



Digital Culture and Feminist Politics in Contemporary Russia: Inside Perspectives

AN INTERVIEW BY INNA PERHEENTUPA
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Abstract: A new feminist generation has emerged in Russia in the 2010s as a response to the increasingly conservative governmental politics and new legislation limiting the rights of both women and non-heterosexuals. The new generation of feminists continues to work around very similar questions than the previous generation, the women's movement in the 1990s. Many activist goals, such as battling gendered violence and conservative gender and sexual norms, remain the same while the social conditions for activism have profoundly changed. If the women's movement in the 1990s emerged in a political climate in which political opportunities were increasing after the demise of Soviet Union, the current movement has been activated in a reverse situation of shrinking political possibilities. Women's NGOs in the 1990s also received considerable funding from foreign organizations in order to achieve their goals and promote democracy in the country whereas the activists today have much less economic resources to draw from. On the other hand, the internet and digital media provide the contemporary feminists a space to conduct a novel kind of activism—a possibility that the earlier generation did not have. Inna Perheentupa, who is currently finalizing her PhD on contemporary feminist politics in Russia, interviewed feminist activists from both generations in order to find out what feminism is about in Russia in the 2010s, what has changed since the 1990s, what digital communication has to offer?

Keywords: Feminism, activism, political opportunities, digital activism, generations, gendered violence

Alla Mitrofanova has been active in the women's movement in Russia since the 1990s. Inspired by the possibilities of new technologies and feminist ideas, Mitrofanova founded a cyberfeminist group in St Petersburg in 1993. The Russian cyberfeminist group makes an intriguing case for investigation, since it was interested in digital forms of activism at a time when the internet was still a hobby for just a few. Unlike many other activists, Mitrofanova has called herself feminist since the beginning of her activism despite the fact that the term 'feminism' continued to have negative connotations after the demise of the Soviet Union, where it was labelled as a bourgeois movement. In addition, Mitrofanova

is one of the few ‘veteran’ activists, who is still very active in the St Petersburg feminist scene and thus is able to pinpoint the differences and similarities between the different generations of activists. The following interview with Alla Mitrofanova was conducted in January 2018.

Image 1. Alla Mitrofanova became a cyberfeminist in the beginning of the 1990s. She continues to be active feminist writer and speaker in St Petersburg.



Source: Alla Mitrofanova

Inna Perheentupa: *What do you think is special about contemporary feminist politics in Russia?*

Alla Mitrofanova: Contemporary feminist politics happen on the level of speech acts and everyday politics. I think it is more important to work practically this way than try to affect

abstract political ideas. I do not think changing political faces would have an effect. When we criticize political images, it is fantasy. When we criticize the way people talk, it is concrete. In this way, by working on discourse, we can gradually establish new social behavior, practices, and institutions. I think this is very productive and practical.

I. P. *What is in your view the most interesting feminist project in contemporary Russia?*

A. M. One big project is Eve's Ribs. I do not know why their version of feminism is so interesting to many people. They combine popular feminism with new intersectional feminism, and they are able to take advantage of social networks. At other feminist events, there are about twenty people, but at Eve's Ribs' events there are always about 100 participants. Eve's Ribs started as a media project—they influence the discursive situation. They do popular media actions with the help of technology. Some of their actions like the one they did in front of the Kremlin,¹ declaring 'feminism is an idea of Russia' and 'woman for president' was brilliant. Many people were irritated by this idea—even the political opposition, and that is why it was so good. They were successful in provoking stereotypes.

I. P. *So successful feminism is often about political irritation?*

A. M. Yes, in the sense of pointing out authoritarian practices. Another interesting event was the Femfest last year (2017). A group of feminists from Moscow decided to organize a huge event on feminism. They came from a very tolerant position that was not political or radical—and it was a huge scandal, because they proposed a kind of glamour feminism. Other feminist activists were furious and it led to a big discussion. As a result, the event was very much politicised, and there were a lot of radical talks and discussions and an audience of around 1,000 people. For a festival, it had a really big impact.

I. P. *Are the Russian presidential elections in any way relevant for feminists?*

A. M. Yes—because we have this interesting story, presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak. She is very friendly towards feminism and constantly fights sexism in media and politics. She is making feminism more visible in a political sense. All people who support her are young people and professionals who used to be sexists, but they have had to change their old-fashioned ideas on gender because of Sobchak.²

I. P. *What role does digital space play in feminist activism today?*

A. M. It is a place for political and gender struggle. Digital space is more open for direct action and it is more open in terms of what can be considered political.

¹ The Kremlin protest became well known and provoked a lot of debates because one of the pictures showing activists in one of the Kremlin towers turned out to be Photoshopped (see The Moscow Times 2017).

² Editor's note: Sobchak was running in the Russian Presidential Election against Vladimir Putin 2018 as the only female candidate. In her campaign, she tried to attract support from the liberal opposition but received less than two percent of the votes.

I. P. *Is there enough digital know-how in the field of activism in Russia?*

A. M. This is a problem. The IT-education in our huge universities always means that you have no access to classes on politics and culture—these two spheres are very separated. There are both women and men studying coding, but they do not get education in social and cultural theory. This has been very disappointing for me. I have been thinking how to solve this gap and bring these two—activists and programmers—together. It is clear that we should work with programmers—there are now thousands of them without any political awareness and understanding of what they are doing.

I. P. *Which laws affect activism the most right now?*

A. M. I just saw a post that our parliament is discussing blogging as classical big media and they want to define bloggers as foreign agents³ as well—so they try to translate the system into punishing not only NGOs but also individuals. They are trying to find a way to accuse individuals through media space.

I. P. *You were a cyberfeminist already in the 1990s. How would you define cyberfeminism? What made you interested in it?*

A. M. As a young art historian at the university, I was curious about how to reshape societies with the help of technology and political theory. It was a time when everyone fantasised about technology. It was also the time when this big movement of techno clubs started. I decided to organize seminars about new technological culture not at the university, but in a techno club, where we did both seminars and danced. Our first club was organized in a bomb shelter—and there revived this strong wave of feminist ideas. We started calling ourselves ‘cyberfeminists’ because we were engaged with cyberculture of the time. I also took part in a huge international symposium of electronic art in Helsinki in 1994. There were thousands of people and I met other cyberfeminists like VNS Matrix from Australia.⁴ We discussed the date of the emergence of cyberfeminism. Our date was 1993, they indicated 1991. Therefore, we established 1991 as the year of the birth of cyberfeminism.

I. P. *What were your cyberfeminist goals?*

A. M. We thought that technology creates a new reality, and feminist theory should be included as one of the main political tools in that space. We changed feminist essentialism into non-binary gender strategy. We thought that there are many gender variations and that we have to be very precise when gender is installed in political relations. In post-Soviet cyberfeminism the idea of cyborg, queer, Perestroika, and postfeminism all came together.

I. P. *How did you use technology back then?*

³ The Russian foreign agent law was enacted in 2012 and requires non-governmental organizations receiving foreign funding and engaged in political activity to register as foreign agents.

⁴ VNS Matrix was an influential Australian cyberfeminist artist collective. Their most influential text is the ‘Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century’ (VNS Matrix 1991).

A. M. I owned the second notebook computer within the art community (in St Petersburg). I was not a programmer, but I was the first computer user and I was able to make simple HTML-stuff. I used the first internet browser Mosaic and then Netscape. We put all our projects on the internet, of course.

I. P. *Do you see any similarities between cyberfeminism then and contemporary feminism now?*

A. M. There are not so many links. Contemporary feminist activism in Russia is more about media action than IT action, which is a different strategy. I think that the great contemporary thing that is close to cyberfeminism is the Sci-hub project by Alexandra Elbakyan (from Kazakhstan). Sci-hub is a pirate site that opens scientific libraries. This project has 120 million users in different countries who cannot use scientific libraries because of commercial hierarchies associated with political neoliberal interest.

I. P. *What do you think the biggest differences are between contemporary feminist activism and feminism in the 1990s?*

A. M. We grew up in the ideology of gender equality and social guarantees. The problems we had were cultural isolation and censorship. Now we have more feminist groups, so it is on another scale. However, modern neoliberalism demonstrates the omnipresent misogyny—female poverty and restriction of rights—which the activists now have to fight. Contemporary feminists have not been able to build global networks like earlier generations. By comparison, the first feminist congress in Russia in 1908 had a very organized structure between feminists from around 80 cities (St Petersburg, Helsinki, Tiflis, Ufa, Moscow, etc.). We do not have such networks now, even if we have the internet.

I. P. *How do you cooperate with younger generation feminists?*

A. M. We, the older generation, give lectures, write, publish theoretically significant books, and offer methodological concepts. For example, at Femfest I talked about the revolution of 1917 as a gender revolution. I tried to show how it was done, practically and politically, to give people tools.

I. P. *What has surprised you most in contemporary feminism?*

A. M. As a person from punk culture, I am more rude, radical, and extravagant and I am surprised by the very delicate articulations of new feminism. It is about intersectional sensibility and responsibility. This new trend of Eve's Ribs goes to intersectional feminism in which every person is split between different vulnerabilities. It discusses very interestingly how we have to support all these vulnerability segments.

I. P. *Thank You very much!*

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Yulia Alimova has been a feminist activist since 2008. She currently works as the coordinator of a feminist project called Eve's Ribs in St Petersburg. Eve's Ribs is one of the few feminist projects that has been successful in receiving long-term funding. It is supported by the Finnish Kone Foundation and organizes parallel events in St Petersburg and Helsinki, Finland. Eve's Ribs' activities include early activist trainings and a feminist festival in St Petersburg. What is special about the project, among other things, is the way it has been able to reach out to activists around the country and bring various different feminist groups together to exchange ideas and practices. The following interview with Yulia Alimova was conducted in January 2018.

Image 2. Yulia Alimova at an Eve's Ribs seminar.



Source: Oksana Zamoiskaya

I. P. *The Eve's Ribs Festival will be organized this year for the third time. What exactly is it?*

Yulia Alimova: Eve's Ribs started as a feminist festival around the themes of gender equality and gendered violence but is now a year-round project that does long term work in St Petersburg and Helsinki. In St Petersburg, we have also a feminist space for activist projects, and we run events there almost every day. We invite different activist projects there. For example, we have a regular weekly support group for women who have faced gendered violence—a psychologist is working with them. There was a high demand because the local cri-

sis center does not provide that kind of help at the moment. We also organise regular film screenings, lectures on psychology, and legal questions with lawyers.

I. P. *What are the long-term goals of your project?*

Y. A. We would like to make the topic of gender inequality and gendered violence more visible in public discourse. We do not think we can at once overcome these problems but the first step is to increase discussion of them in society. In our thinking, we are close to intersectional feminism but we try not to use this term because if you say you are intersectional, some people might not want to participate. In our view, the question of gender inequality is connected to other inequalities and the overall social system and support. We think that in order to solve gender inequality we have to combine different spheres.

I. P. *How do you increase discussion about gender equality?*

Y. A. We try to act on a broad spectrum and organise both lectures and public performances. This is how you can reach different audiences, with a variety of different events. In Russia, feminism is still considered very strange and controversial but at least it is discussed. If you ask people, even young people, they probably would say that they do not go to feminist events and that feminists are strange. You have to choose your words and how you talk about feminism carefully so that people will not get scared.

I. P. *What has the project been able to achieve so far?*

Y. A. We have attracted quite a lot of new people. It is one of our main goals to make the feminist events open for people who do not consider themselves feminists. We think we have achieved this goal. I cannot say that we have achieved it completely, but to some extent that is one of our main outcome. We measure success by the amount of people who attend our events. In our events there are normally about 50–100 people. The festival was attended last year by 500 people in four days. Altogether thirty activists presented their work at the festival.

I. P. *The project brings people together from different regions of Russia and neighboring countries. How many regions exactly?*

Y. A. Last year there were people from ten different regions. There were people from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There are not many festivals like this, though I know from the activists that took part from Perm that also in Perm there is a smaller feminist festival that does not, however, bring together feminists from different areas like we do.

I. P. *How do you think cooperation with Finnish feminists advances your cause?*

Y. A. Cooperation with European countries is very important for activists from countries with situations like in Russia. Otherwise, you cannot gain important experience and have no recourse.

I. P. *What role do the internet and social media play in feminist activism?*

Y. A. Internet is a very important part of feminism, a way to access the feminist community. Most women get to know feminism from social media, especially those people who do not live in big cities, since in many places there is no offline feminism and no events. Overall, it is great that on the Russian internet and Vkontakte there is a growing number of public pages on feminism. Maybe it is the only way young women now start defining themselves as feminists—by starting to read these public pages. I myself became a feminist online. I started reading feminist public pages created by my acquaintances at the age of eighteen. I started helping out with a page on Vkontakte—it still exists. I answered questions from teenagers; those questions dealt very often with feminist issues such as male aggression, the sex industry, and pornography.

I. P. *How is Eve's Ribs present on the internet and social media?*

Y. A. We have pages on Facebook and Vkontakte. On Youtube there are some videos, for example the video we published about gendered violence has been very popular. Unfortunately, we do not have too many resources to develop our internet presence or pay someone to do it for us.

I. P. *What are the main challenges in organizing this kind of project in Russia?*

Y. A. There is always the challenge not to attract too much attention from the government, not to become the object of oppression. I think we are succeeding in this two years in a row. Another challenge, which contradicts the first one, is to attract as much attention for your project as possible. So, if you completely reach the second challenge, then you will certainly attract attention from the government.

I. P. *Is media activism the main way for you to attract attention?*

Y. A. Yes, because even to change some legislation, you need to have public support from the government. For example, if the government would see that there was a lot of public support for the law on domestic violence and felt the demand for it in the society they would maybe do something about it.

I. P. *What media successes have you had lately?*

Y. A. Leda Garina, the other organiser of the project attempted to put together a joint thing with an activist in Krasnodar, but the local Cossacks attacked the group.⁵ They were attempt-

⁵ For more on the attack, see Balmforth 2017.

ing to hold a feminist summer camp like we did in St Petersburg, where we had lectures and feminist trainings. It was supposed to be the same thing but with less intensive program, so I do not know why they attracted so much attention. In St Petersburg no one cares. This was a success in the way it received publicity—the media attention was great—so even if the event failed there were a lot of publications about it.

I. P. *Do you consider Eve's Ribs a political project?*

Y. A. I think that any human rights defense project is political, and even if the organizers are not politically straightforward, they always have a political position. In addition, many of the people who take part in our events are from other social or political projects—people from different socialist political movements or people from human rights projects.

I. P. *Do you yourself take part in public action?*

Y. A. I have been in the activist movement since 2008 and took part in many street actions, then I just burned out. So now, if there would be some really important event, my friend would be in jail or something, I would take part in it, but otherwise not. I think both organising events and street activism are useful. There are many useful things, so you have to think what you want to do. We also do some street actions, but it is the other organiser Leda Garina that does them more than me.

I. P. *Many of the feminist street actions draw from 'actionism'. How do you define it?*

Y. A. 'Actionism' is quite important for feminist actions—it is actions which help to change public opinion, not through direct communication with people, but by media effect—both traditional media and social networks. For example, it is street performances that seek media interest for feminist issues. Actionism started developing only during recent years, there were only a few feminist street actions before that. Now even some other political groups have started doing similar actions dealing, for example, with domestic violence. It is quite a good way of raising awareness.

I. P. *Some forms of domestic violence were decriminalised in Russia in 2017—how has this changed the situation?*

Y. A. Actually, this changing of the law has attracted a lot of interest to the topic of domestic violence itself, and I see it as a positive outcome. For example, there was a publication from the mayor of Yekaterinburg and he wrote that in his city there are now two and a half times more applications from victims of domestic violence after this law was enacted. I do not think this is because the husbands started beating the wives more, but because of the public attention on the topic.

I. P. *Do you think there is hope in changing the law?*

Y. A. In Russia, you cannot make any predictions, you never know what to expect from the government next month. I think it is more important to work on the public opinion. The law on domestic violence would demand creating safe houses and training of police officers so that they would know how to work with these issues. It is a lot of money. At the moment, the government is not ready to spend this money.

I. P. *I heard that President Vladimir Putin had spoken about feminism in a better light in one of his television performances. Do you think his position in relation to feminism has changed?*

Y.A. There was something like this—he said that it is good to fight for rights, but that you need to not exaggerate but be balanced. I don't know why he said this. Maybe he wanted to attract the attention of women.

I. P. What has been the toughest situation you have been in as a feminist activist?

Y. A. We had a lecture on feminism and Islam—a Muslim girl was giving the lecture. We published the announcement about the event and some people threatened that they would come and burn everything down. They were saying they were friends of the president of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov and radical Muslims. We decided to change the place of the event and made a registration for it. In the end, no one turned up. I was really scared, but it turned out I did not have to be frightened. These threats are quite common.

I. P. *Do you think feminism is becoming more popular in Russia?*

Y. A. I think it is very obvious. I started in the party Yabloko nine years ago. At that time, no one knew about feminism and it was O.K. to laugh at feminists and call them names. Now there are a lot more feminists and sexist jokes are, in most cases, considered inappropriate in the opposition.

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Eve's Ribs festival was organized for the third time in October 2018. It brought together feminist groups from 14 different regions including groups from Belarus and Finland. Currently the festival is looking for future funding in order to continue its work. For more information on Eve's Ribs: <https://www.rebraevy.ru>.

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