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Ukraine

“Russia has erased Ukrainian feminist history”

- Features - Feminism -

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An interview with [Feminist Workshop](#) (Ukraine) by Patrick Le Tréhondat (ENSU, France).

First of all, could you tell us about Feminist Workshop, its history, how and why it was founded?

Feminist Workshop was founded by activists with both theoretical knowledge of feminism and practical experience gained through participation in other initiatives. The organization began in 2014, when Russia attacked Ukraine and many forcibly displaced people arrived in our city, Lviv.

Young women — including those in precarious situations, social workers, queer individuals, and displaced women with low income — came together to create a space where it would be possible to make things by hand (embroider, knit, cook) and discuss feminism with other women. We wanted a safe space for ourselves, where feminist knowledge and new connections could be built. From this initiative, the Feminist Workshop grew into an organization that, for more than 11 years, has been creating a feminist and queer space in Lviv, organizing street protests, advocacy and awareness-raising events, empowering new feminist activists, and launching numerous projects — from shelters for internally displaced women and children to sexuality education for kids. We now work in five main directions and continue our activities regardless of global political and security challenges.

You are a fairly new feminist association, yet you often discuss the history of Ukrainian feminism. Particularly the situation of women in Ukraine during the Soviet era, under Stalinism. Why is this past important to you?

We have existed for 11 years, and we would say that for the modern Ukrainian state, we have been here for almost a third of its contemporary history. This might be surprising for European organizations whose grandmothers could still recall the days of protesting for gender equality on the streets of their own cities. Since Ukraine was occupied by Russia (in the form of the soviet union at that time), the history of organized feminist resistance here was abruptly interrupted. The “gender question” was controlled mostly by male party officials in Moscow, while a few brave women, intellectuals and feminists, risked their safety, freedom, and even their lives to continue their work and organize actions in soviet times. We are deeply grateful to those women, and to those who, during the early years of our independence in the 1990s and 2000s, fought for us to exist and continue the Ukrainian feminist tradition.

There is actually a new book by Tamara Martsenyuk, a collection of interviews with feminists from the 1990s and 2000s, that recalls this period. For us, it is important to bring up all of this because, as Ukrainians, we know that Russian imperialism has long tried to erase our political, cultural, and social identities, and feminist intellectual and socio-political movements were among its targets. Ukrainian feminists were persecuted, executed, or forced to leave Ukraine or remain silent. Their names were forgotten, replaced by references to the Global North or Russian schools of thought. Now, as Ukraine reopens and reclaims its past, while we witness both the rejection of Russian imperialism and the attempts by Russia to restore and justify its imperialist narratives, it is vital for us to find our own voices, regain our past, and weave it into the story of modern Ukraine. For us, a free Ukraine is one with a strong civil society, respect for human rights, and gender equality.

Raising these questions also allows us to show another dimension of Russian aggression, through the lens of women’s lives and women’s movements. Since there are still many myths and prejudices about the real motives behind Russia’s invasion and about Russia itself, it is important for us not to remain silent, but to be the voices of those women whose freedom and lives were taken by the Russian patriarchal death machine.

You recently supported the petition to make 8 December Ukrainian Feminism Day. What is the significance of this initiative?

For us, this is an action connected to the reason mentioned in the previous question. Russia erased Ukrainian feminist history. For us, it is an act of reclaiming our past, honoring all those who fought before us, and building a modern feminist movement with their ideas and courage behind us—liberating ourselves from both Western and Russian intellectual domination.

In July this year, you actively participated in demonstrations against threats to the independence of the anti-corruption agencies NABU and SAP. Why did you, as feminists, get involved in these protests?

These protests were vital for us and for our country. Our Ukraine—the Ukraine we are all standing for, for which our loved ones and sisters are giving their lives and health—is an independent and democratic Ukraine, a Ukraine built on the rule of law, a Ukraine where there is no place for corruption. With the adoption of this bill in such a dramatic way and the whole story behind it, it was first of all important to remind politicians of something that was one of the main slogans of the protests and is written in our Constitution, as well as deeply rooted in our national political identity: we believe that the only source of power in Ukraine is the Ukrainian people. It is not the government that defines Ukraine’s path—it is us. And if they decided to test this, there would be an immediate response, as we have seen.

It takes less than five minutes for a ballistic missile to reach Kyiv, Odesa, or Kharkiv—and yet you could see how many people went out to the streets: veterans and soldiers, eco-activists, feminist activists, cultural and political figures, students and pupils. All the driving forces of our society came out despite everything. And the next reason—it is of critical importance for us to be sure that both during wartime and in hopefully peaceful times, Ukraine will not change its course in the fight against corruption and oligarchy. This work is still far from perfect, but we will not give up or abandon the instruments that started such an important process for us—to survive (so that all defense expenses truly reach our soldiers, doctors, rescuers, and others) and to live in a country without corruption and ruled by justice, not by force.

On 7 June, the Ivano-Frankivsk City Council appealed to the Verkhovna Rada with an initiative to ban abortion. There was a petition in the city against this appeal, and the Women’s March wants to take legal action against the city council. Can you tell us about abortion rights in Ukraine and the threats they face?

Even though abortions are legal in Ukraine, women still face reproductive pressure and violence. There are only four pharmacies in the entire country where pills for medical abortion can be found, and there is no clear or adequate information available for women about their reproductive rights. It is clear that wartime conditions and the extermination of the Ukrainian people by Russia have only deepened the demographic crisis in our country, which far-right, religious, and conservative forces exploit to speculate on this issue instead of taking real action to support mothers or families who plan to have children—whether through birth or adoption. One of our activists participates in the action “About Abortion,” which provides women with information about reproductive rights, debunks myths surrounding medical abortion, and raises awareness about their legal rights. We are also part of the Reproductive Rights Network alongside organizations from France, Croatia, Armenia, Georgia, and Poland—sharing our experiences and supporting one another.

Since the closure of the three shelters for single women that you ran due to lack of funding, how have you redeployed your activities?

We chose this year as our main strategic mission is to empower young activists with the necessary tools and

practical skills to run their own initiatives and bring a feminist perspective into other spheres. We made this choice because we see the real picture—activists are experiencing severe burnout, going to the frontline, being killed by Russian missiles, taking care of injured loved ones, or leaving the country due to security reasons. It is crucial not to let our community lose people and to empower more young activists with all the experience and knowledge we have. We are also continuing our work in sex education, and this year we have already provided lessons to more than 100 children. Even more conservative organizations have recently started requesting these lessons. We also continue our work with older women, which began through our shelters and digital literacy lessons. Since it is now nearly impossible to find funding for projects involving older women—especially those who are not living close to the frontline, even though the majority of them are IDPs—we continue these projects on a volunteer basis and support their own initiatives. For example, our latest activity was a guided excursion for them about prominent feminists of Lviv.

We are also continuing our advocacy, media work, and awareness-raising events for both the global public and our community, building new partnerships with Roma organizations, groups of women with disabilities, and others, because it is important for us to preserve our intersectional approach.

A new experience for us this year was our collaboration with a rehabilitation center for veterans. We worked together with a club of women relatives of soldiers, focusing both on feminist perspectives and psychological support. One of the participants—the wife of a high-ranking recovering soldier—whispered to our activist after an event: “Apparently, all my life I was a feminist too!” For us, it is important not to limit our work only to those who already identify as feminists, but to reach and support all women with whom we can stand together in the fight for equal rights. We also continue our street actions—together with Bilkis we organized the first Pride in Lviv’s history—and we continue our international advocacy through participation in events abroad.

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