

Ukraine : Bilkis, feminism in solidarity

Tuesday 8 August 2023, by [Bilkis](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 7 August 2023).

«Our initiative on 26 February will be a day to remember. All because this Sunday we will be starting a new activity, which will be called Godivnichka [1] ... All homeless people and people on low incomes need basic, affordable and, above all, regular help... Meal distributions will take place in Mazepa street, on the right from the Poplar market on the playground. Receiving our aid is not linked to any precondition of political or religious opinion, no document or prayer on behalf of the people will be necessary to receive it. You can just come along for a hot lunch, whatever your circumstances.» This is how Bilkis announced its new activity last February, adding to the many others run by the Lviv feminist group. Two of its members were kind enough to answer our questions about this ambitious project.

Since February 2023, you have been distributing meals in Lviv. How did you come up with this idea?

Ivanka, member of the Bilkis team and coordinator of the Godivnichka project : When I was a child, my parents and I used to walk past rubbish bins and I'd see people taking food from the bins and I'd look at them with childish curiosity: «If you study badly, you'll live like them», my parents told me. I studied very badly and their predictions came partly true, because at the age of 20, I discovered the world of freeganism [2] and became one of those who rummage through rubbish bins))) It was by interacting with the 'rubbish' that I came into contact with people who are not like me, who act for partisan ideological reasons, but who are in need, in poverty, in social insecurity. All their stories touched me to the depths of my soul and I always thought about my privileges and how I wanted to help people in vulnerable situations. This winter, we received a grant for our activities, each member of our team expressed what they would like to do, and that's when I realised that in fact everything was ready to start doing what I had wanted to do for a long time. I was very scared, I had questions and fears: what, where, how? I'd never had any experience in this field, but synergy played a key role. We found a team, big pots, containers and a kitchen. Few people came to the first distributions, the mistake was in our poor information, but that all changed after the street announcements, when I distributed leaflets all over the city about the time and place of the free lunches. Today, we have a long queue, we offer a rationed portion and everything is eaten.

How do you go about distributing more or less than 100 meals, is it a lot of work? I saw on the photos that men were also involved in the distribution. Who are they?

Ivanka : For this project, I'm the coordinator and the cook's assistant. The main cook is Timur, and three volunteers take it in turns to help with the distribution. During the week, we discuss what we're going to prepare, the food stocks we have, the money we have and the products that are currently on sale or in season. On Saturday evening or Sunday morning, we go shopping at the market or the ATB supermarket. On Sundays, I come to Timur's house in the morning and we start cooking. I love this process and always approach each stage with love, even if it means peeling 30 kg of potatoes. The whole house smells of food, we're always airing out the kitchen and we can smell the fried onions ourselves. We prepare a dish, a drink, and there's always a treat - biscuits or sweets.

When everything is ready, we put it in large containers. We take a 'cigarette break' for a few minutes and taste what we've prepared ourselves. All our dishes are very tasty and nutritious. Then we call a taxi, load up a folding table, containers and everything else we need, and head for the distribution point, where there are people waiting for us with empty plates (for environmental reasons, we ask people to bring reusable cutlery and we use virtually no disposable plastic). The distribution starts at 12:00 and goes quickly. Timur fills the plates, one of the volunteers pours a drink, I hand out sweets, sometimes we change roles. Everyone leaves full, we fold up the table and go to the bus stop. On the way back we take public transport and take the empty containers home, clean up the kitchen and say goodbye until next Sunday. Anyone can be a member of the distribution team; the men in the photo are acquaintances of ours from the circle of activists who are joining the project.

How are people reacting? Have you received any help from the town authorities or other supporters?

Ivanka : People always say thank you, thank you very much. The dishes are complimented, we see the empty plates, and that's the best feedback and reaction for us. Unfortunately, we've never received any support [from the authorities], this project was born thanks to a subsidy. It was calculated for six months' distribution, but thanks to our rigorous management and frugal spirit, we've spent just over half the amount, so we're very happy to still have money to continue this project between now and the end of the year.

These distributions are not charity, but social solidarity, which is at the heart of the activities of Bilkis, a feminist, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist group. How do you relate this food aid activity to your feminist struggle?

Ivanka: When I talk about feminism, I'm talking about a lot of things, especially justice, security and equality. That's only one aspect. Various social problems can be superimposed on this foundation, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence and stereotypes, including social inequality. As a militant feminist, I want to make the world a happier, safer and fairer place through equality and fairness. This is precisely where there is a link between our activities and the people who come to eat at our table. I see feminism, above all, as a project with a vision of the world aimed at building the future. In the current conditions, I realised that we had to try to make our society more sensitive and more attentive to those who are more vulnerable than we are, at this very moment, during the war, so that we emerge not only victorious, but also as a democratic and egalitarian society.

You have many activities. Do you have any other projects?

Yana, member of the Bilkis team and coordinator of [Space of Things](#) : Our main projects at the moment are Godivnichka and Space of things. We are also recording a podcast which we will start broadcasting in mid-September. These will be followed by podcasts in Ukrainian on everyday subjects from a gender perspective, such as food, transport, language and so on. We are also in the process of developing a website.

From time to time, we organise events: film screenings, debating clubs, entertainment evenings and we recently organised an exhibition [on women's bodies]. In July, our member Ivanka travelled to the Donetsk region with 'parcels of joy' - 43 boxes of sweets and toys for the children still living there. She may make another trip to the Donetsk, Mykolaiv or Kherson regions in the autumn. We have also published an [Activistka](#) zine on women - in the army or activist - during the large-scale war. We currently have two other zines in preparation - one on women who are addicted to or use drugs, and the second on homeless women and their life on the streets. A short film is also planned on older women and how they experience old age and the challenges they face.

A word about [Space of things](#). How would you sum up this activity?

Yana: Space of things is a permanent free space that operates 3 days a week for 3 hours. You can bring and give things, and you can take things away. It's a project with a social and ecological vocation. We get a lot of positive and grateful feedback. In August (2023), this project will already be a year old! We think this project is necessary, we see that because the number of visitors is so high. We love what we do. And we intend to continue doing it. Things should be reusable and free, not aimlessly polluting the planet and stealing our resources.

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P.S.

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Bilkis, a Ukrainian feminist group

https://www.syllepse.net/syllepse_images/bilkis-english_compressed.pdf

Footnotes

[1] This can be translated as bird feeder.

[2] The “*freeganism*” approach advocates an alternative mode of consumption that tends towards free goods and fights against waste.