

One year on: Ukraine's feminists and left still fighting

Monday 6 March 2023, by [BAKER Michael](#), [GULENOK Olenka](#), [KOSTROVA Bri](#) (Date first published: 3 March 2023).

Michael Baker spoke with Olenka Gulenok and Kateryna (Bri) Kostrova, two activists from the Ukrainian socialist organisation Sotsialny Rukh (Social Movement), about how the war is affecting the struggle for women's liberation in Ukraine, and how the international feminist movement can help.

Olenka and Bri are visiting the UK for a speaker tour organised by Workers' Liberty, 4-16 March (more details [here](#)).

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Can you both introduce yourselves and Sotsialny Rukh?

Kateryna: My comrades call me Bri. I came to the left in about 2014, when I joined the independent student union Direct Action. After that I was part of different queer, feminist and other leftist organisations. I joined Sotsialny Rukh in 2019, and since 2020 I've been on its Executive Board. I am responsible for internal communications and feminist issues, including different partnerships with queer and feminist organisations in Ukraine. I also created a project to gather people interested in leftist ideas — a summer school which explores the topics of trade unions, environmental issues, feminism, anticapitalism, social justice, etc. Sotsialny Rukh is a civil organisation for now, but aims to become a political party. It was established in 2016. We mostly work with different trade unions and organisations, and we have around 100 members.

Olenka: I'm a sociologist and researcher. I conduct interviews with people and write reports about their struggles. Before the war I dealt with migration and various urban issues. I used to research how Ukrainian musicians work overseas. Then the war began and I started researching the experiences of people living in Ukraine, staying in cities close to the front line. I joined Sotsialny Rukh after the beginning of the war — actually, during the summer school that Bri organises!

What effect has the war had on “traditional” feminist social issues, like domestic violence, marriage and divorce, access to abortions, and pregnancy and childcare? The war has clearly had a massive effect on infrastructure, what areas of womens' rights do you think this has affected?

Olenka: The war has definitely worsened the situation in terms of gendered roles and stereotypes. Men are increasingly portrayed as warriors defending their families and their nation. Women are expected to be good mothers, even more so than before. But it's not just about discourses, it's about practices as well, because it's mostly men who are at the front line — there are a lot of people of all genders fighting, but it's still mostly men — and therefore it's mostly women who stay at home looking after children or other relatives.

Then there's the infrastructure: a lot of schools and kindergartens were closed or ruined because of

the war. A lot of schools switched to an online format. So Ukrainian women now perform even more unpaid reproductive labour than they used to. A lot of volunteer jobs are also done by women. In the long term, the fact that women are staying at home, because the kindergartens are closed in many regions, will probably result in an increase in the pay gap between men and women. Regarding access to abortions, there's no data, no statistics, but it's definitely an issue for women fleeing to Poland. I think Ukrainians mostly go to Poland because it's close, but abortions are prohibited there so a lot of Ukrainian refugees were complaining that it was very difficult for them to get an abortion, even if they were survivors of rape; they had to go to Germany or elsewhere to get it.

Bri: And even in Ukraine, in some regions women also don't have access to different plan B pills and so on, so it's definitely a problem here, too.

What are the main feminist groups in Ukraine? Do they tend to be more recent, or older and more established? How have they adapted to wartime activity?

Bri: There are a lot of feminist organisations in Ukraine, and their number has grown significantly in recent years. I think this is because the ideas have become more popular in Ukrainian society. These organisations are usually autonomous, but very often cooperate with each other. I myself am part of a feminist organisation called the FemSolution Collective, which has been operating in Ukraine since 2016. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we were an educational project; we covered topics like the LGBTQ+ community, queer feminism and the like. We also worked with students a lot, providing all kinds of lectures. But after the invasion, we started to focus mostly on humanitarian aid, as the most vulnerable groups became even more vulnerable during the war. We now provide support to women and children, and people with mental health issues. A similar process took place with many other feminist organisations — most of them have now reorganised into humanitarian aid organisations. We try to do other things; we work with the media, for example, and we try to engage with internally displaced women. But it's really hard to do, because our organisations have very limited resources, and we don't have enough staff to do all of these things right now.

How does Sotsialny Rukh orientate itself towards feminist politics and LGBTQ+ politics in Ukraine?

Bri: For many years, Sotsialny Rukh has supported the 8 March International Women's Day celebrations, and marches in support of the LGBTQ+ community. We also work with queer organisations on labour laws and legislative changes. For example, we have a situation now in which the word "gender" has just been introduced for the first time to our labour laws, which caused a big reaction from right-wing radicals. SR responded at the time by openly supporting the position of the LGBTQ+ community on the issue. Recently, I initiated the creation of a women and LGBTI group within the organisation, so that queer people and women in the group can organise together. I hope this year we can devote more time to queer and feminist politics; so far we've not been able to. For a while there weren't many women in the organisation, but more have joined now, so we're looking forward to doing more work on feminist issues this year.

You've mentioned internal displacement — how has that changed the nature of local and regional political organising? Are there prospects for doing practical work with people who live near the frontlines?

Olenka: I was actually discussing this with a colleague that I conduct interviews with. We believe that the main thing we can do right now is just document the experiences people are having, so this information can be collated and analysed. But that's more about research. Around 8 million people have become internally displaced in Ukraine. This means that there are a lot of activists that have been moving to different regions, a lot of initiatives or groups have relocated to relatively safer

locations. On the one hand, it's great for these groups and for the communities they've relocated to, because new social connections are being developed and so on. But on the other hand, the cities and communities they've left don't have them anymore, so there is a lack of activist resources in areas closer to the front line. In this respect, migration brings both advantages and disadvantages. The same goes for people moving overseas. If they are activists, if they belong to leftist or other groups, then this migration helps local community initiatives, but they're needed here as well. Especially considering that a lot of the work we do these days is not just political — there's a lot of humanitarian work to be done.

What are the main things you hear from the people you interview who live on the front lines?

Olenka: There's so much to say. Perhaps one interesting detail comes from the fact that a lot of people are losing their jobs during the war. Factories and businesses are being shut down, and there are a lot of labour rights issues. I notice in interviews that people seem to realise that their problems are shared with others, and aren't just individual to them. Very often, they're ready to fight for their labour rights and sue their employers, which is something I hadn't noticed as much before the war. One woman from Kramatorsk told me during an interview that before the war she wouldn't have been so active in fighting her employer. But now, after surviving war, she's no longer scared of workplace conflict.

Some of your student comrades are involved in a student organisation in Ukraine — could you tell us a bit about it?

Bri: Direct Action has existed since 2008, and the community has existed in some form since the 90s. It's been around for a long time, and our student members have simply revived it. I was part of this organisation from 2014 to 2019. I ran the libertarian film club, the lecture club, and I also organised several demos with them against cuts to scholarships and sexual abuse in universities. It was my first experience of a left-wing organisation. I'm really delighted that our student activists have decided to revive Direct Action, because I really believe students must work together on the political level — they are one of the most powerful social forces that exists.

Their main focus for now is cooperating with Youth 4 Ukrainian Resistance, a coalition of international university students who are organising an international solidarity campaign and collecting signatures on an open statement. They also want to educate people from different backgrounds using social media, and once it has all been established they would like to continue by doing lectures and other activities like that. They now have 15 members with another 10 waiting for approval, so it's already made a great start. For a long time, Sotsialny Rukh was the only leftist organisation here, so I'm really happy that Direct Action is back, and operating in Ukraine again.

It's wonderful news! Before we finish, is there anything you think isn't being discussed as much as it should, or anything you'd like to highlight?

Olenka: I think what we really want most of all is for the leftist and feminist community outside of Ukraine to support our armed resistance, and to understand that we're fighting Russian imperialism; that it's not simply a fight between two governments.

That brings us quite neatly to the last question: what kind of support and discussion would you like to see from internationalist feminists outside of Ukraine? Which campaigns, which forms of solidarity need attention or material support, beyond the initiatives you've already mentioned?

Bri: We really need campaigns for arming Ukraine — that's the most important thing right now. But there are also a lot of grassroots organisations that provide direct help to people here, like FemSolution. We don't have a lot of monetary support, but we have a lot of people coming to us and requesting help. Last year, we already sent almost 800 packages of hygienic products and clothes to internally displaced women, and we also supported a lot of children, providing all kind of school materials. We've also started some work with people in the Kherson region this year and we want to be able to support them properly.

Olenka: There are loads of grassroots initiatives in Ukraine, and they can react very quickly to meet people's needs, unlike the bigger organisations that get most of the attention and funding. So in terms of solidarity and support, it's really important to give financial support to small, local initiatives. They solve people's problems right away, the next day, without all the bureaucracy, and they really lack funding. They're usually volunteer-led, without any salaries or full-time employees.

Michael Baker
Olenka Gulenok
Bri Kostrova

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