundamental assumptions"; that people perceive things on the basis of their own convictions and also that people are inclined towards seeing causality for why things happen (Lerner 1980, 255). Self-blame occurs when sexual assault survivors start looking for reasons for what happened to them in terms of what they might have done wrong (Richardson and Campbell 1982; Lerner and Miller 1978; Kiecolt-Glaser and Williams 1987).

Men still determine norms in partner-relationships in Russia and legislators have not been engaged in improving laws protecting women from sexual and physical violence. "According to reconstructed statistics, in Russia, every forty minutes a woman dies at the hands of a close male: her husband, cohabitant, father or friend. Domestic violence is the same as femicide, both being based on the belief that a woman is not an equal person to a man" (Kharitonova 2015, 24). Currently Russia has no law protecting individuals against sexual harassment. Furthermore, in February 2017, the government decriminalized some forms of domestic

violence that had previously been on the books (Walker 2017). The problem of violence against women might be indicative and/ or the result of the low status of gender equality in other spheres of social life. Only 15% of the Lower House of Russia's State Duma consists of women members (IPU PARLINE Database 2018).

The unequal status of women in society is reinforced (Ashwin 2012, 337) by sexist and patriarchal attitudes characteristic of “rape culture” that permeate Russian media and public discourse. “In the 2000s some Soviet policy themes, in particular the pro-natalist emphasis on women's role as mothers, were resurrected in a modified form” (Ashwin 2012, 329). Popular Russian TV shows such as “Let's get Married” (“*Давай поженимся*”) and “Fashion Judgment” (“*Модный приговор*”) are illustrative of this, and have promoted marriage as the most important factor in women's success for over a decade. An incident on another national show (“Let Them Talk” – “*Пусть говорят*”) further illustrates the point. In March 2017, a rape victim named Diana S. was subjected to public condemnation and mass internet-bullying (Berg 2017). Subsequently, the Burger King Company in Russia created an advertisement wherein a girl without a visible face was painted mimicking a hand gesture used by Diana to indicate how little vodka she had in her bloodstream at the time of her attack. In the advertisement, the gesture indicated that the promotion would be “limited” in duration (*Meduza* 2017).

Victim-blaming in Russian society is quite common. The above-mentioned programs regularly faulted the single women appearing on them for their inability to keep a man, often criticizing their wardrobe and behavior.

## Women's linguistic agency, and rape culture

Public discourses and the way experiences of sexual violence are narrated fundamentally affect how the issue is treated by the general public, legal system and its institutions, e.g., law enforcement. Linguistic agency of various actors engaged in the debate on sexual violence, including women, is of crucial importance. Laura M. Ahearn (in her essay “Language and Agency”) illuminates the meaning of linguistic agency noting that: “because language and culture are so tightly interwoven, neither should be studied in isolation from the other, especially when a researcher seeks to understand a concept as complex as agency” (2001, 131). Ahearn argues that the concept of linguistic agency offers promise, maintaining “that attending closely to linguistic structures and practices can shed even more light on practice theorists' main dilemma: how social reproduction becomes social transformation” (Ibidem). Moreover, categories of grammar “construct the roles of Subject, Agent, and Object differently,” and by examining them, researchers can gain much insight as to “how people attribute responsibility, credit, or blame for an event” (Ibidem). Engaging with discursive aspects of linguistic agency

is equally crucial for such an analysis, as it illuminates how gender limits access to public discourse.

In the social sciences, it is feminist theory that “is intensively involved in questions over access to discourse” (Mills 1997, 97), that women do not have the same access to discourse as men. For instance, as Raewyn Connell has noted, rape is “routinely presented in media as individual deviance, a form of person-to-person violence deeply embedded in power inequalities and ideology of male supremacy. Far from being a deviation from the social order, it is in a significant sense an enforcement of it” (Collin 2009, 116).

Gender-based violence can also be described by the term “rape culture,” a concept which first emerged and crystallized in the 1970s Margaret Lazurus’s and Renner Wunderlich’s 1975 documentary, *Rape Culture*, was an early example of discussing the term within the context of cultural normalization (Peters and Besley 2018, 3). In rape culture, women are subject to the constant threat of violence ranging from sexual comments and sexual/physical touching to direct rape. In such a social, cultural and symbolic context, both men and women treat sexual violence as a commonplace fact. Some feminists of the 1960s–70s argued that historically, sexuality is a form of male domination. Most famously, Catharine MacKinnon stated that “feminism fundamentally identifies sexuality as the sphere of male power” (Jaggar 1983, 105). Social scientists, policymakers, feminist researchers and activists from around the world have all argued that women experience gender-based discrimination (Collin 2009; Hatty 2000; Smiths 2014; WHO 2017; UN Women).

### **#IamNotScaredToSpeak: A brief history of the hashtag campaign**

The #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign triggered widespread hashtag activism to further the feminist cause of fighting violence against women. On July 5, 2016, Anastasia Melnychenko, the head of NGO Studena (whose main activities focus on social adaptation of military veterans, gender equality and human rights activism) (NGO Studena 2018) launched a campaign on Facebook under the Ukrainian hashtag #ЯнеБоюсьСказати with the following request: “I want women to speak today. Let us talk about the violence that most of us have experienced.” After describing her own traumatic experiences with sexual assault, Melnychenko concluded her post with the words: “[I]t’s important for us women to talk about our experiences. It is important to make them visible. Please speak. #IamNotScaredToSpeak” (Melnychenko 2016).

The campaign stayed in active mode for one month. The post of Melnychenko (2016) received over 2,000 comments with many later additions in 2017 and 2018. Thousands of women responded to Melnychenko’s call to share their experiences. Less than a day after the campaign was launched in Ukraine, shares were expanded to Russian Facebook and the hashtag

was translated into Russian – *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* (Mingalieva 2016). From then on, the two campaigns developed simultaneously within Ukraine and Russia.

Studies have shown that hashtag activism has become a new and popular form of mobilization in recent years. As a social phenomenon, it started on the platform Twitter:

Hashtag activism, a term that entered the public consciousness when New York Times media columnist David Carr (2012) wrote of the phenomenon, gives communicators an ability to streamline their messaging on the micro-blogging social networking platform. The hashtag, a function of Twitter that allows users to cluster their tweets around a single issue or focus, has garnered growing media interest in the wake of well-publicized efforts stemming from the Arab Spring and Occupy movements. (Moscato 2016, 3)

After the events of the Arab Spring, activists resorted to using hashtags to attract public attention on a wide range of issues on Twitter, and various other social media platforms such as Facebook (Moscato 2016). An important difference between hashtag platforms relates to post limitations. In 2016, tweets on Twitter were limited to 140 characters (Wagner 2017) whereas Facebook offered authors the wherewithal to narrate and detail their stories more emotionally (e.g. Melnychenko's post had 2,475 characters).

Hashtags have become, in effect, a "Wikipedia data base" of social media platforms. In terms of hashtag campaigns, one could easily navigate and find updated news regarding a topic framed by particular hashtags and every participant becomes akin to a news reporter, thus helping social media platforms become (uncensored and emotional) forums for public debates on crucial social issues.

## Methodology of the Study. Discourse Analysis. Data Collection

Discourse analysis is often used to determine how social action is shaped, by examining patterns of meaning conveyed by the words that people employed concerning an issue (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002). Blache and Durrheim (1999) add that authors' motivations may be apparent or just implied. Such an examination can illuminate participants' ideological perspectives and/or motivations. The hashtag campaign was itself an attempt to change the existing discourse in which sexist insults and misogyny prevailed. In this case, we are not simply analyzing power, domination and inequality, but challenging the dominance that has taken shape in society. For social scientists, discourse is a broad range of social practices (Tannen, Hamilton, and Schiffrin 2018).

I have herein used the method of Discourse Analysis for this study, applying it to the issue of the social media hashtag movement, *#IAMNotScaredToSpeak*. For the purpose of my analysis, in January 2018, I collected Facebook posts with the hashtag *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* and selected 50 of them (based on the criteria below). I used this hashtag as the search query term.

All posts were manually collected and dated between July and August of 2016. Half of the entries were posts of people who shared their stories; the other half belonged to those who reacted to them, sharing their positive or negative opinions. Selected posts met the following criteria: they received a minimum of 10 likes and 2 comments; i.e., they were entries that became starting points for discussion. The great majority, but not all of the participants, were female.

In my analysis, I identified the emerging themes in the posts and developed an analytical framework to organize them. I conducted textual analysis of the collected data on a thematic basis and divided posts into groups based on the following authors' positions: active participants who shared their traumatic experience, their supporters, skeptics and people engaging in victim blaming or belittling these encounters.

## Initial Findings

In the following paragraphs my aim is to examine the new narratives that entered the public discourses and empowered women's linguistic agency. At the same time, it is apparent that such interventions met with resistance leaving the Russian public hesitant towards debates about sexual violence. Within the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign, some women shared stories of sexual assault, which focused on their experiences while others brought up fear, shame and guilt as important components that support the "rape culture." In the analysis of these posts, another aspect became apparent: eleven of the posts used both Ukrainian and Russian language hashtags. This expression of solidarity between Ukrainian and Russian women represented a unique commonality in public debates within these two otherwise warring countries. It also showed the transnational, cross boundary aspect of the campaign.

My analysis of the collected posts revealed the existence of diverse and polarized opinions within the campaign. The first group of posts had the tone of a war manifesto with protest slogans against the existing discrimination. The second group of posts was colored by strong emotions as well, but more out of irritation. They questioned whether a problem really exists and offered support for the existing social order.

In the following sections I present and analyze the most common themes from the authors' collected data: those who experienced sexual assault and shared their stories and those who reacted to the campaign, as such.

## 1. Analysis of people's shared posts framed with the hashtag *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать*.

### *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* as a manifesto against fear

Scholars of linguistic agency argue that wording and word order play an important role in constructing an agent or an object of an action. Such was the case with *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* where the topic of fear was addressed in several dozen posts and exemplified by these women's statements:

I'm not scared to speak, but I'm scared of many other things:

- to go alone by taxi;
- to go out in shoes and clothes, in which it will be difficult to run, if need be, to escape;
- to return home alone in a state of intoxication;
- to wear short skirts or shorts.

It can be said that my experience is basically an experience of fear.

In fact, I'm afraid, and for a long time I'll be afraid, and the rage inside me is as if it happened yesterday.

When I pass that street now, my heart contracts from fear.

Participants acknowledged the existence of a culture that cultivates women's fear, in other words, rape culture. Many posts followed the hashtag with the phrase "I'm really scared, but I'll try to speak now." The hashtag itself was a kind of manifesto, a challenge not only to society and the dominant discourse, but to itself, an attempt to overcome public fear. The campaign's form, a hashtag online movement, provided a platform for mobilizing Russian women and gave them linguistic agency to participate.

### Self-blame, predicting social anger

Authors who shared their experience often expressed feelings of shame and guilt. They seemed to foresee the reaction of society in advance, even choosing silence. They tended to project the wrath of society onto themselves, attributing the blame for what happened to themselves, as evidenced below:

What was special that happened? You're not the only one. It was I myself who had come! I, myself who did not refuse champagne. I, myself who stood as a dumb idol while he did what he did.

I was ashamed. I'm still ashamed – like many others.

Why did you not tell anyone? Because it's scary. Because apart from condemnation, embarrassed banter and even frank jeers I did not expect anything.

As many studies have indicated, such self-blaming can occur when survivors themselves sometimes attempt to make sense of their having been subjected to violence and/or negative experiences seeking some reason, any reason, to explain why it occurred to them (Richardson and Campbell 1982; Lerner and Miller 1978; Kiecolt-Glaser and Williams 1987).

Being put in such a vulnerable position affects women in a threefold manner: after experiencing humiliation from the rapist, the woman may then be publicly condemned or subjected to ridicule in some manner and this while coping with her own sense of guilt and shame for what happened. Foreseeing such a reaction, women provided detailed explanations in their posts that aimed to counteract societal stereotypes with regards to sexual assaults:

“I was without make-up in normal clothing”

“I was without make-up in sporty clothing. It was 1pm on a crowded street.”

In this manner, the authors pushed-back against the stereotype that only women who dressed sexually provoked men's aggression. At the same time, these posts' authors were, in a way, seeking social pardon, suspecting themselves of some sort of wrongdoing. Anastasia Malnychenko's opening campaign words are instructive: “I want us to not justify»I was walking in my sport clothes during the day time and I was still grabbed.« Because we do not have to justify it. We are not guilty. A rapist is ALWAYS guilty.” (Melnychenko's Facebook page 2016). In this manner, survivors reproduced discourse that was typical for “rape culture,” wherein women were often blamed for their own sexual assault, and were required to prove that they did not provoke the aggression in any way (as if aggression could be provoked – a common precept in rape culture societies).

### **Protest against stereotypes from rape culture**

Feminist researchers have emphasized that there are common myths about rape that support rape culture (Burt 1980; Russell 1982; Ussher 1997). One of the myths is that sexual assault occurs rarely. The authors of posts that shared stories about sexual harassment often fought with their own established stereotypes. In particular, they emphasized the frequency and prevalence of this phenomenon:

I think each of us [women] has something to tell.

It always seemed to me that in my life, as in the life of most women, there were several cases of harassment. I began to dig into my memory. Not a few. Dozens.

Thus, authors sought to refute the stereotype that violence or sexual harassment only happened to those who provoked it. They also drew attention to the fact that sexual harassment in society is considered the norm:

The worst thing is that in our society THIS is the NORM OF LIFE. You understand? Violence and coercion is the norm of our life with you.

This is some kind of general idiocy, everyone knows that it exists, but everyone is silent. And people feel dirty and guilty. But it is obvious that only one is guilty – a rapist.

The authors used emotionally colored speech in their posts. They often resorted to capital letters so that posts sounded like screaming.

### The image of a predator of sexual assault and the place of action

Posts under *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* also contributed to the fight against the stereotype that a rapist is always someone else, i.e., the “restrictive criteria” that strangers (choosing their prospective victims on the basis of some visual triggers) are the primary rapists. This stereotype clouds the entire issue of rape’s true nature, as sexual violence is actually often committed by a partner, husband or relative, thus silencing most victims (Temkin and Krahe 2008). Women participating in the campaign stated:

*#IamNotScaredToSpeak*, although actually I'm scared. Because it was my relative, significantly older than me. I was 12. [...] but fortunately I sobbed and refused to follow him.

I hardly survived the birth of my child, I was sewn up after a difficult birth. I did not know that I could resist, and say no to my husband. The man is more important. He needs sex.

The last passage refers us to a broader feminist discourse that a man has the prerogative wherein he dominates a woman, who has no right to object. According to the WHO, “30% of ever-partnered women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner” (WHO 2013, 2). However, such crimes do not fit into society’s rape myth where the perpetrator is an unknown violent stranger. The campaign, *#IamNotScaredToSpeak*, gave

voice to women who experienced sexual violence from their partners and brought this problem into public debate.

### Intentions to participate in the campaign. Women's solidarity

Campaign participants often explained their motives as the desire to change the public mood against victims of sexual assault by asking men to think about woman's desires, encouraging parents to pay attention to their children and expressing solidarity with other women:

I hate violence. I do not want my daughter to face violence. I want boys to read about this and NOT BECOME violators. Read the stories on the hashtag, read the comments. You will understand a lot. Girls! You will realize that you are not alone.

And now I want to say, girls, my darlings, my bold ones – I am with you.

Thousands of stories with the hashtags *яНеБоюсьСказать* and *яНеБоюсьСказать* eloquently illustrate why we need feminism... I need feminism so as not to be afraid. I need feminism to fight. I need feminism to change this. I need feminism to win.

The last comment touches on a very important topic: this campaign was the first large-scale manifestation of women's solidarity in Russia. As the press secretary of Transparency International Russia, Anastasia Karimova, noted: "It seems to me that what arose was a request for a feminist discourse, which was previously not present in Russia ... What is happening now with this campaign is quite in line with the actualization of feminism and the struggle for women's rights in general" (Medvedev 2016).

## 2. Analysis of campaign reaction posts

Reaction posts fell within a variety of categories: pro-feminist reactions *supporting victims; criticism, supporting the existing power dominated discourse; and conspiracy theories relating to the discussion of Russian-Ukrainian relations.*

### Pro-feminist reactions supporting victims

The majority of analyzed posts within this category, were written by men. (Women also expressed their support for others, but more commonly only after sharing their own personal

experiences.) There were three particular posts in which a male stated that he should take his own behavior into account:

What a shocking campaign. I started to think, perhaps, I also have to apologize in front of some people. Of course, I knew that it's common, but I didn't know TO WHAT EXTENT...

After reading lots of posts with the hashtag #IamNotScaredToSpeak, I called one girl to apologize for my past behavior, but she said "what are you talking about"

I wish I knew how painful things could be. I might need to also apologize, I think all of us men need to do so.

The motive of apologizing was present in all these posts. Despite such apologies being uncommon, many women commented that it was already a small step toward changing the dominant attitude. Through these examples, we can see the shift of existing power relations, as more men started to realize that fear of violence is a tool of unhealthy dominance.

Another common motive in posts expressing support was admiration for the courage of people who shared their traumatic experience:

Thank you for your courage!

Such brave people – I am impressed!

I am ashamed of the reaction of many men. I'm ashamed not only for the mentality of men, but also for the Russian mentality, for our inability to hear and feel compassion.

The respondents expressing appreciation were both male and female.

### **Criticism, supporting the existing power dominated discourse**

On the other hand, many comments, supported the dominant discourse by referring to the guilt of victims, blaming them for fabricating stories and/or exaggerating them:

I'd like to remind everyone that in most cases the victim is guilty for the sexual assault!

What do you expect from us, from men? [...] A man always needs sex and women remind him about it every second they wear short skirts and stuff.

Nostalgic marathon of sex stories “oh, I was young once, and all men wanted me”

There were posts of people who did not understand the point of the action, and the common theme of such posts was to attack the exhibitionism of the participants:

Sorry, I don't understand anything in this campaign, but I can't stop thinking that many stories are of a dreaming nature.

I take this action as the exhibitionism of souls.

Well, this is exhibitionism, this is the result of such harassment; this is not therapy. This will not help anyone.

These reactions correspond with the dominant discourse and stereotypes about women and their modesty.

### Conspiracy theories relating to the discussion of Russian-Ukrainian Relations

Another popular reaction to the campaign involved an effort by Facebook users to identify a mechanism of manipulation while expressing skepticism about the movement:

I told you that your campaign was a total manipulation. Read this article! And do not let others cheat you! [Link to website].

The above comment was followed by a link to a media source analyzing manipulation techniques on the internet to encourage other people to accept this point of view. Comments with links to articles were not uncommon:

I would like to ask Anastasia Melnychenko: does she want to launch the same campaign on her Facebook with the confessions of the inhabitants of the "ATO zone" telling about other rapes ...?

People, are you serious? How can you join this stupid campaign organized with some American grants?

These two comments were typical for users who accepted official Russian government sources that delivered a message of Russia being surrounded by enemies. The first commenter suspected a connection between the initiator of the campaign and the Ukrainian Army fighting in the East of the country; the second commenter saw an American conspiracy. (A more

thorough analysis of these aspects is beyond the scope of this paper; it is a topic that itself requires additional research and is thus addressed here only cursorily.)

In a way it is curious that the campaign had political features and provoked political discussion. It was an exceptional mass movement (the first since protests for fair elections in 2011–2012). Another significant feature of the campaign was the simultaneous functioning of two hashtags, in Ukrainian and Russian, in many of the posts. The Russian action responded to the Ukrainian one and existed in parallel with it. Given the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, this action was a curious exception with authors of posts participating in a public debate that was now uniting the warring countries.

### Context of the Campaign

*#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* started at the grass-roots level of ordinary people with celebrities joining the discussion a few days later (Krasnova 2016). This was a significant contrast with the *#MeToo* movement, which was started by celebrities. Alyssa Milano, (and others) who encouraged women to share their experiences of sexual assault popularized the hashtag *#MeToo* (Chuck 2017) and spurred the movement to become a truly global feminist protest. In contrast, *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* was initiated by a Ukrainian human rights activist. While Anastasia Melnychenko was an activist with several thousands of followers, her stature in either Ukraine or Russia was not at all comparable with that of a Hollywood star with a mass following. Melnychenko's following in Russia was not even that of a low-level famous person. Yet, her appeal to women to speak out on the issue of sexual harassment elicited a mass response of a grass-roots nature, as well as subsequent media attention.

Moreover, the environment in Russia where the *#ЯНеБоюсьСказать* campaign developed, was not at all comparable to the one in which the *#MeToo* movement gained traction. Russian civil society differs to what exists in many other countries, particularly in many European nations and North America, where campaigns of a protest nature are not uncommon. Two factors account for this: one is historical and the other results from the current politics of the Russian government. The historical factor is argued by Crotty (2009, 87):

The legacy of the Soviet Union still casts a shadow over the development of Russian civil society. It continues to shape the structure of Russian society and the propensity of individuals to engage with social movements and other civic organisations. In this context the Soviet Union's approach to civic activity remains a topic of debate within the literature, with some scholars viewing Soviet civil society as "historically weak" or "oppressed" and actively removed from society (Nichols 1996; Osgood & Ong 2001; Woolcock 1998; Kennedy et al. 1998). Others contend that Soviet civil society was not weak, but "institutionalised." (Rose 1995; Mishler & Rose 1997; Hartner 1998)

More recent political actions relating to “the regime’s restrictions on the right to public protest and on the independence of the media” (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 544) further complicated the environment for Russian citizens to have their voices heard. “[A] 2006 nongovernmental organization (NGO) law increased the power of the Justice Ministry to monitor NGOs not seen as supportive of Putin, checking a sphere dominated by professional women” (Johnson & Saarinen 2013, 544). Additionally, since 2012, administrative responsibility for holding and participating in rallies was tightened. This led Nils Muiznieks, the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, to publish a memorandum castigating Russia for “the right to freedom of assembly [which] has been curtailed in recent years, particularly as regards the organisers’ autonomy in deciding on the place and the manner of holding public events” as well as “restrictive interpretations” of government policies which have, for Russian citizens, become, “a *de facto* obligation to seek authorization for holding public events. At the same time, the already severe sanctions have been dramatically increased by the legislative changes and have been widely applied” (Council of Europe 2017).

## Conclusion

The scandal in Hollywood with Harvey Weinstein (and the subsequent #MeToo campaign) has been referred to by some Russian media outlets as the American version of #IamNotScaredToSpeak (Klimushkina 2017; Deutsche Welle RU 2017; Balaeva 2017). This stems from the fact that #IamNotScaredToSpeak actually preceded #MeToo. However, the Russian campaign is rarely seen as the starting point of the global conversation about sexual violence and women’s solidarity against it. A number of scholars attribute this to the lack of visibility of East European feminism vis-à-vis a perceived Western feminism hegemony (Jung 1994; Havelkova 1996; Slavova 2006; Blagojevic 2004; Kasic 2004). This is a question which requires more research.

In relation to the restrictions that the Russian state places on its citizens to organize and engage in mass activity of a protest nature, the #ЯНеБоюсьСказать hashtag and internet campaign was an unprecedented mobilization of voices in the Russian public sphere as well as a political protest able to utilize few alternate forums. It reached an audience that would have been difficult to reach otherwise. Without a doubt, spontaneity was one of the most important features of #ЯНеБоюсьСказать and could have been a factor of its unprecedented traction in Russia, which drew the issue of violence against women into the mainstream of Russian public discourse. Melnychenko’s campaign needs to be seen in this context.

One result was that, feminist discourse gained unprecedented public attention in Russian social media as well as drawing in more traditional Russian media. The #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign was not specified as feminist and it was not common for

its women-participants to identify themselves as feminists. However, in my opinion, raising the important issue of violence against women with the intention of breaking the silence made this campaign de-facto feminist. The campaign also contributed to women's solidarity building as women-participants mutually acknowledged sexual violence and oppression by men. I argue that other feminist driven campaigns (such as #andIamaFeminist, #NotTheReasonToKill) and subsequent reactions on social media to sexism in advertisements and cases of domestic violence that have been initiated in Russian social media since 2016 would not have been possible without the exposure and coverage that the #яНеБоюсьСказать campaign engendered.

Traditional media sources actively followed the #яНеБоюсьСказать campaign for two months. #IamNotScaredToSpeak challenged women to share their traumatic experiences and offered women linguistic agency in the following ways:

- It was led by women, and it engaged with predominantly female audiences (thus creating a situation in which women gained control over how their experiences of sexual violence were narrated).
- It happened outside the legal, power system.
- It was not coordinated “from above.”
- It utilized the more democratic space of the internet; providing a forum for people, including women (as well as marginal actors, perhaps without the financial wherewithal and/or access to intellectual discourse) to speak directly about their experiences (without mediation “experts,” i.e., the male point of view).

As discussed previously, gender limits individual opportunities and access to public discourse and the transformation of the associated *Structural* norms is a slow and often confrontational process. My research supports this, revealing that the campaign, being orientated to women and focused on sexual violence in Russia, was accompanied by a strong backlash based on denial and victim blaming – strategies often used to disregard sexual violence in other social and cultural contexts. Yet, #IamNotScaredToSpeak influenced the dominant discourse by providing platforms for people to express their experiences. In an interview, Melnychenko described her motives:

The idea of the campaign...arose after I read one discussion where the victim of violence was accused of being guilty. In the country [Ukraine], and indeed in the post-Soviet space, instead of unconditionally blaming the rapist, society immediately begins to look for – what the woman did wrong, why did this happen to her? Maybe she was in a short skirt, or was going home late, or maybe she was drunk. It turns out that the woman is to blame simply because she was born a woman. (Melnychenko in Skibickaya 2016)

Russian sociologist Kharitonova argues that to fight the existing rape culture in Russian society and to overcome the violence it produces requires owning up to its existence. Only

then can the basis of the whole culture (the paradigm of social building) begin to be changed (Kharitonova 2015, 25). The extent to which public discourse has been challenged by this campaign is an issue for further study. However, it is clear from my study's initial results that a new narrative may be in the process of forming and is a direct result of this campaign's elevation of women's solidarity and increased discussion of such taboo topics as sexual harassment in Russian society. #ЯНеБоюсьСказать posts have not been removed and are still accessible to online searches. The hashtag remains in the collective memory and to this day traditional Russian media still refer to it in their coverage. Posts in 2017, subsequent to the initial campaign, used two or more hashtags such as #MeToo and #ЯНеБоюсьСказать, reinforcing the idea that the #IamNotScaredToSpeak campaign was successful and remains present in Russian society.

The transnational nature of #IamNotScaredToSpeak, with its origin in Ukraine and its reach into other post-Soviet spaces, is another indication of its resonance. Dina Smailova, a resident of Kazakhstan, decided to share her story by creating the hashtags #ЯНеБоюсьСказатьи #НеМолчиKZ (#Don'tKeepYourSilenceKazakhstan). After launching the campaign in Kazakhstan, she soon followed up with the creation of an assistance organization for victims of sexual violence *НеМолчиKZ* (Aleseeva 2017). Users of Russian Facebook were continuing to post under the hashtag #IamNotScaredToSpeak at the time of this article's completion in 2019. Moreover, other feminist campaigns have been initiated in Russian social media since 2016. A Russian Facebook and Instagram campaign dates from February of 2018 and uses the hashtag #ИЯФеминистка (#andIamAfeminist).

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**TYTUŁ:** #ЯНеБоюсьСказать (#NieBojęSięPowiedzieć) kampania z lipca 2016 roku na rosyjskojęzycznym Facebooku: analiza dyskursu

**ABSTRAKT:** Aktywizm cyfrowy lub hashtagowy na platformach społecznościowych, takich jak Twitter i Facebook, w ostatnim czasie zyskał popularność na całym świecie. Kampanie takie jak #MeToo i #YesAllWomen zwróciły uwagę na problem przemocy ze względu na płeć i mizoginię. Artykuł ten jest poświęcony podobnej, ale wyjątkowej kampanii – #ЯНеБоюсьСказать (#NieBojęSięPowiedzieć) – która odbyła się w rosyjskojęzycznej społeczności Facebooka w lipcu 2016 roku. (Po tym wydarzeniu identyczną kampanię rozpoczęto na Ukrainie, a następnie w innych byłych radzieckich republikach, między innymi w Kazachstanie.) Cel tego artykułu jest dwojaki. Po pierwsze, przeprowadzając analizę dyskursu, autorka przygląda się postom związanym z #NieBojęSięPowiedzieć i stawia tezę, że kampania, w wyniku aktywnego udziału kobiet, zwiększyła widoczność problemu przemocy seksualnej. Uczestniczki kampanii, które zdecydowały się ujawnić osobiste doświadczenia swoje i innych, pomogły zwiększyć znaczenie kobiecego sprawstwa językowego i uczyniły #NieBojęSięPowiedzieć pierwszym jak dotąd dużym ruchem feministycznym w Rosji. Po drugie, autorka bada specyfikę kampanii #NieBojęSięPowiedzieć i stwierdza, że miała ona przede wszystkim charakter oddolny, a samoorganizacja i udział zwykłych ludzi były kluczowe dla powstania ruchu. W przeciwieństwie do #NieBojęSięPowiedzieć kampania #MeToo,

działająca w kontekście zachodnim, była w dużej mierze inicjowana i prowadzona przez gwiazdy.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** ruch feministyczny, przemoc ze względu na płeć w Rosji, cyfrowy aktywizm, #NieBojęSię-Powiedzieć