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Russia's Opposition Urgently Needs to Take Sexism Seriously

By Roxana Kiseleva

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Ilya Yashin and Roman Letvitin joking about how a young supporter will soon reach the age of consent. **Screenshot / Youtube**

First, let me introduce myself. My name is Roxana Kiseleva. I'm an activist with the Feminist Anti-War Resistance movement, a journalist, a radical leftist bimbo and one of the authors of the statement issued by the feminist members of the Peaceful Russia party condemning a sexist joke about when a young supporter would reach the age of consent, made by our party chairman Ilya Yashin and his associate, Roman Levitin.

For years, I made a conscious decision to avoid working with men. I can't think of a single activist or political organization where women haven't experienced harassment by male colleagues, whether verbal or physical. Every time we women found the courage to speak publicly about what we had been through, we would try to have a conversation about boundaries, abuses of power and the vulnerable position women occupy in a country where the police can't always be counted on to help you.

But every time, there were men who would climb onto their soapboxes and loudly proclaim that “None of this matters. What matters is that Putin has seized power in Russia.”

And round and round we would go.

Related article: If Russia's Opposition Wants Change, They Must Change Themselves

I make my living outside of campaigning. Activism has always been something I did on the side, a form of unpaid work I chose to do, without any ambitions of turning it into more. That meant I could choose who I worked with.

I would have been more than happy to stay in my feminist bubble. I’m already running on empty and I’m not willing to fight yet another battle just to get my colleagues to take women’s issues seriously in politics. But Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine made me rethink my rules.

Gender equality doesn’t exist. There isn’t a single country where women enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men. Politics is no exception: power remains firmly in the hands of men, often older and deeply conservative. We women have to elbow our way in and raise our voices just to be noticed, let alone make room for ourselves.

For big and powerful institutions like the European Parliament, the kind of political actor they know how to deal with is a democratic organization that stands for everything good and against everything bad, led by a well-known man whose Instagram is 90% photos of him shaking hands with other respectable political figures. Unless you’re as well-known as, say, Pussy Riot, don’t expect the men in suits to treat your ideas with any reverence.

For me, joining a political party is a way to get through to those men in suits. To tell them about Galina Bekhter, a 68-year-old political prisoner with dementia who can no longer eat without assistance but isn’t receiving the care she needs. Or about Aishat Baimuradova, a Chechen woman who fled her family to Yerevan, only to be found and brutally murdered there. Or about Sofia, a 14-year-old from Samara, the youngest person on Russia’s list of "terrorists and extremists."

When the world finally rids itself of yet another dictator in Vladimir Putin, and Russians have a chance to hope for a better future, I want women to have an equal seat at the table in peace negotiations and in the process of rebuilding Russia. So that when we once again raise issues like abortion rights, sex education, equal access to resources, and legislation against domestic violence, we’re actually listened to instead of brushed aside.

That’s why Russian women need access to international politics now, not someday in a post-Putin future — and why Western institutions must recognize us as political actors in our own right, not as an afterthought or an accessory to the men they already consider their counterparts. And to make that happen, we’ll have to work with men — if only to get a foot in the door in spaces where feminist organizations and women-led groups aren’t very welcome.

I already have so many questions. How will a future Russia tackle its catastrophic demographic decline? What guarantees do we have that a new government won’t turn women

into baby-making machines in the name of repopulating the country? And how can it promise peace when so many prominent Russian politicians — men positioning themselves as opposition leaders — still refuse to acknowledge the link between patriarchy and war?

Women shouldn't just be given a voice. They need to be listened to, and taken seriously. We have to stop pretending that we'll deal with the war first, put the perpetrators behind bars, establish democracy, and only then, someday, get around to women's rights, the environment, and Indigenous peoples — everything we'll be expected to address to qualify for European integration.

Women in Russia aren't even a minority — we outnumber men by 3%. So why are women's rights always pushed to the bottom of the agenda? Why do we get a place in politics only through quotas, or when there's nothing left to lose?

Even in relatively peaceful Europe, you can feel the end of the world creeping closer. The reason we've ended up here is that the world has belonged to men for far too long. If women don't get involved in politics themselves now, the future may have no place for us — or even remember we were there. That's why I'm not leaving the Peaceful Russia party.

I'm sorry that Ilya Yashin's public conduct has done so much damage to the party's reputation and left so many of its members frustrated. It will make it harder for me to do what I joined the party to do. And I suspect this won't be the last time.

But I want to remind everyone that although Yashin initiated the party's creation and co-organized its founding congress — giving him an advantage in the election for party chair — he is only a temporary leader. The party does not belong to him. And we, the party's feminists, have enough influence to get our statement published on its social media without edits from the party leadership. We intend to fight for what matters to us, both in the wider political arena and within the party itself.

I'm also disappointed that some of my male colleagues responded with mockery to the discussions sparked by the scandal. "None of this matters. What matters is that Putin has seized power in Russia." I've heard that line too many times already.

We're not talking about rookies, here. We're talking about grown men with a substantial political background. These are people who were active in Russian politics back when opposition politics was still legal, when they had the good fortune to be able to influence what was happening in Russia and change things.

Related article: What Did Russia's Opposition Do When Yabloko Was Thrown Off the Ballot? Keep Fighting Itself.

The age-of-consent joke itself is a symptom of a wider problem: the men of the Russian opposition still have a long way to go when it comes to taking gender issues seriously.

I have absolutely no desire to invent new ways to police my colleagues' behavior. I want the men in the party to show greater awareness and respect for women. Politicians are public servants. If you think the statement by the feminist members of Peaceful Russia is pointless

busywork, then you're not qualified to lead Russia toward a brighter future. Women's issues are an essential part of any democratic agenda.

You should be grateful to the women who are willing to take on extra work and help educate you. We are literally offering to do the work of remedying your ignorance for you.

I just hope my colleagues will approach our proposal for workshops and discussions on gender issues with the seriousness and sense of responsibility it deserves.

In our statement, we say we want to adopt the best practices of European political parties. I'm personally inspired by the boldness and fierceness of European women politicians like Kathrin Gebel, Iratxe García and Jess Phillips when they publicly challenge men over sexism and call them out on it. Refusing to stay quiet is another excellent European practice.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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