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International Women's Day in Russia

# Feminist resistance in Russia

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**After a year of war in Ukraine and in the run-up to International Women's Day on 8 March, Nadia Badaoui spoke with Mira and Bella from the Russian Socialist Movement (RSD, United Secretariat) and Liliya Vezhevatova, one of the coordinators of the Feminist Anti-war Resistance (FAS).**

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### **What forms of resistance to the war in Ukraine exist in Russia today?**

**Mira:** Resistance can be divided into three branches. The first, and surest, is coverage of how the war affects Russian society, resistance to Putin's propaganda. Thus, information is now more actively disseminated on Telegram: on the personal blogs of famous people and on specialized channels on the subject, such as *Névoïna* (Non-war). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the safety of this method of resistance can only be discussed in comparison with others.

The dissemination of "disinformation about the Russian army", which is often a simple observation, is legally punishable. For example, former municipal deputy and politician Ilya Iashine was imprisoned solely for telling (without direct statements about authenticity) the generally accepted version of what happened in Butcha. However, there are not so many criminal prosecutions, when there are hundreds of thousands of people who republish the cruel truth.

The second form of resistance is action aimed at expressing protest. A striking example is the actions of FAS. Pasting flyers, invading "non-political" spaces like neighbourhood WhatsApp groups or grocery stores. All of this should increase the visibility of dissent for apolitical citizens and support those opposed to the war. Establishing the security of such a method of resistance is quite difficult, because, on the one hand, it is necessary to mobilize activists massively so that the action is really visible, and on the other hand, to tell them how to act with caution.

Thus, Sasha Skochilenko is now imprisoned for participating in the "Mariupol 5000" action, after being denounced by "vigilant" citizens. To reduce the number of such cases, Telegram channels such as *Antivoyenny Bolnichny* (Anti-War Sick Leave) or *Anarkhia+* (Anarchy+) already have sufficient instructions to quickly understand existing strategies of self-defence against persecution.

It should also be noted that actions sometimes start spontaneously. For example, after a Russian missile hit a house in Dnipro, people began taking flowers, toys and candles to monuments associated with Ukrainian culture. Such initiatives from below are incredibly encouraging for me as an activist. Passing in front of the monument to Lessia Ukrainka (a Ukrainian writer, 1871-1913), drowned under the flowers, I could not hold back my tears.

The third and most radical branch of resistance is that which causes direct damage to the state apparatus. People set fire to military enlistment offices and sabotage railway tracks. Such actions require maximum security measures and often the presence of an organization, even a small one, such as a group of comrades. A good example is BOAK (Anarcho-Communist Combat Organization). Women also participate in these radical forms of protest. A recent FAS interview with BOAK showed that in such actions, gender helps women, due to police sexism and expanded possibilities for disguise.

### **Can you give concrete examples and results of resistance?**

**Mira:** The damage caused is not easy to calculate even in direct actions. For example, which of the “sudden disruptions” on railways are actually related to repairs, and which to the “Stop the Wagons” campaign? It can only be noted that “repair work” seems to be more frequent and it can be assumed that this is due to the railway guerrillas.

More than 50 military enlistment offices were burned. We don't know how many conscript cards burned this entails, but this kind of action terrifies the system and hinders its work. It is also difficult to assess the fight against state propaganda. According to *Meduza* (liberal opposition media), the number of supporters of the war halved between July and November 2022. Here, what role does anti-war awareness play, and what role do the successes of the Ukrainian army play on the front? But one thing is certain. Anti-war activists have learned to live and fight underground, which I think is already a great achievement.

**Bella:** A perfect illustration is the partisan resistance of ordinary citizens, elderly women, who lived in the days of the USSR and who are left-wing. They opposed the war, burning military recruitment offices.

**Liliyah:** We've already mentioned street performances. Thus, in March, we at FAS launched the “Mariupol 5000” campaign: our activists erect impromptu commemorative crosses. We also supported the campaign to commemorate the victims of the missile attack in Dnipro when people spontaneously started bringing flowers and toys to urban sites associated with Ukraine. I am also the editor-in-chief of the anti-war samizdat *Jenskaya Pravda*, which we stick in the streets, leave in the parks and put in the mailboxes.

The newspaper is aimed at mothers and grandmothers, to whom we give an alternative opinion in a language they understand, showing injustice, persecution, positive examples of resistance on the part of older women. We have just published number 19, we have made an issue in the Tuvian language and now we are preparing articles in Bashkir and Chuvash.

In March 2022, FAS announced the “Mariupol 5000” action in memory of the victims of Russian bombing in the city. The aim of the action was to install 5000 crosses throughout Russia. At the time, it was not known that the deaths were more numerous than that.

### **Who makes up the feminist resistance? What is its motivation?**

**Mira:** The resistance is quite decentralized, so it's hard to talk about sociology. It is in feminist resistance that activists generally gravitate at least to the “left”. Many liberal opinion leaders have left the country, many have been imprisoned. So I think the liberals, who are used to picketing and demonstrating, are still a little confused.

Left-wing progressives, on the other hand, have always sympathized with a certain “illegality” and were familiar with the decentralization of protest, which helped left-wing anti-war initiatives survive. Women activists are mostly in the big cities (where it is easier to find comrades and organize), they also have more time for actions, which means that they most likely work in the field of intellectual work, where the schedule is not so restrictive. As for the motivation for feminist resistance, it is largely directed against the regime. Activists understand that war is a terrible consequence of the whole system.

However, completely different women participate in spontaneous protests against the mobilization. Before, they were not against the state, but now, as their sons and husbands are taken to the front without proper clothing or training, in desperation, they protest against this personal grief. Since mobilization mainly affects the precarious strata of the population in poor regions, such initiatives are more widespread there.

**Liliyah:** There are SAF volunteers in about 50 cities, large and small, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. We are a left-wing movement composed mostly of intersectional feminists. But we have people of different opinions. If we talk about age, there are young women and trans women, but there are also mothers, women over 30. But we do not collect statistics. To be identified as a member of FAS, it is enough to share the values of our manifesto: horizontality, anti-imperialism, anti-militarism. First, FAS has an anti-war motivation. The war in Ukraine is our main problem now. All other questions we reserve for better times.

### **What difficulties have Russian feminists faced in recent years? What are the challenges?**

**Liliyah:** One of the main problems is the lack of a law criminalizing domestic violence. In 2018, a law was passed to decriminalize domestic violence, classified as an administrative offense and not a criminal offense: the offender pays a fine, which the whole family, including the victim, ends up paying. The big problem is the indifference of the police and the system in general to women's problems. Statistics on domestic and sexual violence are not collected or published. Now, initiatives are being promoted to ban the right to free abortion, to remove it from free compulsory medical insurance. So far, these laws have not been passed, but when a woman sees a doctor to have an abortion, she is dissuaded and must take a 48-hour or week-long reflection period, depending on gestational age. The other day, representatives of the Orthodox Church even suggested introducing compulsory consent of the husband to an abortion. Today, we have only one task: to contribute to the end of the war in Ukraine. We at FAS provide psychological and financial support to Ukrainian asylum seekers in Russia, although the authorities do not rush to grant them refugee status.

Nevertheless, we believe that it is not safe for Ukrainians to be in Russia at the moment. On the other hand, sooner or later, a large number of men accustomed to violence will return from war, which will certainly lead to an increase in violence against women. We need to start thinking about how to minimize this problem.

**Mira:** The preservation of "traditional values" is an integral part of Putinism's rhetoric, so all feminists in Russia are also opponents. It is necessary to fight both against conservative attitudes in the minds of Russians and against the state that tightens the screws. There are two main difficulties associated with this.

First, there is no real possibility of influencing the current conservative policy under the current system. If in 2019 we could still hope for the adoption of an admittedly watered-down law on domestic violence, it is clear in 2023 that the feminist movement must not rely on legal levers of influence.

Secondly, the opportunity to speak openly about problems and, consequently, to appeal to the general public is reduced. An example of this is the criminal prosecution of Yulia Tsvetkova (prosecuted for defending LGBTQIA+ rights and distributing drawings of vulvas) and how the Federation Council wanted to designate posts by radical feminists and the childfree movement as illegal content.

Therefore, the large-scale task of feminists is to overthrow the current regime.

Another area of work remains making contact with women, most of whom only know feminist discourse from pro-government horror stories. The wives and mothers of the mobilized, who spontaneously unite to defend their rights, are the group with which the feminist movement has the best chance of establishing a dialogue.

**Bella:** The difficulty in the feminist movement is also caused by the economic and social situation of activists; Some have left the country, some are burnt out. But we must continue to fight not to fall into barbarism.

### What is the situation in the national republics?

**Mira:** For example, in Tatarstan or Buryatia, there are no striking specificities for feminist activists. But if we talk about Chechnya and Dagestan, such monstrous problems as female circumcision and honour killings are not uncommon. In Chechnya, the law does not really apply and life is subject to Kadyrov's personal will. Therefore, awareness is extremely slow and often the only solution to the problem is an extremely dangerous operation to get the victims out of the republic and then out of the country. One example in Dagestan is the story of four sisters who were circumcised as children and decided to run away when their relatives wanted to marry one of them to her cousin. The family, for whom, according to tradition, the escape of unmarried girls is a disgrace, immediately began to search for them, but the sisters managed to get to the border with Georgia, where they were illegally detained for 8 hours. Relatives, who were waiting for them at the checkpoint, came to pick up the girls, but thanks to widespread media coverage, the story ended successfully

I want to emphasize that we only know the tip of the iceberg. In these regions, it is even more difficult than in the rest of Russia to conduct independent journalistic investigations or to draw some real statistics.

**Liliya:** In Chechnya and Dagestan people are disappearing, cases of extrajudicial executions have been recorded. The other day, in Chechnya, a woman was refused a passport without a man's guarantee.

Every month, FAS publishes an anti-war newspaper in Russian, Tuvan and Chuvash. It tells the truth about the war, but imitates the style and language of neighbourhood newspapers in order to elicit less distrust and rejection. The editors try to put in this samizdat not only distressing content, but also recipes, crosswords, news anecdotes.

### Why are women (SAF, Soldiers' Mothers Committee, etc.) more successful than other social groups in organizing to oppose the war?

**Liliyah:** Shortly before the war, many political movements had been purged. Feminists have succeeded in creating a network of organizations at the level of towns and villages. We have all known each other for a long time, and this allowed us to organize quickly: we published our manifesto the day after the war began. In addition, the FAS was originally conceived as a horizontal movement, which troubles the intelligence services, the FSB, because they cannot find out who is in charge. The structural unity of our movement is a cell, which is not clear to the security forces.

### How is the left's resistance to war different from that of other political camps? How does the left resist the war?

**Mira:** During the war, ideological divisions on other issues faded. If we talk about feminist resistance, then there is an even more common background among activists than on average in the political field. But it seems that the left tends more to support radical actions that the state defines as violent (for example, burning military enlistment offices). Some liberals have the idea that such illegal actions repel the population. On the left, it is often assumed that the state should not be allowed to determine what constitutes "violence" and that forms of resistance can take many forms. There are public discussions about this, for example on the pages of DOXA (student media).

**Bella:** We at RSD work in the field of information, participate in discussions and organize conferences. At this point, this is our core activity. It should be noted that it is the liberals who have always defined the non-violent format of the demonstration. It is this method, over the past twenty years, that has helped the regime adapt to sterile opponents. Unfortunately, most anti-war initiatives, including SAF, are led by activists who recently left Russia under threat of retaliation. And yes, they continue to call on those who have remained in the country to use nonviolent methods of

struggle as if the elites had not switched to open violent repression of those who disagreed, which means that an equivalent response must be given.

### **How can the left in other countries express solidarity with the Russian left opposed to the war?**

**Mira:** It is very important that the anti-war movement is visible. I wish more people in other countries understood that in Russia there are a large number of people who are against what is happening. And the idea of Russia as a state in which discontent is brewing and where there are active opponents of war would be very useful. After all, the narrative that Putin and his government represent the interests of Russians is, to some extent, playing into the hands of the authorities.

It would also be cool if the non-Russian left tried to make its governments understand that they should not negotiate with the Putin regime but bet on it changing. What happened after the world community turned a blind eye to the annexation of Crimea speaks for itself; Putin will not abandon his imperial ambitions, do not expect a different foreign policy from him. And, of course, we must support the courageous Ukrainian people in their struggle. Success depends on the situation at the front.

**Bella:** In my opinion, the solidarity of left-wing forces in other countries is important: it is both media support and financial support, it is speaking out in the public space, cooperation and common tactics, sharing effective means to resist an authoritarian regime. After all, the problem is not just about Russia.

### **What else does our readership need to know about resistance to war in Russia?**

**Liliyah:** This bullying against Russians, even those who are opposed to the war, is just playing into Putin's hands. Western politicians have been shaking hands with Putin for 20 years, and now the Russians are to blame!

**Mira:** What I have discussed describes the main forms of left-wing protest. But resistance is not limited to this and collective political action in general. There are many people in Russia who oppose the war in their own way: instead of propagandist "lessons", teachers give extra-curricular awareness classes, young people convince their parents who watch TV, lawyers help escape conscription. All these Russians are making their small contribution.

### **What does your "beautiful Russia of the future" look like?**

**Bella:** I don't believe in this concept of the liberal opposition. As long as there are neoliberal policies, the problem is not only in the current regime in Russia, but also in the economic formation. "The beautiful Russia of the future" is an empty phrase, into which everyone puts their idea.

**Mira:** For me, the Russia of my dreams is first and foremost a democratic society that has overcome atomization. And secondly, of course, a state with a strong representation of left-wing forces in power, fighting inequality and reflecting on coloniality. Precisely in this order, because the main problem seems to be the disintegration of society, not its "right-wing" bias. In "the beautiful Russia of the future", people will trust each other again and see that politics concerns everyone and that it is dangerous to hide from it. And, of course, this mature civil society will take responsibility for repairing the damage caused by the previous regime. The Russia of the future will pay reparations, reshape its foreign policy, and conduct investigations to establish a complete picture of how the invasion of Ukraine happened. Provide the necessary help that Ukrainians will be ready to accept. Therefore, Russia will take care of its own inhabitants, the most vulnerable, who have long lived, despoiled by the elites. It takes a lot of work in this direction, and in a country impoverished by war, it will be twice as difficult to carry out a restoration, but I am sure that

we will get out of it.

Certainly, I also have personal dreams about the future of Russia. For example, I sometimes imagine how, after the abolition of repressive laws, I would simply go out into the centre of Moscow with an empty sheet of paper and stand for a long time until I freeze. The high blue sky of January will give way to pink twilight, and not a single policeman will stop me.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Solidarités](#).*

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