

Meet Russia's feminist resistance to Putin's war on Ukraine

Wednesday 6 April 2022, by [KOKOREVA Viktorya](#), [ROSSMAN Ella](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2022).

In early March, Russian feminists joined forces and organised Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), currently the most organised anti-war movement in Russia. Viktorya Kokoreva contacted a member of its coordination group, Russian feminist activist and historian Ella Rossman. They talked about the repression that young women suffer, violence during arrests, and how it falls to Russian women to fight for the humanisation of the entire country.

What are the features of your resistance to the war?

Our movement is now trying to stop the war in any way possible. When it started, all Russian feminists were of course left in a state of shock, because of how this war against civilians was waged from the beginning and because our state decided to invade the territory of an independent sovereign state.

But it also came as a blow to everything we have been doing in Russia for many years. Over the past ten years, the feminist movement has been developing actively — in fact our activists have done what state organisations and bodies should have done, such as providing support for women in situations of domestic violence.

After the war began, that whole struggle got wiped out. There will be more poverty and more violence in Russia, especially with all the sanctions.

Nobody understood this war, so feminists became the first opposition force in Russia to create an anti-war association. Now, our two main courses of action are to protest and to inform. On the one hand, we unite feminist groups all over Russia — there have been more than 45 feminist groups organised in different cities.

Groups outside the country also join with us: in Italy, Switzerland and the United States, for example, they have demonstrated under our logo. We organise street protests against the war and call on the government to stop it. Groups abroad are calling for pressure from local governments on the Russian government.

And the second thing we do is inform. In Russia, even before the conflict started most independent media was jammed or closed down. Now social media sites are blocked or slowed down by the government. People get very little independent information: what they mostly get is state propaganda.

Our first method is to distribute leaflets, the second is through online campaigns that we regularly launch over social networks. We do this not only on Instagram, but also on social networks for example, on Odnoklassniki [a Russian social media platform popular among people aged 40–70], we launched parodies of its “send-this-to-seven-friends-and-you-will-be-happy” messages. But we called

them “letters of doom” and wrote an anti-war text with information on the victims.

Even distributing anti-war leaflets in Russia is very dangerous now. What advice do you give to those who protest?

Any protest is very dangerous now. Due to the new laws on betraying the homeland (up to 20 years of imprisonment) and the law on fake news (up to 15 years), it is forbidden to spread any information about the war other than that approved by the Ministry of Defence. Any protester on the street is arrested, even though single pickets have not yet been outlawed in our country.

Many of our young women have already been snatched by the police for pasting up leaflets, so we openly warn our volunteers that it is dangerous. We have a [Telegram channel](#) that describes our basic security tools — we suggest that you prepare for the distribution of leaflets as if for demonstrations: “Always go with someone else, have a charged phone and water, keep in touch with each other, and have at hand the details of the lawyers from the OVD-info department [a Russian human rights organisation that provides initial legal assistance at demonstrations].”

For online campaigns, we also have a mechanism for secure communication on the internet: we explain what encrypted messengers are, where you can chat, where not, and which application to use so that it deletes all your correspondence when you get arrested.

Telegram has also become dangerous, as its correspondence is often used to accuse you of “telephonic terrorism” and extremism. Also, I keep an eye on how other groups behave in online space and regularly let them know if they are putting themselves in harm’s way.

How has repression affected FAR?

Right now, I would say we are the most organised in Russia. Before the war, Yulia Tsvetkova [activist illustrator who drew comics about women’s rights] was jailed for pornography and Anna Dvornichenko [specialist in gender studies and organiser of feminist festivals] was practically kicked out of the country. Our group has come in for a lot of repression but since, at the same time, women are always underrated in the patriarchal culture in Russia, they didn’t expect us to become a political force.

Our core group is deliberately kept small so as not to detract from the effectiveness of our work. We ask all feminist groups in different cities to self-organise and independently discuss the actions we propose to them, and not to join our group. This is a question of security, because if they come after us, there will still be many autonomous cells able to continue functioning by themselves.

Furthermore, some of us have already left Russian territory because the police are already aware of our activities and many activists have already been searched and arrested on charges of “telephonic terrorism”. This sort of charge is a new way for the police to suspend activists’ activities for a while and intimidate them.

Can you tell us more about the behaviour of the police during the demonstrations?

On March 6, we had several columns of women as part of the anti-war action in Russia. Many of our young women participated in different cities. On the same night as the arrests, we received information of several cases of police beatings and torture of young women. Cases of sexual violence by police officers have also been reported in St Petersburg.

And now the Human Rights Council in Russia has announced that the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Investigative Committee are conducting an inspection of one of the police stations in Brateevo,

where one of our young women recorded an audio of officers beating her up and forcing her to answer their questions. By the way, she later said that in her childhood her father often beat her, so in this situation she kept a cool head and managed to turn on the recorder.

On March 8, we organised a global action in memory of the Ukrainian dead. We suggested to the women in Russia to go to the World War II monuments, which are present in every city and village, and to lay flowers in protest. Around the world 112 cities participated. This was especially important for small towns, where the young women thought they were the only ones who were anti-war. So, they went to the monuments and saw a bunch of anti-war wreaths, postcards, and posters, and were surprised. They became aware they were not alone.

What work did you do in Russian society before the war broke out?

Well, there is a misconception in Europe that gender equality in Russia was achieved under the Bolsheviks, but that's not true even from a historical point of view. And in modern post-Soviet Russia things have gotten worse: in recent years the possibility of having an abortion has been severely limited, the period in which it can be had has been reduced, and if a woman decides to terminate a pregnancy many clinics have made it mandatory to consult priests.

In Russia there is no domestic violence law, the maximum penalty for this crime is a fine, we do not have normal protection for the family, there are no structures offering protection. Feminists have long fought for this law, but it has never been adopted. All our shelter facilities and psychological work with victims of violence are provided by the efforts of volunteers and without state support.

Feminists are trying to humanise Russian society. We currently have a very high tolerance of violence in society: if a student is beaten up in school, well, he's being disciplined, if a man beats a woman, well, things are being sorted out.

Feminists are changing this viewpoint, explaining and showing that we can live differently, that remaining silent about violence it is not normal. Understanding of this problem is growing. Young men, pro-feminist, have begun to join us, to take part in our actions.

However, we think the war will take us back many years in this area.

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