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‘Russia Wants Family Violence to Persist’: Feminist Activist Zalina Marshenkulova

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Zalina Marshenkulova. **Courtesy photo**

At 38, blogger and activist Zalina Marshenkulova has secured her spot among the most significant figures of Russia’s women’s rights movement — an “icon of Russian liberal feminism,” as Russian media have called her, a term that she now uses ironically.

Since 2017, Marshenkulova has run the popular Telegram blog Female Power — which now has over 17,400 subscribers — where she shares news commentary and notes on her personal life.

However, most people outside Russian feminist circles learned Marshunkulova’s name in 2019 when she participated in Reebok’s controversial social media ad campaign that aimed to “dispel myths about traditional gender roles.”

Reebok used Marshenkulova's quote "Don't sit around waiting for a man's approval — sit on a man's face" as one of its campaign slogans. Though the ad was deleted following a storm of negative reactions, Marshenkulova's racy quote went down in the history of Russia's feminist movement.

On Nov. 26 Marshenkulova, who has been living in exile since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, will speak at Women Against the Kremlin, a groundbreaking gathering of women leaders standing against war and authoritarianism hosted by The Moscow Times in Amsterdam.

Ahead of the event, The Moscow Times spoke with Marshenkulova about activism in exile, the Kremlin's repressive laws and the state of women's rights in Russia.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The Moscow Times: Has your activism transformed in exile? What are the key areas of your work right now?

Zalina Marshenkulova: I currently live in Germany on a humanitarian visa and I want to thank the German government for trusting me and tending to my case. I received the visa before there were any criminal cases against me [in Russia], but now I have one [on charges of 'justifying terrorism'] and am waiting for the second one over non-compliance with the 'foreign agents law.'

I don't follow requirements around my 'foreign agent' status because I deny all of these insane, fake charges against me. I refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of Putin's junta and follow any of their insane demands.

Most of my time right now is dedicated to survival. To be able to live in Germany without relying on social benefits means I have to work a lot. I'm usually involved in three projects at once. People often assume activists are just grant recipients who don't do much — that doesn't apply to me. I work every day to support myself and my family. I only engage in activism in the free time that I can carve out.

Together with colleagues from Feminist Anti-War Resistance, we've organized several events here in Germany, aiming to inform local audiences about the situation in Russia and various fabricated charges that people are detained on. For Europeans, these stories are often quite shocking.

I myself am facing eight years in a Russian prison for being against the invasion of Ukraine and for calling a man [pro-war blogger Vladlen Tatarsky] who participated in the military action against Ukraine the war criminal that he is.

He died in a terrorist attack and there's no proof whether it was organized by the Ukrainian intelligence services. We don't know who blew this guy up, but I am accused of justifying Ukraine's aggression against this particular serviceman — Russian authorities call this 'justification of terrorism.'

I didn't call Tatarsky any offensive names. I didn't incite anyone to commit a murder. I posted a video where this killed serviceman himself says, 'We'll kill everyone, we'll cut everyone

down.' [Tatarsky], the person who went out [to Ukraine] to kill and called for more killings, isn't considered a terrorist by Russia.

Why am I saying all this? Because one of the things I am working on is helping political prisoners in Russia, raising money for them and their lawyers. A huge number of people are currently behind bars on absurd charges similar to mine, including theater director Yevgenia Berkovich and playwright Svetlana Petriychuk and many teenage boys and girls.

The second issue I am working on is the representation of Russians in Europe. Those of us who fled the war or opposed it while in Europe face issues like bank account freezes or outright bans on opening them. We are in an absurd situation: despite opposing the killings and the invasion, and following European law, we still face various bans and restrictions simply because we have a Russian passport. I think this is also an important issue that needs attention.

All in all, like every feminist, I am fighting two battles at the same time: one for basic human rights and the other — for women's rights.

How would you describe the situation with women's rights in Russia right now?

Women are, of course, very vulnerable in an environment where anyone can be jailed for no reason.

But women are also subjected to reproductive violence that many governments — including Russia — are facilitating with renewed rigorousness these days. [These acts] include abortion restrictions and attempts to ban abortion altogether. In other words: attempts to turn the state away from secularism and toward religious obscurantism.

The State Duma passed a controversial bill outlawing so-called "childfree propaganda" last week. It's easy to dismiss this as yet another absurd invention of the Kremlin, but how will it impact women — and men — in Russia?

This is yet another repressive law, just like the law on the so-called 'justification of terrorism' or 'LGBT propaganda.' These laws basically forbid people to be gay or childfree. Laws like this should not exist. It's complete nonsense.

I was labeled a foreign agent for promoting 'LGBT propaganda,' among other things. But unlike most Russian politicians who advocate for 'traditional values,' I actually have a family. I have been married to one person for 16 years and I have a child.

Oddly enough, most Russian traditionalists and propagandists have never been married, and have no children or families of their own but are pushing everyone else around to do otherwise. It's quite amusing.

You have a large social media following. Do your posts still resonate with the audience inside Russia? How do you manage to remain a 'Russian activist' while living abroad?

I think I am more of an international feminist activist now because I am losing the connection [with those inside Russia], but that is completely normal.

Moreover, as an alleged ‘terrorist’ I had all my Russian bank accounts blocked, so I can’t get donations from those in Russia, but even if there was a way, they could face prison for financially supporting me. The same goes for ad placements in my blogs.

So now I receive support from Russian speakers abroad — that’s my audience.

Much of the discussion about Russia’s future and present now revolves around regional inequalities and the rights of Indigenous people. Do you think the intersectional approach — which takes those things into account — is relevant to current Russian realities? What prism do you apply to your own work?

I have a complicated relationship with intersectional feminism because I am a liberal feminist. I understand the importance of intersectional feminism, as well as the importance of radical feminism. All these types of feminism should exist. But, I believe that everyone should focus on what they do best.

Based on the feedback and numerous letters I received throughout my activist career, I seem to be most effective at cleaning out the dried-up crap of prejudice from the minds of patriarchal men and women.

I believe it’s important to remain in constant dialogue with society, not to isolate oneself. I am, in fact, always in touch with patriarchal members of our society because it’s important for me to educate and enlighten the entire world — not just women, but men as well.

With this, I fight against dictatorship in politics, which always begins with dictatorship within oneself and in personal relationships. I try to show people that it is possible to build one’s family and country without violence — for that, I face jail time.

The Russian state wants family violence to persist because domestic violence enables state violence. If a person is taught that beating one’s family member is ok, then they will perceive state violence and news of someone being tortured as something normal. So it is important to first implement change in personal relationships and families and then change the state — not the other way around.

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