

Will Russia Become the Capital of World Feminism?

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In the middle of 1993 at the peak of the election campaign, the weekly magazine *Ogonyok* published an unusual set of articles under its regular rubric "Presidential Marathon Race" that discussed parties, political movements, and other groups taking part in the elections. The subject of all the articles was Russian women, and the series argued why women had to fight for key positions in the state that had been the first to introduce complete equality of men and women. This was virtually the first intensive study of women's issues in the Russian press, and as such, it roused great interest although it also met with mixed reviews. Many democratic readers, as well as some colleagues of mine who were journalists and political commentators, were skeptical, arguing that the so-called "women's issues" were irrelevant to the prospects of democratic reform, and they felt women should pay more attention to the home. "I would in no way stand such a wife as Ella Pamfilova," said one of the magazine's most faithful advocates of reforms, talking about the minister of social security—"What's this?—Rushing off to Gaidar's place at two o'clock at night!"

Since then, the political situation has changed repeatedly, and the "Women of Russia" bloc won 11 percent of the vote in the Parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, so far it has not been influential in the Duma. This is perhaps because of the bloc's vague position on some issues, on which "Women of Russia" simply takes an intermediate position between the Agrarian and the Communist Parties. On the other hand, given Russia's political environment, if you just mention the necessity of addressing women's problems, people immediately curl their lips, stare at you sympathetically and ask whether you are well, and after they realize that you are okay, they are simply confused: "Do you really think they are important?"

However, everyone is aware of the tough position of Russian women during the last few years. It has become traditional to mention the "female face" of Russian unemployment. Women make up more than 70 percent of the average registered unemployed, and more than 90 percent of the unemployed in certain regions. Most of these unemployed women are between thirty-five and fifty-five years old, and two-thirds of them hold university or professional degrees. The media has written extensively about how difficult it is for an unemployed woman to find a job. But in the same media, government officials refuse to create new jobs for women. This can hardly be a surprise since the minister of labor, Gennady Melikian, has persuaded his compatriots to keep women at home—at a time when even men lack jobs.

Unemployment is not the only headache for Russian women. The wages of employed women have decreased significantly in relation to men's. Before perestroika, an average woman's wage was 70 percent of a man's, but now it is only about 40 percent. Compared

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to men, women have very few opportunities for self-improvement, retraining, or going into business. Only about 10 percent of female business school students enter business after graduation.

Other problems affecting Russian women include the feminization of poverty. Many Russian families have been impoverished by the economic transition, particularly many women-led households or fatherless families, which constitute 15 percent of all families. The decline of health care is also a major concern, since government priorities do not include care for the mother and child. More than 40 percent of all Russian children live in poverty, and female health care as a whole is neglected. The Ministry of Health has introduced high abortion fees without any discussion, although abortion is the primary and often only form of contraception available. All these facts are well known, and the figures appear everywhere and are even published officially. Yet public opinion in post-Soviet Russia refuses to treat "women's issues" as serious nationwide problems that require adequate attention, effort and resources.

At first glance, this situation is paradoxical. It is characteristic of the period of recent reforms; like a mirror it reflects the unilateral nature and hypocritical form of the post-perestroika decisions that have been progressive and even revolutionary in appearance, but have only superficially addressed the problem. The tragedy of post-Soviet reforms is that they have not changed the Soviet mentality.¹ Today, "women's issues" are a key to understanding all aspects of contemporary Russian society such as economics, politics, or social and cultural problems. Attitudes towards women are not only a litmus test for the depth and genuineness of democracy, but an indicator of the viability of groups and structures in future Russia. The organizations and groups that are seriously interested in supporting women belong to the generation of new independent institutions in society. It is here that one can talk about the so-called "third sector" that is still foreign to the post-Soviet mentality.

New independent women's movements began to form only during perestroika. In the Soviet period, all the so-called "women's initiatives" were entirely official; they were initiated by the establishment and were just another means of ideological pressure. Soviet Women's Councils and Committees of Soviet Women had their own hierarchy and nomenklatura, rhetoric, and privilege distribution system. These organizations diligently contributed the required "percentage" of women to the mute legislative bodies, and they were infinitely distant from the lives of ordinary women. As a result, it was quite natural that public thought created the image of a "*nomenklatura* woman"—a mutant who had lost feminine features but had not gained those of a man. This unattractive image substituted for the ideas of equality that were originally put forward by the Bolshevik revolution. It is therefore not surprising that in the stagnation period of Brezhnev and his immediate successors, another image of a woman as one indifferent to political and social life with her top priorities being love, family, and children gained public sympathy. This image was presented in the pre-perestroika liberal media,² as a contrast to the official concept of a woman as a "worker and mother." So the new image naturally occupied the headlines in the post-perestroika media, (This was especially true after Gorbachev's "revolutionary" statement that declared a woman should have more time to spend with her family), with the only difference being that the pre-perestroika Russia liberals' "ideal woman" was basically a romantic figure, which became a more erotic image during and after perestroika. The "worker and mother" was thus replaced by the "wife and friend" in the public

conscience, i.e., one stereotype was substituted for another. Both images were far removed from reality which was becoming more and more difficult for women.

Women first began to organize because they as the major victims of economic reform needed to react in some way. Moreover, independent groups were needed because the official women organizations—"Union of Women of Russia" (descendants of the Committee of Soviet Women) and its branches simply reproduced old Soviet ones, and were not credible for the reasons mentioned earlier. In addition, the new democratic initiatives, which were actively supported by women from the very beginning of perestroika via petitions by the Memorial Society, demonstrations, election campaigns etc., neglected the interests of women themselves and did not contribute to women's self-realization.

At the dawn of perestroika, there were few women groups, clubs, and associations.

These emerged principally in Moscow and Leningrad, and consisted mostly of representatives of liberal arts and intellectual professions. They were quite often short-lived. This state of affairs changed dramatically with the coming of perestroika. By the early 1990s, independent women's organizations already existed in almost all major Russian cities, in many Russian towns and district centers, in the North, Far East and Siberia, and also in Ukraine, Byelorussia and other republics. The number of participants of the first Independent Women's Forum held in 1991 in Dubna exceeded 50, although not all the organizations were represented there, and that of the Second Forum in 1992 exceeded 200. Since that time, more and more new groups have emerged. For example, in St. Petersburg there are more than 40 women's organizations. On the other hand, the already existing groups and clubs have tended to consolidate into various consortia and associations that unite initiatives by regions and fields of interest such as "Conversion and Women."

At this moment it is hard to know exactly how many women's organizations exist in Russia. Some of them are not legally registered, although they conduct legitimate work. There is also little information about the organizations in the distant provincial regions. Nonetheless, we can see that women's initiatives are making real progress in Russia.

A number of ways to classify women's organizations in contemporary Russia exist. One way is by "political status," and the first political organization which comes to mind immediately is the parliamentary bloc "Women of Russia" headed by a State Duma Deputy, the Chairman of recently created President's Commission for Women, Family and Demography Affairs Ekaterina Lakhova. The bloc is very heterogenous, quite conservative in parliamentary discussions, and is considered to be a "reasonable center." Most Russians associate it with Soviet nomenklatura, but this impression is not always correct. The popularity of the bloc grew during the Chechen events when "Women of Russia" supported the "Soldiers' Mothers" movement, and offered to remove the Government Minister of Defence Grachev. For the forthcoming Parliamentary elections, the bloc leaders are planning to initiate a centrist political party based on the "Women of Russia" bloc.

We should also mention the women's faction in the Social Democratic Party, whose emergency is not surprising. The other initiative—the Liberal Women's Fund—looks more unusual in the contemporary political climate. Its leader is MP Irina Hakamada, the second

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player in the parliamentary faction "Union of the 12th of December." Hakamada represents a "new type of political woman" and prefers to build a base of support not among all Russian women, but among those who represent the emerging "third class." For this purpose she has established the Liberal Women's Fund in order to contribute to the development of this third class in Russia. The first conference, "The Political Situation in Russia: Women's View", held by the Fund in spring 1994, made it evident that Hakamada's ideas were not supported by everyone, nor any other the liberal ideas for that matter. However, Hakamada's other initiatives, from the bill for family support to the amendments to tax legislation, are gaining advocates.

Speaking about the "official" part of the women's movement, we should also mention the "semi-official" Women's League that unites a number of organizations of different sizes. The Women's League is also going to participate in future elections. Essentially, this organization and its constituent units lie somewhere between independent and "official."

The next category of women projects involves making a distinction between commercial and nonprofit organizations. For the most part, small and medium-size women-owned businesses are growing in number, and Businesswomen Associations, women's business clubs and the Union of Businesswomen operate quite successfully all over the country. Businesswomen are found in small and medium-size businesses—as services-oriented firms, small stores, small factories, and so on. There are no women in big business. Only one businesswoman is the chair of a private bank, and only one is the chair of a cinema company. The idea of a "women's bank," originated by Irina Hakamada, is still a dream for many active women entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, women-owned businesses hardly contribute to the major industries, but they may well do so in the future. Certain projects such as "Korni Travy" (the Grassroots) or "Vasilisa" in Moscow provide sponsorship to women initiatives on a regular basis.

But it is the independent nonprofit organizations that are of great interest. They do participate in the new democratic society, and their experience cannot be underestimated. Members of these organizations do not belong to the former Soviet elite. As a rule, the cores of these organizations consist of women of younger generations, whose mentality is substantially different from that of most "official" women in leading positions. The structure of these organizations is also quite new for Russia. Unlike traditional rigid hierarchies, they are trying to follow a "horizontal" structure, often with a vaguely defined center. They provide information and consulting services.

We now return to the first independent women's organizations which began to appear towards the end of the 1980s. By 1988-1989, small groups existed in Moscow and Leningrad, which consisted of highly educated intellectuals, belonging principally to scholarly and literary or artistic circles. The members of these unofficial groups—LOTOS (a feminist group at the Institute of Culture), the Association of Women Cinematographers, the Moscow clubs Sappho and Harmony in Moscow, the Circle of Authors, and Women's Reading, a samizdat magazine in Leningrad—were interested in western theories of feminism, and studied western texts. These groups launched the first feminist analyses of the contemporary situation in Russia. It should be noted that this work was influenced in large part by the appearance of new talented authors. Women critics discussed women's writing and women's films, and the literary journals began discussing these themes. The groups in this period were few in number and elitist, and thus their activity was unknown to the majority of Soviet women.

In the same period, the structures representing the official women's movement exhibited a certain enthusiasm for change. Thus by the end of the 1980s, a re-animation of the Women's Soviets under the aegis of the Committee of Soviet Women took place, the club 33+1 appeared at the journal *Rabotnitsa*, and the group Creation which was oriented toward the development of the cottage and handicraft industry also appeared. In 1989 an attempt to create a women's section in the frameworks of the already extant Union of Writers of the USSR was launched. In this entire period, the growth of women's self-understanding was not fostered because the official view propagated the "natural destiny" of women, and because society, aspiring to free itself from the ideological prism and wholly oriented to liberation in the broader sense of the term, could not conceive of special rights for women and minority groups.

In this very period, the first free elections to the USSR Supreme Soviet were conducted, without envisaging or allowing for a women's quota as before. Earlier, women made up a third of all elected organs of power, and women members in the new Supreme Soviet now made up only 15 percent. The majority of women deputies dissociated themselves from "women-politicians" and sought to emulate Galina Starovoitova who said that there was no place for gender in politics. Perestroika gave rise to some prominent women who will go down in history, such as deputies Galina Starovoitova, Evdokia Heyer and other public figures, or perhaps the former human rights advocates Elena Bonner and Valeria Novodvorskaya, or the trumpeter of the Communist ideal, Nina Andreyeva. Perhaps, history will also remember the thousands of unknown women who courageously appeared in demonstrations to defend the last political prisoners, or collected signatures to create the Memorial Society, or demanded the abolition of censorship. But on the whole, the women's movement was not a part of the political and social life of the country.

This situation began to change with the end of perestroika and the disintegration of the USSR. From 1991 to 1993, the "woman question" became more audible, principally because the economic reforms hit women hardest. The first official census of unemployment in 1992 revealed that the majority of those affected were women. This same study also showed that poverty was becoming feminized, and that women's health was worsening. The USSR's acceptance of the international standards for the measurement of maternal mortality revealed that the country ranked among the least developed countries in the world on this indicator. In short, the discomforts suffered by Russian women were now proclaimed to the world.

During this period, independent women's groups and associations grew in number. Two tendencies were observed during this process. First, many pre-existing groups were now strengthened and institutionalized. The group LOTOS in Moscow formed the basis for the Center for Gender Studies at the Institute of Socio-Economic Demographic Studies, itself part of the USSR Academy of Sciences. This center was the first in Eastern Europe. The group of women activists at the journal *Women's Reading* in St. Petersburg formed the St. Petersburg Center for Gender Studies. It should be noted that the Moscow center drew upon the academic community, particularly economists and philosophers, while the St. Petersburg one consisted mainly of women activists.

The Moscow Center for Gender Studies carried out a series of research studies, and published some brochures which were published by publishing houses. The themes of such studies were women's work, the participation of women in political parties, the work conditions and living standards for women, and debates on feminist theory. Unfortunately, the interesting facts gathered in these pamphlets and other publications were inaccessible

to a wider audience. The print-run and circulation of these academic publications was not great, and the researchers failed to promote their work in the Russian press or with the larger Russian public. Thus women's studies in Russia remained the domain of a narrow audience of people known mainly to each other.

The other development in this period (1991-1993) is the rise of a number of independent grassroots organizations, which appeared first in the larger and more industrialized cities such as Moscow, Ekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk), Chelyabinsk,

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Murmansk, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Kemerevo, Irkutsk etc, and only later in the smaller cities and workers' settlements in all of Russia. These organizations emerged everywhere that women's unemployment and other deleterious effects of the economic reforms appeared. The new organizations united women of varied education

backgrounds and political orientations, ages, and interests. Their rise was necessitated by the urge to survive this difficult economic and historical period.

Some mostly regional groups should be singled out. These groups represented a wide spectrum of interests—mothers of large families, single mothers, soldiers' mothers, support of women's unemployed, the foundation of private enterprises, women business clubs, political support for women deputies, women professionals, women teachers and instructors in the highest institutes of learning, workers in regional textile factories, and defence industries, and support for children and invalids. On the whole, the term “Women's Club” by itself promised some relief to women in any region.

This period can be characterized as one when experience and a number of small successes were accumulated by women activists and women's organizations. Although prospects for the association of the former Soviet peoples could not but provoke psychological opposition, the majority of the so-called nongovernmental organizations of the Soviet model were disguised offshoots of that same governmental machinery and ideology. Women's initiatives however managed to get some practical results. Having realized that waiting for official support from the state and its agencies was pointless, women began to reconstruct their own lives. The sphere of their activity varied; for example, there was the Urals town Zarechny in the Sverdlovsk oblast, where women took control of the distribution of humanitarian support, and organized material support for single mothers and the unemployed, and in Perm, the newly set-up women's clubs began to train the unemployed in starting up their own businesses. Former engineers and physicists became owners of cafes and set up service-oriented firms, mini-automobile parks or ateliers, where their unemployed colleagues found work. In Ivanovo, trade fairs of artisans and master craftsmen from cottage industries were conducted, while in Zhukovsky in the Moscow region, the political debate club “Prologue” opened its doors. In Irkutsk, mothers of large families decided to build their own cottages to house their families. Similar initiatives began to appear throughout Russia. The women's movement as a social force thus began to pool its resources in Russia, showing here and there some influence in specific localities and regions.

Significantly, while all this was going on, the majority of the new independent local organizations of women refused to associate themselves with feminism. Many were simply

unwilling to be called feminists, and viewed this word itself negatively. The notable absence of cooperation and networking between different groups and individuals also must be remarked. People worked alone, and groups from different regions did not know of each other's existence. The mass periodicals failed to mention these women's initiatives, and the public was unaware that the women's movement existed at all. The newly created movement lacked the resources and the experience to arrange serious networking, despite the attempts to create a united front of women's groups at the 1991 and 1992 forums in Dubna. A single All-Russian organization did not emerge, and the participants of the forums did not even manage to create more lasting relationships among themselves.

During this period, two wings of the women's movement distinguished themselves. There could be no unity between the so-called elitist and the so-called regional movements, and the two wings did not use the same language. The feminist researchers armed with western terminology often used jargon which was largely incomprehensible to women from the distant cities, who were preoccupied with carry the burdens of daily problems of survival. The discourse on women's issues in the capital and St. Petersburg was not influenced by the activists of the independent women's movements, partly because the mass media were not drawn into this work, and neither were the more creative intellectuals who were directly working with these issues.

At the same time, a negative image of activists and feminists was generated by the mass media, and feminists took the hitherto-empty lowly rank assigned to the "enemy of the people." The word "feminism" itself was a synonym for "Bolshevism." Anti-women articles published by authors and journalists appeared chiefly in the newspapers *Moskovskii komsomolets* and the journal *Stolitsa*, depicting a terrible, unattractive fate that imperilled men and the entire society in the shape of feminists. The popular magazines for women which had survived from the Soviet era such as *Rabotnitsa* and *Krest'ianka*, and the newer women's magazines published by the "House of Cosmetics" or "Sudarushk" continued to leave a bad impression on the public imagination, through their poor writing, bad design, shallow articles, and pornographical approach. The "better" quality journals such as *Burda moden* or *Ona* impressed readers by the excellent paper they were printed on and their absolute dullness.

After 1993, the women's movement was transformed once again. First, the women's bloc in parliament arose, along with the activation of the official women's movement in the shape of the Union of Russian Women. Many voters chose the electoral bloc "Women of Russia" if only for the reason that not one major political group or party included a word about women and women's issues in their party platforms. On the other hand, voters noticed that this political bloc had no alternative program to offer. Keeping this fact in mind, and that the bloc's leaders reminded voters of the "official" Soviet representatives from the Committee of Soviet Women, it becomes clear why the democratic orientation of women was not tested, although the illusion of Soviet-era women-politicians soon faded for those who supported "Women of Russia." This parliamentary bloc, whose policies on many issues were similar to policies of the Agrarians and Communists, realized that it was unable to affect official policy on women.

The whole period after 1993 for the Russian women's movement can be described as a period of emancipation from the illusory belief that the state could help women survive the period of economic transition, and from the hope that the official women's movement could keep the interest of Russian women. The 1993 Presidential Ukase about the priority of state policies regarding women, family and demography admitted the importance of the

problem, but did not result in any concrete measures save the creation of the Special Presidential Commission on Women, Family, and Demography. This commission lacked both money and real power. Even the existing orders such as the Ukase on Support of Mothers and Children in the regions were not carried out. By 1994, some conferences on women sponsored by the government took place, but these suffered from their inability to generate concrete ideas on measures to help Russian women. These conferences, official in form and language, could not meet the needs of Russian women. Finally, the state was not seriously interested in assisting women, and was not prepared to increase the budget deficit by solving women's problems.

In these conditions, the activities of the non-governmental local organizations grew to become more important than ever. Their numbers are great; in St. Petersburg there are

more than 50, while little Sergiev Posad has more than 12! Today, there are women-centered NGOs in every city and town. Many women's organizations which had emerged in the preceding period as purely local ones now became really powerful in the regions, influencing decision-making, getting money from the local budgets and from the local women's enterprises. This is

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true of the women's associations “Angara” in Irkutsk oblast, and those in Kemerevo, Kola peninsula, Karelia, Rostov and others.

At the same time, interregional unions and associations such as “Conversion and Women” which united women workers in the defence industries, the Association of University Women and others were strengthened. One after the other, they began to join consortiums and networks of women's initiatives, among which are included the Network of Study Centers for Women, or the Information Center for the Independent Women's Forum and others. International women's organizations are also forming, such as the consortium of women's initiatives CIS 2 USA, the Russian-American Women's Alliance and others, which link up Russian organizations with foreign ones.

Western financial support is a crucial factor in the growth of these organizations; for example, the Moscow Center for Gender Studies is financed mostly by American foundations, while the St. Petersburg Center for Gender Issues is supported by German women's groups, and other groups receive help from the European Union. With this support from Western sources, women's groups and associations are healthier than ever. At the same time, if Western aid supports mostly the central organizations in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other large cities, the regional associations depend entirely on their own regions and local enterprises. Currently, a clear strategy for fund-raising is absent among the women's groups in Russia, although this is necessary to strengthen the women's movement.

The fundamental problems of the women's movement today are the absence of solidarity, the lack of a set agenda and principles of activity, the absence of well-known leaders, and the lack of a strategy to support itself. These problems are quite deep-rooted. In 1994, the Association of Women Journalists conducted a round table, “Women and the Contemporary Situation in Russia,” but the tendency to unite was not sustained amidst the ambitions and arguments of the different factions. On the whole, the women's movement

cannot continue to be heterogeneous like Russian society itself. It is clear that the entire movement has suffered from the same disease that has afflicted Russian democrats.

What likelihood is there of a new *nomenklatura* emerging from the movement? At this time, the independent women's movement is one of the most important forces guiding democratization, and perhaps it is signifying a fundamental transformation of Russian society. The women's movement can aspire to great success in Russia. For example, the group "Committee of Soldiers' Mothers" is convinced, with the recent example of Chechnya, that the country has changed more than the leaders and their most cherished political declarations. Women can change much for the better in political and social life, and in a more humanitarian way. And there is no longer any doubt that Russian women, who have developed powers of resistance and courage as well as tremendous

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intellectual and creative capabilities, will claim their part in the economy, in politics, and in other spheres. Most importantly, they will help the country gain a real democratic essence and will arrange every street and every building rationally and humanely. "The heap of garbage in my yard"—said MP Lisa Bozhkova from the town of Zhukovsky, a leader of a political women's club—"is also politics, and the fermented milk in the shop is also politics as well. It is all around me. And until we do realize this we will be in trouble." Russian women can and must live well in a normal country. No one else will do this for them.

Notes

1. The "double standard" was readily accepted by Soviet society. No one was surprised by the double workload of Soviet women, and although they were declared the most free in the world, the government used women both for propaganda and practical purposes simultaneously. The women were expected to represent achievements in the field of human rights and equality and to support the most convenient patriarchal lifestyle, while providing a permanent supply of cheap labor.

2. This was especially true after Gorbachev's "revolutionary" statement that declared a woman should have more time to spend with her family.