

‘The word feminism is still a trigger’: Russia’s feminists in their own words

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Four activists from the country’s regions explain how they’re trying to bring feminism to a wider audience

A new wave of feminist activism is spreading across Russia, breaking boundaries both online and off. These initiatives tackle all kinds of topics; some provide help for victims of domestic violence, others offer self-education and try to spread positive images of women in the public sphere. From Moscow Femfest, an acclaimed feminist festival launched in 2017, to the Eve’s Ribs community hub and domestic violence centre Nasiliu.net, Russia’s feminist infrastructure is growing – in Moscow and St Petersburg, at least.

Outside the major cities, however, there are much fewer organisations and projects working on a feminist agenda. According to Nasiliu.net, Russia has 207 officially registered organisations that provide legal and psychological assistance to women, 14 of which are located in Moscow and 25 in St Petersburg. But some regions have no aid organisations at all. The Russian feminist association ‘She’ [says](#) that feminist events are held in 45 towns or cities (not including these two cities).

openDemocracy spoke to the founders of independent feminist projects in four Russian regions – from the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad to Tatarstan and Buryatia in Siberia – about their work, the practical difficulties they face and how they’re changing the country.

[Feminitiv](#), Kaliningrad

Dasha Yakovleva, co-founder

Feminitiv was set up in December 2018. Officially, we provide “information and consulting services” – lectures, film screenings, online and offline meetings – and we’re active on Instagram, where we share useful content.

We also provide free psychological assistance for women, girls and LGBTQ+ persons, online or in person, and we also run support groups moderated by our psychologists. Online consultations are also open for girls from other regions.

Feminitiv is financed by grants from partners. The money is spent on employees’ salaries, our projects and the office costs. We have a team of six, and we work with specialists on a freelance basis – for example, a lawyer and a clinical psychologist, who advise on complex cases. We also have an online chat with 75 participants, run by volunteers.

At the moment, Feminitiv is registered as an individual entrepreneur (under my name). We wanted to set up as an NGO, but over the past six months it has become clear that obtaining NGO status will only complicate our work and risk us being seen as a “foreign agent”.

I know from acquaintances that the authorities have increased their attention towards us, but there have been no serious complaints so far. Perhaps this is because our rhetoric is rather soft. It's a point of principle for us to avoid self-censorship and to continue publicising our position, but we are very careful.

For example, the Eve's Ribs organisation in St Petersburg has a very strong activist, even political, position. We try to be careful; our PR manager checks the wording on our statements a hundred times. We are careful with words, with LGBTQ+ symbols. It's important for us to maintain a safe space for the community.

Kaliningrad is a region with a strong FSB [Russia's security service] and military presence. Employees of international NGOs have told me they would not carry out any projects in Kaliningrad because "the FSB there is angry". This is partly because Kaliningrad is isolated geographically - on the edge of the Baltic, sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland.

"We do feel isolated sometimes, partly because of our geographic location [...] Here, there are very few of us, we are almost alone"

Thanks to Kaliningrad's pre-war ties with Germany, we also have the concept of "creeping Germanisation" [German influence]. For example, if we did something about German women who used to live in Kaliningrad, then this can be attributed to "creeping Germanisation". Of course, we can't mention that the region might move away from Russia; the Center for Countering Extremism [a law enforcement agency] would immediately come and check us for signs of separatism.

We get constant aggression online, but we no longer pay any attention to it. Once we conducted a live broadcast on Instagram and talked about youth movements and lesbians. Immediately afterwards we started receiving voice messages from bots: "What flags do young people gather under?", "Which one of you is a lesbian?"

Until recently, there were no LGBTQ+ organisations in the Kaliningrad region. We consider ourselves intersectional feminists, so we run support groups and psychological consultations for LGBTQ+ people. Russian federal law prohibits "LGBT propaganda" for children, but Kaliningrad has a regional law banning "LGBT propaganda" completely. Therefore, people are very afraid: when we held a screening of the film '[Children 404](#)' [about gay and lesbian young people in Russia], not a single venue wanted to take it. To date, there have been no precedents for the use of this law, but anything could happen.

We do feel isolated sometimes, partly because of our geographic location. In Moscow and St Petersburg, there are a lot of NGOs working on social problems, with teenagers, women and so on. Here, there are very few of us, we are almost alone. I would like to be a part of Russian society, and even the international community. It's very important to know that you're not just a small initiative, but part of a bigger, important process.

[FemKyzlar](#), Kazan, Tatarstan

Dina Nurm, coordinator

I spent four years in online feminist groups and was envious about all the feminist activity in Moscow and St Petersburg.

I really wanted something similar in Kazan.

First, we created an online chat, and then a public forum on the VKontakte social media platform,

where we gradually gathered an audience with similar views.

In November 2018, we held our first event: a female open mic night, where any woman can present her work on a topic related to feminism. It can be a stand-up act, a monologue, poems, songs, instrumental compositions – there are no limits. Everyone has 15 minutes to speak, and no one will tell the women to shut up. We only interrupt if there are very misogynistic ideas in the performance. We still hold these events; this is how we give women a voice.

The Tatar word *Kyzlar* means ‘girl’. Haters always emphasise that we have combined a Tatar word with the Latin word *fem* – it pisses them off. When we came up with the name, we wanted it to be bright and ironic; we want to patent the name so that nobody can stop us from using it.

We don’t have an office, nor any kind of financial support. We run everything on pure enthusiasm and without any formalities. We hold events at friendly NGOs, independent spaces or bars. Sometimes we have to charge admission of 100-200 roubles, to pay the rent. But the good news is that people will even come to paid events: it means there is a demand for our ideas.

“We’re often asked about Tatarstan as an Islamic region, but I perceive it as quite secular. There are some religious Muslims in Tatarstan, but this does not greatly affect our work. I would love to get acquainted with Islamic feminism, to reflect on Tatar culture and our region’s multiculturalism”

Our activities are always different and depend on the desires of the participants. Last year, we held five street actions against domestic violence. In one, an activist picketed a police station with a cardboard coffin, in reference to the stereotypical police phrase in domestic violence incidents: “When there’s a corpse, we will come and inspect it.” A court decided the coffin was a “prefabricated collapsible structure” and imposed a fine, which our supporters helped collect – we’re really grateful to them.

We held another action in the summer, which we called ‘[Bloody wedding](#)’, at Kazan’s registry office. These are all good ways to draw attention to the issue.

We’re often asked about Tatarstan as an Islamic region, but I perceive it as quite secular. There are some religious Muslims in Tatarstan, but this does not greatly affect our work. I would love to get acquainted with Islamic feminism, to reflect on Tatar culture and our region’s multiculturalism, but, unfortunately, no one on our team is well versed in this.

Surprisingly, we rarely encounter haters – we receive negative comments on social networks, but nothing more. Police officers have come to our film screenings, which are held in the ‘Acceptance’ LGBT centre. A concerned citizen tipped them off and asked them to inspect us, although it seems to me that they were really interested in the centre itself.

The last time the police bothered us was at a screening of ‘*Tochka*’, a Russian film about prostitution. We explained what was happening, they made sure all the participants were 18 or over, and left. You do have to be careful. When we held a screening of ‘[Never Rarely Sometimes Always](#)’, I tried not to say in the adverts that it was a film about abortion.

The main problem now is the lack of people; we have between five and ten active participants, and this is not enough. The last open mic, in early March, was organised by three of us. I would like more initiatives, more projects, more participants. We would like to get funding, but we don’t have the experience or someone to organise it. But the main thing, of course, is just to continue working and not close down, despite the difficulties.

Syktyvkar Femfest, Komi

Dasha Ananyeva, co-founder of Revolt Center and co-organiser of Syktyvkar Femfest

I went to the first Moscow Femfest in 2017, and realised how great it is to be a part of this kind of friendly space.

I wanted to hold a similar event in Syktyvkar – a festival, because the format allows you to form a community.

With lectures or reading groups, where participants gather for an hour or two and then disperse, this is much more difficult to achieve. A festival has many different activities, everyone can choose their own thing, and then get to know each other during the breaks.

But I wasn't sure whether people wanted something like that in Syktyvkar. We invited Lelia Nordik, an intersectional feminist, eco-activist and freelance journalist, to our newly opened [Revolt Center](#) to give a very basic lecture on what feminist organisations exist in Russia and why they are necessary. About 90 people came, which is a lot for Syktyvkar, and I realised there was demand.

We found partners (including the Heinrich Böll Foundation from Germany and the local [7x7 media project](#) project) to finance us and invited speakers from all over the country. The programme was strong and in no way inferior to the Moscow event, and we received very good reviews. When a girl took the microphone at the festival's farewell session and said that for the first time she felt herself in a safe place, I realised that everything had worked out.

We had an ambitious goal: to create a community that would propose ideas and organise its own events. This is how the Revolt Center works; we provide a platform and our help, but the initiative has to come from local activists. People say: "I want to give a lecture on such and such a topic," "I want to do a seminar or reading group."

We created a closed group online for those who want to set up a feminist movement, and we invited the group's members to events. Everyone came and participated, but no one volunteered to organise something of their own.

Therefore we decided to postpone a second Femfest, and organise small but regular activities ourselves. Due to the pandemic, we've not had many events lately, but we did hold workshops and film screenings, and wrote letters to [women political prisoners](#).

A purely feminist agenda is not for everyone, and we don't want to scare away anyone who would be potentially interested in these events

Now we want to create a community for women, with a diverse agenda that would be of interest to a wide range of girls, rather than a narrow feminist focus. Ideas include training on how to become a municipal deputy, a women's film club and reading groups. A purely feminist agenda is not for everyone, and we don't want to scare away anyone who would be potentially interested in these events.

The word feminism is still a trigger for people in Russia. I recently gave an interview to a local TV station about feminism. People wrote such rough and tough things in the online comments. It was unexpected – and even worse than when we launched our SyktyvkarFemfest.

With the Femfest, they targeted me personally, because I was the most prominent organiser. Then someone wrote publicly that they would come to Femfest and cause trouble. Our private security

service agreed to arrive within five minutes if anything happened. For two days we waited, suspecting every big man who came by. In the end, some drunken teenagers arrived, and began to shout and make jokes about feminism. They got into a skirmish with some of the festival goers, the teenagers were embarrassed and we just asked them to leave.

Apart from us, no one else in Syktyvkar is involved in women's problems. There is one shelter, whose director contacted us when we announced Femfest. It's very private and does not advertise, although the director agreed to moderate one of our sessions. We tried to continue the relationship – sometimes we give the shelter clothes for children and women – but there's no close cooperation as yet.

In the neighbouring town of Kirov, the situation is much worse: there is only one religious shelter for women, where only women with newborn children are accepted. That's it – other women simply have nowhere to go.

From afar, Syktyvkar can look like a very activist region. We have the [Shiyes anti-landfill campaign](#), the 7x7 media project and now the Revolt Center. After Shiyes, many people, including women, began to get involved in politics and activism. But internal squabbles and problems interfere with our work. We hope that, together with our colleagues from Moscow, we will overcome them and start working on a new women's club in the near future.

[IFreedom Buryat Feminism](#), Ulan-Ude, Buryatia

Maria Khankhunova, co-founder

IFreedom started in 2016 as an online community on VKontakte, then we gradually began to expand on Instagram, Telegram and into offline events.

Initially, there were just four of us, but now there are many more participants. We focus on debunking the myth that feminists are terrible man-haters.

We came up with our name – IFreedom – at the very first meeting. I still think that it suits us perfectly. Feminism is inner freedom for us, and for everyone, regardless of gender. As an unregistered movement, we cannot conduct large offline activities; we have both freedom and restrictions due to the fact that we are a fairly small community and our activities are more of a hobby.

One of our first actions was a photo session where we wore T-shirts saying “I am free”, “I am impudent”, “I am strong”. It was a very positive action without a particularly radical message, but we still received a bunch of hate comments. Now our Instagram page has around 1,700 subscribers, so hate comments are quite frequent.

We try to be open to different views, but if people are rude, we have to reply to them. Of course, we don't have as many haters as national NGOs or activists, but the community of people like us is also not that big. If problems arise, there are not many organisations in Russia's Far East that can stand up for us. But we do have very loyal subscribers; we receive words of gratitude for just being who we are – without this, we would have burned out long ago.

To normalise the idea of feminism, we are doing a series of interviews with feminists and pro-feminists, active in Buryatia, who are not afraid to express their position. Usually, our interviewees are recommended to us by people we've already interviewed, or by our subscribers, because we try to respond to popular demand and do what our audience is interested in. These interviews are also a form of self-reflection; people answer questions and think about things they've not thought about

before. We also have a lot of content on Instagram: quotes from famous women, informative and supportive posts.

“There is no women’s shelter or crisis centre in the republic, and there are no statistics on domestic violence. But there is an organisation that wants to ban abortion and helps women with unwanted pregnancies”

We focus on online projects, but try to hold regular offline events too. We wanted to hold a festival, but changed our minds because of the pandemic and because festivals, it seems to me, are already going out of fashion. Last year, for International Women’s Day on 8 March, we held a guided tour of the city about women in Buryatia’s history; this year, we held a discussion about personal experiences of feminism.

We also held a very unusual tattoo party, where a tattoo artist from Buryatia created feminist tattoos in the Buryat language. Lots of people came, it was a great event. We have our own merchandise: stickers, ribbons with the words “Buryat Feminism”, “Baikal girl power” and so on. This is also a way of informing people about feminism.

There is no women’s shelter or crisis centre in the republic, and there are no statistics on domestic violence. But there is an organisation that wants to ban abortion and helps women with unwanted pregnancies. They have occupied public transport with posters saying “This child wants to live”, “You will get help, keep the child”. They have the resources to get local media to tell their stories. Sometimes their posters look like responses to our posts, and we know they are following our activities.

We don’t work with the authorities or related organisations because we are an unregistered initiative and want to avoid unnecessary attention. So far, there have been no complaints from the authorities – perhaps they don’t read Instagram or we have too few subscribers.

If victims of domestic violence contact us, we give them the details of friendly journalists – publicity often helps resolve a situation. We cannot provide help ourselves, because we have no resources, no lawyers, no psychologists. Perhaps, if participants with these skills appear, then we can engage in more practical work.

We are friendly with other activists, and try to foster independent projects. One girl has an Instagram project about gender stereotypes, called “[Like a girl](#)”; another is looking at the visibility of women in the history of Buryatia.

I would like more initiatives related to women, more activists and more assistance. We want to create a sex education project and provide training for journalists on how to cover domestic violence – even good journalists can make mistakes. We have a dream of getting 10,000 subscribers, then we can create a website, start a Patreon and develop our ideas further.

Maria Koltsova

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