

# RESEARCHING COMPLAINTS: TRADITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES: *An Introduction*

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In this issue, we publish several papers presented at the international conference “Complaints: Cultures of Grievance in Eastern Europe and Eurasia” that took place on March 8–9, 2013, at Princeton University.<sup>1</sup> Organized by the Program in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies in collaboration with the Program in Law and Public Affairs,<sup>2</sup> this conference aimed to examine the concept of the so-called people’s law from an interdisciplinary perspective. The idea was to separate grievances from a variety of other letters to the authorities and to consider them as a specific genre. Complaints are a peculiar phenomenon, as they represent a form of citizens’ epistolary dialogue with the powers that be. In communicating their demands, their discontent, or their indignation, complainants frame their letters according to what they think is appropriate in a given sociopolitical context. In other words, a complaint is a peculiar social mirror, an idiosyncratic, culturally determined translation of legal ideas into the language of the law’s users. Even though this law, as reflected in complaints, does not have any explicit norms, it nevertheless allows us to see the terms and rhetorical constructs expressing subjectivity and legal competency.

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<sup>1</sup> See the conference’s website: <http://culturesofgrievance.wordpress.com/>. The conference’s call for papers elicited over a hundred responses, from which the organizing committee selected 22.

<sup>2</sup> The organizing committee included Kim Lane Scheppele, Professor of Sociology and International Affairs, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and the University Center for Human Values, Director, Law and Public Affairs Program, Princeton University; Serguei A. Oushakine, Professor of Anthropology and Slavic Languages and Literatures, Director, Program in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Princeton University; Kathryn Hendley, Professor of Law and Political Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Law and Public Affairs Fellow, Princeton University; Michael Gordin, Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, Director, Fung Global Fellows Program, Princeton University; Irena Grudzinska Gross, Research Scholar, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and Department of History, Princeton University, Professor, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

A complaint is a complex and multifaceted subject of study, for it is not an unequivocally defined analytical category. As Katherine Lebow notes in her article, “the idea of complaint is hard to disengage from its rich, sometimes contradictory associations in colloquial usage, which are always historically and culturally contingent” (Lebow, this issue, 15). A researcher studying complaints inevitably faces the necessity of learning how to deal with the semantic complexity of this phenomenon and how to consider complaints in context.

Filling the communicative space between a citizen and powerful institutions, a complaint tells a lot about both sides. The conference meant to draw attention to this peculiarity of complaint and to treat grievances as a rich source of information both on the institutions of power and on the complainants.

A complaint reflects its author’s notions of how the authorities might fix the situation. The act of complaining demonstrates the author’s belief in the addressee’s ability to help, confirming his authority and legitimacy. At the same time, by choosing to petition the powers that be, the writer reveals not only his or her notions of authority but also the general view of the world in which the complainant wishes to be localized. In a sense, a complaint is a form of discursive self-fulfillment and self-representation.

The language of complaint is a separate field of study in its own right. On the one hand, this language is determined by contemporary political discourse: those in power should be spoken to in their own language (Kotkin 1995; Fitzpatrick 1996; Kozlova and Sandomirskaja 1996; Nérard 2004). On the other hand, a complaint is a proprietary document grounded in a certain (either clearly stated or merely implicit) narrative, legal, and civic viewpoint informing the text. While studying the texts of complaints, one inevitably asks the following questions: To what extent have the authors internalized the values of the political clichés in which they write? Accordingly, how rationally do the authors inscribe their requests in the framework of the legitimate? Probably the best answer to these questions is the one given by Israeli historian Igal Halfin, discussing how political discourse and the author of a subjective text mutually influence each other: “A historical actor is capable of creating new linguistic forms by interpreting and modifying existing political language, but his ‘I’ inevitably changes through this activity, and it is not up to him to foresee the nature of these changes” (Halfin and Hellbeck 2002:245).

The phenomenon of complaint, with its mighty cultural and emotional components, goes way beyond the limits of an official address to the authorities. Nancy Ries, an American researcher of everyday language who analyzed Russian narratives of the perestroika era, dubs daily grievances a “shorthand” of social ontology (1997:1). Considered from this angle, complaint emerges as an independent discursive genre, more immediately connected to society’s history and culture than to any political regime. The reality proves that regimes come and go, while complaints remain.

Due to its multifaceted informational value, complaint makes for a prime subject of interdisciplinary study. Letters to the powers that be serve historians, sociologists, political scientists, and linguists to address all sorts of research questions. However, addresses or complaints are most often used as an instrument—a source of

information helping to develop and explain popular social concepts of subjectivity, social justice, power relationships, and the like. In contrast, the Princeton conference attempted to zero in on the complaint, to examine this phenomenon in all its complexity, and to pay particular attention to the methodology of studying and understanding this specific genre. While preparing this issue, we followed the same guiding principles. The authors of the texts published in this issue use complaints to solve diverse research problems, so that the reader can see both the potential and the methodological limits of studying complaints.

Katherine Lebow presents her study of social memoirs penned by the marginal groups of Polish society of the 1930s. The channel opened by the contest for best autobiography, arranged by Polish sociologists, overflowed with grievances from peasants and the unemployed. Complaint in this case emerges as a means for the socially deprived to establish their existence in the present and future. Autobiographers used the contest as an opportunity to make public the difficulties of demanding social justice and a way to memorialize their distress for posterity, to leave testimony which will once be heard by the moral community.

Amieke Bouma dedicates her article to the sociopolitical transformations occurring in Germany after the country's unification. Here, complaints replace or compensate for the unsatisfactory legal system. Examination of this habitual function of grievances under new sociopolitical conditions allows the author to touch upon the problem of status devaluation, the meaning of the past, and the transformation of the practice of complaining in response to the changing sociopolitical context.

Elena Bogdanova's article looks at contemporary Russia, where the practice of complaint writing thrives and acquires new features regardless of developing legal means for conflict resolution. Her scrutiny of petitions addressed to the president permits her to trace the penetration of religious discourse and to establish the function of religious justifications in complaint writing. By applying the sociology of critical capacity to an analysis of the texts of complaints, one can ascertain the grammar of the critical argument produced in a complaint, which is different from the grammar of the critical argument as produced in a dispute between equal actors.

Milla Fedorova in her essay "'Give Me the Book of Complaints': Complaint in Post-Stalin Comedy" focuses on how Soviet subjectivity shaped complaint as a moral dilemma. Using popular Soviet comedies as her source material, the researcher reconstructs normative notions of what could be criticized in Soviet society and how it was to be done. In particular, complaint is seen as a moral choice. At the same time, the discursive understanding of the status of complaint and the image of a complainant transformed over the Soviet period: from a highly positive attitude in the Stalin era, to a more critical one during Nikita Khrushchev's Thaw period. By analyzing satirical comedies, the author demonstrates that the authorities could manipulate the democratic and pseudodemocratic opportunities complaint offered, whereas the complaint itself was more of a subject than an object of Soviet propaganda.

In addition to the articles and the essay, the issue includes two review essays. Marianna Muravyeva looks into the methodological aspects of studying the culture of complaint. Her survey of petition culture traces the formation of methodologies

for studying complaint in the context of Russian society and offers directions for research into the gendered aspects of complaint writing, emotional modes of complaining, and comparative analysis of cultures of complaint.

Freek van der Vet offers a survey of studies into petitions submitted by Russian citizens and non-profit organizations to the European Court of Human Rights. Russia leads other countries in the number of complaints it has sent to the Court: Russian citizens attempt to restore justice by turning to an arbiter outside of the national legal system. Van der Vet's review essay signals a novel way of interpreting complaints, which is different from any other text in this issue. Just like petitions to the European Court of Human Rights, the practice of complaint writing breaks out of the customary understanding of this phenomenon. In a sense, Van der Vet's text echoes the Princeton conference's implicit goal—to conceptualize complaint as not only a subject of interdisciplinary study but also as a universal, nonnational, multifunctional communication practice between citizens and the establishment.

Common history, including the socialist period, unites Russia and Eastern Europe. Complaint is contextual, and the past shapes research traditions. By focusing squarely on complaint and by limiting the geography of research to Russia and Eastern Europe this issue supports existing approaches to studying letters to the authorities and, at the same time, questions their relevance and the degree to which they are or are not up-to-date. The contents of this issue show that complaint is not just a subject of sociohistorical research. The contemporary world creates new contexts and places new demands on the understanding and study of complaints. Contemporary European programs for democratization of public governance and soft regulation presuppose involving citizens in political processes by means of complaints. An American program entitled We the People<sup>3</sup> stimulates unmediated communication between the citizens and the president of the United States—again, through complaints and petitions. In new contexts, complaints acquire new meanings and new value; therefore, methodologies for studying complaints must develop as well. It is our hope that the contents of this issue will be of help in this process.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Elena Lemeneva*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov>.