

Russia's women are fighting back against the war in Ukraine

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How does a largely faceless and nameless group of Russian activists operate in Russia and beyond?

Within 48 hours of Vladimir Putin's [24 February invasion of Ukraine](#), Russian feminists had mobilised to form the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR).

"Feminism as a political force cannot be on the side of war, particularly a war of occupation," the initiative's manifesto [read](#).

The document called on Russian feminist groups and activists to "unite their forces" against the Kremlin's war in "opposition to war, patriarchy, authoritarianism and militarism".

Its authors aimed to draw on the surge in feminist organising in Russia, where feminist spaces, events and initiatives have sought to tackle a [range of issues in recent years](#), from provision for victims of domestic violence to self-education and spreading positive messages on women in public.

Branches of FAR - which act autonomously - have since published a newspaper aimed at women who are outside the activist feminist agenda, supported people detained at anti-war protests in Russia, and [spread information online about the reality of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine](#).

What is FAR up to now that Putin has called for [partial mobilisation](#) - Russia's first since World War II - which prompted protests across the country?

openDemocracy spoke to one of FAR's founders, who must remain nameless as part of the movement's policy of keeping the majority of its activists in the shadows. How does FAR even operate in such conditions?

openDemocracy: FAR tries to maintain anonymity for its activists but some well-known ones call for protests against the Ukraine war. Is there a form of 'safe publicity'?

I think there is no safe publicity when you are engaged in activism [in Russia].

But I can explain why we did it this way. When a movement has no public faces, it has less credibility. And when you know the movement has an activist you trust and whose background you are familiar with, this creates more trust. It's easier to attract people this way. We have activists who have left Russia and can now afford to speak openly.

openDemocracy: Tell us about your target audience. Who was it at the start of the invasion and who is it now?

The core of our audience consists of feminists and activists who were already involved in the anti-

war agenda. But since we position ourselves as a movement whose main goal is to mobilise activists in Russia's regions, we work for a different target audience and try to involve them in politics and social struggles.

Our target audience is not only activists. In order to attract other people, we publish, for example, the Zhenskaya Pravda newspaper (Women's Truth). It is aimed at older women, who are not particularly interested in politics.

openDemocracy: You want more women to be involved, not just those with a feminist agenda?

Yes. The only thing is we cannot communicate with our entire audience via the same channel. We have a Telegram channel. But the newspaper is not affiliated to us. It's a separate publication. This segment of the audience needs to be addressed through the channels they use.

openDemocracy: What do you publish in the newspaper?

We use a different language, which is closer to this audience and more understandable for them. We don't talk about feminism. We don't overload them with left-wing terms and the like. The writing is very accessible. We try to include articles by independent media outlets that we think are important. Sometimes, we publish the excerpt of an article and say where it can be read in full.

[The newspaper has] everything that can be found in the magazines and papers sold in kiosks. You can even find recipes and jokes in [Zhenskaya Pravda]. That inspires confidence.

"Protests by Russians [living] abroad cannot influence the situation in Russia. But the opposite can happen: protests inside Russia could be picked up outside the country's borders"

openDemocracy: Has the movement's position and manifesto changed in any way over the course of Russia's war in Ukraine?

No, but after six months of war, we updated the [manifesto](#). That's because a document we hastily published on the second day of the war needed to be updated. It has been updated and edited by all of our branches.

openDemocracy: What changes did you make to the manifesto?

There was a need to clarify our position on specific issues. For instance, there was some confusion over a European movement, the Feminist Resistance Against War, whose name is similar to ours. They [advocate for the disarmament of Ukraine](#). We don't agree with that and are for arming Ukraine, but [the group's name] made people think they were writing on behalf of FAR.

openDemocracy: You are planning a YouTube launch. What is it and who is its target audience?

We are planning to launch a YouTube show. There should be two programmes, [one will have] anti-military analysis and the second will be aimed at people who have remained silent about the war.

openDemocracy: What do FAR's branches do and what are your hopes and aims when you campaign to set up new branches in different countries?

FAR cells are organised groups of activists in different cities and countries. They are loosely related.

Each reserves the right to hold any protests it considers necessary. An individual cell doesn't need approval for that. The idea being that cells share our mission and values but have sufficient authority. You can team up with other activists to create your own cell, use our identity and so on.

I would say that the main goal of the international cells is to draw the international community's attention to the war. We thought that the whole world understood there was a war going on and was talking about it. As it turned out, we live in a bubble. A lot of people have not heard about the war or are not interested in it. FAR cells are needed to spread information, to establish contacts with feminist anti-war organisations abroad and to build a bigger network. This increases our influence.

openDemocracy: Do you hope that these international cells will become the core of anti-war protests, going forward?

I doubt that the core of the protest will come from foreign branches. The core of [any future] protests will be in Russia. And, by the way, [the core of the protests] has already appeared after the declaration of [partial] mobilisation.

Protests by Russians [living] abroad cannot influence the situation in Russia. But the opposite can happen: protests inside Russia could be picked up outside the country's borders. Russians outside the country need to show solidarity with Russians who are inside it.

"The only tool to radicalise the agenda when you are abroad is to call on people to protest. But do you have the right to do so? It's complex"

openDemocracy: How do FAR's regional coordinators in Russia manage to remain anonymous? How is this achieved in practice?

We have a separate person who deals with security. We keep [regional coordinators] completely anonymous even for us [the movement's membership], because we understand that, in terms of safety, the needs of people who are inside Russia are completely different from the needs of people who are outside the country.

We don't link branches to one another. God forbid, something could go wrong. The branches are loosely connected. We know only that people find one other but I can't tell you how, for security reasons. They have a direct connection with us through our Telegram bot, Instagram and other channels. We can consult them there and give them advice on safety.

openDemocracy: Did you encounter any specificities in particular Russian regions where your activists work?

I can't say much, because these specificities only became obvious in the last week [after the announcement of partial mobilisation sparked [protests in some regions](#)]. Some regions are more active, some are less active. In some, protests without any connection to FAR are taking place. We fully support them. For example, [incredible things](#) are happening in Buryatia right now.

The [partisan movement](#) [which includes leftist anarchists, pro-Ukrainian activists and far-Right groups] has intensified action in some regions. Everyone is afraid for their safety, but they feel the need to do something. There are more guerrilla attacks now than ever.

openDemocracy: Could Russian regions with high ethnic minority populations, as in Buryatia, trigger more radical and concerted protest against war and mobilisation across the country?

I very much hope so. What has begun out of strong emotions could become structured and organised. These regions have given [everyone] a very powerful momentum. People are furious.

I haven't seen anything cooler in the last six months than the way women are resisting in Dagestan, Yakutia and even Chechnya. I could never have imagined that women would come out [to protest] in Chechnya. Anywhere else, yes, but not there. In the context of the [extremely oppressive] Chechen regime under which these women live, this is an incredible step.

25 September: protests against mobilisation in Makhachkala, Dagestan. Source: Current Time

openDemocracy: Why is this happening in regions where the majority of the population is indigenous [and non-Slavic]?

I think angry women can do anything. Mobilisation currently resembles ethnic cleansing. This is not new and not an idea I have come up with. There are lots of villages that have been completely emptied. Not a single man remains. People in the regions are not less educated, they understand it all perfectly. They see that they have become a resource for Moscow. And now Moscow is starting to pump people out of there. In the European part [of Russia], Moscow will try to create the illusion that things are normal until the last moment, but this will not last for long.

openDemocracy: What's FAR's reaction to the wave of [women's protests that began in Dagestan](#)?

We are incredibly supportive. In practice, we support them via media coverage and we keep in touch with them. We haven't been asked to support them legally [in case of prosecution]. We are open and fully prepared. If they need any help we will try to support them.

openDemocracy: How can you radicalise the anti-war movement in Russia this way, while abroad? And is it even a good idea to do this?

This is a very delicate ethical issue that I argue about every day. As of now, the only tool to radicalise the agenda when you are abroad is to call on people to protest. But do you have the right to do so? It's complex. I have my opinion, others have theirs.

What other resources are there? Providing legal support, supporting people who hold anti-war views with information and financially. People can go outside, walk around and get to know each other. We provide legal assistance and we call for sabotaging the work of Russian state structures.

Today, we received some news from a source and we immediately wrote an appeal to sabotage the work of [military] draft centres. We also publish calls to take to the streets. For the most radical activists, this means taking part in street protests or participating in acts of sabotage.

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