Micromobilizing Emotion: How Feminist Anti-War Resistance Builds Affective Infrastructure in Exile

Karolina Nugumanova[a,1,*]

[a] *Political Science and Sociology, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy*

Abstract

How do grassroots feminist movements convert moral shock into sustained resistance under war, repression, and exile? This article examines the diasporic wing of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR/FAS), a transnational network of Russian feminists formed in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Drawing on 56 in-depth interviews with activists in 25 countries, it conceptualizes FAS as an *affective infrastructure* that joins affect, meaning, and materiality to enable emotional survival and political resistance. Extending Ward's micromobilization model, the article advances the concept of *productive mediation*—a feminist process that transforms morally charged emotions into politically meaningful action and sustained participation. FAS's repertoire—symbolic performances, embodied signals, grief activism, and care-based practices—creates an emotionally resonant, low-threshold path into and back to collective action in diasporic and authoritarian settings. The analysis shows how alignment of ideology, horizontal and decentralized structure, and ritual lowers entry costs, supports withdrawal and return after burnout, and renders dissent durable. The article contributes to three literatures: affect theory and micromobilization; feminist scholarship on exile and forced migration; and research on transnational feminist infrastructures under authoritarianism. It argues that FAS does not treat emotional labor as ancillary to politics but centers it as a generative force. Rather than merely enduring the emotional fallout of war, FAS channels difficult emotions—grief, guilt, and fear—into collective feminist action, making participation emotionally bearable and sustainable over time.

Keywords: Feminist Anti-War Resistance, affective infrastructure, productive mediation, micromobilization, diasporic activism

*Corresponding author.
Email address: karolina.nugumanova@sns.it (Karolina Nugumanova)
[1] ORCID: 0000-0002-4811-0837.

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War is never only material or geopolitical; it also cuts through the most personal layers of existence—our bodies, emotions, and gendered relations. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of Russians who opposed the war and soon left the country. According to panel estimates from OutRush—a project on Russian post-2022 emigration—over 800,000 people have emigrated since the invasion; 78% cited disagreement with government policies as a key reason for leaving (Kamalov et al., 2025). This cohort is younger, urban, digitally connected, and markedly more egalitarian than those who remained in Russia (Kamalov et al., 2024), and many describe the war as an event that unleashed sadness, depression, guilt, and responsibility—emotions deeply entangled with longer histories of gendered trauma (Nugumanova, 2024).

Within days, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAS) emerged, issuing a manifesto translated into 14 languages and inviting anyone who shared its principles to form a local cell, in Russia or abroad. Currently, FAS coordinates dozens of autonomous groups in more than 30 countries. Its dual agenda—explicit feminism and anti-imperial anti-militarism—and its horizontal, cell-based structure make it one of the most visible exile movements. FAS's repertoire ranges from grief vigils and nail polish "quiet pickets" to mutual aid and legal support, blending symbolic expression with practical solidarity.

This article asks how exile movements like FAS convert war-induced emotions into sustained forms of feminist dissent. To answer this, I build on and extend Ward (2016) multi-stage recruitment model of micromobilization, which maps the progression from trigger to collective action through cognitive, affective, and structural mechanisms. While productive, this model treats emotion largely as a catalyst for collective action, and leaves gendered dynamics and long-term engagement underdeveloped.

To address this gap, I adopt the concept of "productive mediation" (Friedman and Rodríguez Gustá, 2023)—a cyclical feminist process and praxis that transforms emotion into sustainable action—and apply it to the case of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance. Building on the term "affective infrastructure" (Näre and Jokela, 2023), I argue that FAS functions as such a system that combines meanings, affect, and materiality and enables emotional survival, symbolic resistance, and durable activism under conditions of dispersion, repression, and exhaustion. Put simply, my argument is that movements like FAS work to take chaotic, destabilizing, or even paralyzing emotions such as grief, guilt, and fear, and reframe and redirect them into forms of feeling that are appropriate for collective action and feminist protest. What is distinctive about FAS is not just that it channels raw emotions into activism, but that its organizational

structure, emotional practices, and repertoire of symbolic, low-risk rituals together create conditions for sustainable participation. These features lower the threshold of entry, make it possible for activists to return even after burnout, and provide safer, more durable ways of engaging in dissent. In this way, FAS enables political engagement to be not just an immediate reaction, but also a form of long-term feminist resistance.

Drawing on 56 in-depth interviews with FAS activists across 25 countries, I show how this infrastructure is built and sustained—not only through ideology and structure, but also through affective repertoires such as symbolic street performances, care-based routines, and embodied protest rituals. These micropractices are more than expressive acts; they serve as mechanisms of emotional continuity, ethical alignment, and feminist world-making.

By centering productive mediation as a feminist logic of micromobilization, the article contributes to three overlapping literatures: (1) affect theory and micromobilization in social movement studies; (2) feminist politics of exile and forced migration; and (3) the emergence of transnational feminist infrastructures under authoritarianism. FAS is neither flawless nor universally embraced—some feminists critique its limits on solidarity or uneven praxis—but its form, fragility, and persistence offer a powerful case for rethinking how movements endure: not despite emotion, but through it.

1. Gendered Emotions, Feminist Infrastructures, and Political Mobilization in Exile

War exposes and intensifies gendered hierarchies—in roles, bodies, and emotions. As Sjoberg and Via (2010) and Goldstein (2001) argue, war re-arms militarized masculinities while casting femininity as vulnerable, violated, or caregiving. These hierarchies, according to Ahmed (2013), reverberate through the emotions that war elicits: grief, guilt, rage, and shame tend to "stick" to bodies and narratives along gendered lines of power. Feminist scholarship has long demonstrated how women and other feminized subjects are socialized into "relational" emotions—care, responsibility, and moral sorrow—while male-coded anger is more readily recognized as politically legitimate. Feminized affects are often dismissed as private, irrational, or apolitical (Hochschild, 1979; Whittier, 2001; Taylor and Rupp, 2002).

Despite these insights, emotions remained marginal in mainstream social movement theory for much of the 20th century. Resource mobilization models of the 1970s reframed protest as rational and strategic, correcting earlier assumptions of "mob psychology" but erasing affect. Critics such as Piven and Cloward (1995) countered that such models overemphasized organizational continuity and ignored the disruptive, emotional nature of protest. Feminist scholars pushed further. Craddock (2020), for example, critiques how "malestream" social movement theories privilege rational and structural explanation while sidelining the gendered dynamics of participation, motivation, and labor. Movements, she argues, are not neutral arenas but gendered spaces where emotions shape both entry points for activism and everyday practices. Emotions are also

gendered, and their role should not be obscured by rationality, especially in rapidly changing contexts.

The "emotional turn" (Jasper, 1998; Goodwin et al., 2001) reintroduced emotion into social movement theory, yet gender aspects often remained underresearched. Emotions like anger, hope, and grief are often treated as universal, despite the fact that some affects (such as pride and rage) circulate more easily in masculine-coded registers, while others (guilt, care, shame) are feminized and devalued. Moreover, emotional labor is unevenly distributed. Even progressive and "fluid" movements often rely on women to perform the unacknowledged work of care, maintenance, and morale (Hochschild, 1979; Acker, 2006; Nugumanova, 2024).

Survey data further highlight these asymmetries. The 2022 OutRush dataset shows that 55% of Russian migrant women who left after the invasion reported feeling guilty for the war, compared to 48% of men; 64% of women and 57% of men felt responsible; and 78% of women versus 65% of men wanted to make amends (Nugumanova, 2024). These "feminized" emotions like guilt and compassion correlate with higher female participation in anti-war action—the so-called reverse gender gap—suggesting that guilt and compassion may serve as mobilizing forces, rather than inhibitions. As Nugumanova concludes, war-induced emotions appear to be among the strongest predictors of post-migration political engagement among Russian emigrants.

Yet emotions alone are often not sufficient for political engagement. Ward's (2016) recruitment micromobilization model identifies three stages in this process: ideological commitment (the formation of mobilization potential), motivation to act (a shift from sympathy to readiness), and overt participation (crossing practical thresholds to action). At each stage, Ward maps three types of mechanisms: cognitive (frames and identities), affective (emotional development), and structural (social and organizational ties). Crucially, he centers personal connections—both informal and organizational—as key to facilitating movement across stages.

While this model offers valuable insights into how networks and organizations recruit participants into action, it proves less equipped to fully capture the dynamics of feminist mobilization under conditions of war and authoritarianism. In such contexts, several complementary insights from feminist literature and theories of moral shock can help deepen and extend its explanatory power.

First, emotions play a more central role than Ward's framework allows. In his account, emotions function primarily as accelerants—short-term catalysts—rather than as enduring political forces. Yet in the context of war and forced migration, emotion is not just a trigger—it is the terrain on which political engagement unfolds. In feminist movements, such emotions are not transitional but constitutive.

Second, the model is gender-neutral. Robnett's (1996) concept of "bridge leaders"—often women who connect grassroots actors to more formal leadership—demonstrates how emotional registers, network structures, and political pathways are deeply gendered. Movements grounded in horizontal, care-based organizing—typically led by women—often mobilize through different logics than those struc-

tured around vertical, command-style hierarchies, which are more characteristic of male-dominated movements.

Third, the model pays little attention to participant retention—an issue that Ward himself anticipates as an important direction for future research. He rightly asks: *Why stop with actual participation?* This question is especially pressing in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. More than three years into the full-scale invasion, exhaustion and activist burnout are widespread. Ward's model explains micromobilization as a threshold—an endpoint of recruitment—rather than the beginning of a longer process of remobilization. But in ongoing political crises, what matters most is not just how people are mobilized initially, but also how they remain engaged over time.

This is where theories of moral shock and emotions offer a vital complement. Whereas earlier work—such as Jasper and Poulsen's (1995) foundational concept of *moral shock*—emphasized sudden emotional triggers that spur political engagement, more-recent scholarship argues that such approaches often reduce emotional dynamics to isolated catalysts, overlooking their social complexity and cultural embeddedness (Flam, 2015; Sevelsted and Toubøl, 2023). Munson (2010), for example, suggests that moral shock alone is not always sufficient to produce sustained action, though it can help enable it. As Flam (2015) argues, often, moral shock must be socially processed: its meaning interpreted by movement actors, discussed within networks, and channeled through supportive environments. Without this, the same rupture may solidify into emotional disorientation or withdrawal. Flam (2015) emphasizes that the work of "subverting" emotions is especially necessary for slow-burning emotions such as grief, guilt, and fear, in contrast to fleeting outrage that may provoke immediate protest. She further argues that a key task for movements is to legitimize collective anger, reduce paralyzing fear, and cultivate alternative "feeling rules" and counter-emotions that foster emotional solidarity. Protest rituals (e.g., chants, songs, embodied gestures) can transform individual affect into mutual courage and a sense of collective efficacy. From this perspective, emotional sustainability relies not only on ideology or structure but also on a movement's ability to hold and reshape difficult emotion. This has proven especially relevant in studies of mobilization under authoritarianism, where breaking the "fear barrier" often requires emotional work, not just ideological clarity.

Empirical research confirms the importance of emotional labor in social movements. Friedman and Rodríguez Gustá (2023) on the example of *Ni Una Menos (Not One Less)*, a prominent Latin American feminist mobilization against femicide and gendered violence, show how informal affective infrastructures help sustain participation over time. The authors describe a process of *productive mediation*, in which feminist learning and affective bonding enable participants not only to join, but also to remain engaged across successive waves of protest. This process is understood as a form of well-networked feminist praxis. The authors find that long-standing activist spaces and movement brokers—combined with innovative interpretive frameworks, repertoires of action, and organizational forms—help explain why feminist movements remain attractive to new generations. These findings echo frame alignment theory,

but go further: it is not only cognitive resonance, but also shared affect, mutual care, and relational continuity that weave movements together over time. These emotional textures often form the invisible scaffolding of long-term mobilization, especially when political struggle becomes a marathon rather than a sprint. Authors bridge insights from micromobilization with emerging research on contemporary feminist organizing; I build on this bridge to theorize FAS.

To conceptualize these dynamics within FAS, I adopt the idea of *productive mediation* (Friedman and Rodríguez Gustá, 2023) to describe the collective process through which diffuse, morally charged emotions are interpreted, shared, and transformed into politicized forms—such as shared frames, repertoires of contention, and ritualized practices of dissent. Productive mediation is not a one-off conversion but a cyclical feminist practice that continually reactivates emotion as conditions shift. Micro-rituals—small acts like nail polish "quiet pickets," grief vigils, and trauma circles—occupy the hinge between structure and affect. These practices are low-risk but symbolically potent, emotionally anchoring, and flexible enough to be renewed across time and space. In exile, where mass mobilization is often unsafe or unfeasible, such practices become infrastructural. They hold affective coherence between headline protests and preserve activism when formal channels collapse. Through productive mediation, FAS shows how rupture can become rhythm and how feeling can become form.

The next section briefly sets out the context in which FAS emerged, then traces how the micromobilization cycle operates in practice.

2. FAS in the Historical Context of Russia's Post-Soviet Feminisms

The Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR/FAS) erupted within hours of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022—an astonishing speed given how constrained feminist organizing had become under Putin. Since the early 2010s, Russia's feminist scene had been squeezed into a narrow corridor carved out by NGO professionalism and tactical accommodation with the state (Sundstrom et al., 2022). Laws like the 2012 foreign-agents law, the 2013 gay-propaganda ban, and the 2015 undesirable-organization law, alongside a broader conservative turn glorifying militarized masculinity and "traditional values" (Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014; Novitskaya et al., 2024), made anything resembling open, anti-imperial, transnational feminism seem impossible.

Yet FAS stood on the shoulders of decades of grassroots work. From the first sexual-violence hotlines (e.g., "Sisters," founded in 1994) and crisis centers through mutual-aid circles in the 2000s to Pussy Riot's[2] 2012 "punk prayer" and the Flower Day performances—it was this decentralized, leader-light infrastructure that FAS inherited nearly intact. As Solovey (2022) argues, those

[2]In December 2025, a Moscow court, following a lawsuit filed by the Prosecutor General's Office, designated the feminist punk group Pussy Riot as an "extremist" organization and banned its activities on the territory of the Russian Federation (Osborn, 2025).

initiatives had already normalized feminist discourse and embodied horizontal organizing. This groundwork primed mobilization. Yet most feminist groups had avoided confronting Russia's external wars. As Ukrainian scholar Hanna Hrytsenko (2022) notes, during the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war in Donbas, Russian feminists either remained silent or even displayed outright hostility toward Ukrainian voices. FAS thus marks a belated yet pivotal rupture with that disengagement, explicitly calling the full-scale invasion a patriarchal, imperial war.

A defining moment came with FAS's manifesto, published only days after the invasion. Quickly translated into 14 languages and shared across Telegram channels and independent outlets, it named the war as both imperial and patriarchal and called directly for solidarity with Ukraine. "Feminism as a political force cannot support war, especially war of conquest," the text stated (Feminist Anti-War Resistance, 2022). FAS aligned itself with other feminist actors opposing the war, yet pushed the stance further, offering a clearer, explicitly anti-imperial feminist politics that connected everyday patriarchal violence to systemic oppression. Instead of the moralizing idioms typical of the Russian liberal opposition, the manifesto offered participants an immediate ideological compass and a political vocabulary that turned private pain into collective struggle. In this sense, FAS stood with other feminists against the war while also sharpening the frame by naming patriarchy, empire, and "traditional values" as mutually reinforcing.

A subsequent addition to FAS's manifesto codified this stance into a program: withdrawal of Russian troops to the 1991 borders, demilitarization (including ending fossil-fuel financing of militarism), repeal of discriminatory laws and conservative constitutional amendments, reproductive justice, labor rights, support for political prisoners, an all-for-all prisoner exchange and reparations to Ukraine, alongside a broad decolonization agenda and protection of ethnic minorities (Feminist Anti-War Resistance, 2022). Importantly, it also centered support for LGBTQ+ people and other vulnerable groups, making FAS's commitments explicitly intersectional in practice and consolidating its identity as a distinctly anti-imperial feminist force.

These explicit commitments help situate FAS within what Surman and Rossman (2022) describe as a "new" dissidence: youthful, student-rooted, and driven by a fresh moral-political language. Borrowing Budraitskis's (2022) label "dissidents among dissidents," FAS activists confront a double squeeze with deep Soviet roots: repression from the Kremlin on the one hand, and dismissal by the older, male-dominated opposition on the other. Much like the *samizdat* collectives (self-published underground literature) of the late Soviet era, they are often treated as marginal or unserious. Yet among FAS's supporters are significant numbers of queer activists and survivors of patriarchal violence, whose experiences sharpen their sensitivity to the human costs of war and help explain their uncompromising stance compared to many other anti-war actors.

Probably thanks to this combination of grassroots feminist legacies and its clear anti-imperial stance, FAS has rapidly become one of the most visible Russian anti-war movements abroad. Today its autonomous cells operate in more

than 30 countries, carrying familiar repertoires of creative protest, care work, and mutual aid into a distinctly exile-driven, transnational formation.

3. Data and Method

This article is based on 56 in-depth interviews conducted online (via Microsoft Teams) between September 2023 and April 2024 with grassroots members of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAS)—including activists, local-cell coordinators, and volunteers. Although only one interview included a core coordinator, we intentionally foreground the perspectives of rank-and-file participants to capture the everyday dynamics of decentralized feminist organizing. The majority of participants self-identified as women.

The project, developed by a team of social scientists across Europe, Asia, and the United States, received ethical approval from Indiana University's Institutional Review Board and the informed agreement of FAS's coordination group. Because recruitment relied on public calls and snowball sampling across Telegram, Signal, and allied online networks, the sample likely overrepresents digitally active, networked activists in exile and underrepresents less-connected or offline organizers; findings should be read with this scope in mind. For security reasons, we excluded anyone currently residing in Russia and did not disclose host country locations; nonetheless, respondents were based in 25 countries across Europe, North America, the South Caucasus, and East Asia.

Most interviews were conducted in Russian and subsequently translated into English, while five interviews were originally carried out in English in agreement with the interview participants. Quotations are presented verbatim wherever possible, with minor editorial changes made for clarity. The semi-structured interview guide covered migration trajectories, motivations for anti-war engagement, involvement in FAS, risk perception, and the practicalities of movement-building in exile. Although emotions were not explored as a discrete topic, feelings such as guilt, grief, and anger surfaced repeatedly across narratives, making affect a central analytical lens in this study.

4. FAS as Affective Infrastructure: Components of Productive Mediation

Interviews reveal that emotion is not peripheral to FAS—it is central. In the early days of the invasion, participants described feeling overwhelmed: grief, fear, guilt, and despair came up repeatedly. Although they did not always frame their experiences as transformation, their narratives shifted notably when they began discussing FAS. Emotional language moved from disorientation to a vocabulary of care, shared commitment, mutual support, and responsibility.

This shift suggests that FAS operates not just as a political initiative but as an affective infrastructure. Rather than offering a linear path from feeling to engagement, FAS supports a cyclical, adaptive process. Its infrastructure brings together three core elements: (1) a feminist anti-militarist ideology; (2)

decentralized, horizontal organizing that diffuses risk and encourages agency through shared commitments to care and safety; and (3) a repertoire of emotionally resonant micro-rituals. These elements enable the collective processing of emotion—not by suppressing it, but by organizing around it.

At the core of FAS's productive mediation is a key feminist insight: feeling and political action are not separate, and both are deeply gendered. Emotions coded as feminine (e.g., grief, guilt, fear) are often dismissed as irrational or irrelevant to "real" politics. FAS challenges this dichotomy. It treats feminized emotions not as private residues but as public resources to be named, shared, and mobilized.

Activists' narratives make clear that these emotional asymmetries are not accidental; they are rooted in broader post-Soviet gender regimes. Participants described Russian society as patriarchal—not only in terms of male dominance but also in the uneven distribution of emotional labor and responsibility.

> A woman is always made responsible—for everything and everywhere. ... But the way it's articulated reveals a double standard. It always implies that the man is more important. (female, South Caucasus, UAOY077)

> We have a patriarchy with a matrifocal structure. That's what remained in many socialist countries. It developed in such a way that in the household and at the lower levels of government, not even power, but responsibility that largely belongs to women. (female, Europe, LDIH031)

The emotional labor of dissent is not distributed evenly. It is feminized, often invisible, and frequently exhausting. One male activist admitted it and captured the imbalance with a metaphor:

> If a male activist has a bullet in one leg, a female activist has bullets in both—plus a kettlebell. (male, Europe, DNIH014)

This emotional burden—often invisible and feminized—is foundational to dissent. FAS does not erase it; it builds spaces that acknowledge it, name it, and offer ways to share it. Emotional labor becomes the raw material for political resistance.

FAS's sustainability rests on an affective infrastructure—an institutionalized system that enables emotions to be processed, politicized, and sustained. This infrastructure is composed of

1. a shared feminist anti-militarist ideology,
2. a decentralized and inclusive organizational structure, and
3. a repertoire of emotionally resonant micro-rituals.

Together, these components generate a cycle of productive mediation, in which emotions move from personal experience to collective expression and back again. This cycle—explored in Section 4—illustrates how FAS's affective infrastructure transforms feminized emotional labor into durable political activism.

4.1. Ideological Anchoring: The FAS Manifesto and Feminist Anti-Militarism

FAS's one-page manifesto performs what Ward (2016) calls the first micromobilization step: it names the moral shock of war and translates it into a legible political frame. Rather than merely stating opposition, it channels disorientation into shared feminist and anti-imperial diagnoses, offering participants clarity and orientation. This helps explain how participants, despite emotional overwhelm, shifted from paralysis to ethical commitment and action. As one activist explained:

> We are standing there in a cell and are still part of the FAS. We automatically say that we agree with the manifesto—that's what we read, we agree with it, and we support it. (female, East Asia, BYIH018)

This shared language and vision help transform emotional disorientation into ethical clarity, which scholars have identified as a key first step in micromobilization (Ward, 2016). While FAS does not demand ideological uniformity, the manifesto serves as a flexible anchor that orients political debates, emotional attachments, and visions of the future.

One participant recalled conversations within an internal working group on what might happen in a post-Putin world:

> We had an initiative group in the FAS in order to write some kind of political program. Like: what will happen when Putin dies, or he is killed, or he leaves—there will be a window of opportunity. What are we doing then? And there were many discussions: should we remain part of the FAS and make this program part of the FAS, or should it be something separate? How do we feel about the revolution? How do we feel about violence? We discussed all this there. (male, North America, NUIH021)

These reflections highlight that ideology within FAS is not static. It is lived, contested, and responsive; it is a space where difficult questions can be asked without collapsing solidarity. Amid diversity of views, the manifesto does not impose uniformity but offers ballast. As another activist put it:

> A common goal is needed. Many people [at FAS] understand that what is happening is terrible, and therefore the goal unites everyone—and the disagreements, they recede to the second plan. (male, Europe, DNIH014)

4.2. Organizational Form: Horizontality, Decentralization, and Intersectional Safety

FAS's structure reflects its feminist ethics in practice. It is horizontal, nonhierarchical, and deliberately open to initiative. This lowers the threshold for participation and allows emotional urgency to become political action. As one activist explained:

> FAS is a purely horizontal initiative—everyone can propose an idea, organize an action, or post on social media. It's quite democratic and very cool . . . we vote, and it works. (female, Europe, RDIH008)

Leadership, where it exists, is not directive but facilitative. People rotate in and out of roles, which helps prevent burnout and fosters shared ownership.

> We all have the opportunity for the coordinators—let's say, the international chairmanship of the FAS—to make some of their own changes. But at the same time, we often send these files to the cells, that is, in fact, all participants of the FAS have the opportunity to influence things and generally leave their voice somewhere, to somehow change something. (male, North America, NUIH021)

Decentralization strengthens this flexibility and allows cells to minimize risk. Local cells operate autonomously and adapt tactics to local risks, resources, and alliances. Some participants described the structure as both elusive and resilient. One of FAS's organizers explains:

> The cells establish their own partnerships, or sometimes there are some common connections. Cells are quite autonomous; they make their own decisions, they live their own lives. . . . This decentralization helps not to have any very unambiguous enemies. (female, Europe, LDIH031)

Another interlocutor put it poetically:

> Cells are like mushroom spores that spread somewhere. . . it reminds guerrilla groups—no one knows where they are, but they exist somewhere. (female, Europe, QRJS064)

This dispersed structure doesn't mean isolation. It also makes space for partnerships across contexts. Some cells collaborate with feminist, queer, or anti-racist organizations in their host countries, tailoring actions to the political landscape. Others emphasize internal education or care. This plurality is a strength, not a fragmentation.

FAS's commitment to intersectional safety reinforces its distinctiveness. Many participants described feeling emotionally safe in FAS in ways they did not in other opposition spaces:

> [FAS's structure] is more about small groups because I know these girls and we know each other, but it was safe spaces, when we talked about our concerns. It's nice to see that girls are very supportive and care about the human safety of all people. (female, South Caucasus, ZCOY026)

Others contrasted FAS with more masculinized opposition circles, which they found emotionally sterile or implicitly exclusionary:

> The FAS understands that the "white-blue-white flag movement" is not as inclusive as it should be. ... Anti-war activists are often sexist by nature, they are often homophobes, and they may not even suspect it themselves. ... The FAS is more complex; it has certain values, it is a certain community. (male, North America, NUIH021)

Thus, FAS's organizational form (its horizontality, decentralization, and inclusivity) functions as a core component of its affective infrastructure. By fostering agency, navigating risks, and institutionalizing care, FAS creates a flexible yet emotionally durable environment that enables *productive mediation*: it holds, processes, and reactivates moral shock across time and space. Rather than burning out, emotional urgency is repeatedly converted into action through a structure designed to support vulnerability, autonomy, and collective resilience. While structure creates the conditions for participation, it is ritual that gives it rhythm.

4.3. Affective Repertoires: Rituals of Symbolic and Care-Based Protest

Within weeks, FAS members began converting raw affect into a layered repertoire that includes (but is not limited to) *street performances*, *embodied signals*, *grief activism*, and *practices of care* (see Table 1). These micro-rituals are low-threshold yet high-signal: they render dissent legible, emotionally resonant, and collectively repeatable. They form part of a broader cycle of productive mediation that enables sustained feminist activism under conditions of risk and displacement. In FAS, this process is visible: micro-acts move from improvisation to routine, from personal instinct to shared script. More than symbolic, these rituals keep feminist affect circulating—they generate fresh emotion, create shared memory, and feed back into the mobilization cycle. Such practices align FAS with a broader tradition of new social movements that prioritize cultural contestation and meaning-making over institutional politics (Offe, 1985; Melucci, 1985).

Table 1: FAS's Repertoire of Micro-Rituals: Their Emotional Functions and Political Effects.

Type of Ritual	**Examples**	**Emotional Function**	**Political Effect**
Street Performances	White dresses with bloody toys; Putin mask action	Shock, grief → collective resonance	Public visibility, affective publics
Embodied Signals	Manicure "quiet picket," ribbons, clothing symbols	Recognition, belonging	Everyday resistance, counterpublics
Grief Activism	Silent vigils, flower-laying, wearing black	Collective grief, shared memory	Politicization of loss, solidarity
Care-Based Rituals	Letters to political prisoners; fundraising for Ukrainian servicewomen	Solidarity, responsibility	Sustaining networks of feminist care

Source: author's interviews and analysis.
Note: Examples are illustrative; categories are not mutually exclusive.

These forms of ritualized dissent do not function in isolation. For some participants, these practices reshaped how they thought about activism. One said:

> I started following the FAS Telegram channel. . . . I looked at all the ways they offered to protest—like wear all black. That's a type of protest. There were just so many things that I never thought could be used as a form of protest. It was important for me to get to know that—even though I can't openly express my opinion, there are more subtle ways that might be safer for me to use. (female, large Western country, NUOY048)

This is one of FAS's key contributions: it normalizes alternative forms of dissent and helps normalize symbolic engagement as a valid and accessible form of protest. Over time, improvisation solidifies into infrastructure, and resistance becomes a routine.

Street Performances.. One powerful mode of micro-ritual is the *symbolic street performance*. These actions rely on mood, imagery, and affect to provoke a response. Though not frequent, they are carefully staged and emotionally intense. Their impact often extends far beyond the immediate event. Visuals travel. One activist remembered a haunting scene:

> We had an action near the tank; we were in white dresses, bloody toys were scattered in blood, and most of the people reacted with

> interest. And it was interesting; they read our leaflets, and they donated. (female, Europe, RDIH008)

These actions are crafted to spark resonance rather than provoke direct confrontation. They draw attention through visual dissonance, juxtaposing innocence (white fabric, children's toys) with militarized violence (a tank). Visually striking and emotionally loaded, such performances are often photographed, circulated online, and can crystallize into what Papacharissi (2015) calls an *affective public*: a loosely connected network (in digital space) held together by shared feeling, amplified through visibility and resonance. The exchange is reciprocal—onlookers engage, and activists, in turn, feel seen, supported, and connected. This affective loop fosters a sense of solidarity and meaning that can sustain long-term commitment.

The same activist explains how she started to do performances:

> When the war began . . . I no longer wanted to speak with slogans, just words. It already seemed to me that everything had been said. I didn't see a way out for emotions, for this huge amount of pain and fear. I realized that I want to express myself through creativity. In [Europe], I stopped fearing for my safety as much. This untied my hands—and I began to organize performances. . . . We led a man in a Putin mask to a punishment cell and put him behind bars. I liked it. I immediately saw that it was possible to improve the organization of the action—to lay things out and to take initiative. And then I began to take a direct active part in the organization. . . . I started to do some of my own actions, and I think to do actions myself on behalf of FAS . . . because there is a lot of energy, a lot of ideas, and sometimes it is easier to do it yourself. (female, Europe, RDIH008)

This was not just a performance but a moment of self-activation. Taking part gave her not just a model, but a sense of agency. FAS's approach creates room for such creativity and often encourages it. People carry the movement's name forward even when acting independently. Symbolic actions function as both expressions of dissent and catalysts for growth. In exile, some activists rely on such acts to remain connected.

Embodied Signals.. Beyond the public stage, other micro-acts politicize intimacy, such as *embodied signals*. "Manicure protests," ribbons, clothing details—these gestures don't require crowds or permits. Yet they carry meaning. One activist said:

> Do you want a vivid statement, clearly political—but what if it were a little quiet, as if dissolved in everyday life?" asked one activist. So, I got a manicure: gel varnish with the Ukrainian flag on all my fingers. . . . And a "*tikhiy piket*" ["quiet picket"] was written in volume across my nails. Conveniently, that phrase contains exactly 10 letters—for 10 fingers. (female, South Caucasus, ZCOY042)

Here, the body becomes a message board, and protest dissolves into the everyday. These acts are quiet, but they are not invisible. Another activist described an encounter in the metro:

> I had a shellac manicure and there was this kind of non-binary icon. And I see some kind of very young girl, like 18 years old, with a short haircut, wearing a T-shirt like "[one of the countries of South Caucasus] Pride." I come up just silently, show this non-binary icon, she replies with a fist. ... We start exchanging things quietly, I show her videos on Instagram, she shows me these inscriptions: "Fuck Russians." ... Later she messages me: "Thank you so much, it's so nice to meet people like you, who think, who care ... I'm really happy you're here. (female, South Caucasus, DNIH015)

These exchanges generate what Michael Warner (2002) calls *counterpublics*: discursive arenas where marginalized groups create alternative norms and identities, often through shared aesthetics and embodied practices. For FAS activists, these acts not only are anti-war but also challenge patriarchal structures, intertwining feminist and anti-authoritarian resistance.

They also carry risk. Inside Russia, these signs can attract police attention, abuse, or arrest. Practicing them abroad carries a double function: it affirms resistance and honors constraint. These symbolic acts function as echoes of silenced protests. They keep the activist body in a state of alertness, ensuring it remains visible, responsive, and capable of acting as soon as new opportunities arise.

Grief Activism.. Another form of affective ritual is *grief activism*. Many FAS participants have engaged in flower vigils, dressing in black, or silent commemorations on symbolic dates. One said:

> I once went to the FAS and followed what they were doing. ... I definitely went out with my friend in black with white flowers in honor of the memory action. (female, South Caucasus, UAOY077)

These gestures can politicize grief in ways that do not provoke direct confrontation but nevertheless often demand to be witnessed. Mourning, in this sense, becomes a mode of collective pedagogy. As Judith Butler (2004) notes, grief might not just be private, but political, because it asks whose lives count. For FAS activists in exile, mourning rituals politicize grief through memory-making, connecting participants across time and geography by affirming whose losses are legible and whose futures are still imagined.

Care-Based Rituals.. Finally, *care-based rituals* form the quiet backbone of FAS's repertoire. Though less visible, they are no less political. Writing letters to political prisoners and fundraising for Ukrainian servicewomen—these are not only compassionate gestures but also statements of solidarity. As one activist put it:

> Of course, this will not release them [political prisoners in Russia], but at least it will be a little easier [for them]. It seems to me that all is not lost. (female, one of the Baltic states, MKJS035)

FAS regularly circulates calls to action, updates on cases, and donation appeals. These are acts of care, but also forms of contestation. Another participant explained how their local cell resumed such practices after emigration:

> I joined [FAS] here, and we resumed the activities of the [local] FAS cell. We held several evenings of letters and collections, and the focus of the letters was female political prisoners. In Russia, the collection was for fellow countrywomen—it was for a Ukrainian military woman. There was a collection of things and funds for their needs. (female, Europe, NYIH503)

These choices reflect deliberate political commitments about who deserves care and solidarity. Supporting Russian women in prison or Ukrainian servicewomen embodies FAS's feminist, anti-imperialist ethic of care and highlights those most at risk from patriarchy and war. Taken together, such micro-acts form the connective tissue of FAS's "infrastructure of resistance" (Shantz, 2009), sustaining momentum between major protests, especially when large-scale mobilization is unfeasible.

From public grieving rituals and letter writing to symbolic performances and subtle gestures like "manicure protests," each act reinforces a shared emotional register and sense of belonging. Crucially, these micro-rituals also redistribute the emotional and logistical labor of activism. By offering low-cost, emotionally resonant, and repeatable forms of dissent, they expand access for marginalized or burnt-out participants. In FAS, symbolic acts are not a substitute for "real" politics, but a political strategy in their own right, especially where care, visibility, and sustainability are radical acts.

4.4. From Components to Micromobilization Cycle: Productive Mediation in Practice

How is it that, three years into a full-scale war, many FAS participants remain politically engaged—organizing actions, supporting others, and continuing to care? This question is especially pressing in the context of gendered displacement. For many women in exile, activism unfolds under a triple burden: the emotional toll of war, the precarity of migration, and persistent expectations of care work.

In FAS, activism isn't treated as a sprint or a constant struggle. Instead, participants find a rhythm that allows them to stay involved over time—stepping back when needed and returning when they're ready. These small, repeatable acts of engagement create a sense of meaning, connection, and continuity. But emotional sustainability takes more than just expressing feelings—it depends on an environment that acknowledges the psychological weight of activism and makes space for rest and return. FAS creates that kind of environment. Rather

than relying on rigid hierarchies or charismatic leaders, it provides an "affective commons" (De Angelis, 2017). This commons is maintained through regular check-ins, trauma-informed practices, and shared care infrastructures. Participants describe gaining not only protest tools but also access to care infrastructures: cybersecurity trainings, burnout spaces, and informal peer solidarity networks.

This infrastructure does not prevent breakdowns—activists still step back or burn out—but it accommodates them. Here, productive mediation becomes a cyclical feminist mechanism—embedding affect into routine practices of care, recognition, and reintegration.

Despite the hardship of emigration, for many, exile deepens political commitment. Freedoms acquired abroad (relative safety, freedom of speech, the ability to build community) come with a heightened sense of responsibility:

> I just feel a certain responsibility that I am not in Russia. I stayed here so that I had freedom of speech. It seems to me that the more freedom you have, the more responsibility you have. And therefore, from the very beginning, the FAS was my great desire to help everyone to some extent. (male, North America, NUIH021)

Another participant agrees:

> It is just part of the collective responsibility that immigrants will bear now, but then everyone will bear it when it is over. Here we are—immigrants, activists, journalists. (female, Eastern European country, MPOY033)

For some, responsibility becomes purpose:

> I love activism—it's my ikigai. You know this concept. This is true. This is my gig, and I know it. But also, I couldn't just leave—these were projects I was leading, people I promised to help. There was a certain responsibility. (female, Europe, WCOY060)

Others emphasize feminist resistance as the refusal to silence pain:

> I'm not just one victim of violence. I won't advise you to lie down on the floor and cry quietly in your room. For me, feminism is, first of all, about normalizing dialogue about violence—where victims' voices are heard. (non-binary, South Caucasus, DNIH006)

FAS thus operates not merely as a protest network but as a feminist infrastructure of endurance. It sustains political agency under dispersion and emotional strain by institutionalizing care, anchoring emotion in ideology, and offering repeatable practices that remobilize affect. FAS demonstrates that under authoritarian repression, building emotional sustainability becomes a vital strategy rather than a byproduct.

Figure 1 maps this dynamic: FAS's three key components, namely ideology, structure, and ritual, function not in isolation, but in a feedback loop. Together, they show how war-induced negative emotions, often paralyzing, can be converted through productive mediation in the cycle of micromobilization.

Figure 1. Micromobilization cycle, enabled by productive mediation in FAR

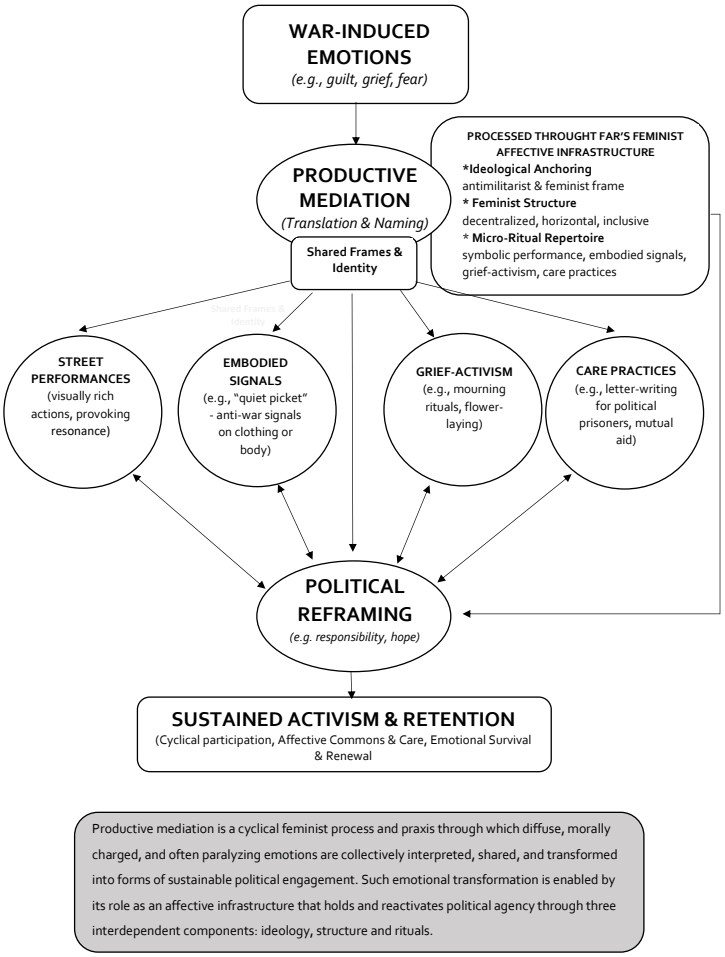

Figure 1: Micromobilization cycle, enabled by productive mediation in FAS.

Source: Nugumanova, K., 2026.

Productive mediation is a cyclical feminist process and praxis through which diffuse, morally charged, and often paralyzing emotions are collectively interpreted, shared, and transformed into forms of sustainable political engagement. Such emotional transformation is enabled by its role as an affective infrastructure that holds and reactivates political agency through three interdependent components: ideology, structure, and rituals.

In sum, FAS functions as an affective infrastructure that does more than channel dissent—it makes it emotionally and politically sustainable under conditions of repression and exile. Through the cyclical process of productive mediation, FAS converts moral shock into mobilization by anchoring it in a shared feminist and anti-imperial ideology, distributing it through horizontal, care-based structures, and regenerating it via emotionally resonant micro-rituals.

What distinguishes FAS from many other Russian anti-war formations (both inside and outside the country) is precisely this alignment of ideological frame, organizational form, and emotional repertoire of contention. First, anti-imperial feminism provides a core narrative that links war, patriarchy, and colonial violence—gaps often avoided by mainstream opposition actors. Second, decentralized, non-hierarchical, and inclusive structures foster care, participation, and resilience. Third, portable micro-rituals enable safe, affectively charged dissent, particularly well-suited to authoritarian and diasporic conditions.

These strengths do not erase internal tensions. Decision-making can stall, intersectionality may remain uneven, and transnational alliances are not always frictionless. Yet FAS has shown remarkable resilience. Its capacity to hold, process, and redistribute emotion has enabled many participants to remain political across time, distance, and emotional strain.

5. Conclusion

The Feminist Anti-War Resistance offers more than a compelling case of exile mobilization; it prompts a rethinking of how feminist movements transform emotion into sustainable resistance under conditions of disruption. Drawing on 56 semi-structured in-depth interviews across 25 countries, this article has shown how FAS builds an *affective infrastructure*—an emotionally literate ecosystem grounded in feminist ethics, horizontal and inclusive structure, and emotionally resonant micro-rituals.

At the heart of this infrastructure is *productive mediation*: a cyclical feminist practice that transforms diffuse, gendered emotions into repeatable, low-risk, and politically meaningful action. FAS's form of micromobilization is not a one-time transition from shock to protest but a recursive loop in which emotion is continually brokered, held, and remobilized. Through decentralized care networks, flexible rituals, and ideological anchoring, FAS sustains activism not despite emotional strain, but by working through it.

Rather than treating care and emotion as distractions from "real" politics, FAS centers them as strategy. It demonstrates that under authoritarianism, building spaces that normalize withdrawal, support return, and hold emotional complexity is both an ethical commitment and a political necessity. FAS does not merely resist external violence; it redefines the internal conditions under which dissent can survive.

Though grounded in the specific experience of Russian feminists in exile, FAS offers broader insights for feminist and anti-authoritarian movements globally. In an era marked by political crises, fragmentation, and emotional fatigue, FAS's

model shows that emotional sustainability is not a distraction from politics, but it is its foundation. Shared feeling, far from being a liability, becomes the condition of political life. FAS invites us to see micromobilization not as a moment of awakening but as a rhythm of care, repetition, and collective endurance. In a moment when authoritarianism seeks to erode solidarity and render care apolitical, FAS reminds us that emotion is not what interrupts politics—it is where politics begins.

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