

RUSSIA: Russian women denied protest against bill decriminalising domestic violence vow to keep fighting

By Sofia Lotto Persio

International Business Times (24.01.2017) – <https://yhoo.it/2k2o6wa> – As women's marches took over the streets of major cities on Saturday (21 January), a group of women in Russia are struggling to obtain permission to protest a bill that would decriminalise domestic violence.

The organisers were seeking permission to hold a rally on 28 January in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square, a largely pedestrian area south of the Kremlin and the Red Square where a mass rally against President Vladimir Putin was held in 2012. They submitted their request on 17 January, ahead of the 10-day deadline for such requests and estimated around 1000 participants.

The response from Moscow's mayoral office baffled them. It rejected the application stating: "There [were] no grounds for [organisers] to hold a public event with the declared number of participants." It also said that holding the event would interfere with the movement of pedestrians and vehicles across the city, "violating the rights of the citizens who are not participating in this event".

The women had been prepared to encounter some form of resistance, considering the government's intolerance of opposition views, especially when expressed through public protests. "I can't say that we are surprised, but we did not expect that we will be interfered in the implementation of our constitutional rights in such an explicit form. We understood that everything possible would be done to make us keep silent but it was a surprise that government played unlawfully," one of the group's spokespersons, Maria Kogan, told IBTimes UK. "The fact that we have to ask permission for our constitutional right is sad in and of itself, and the reasons of denial are baseless."

The organisers know their rights, as the three women who started the group were all students at Moscow State Academy of Law. The group grew to a core 16 members who started working organising a protest through Facebook and VKontakte (Russia's most popular social network), united by their feminist ideals and the desire to improve the status of women in their countries.

The group is however fighting back. They are appealing against the mayor's rejection, as they were not offered an alternative place for the rally, as required under the law. They are also applying for a permit for a new rally, in Sokolniki park on 4 February. The park's location, in the northern part of Moscow is not ideal, as it would not get as much attention. "This is a common theme with all of the rallies now, they are pushed to the sides, away from the public eye," Kogan complained. "But the problem with this law is pretty obvious and, if the law get through, it may affect a lot of people, so I believe people will join us anyway, and anywhere".

How the law would change

The bill decriminalising domestic violence passed a first reading in the Russian parliament (Duma), on 11 January, with an overwhelming majority of 368 votes in favour, one against and one abstention. The bill was proposed by Yelena Mizulina, a conservative MP chair of the parliamentary committee on family issues.

One of the main proponents of the “gay propaganda” laws, Mizulina first proposed the bill on 27 July. “Battery carried out toward family members should be an administrative offence. You don’t want people to be imprisoned for two years and labelled a criminal for the rest of their lives for a slap,” she said.

The bill will undergo a second reading on 25 January. It would make domestic violence – defined as the beating of a relative – a civil offence, punishable with a fine of up to 30,000 roubles (£405), arrest lasting between 10 or 15 days, or 60 to 120 hours of compulsory labour (which was introduced at the beginning of the year as an alternative to imprisonment). It would be treated as a criminal offence should the beating occur more than once a year, or if the crime was perpetrated as an act of hooliganism (which in Russian law encompasses any breach of public order) or is motivated by hatred or enmity. In this case, the punishment would be either compulsory labour or imprisonment up to two years.

While some activists were sceptical about the law’s chances of success, Kogan said their group is concerned: “It is possible

that this law will be approved, that is why we are doing everything we can to be heard by the authorities.”

Organising the resistance

In less than two weeks, the protest gathered more support than the organisers were expecting, but they also faced criticism. Some accused them of ignoring male victims of domestic violence, although the organisers never claimed the rally would be for women only. Others told them they misunderstood the law. “In the Russian media this law is called ‘law about the slap’,” Kogan explained, saying that people think it would prevent children from being taken away from their parents if they have some accidental bruises. Other critics told them that nobody would attend the rally.

In fact, the women’s rally is not the only protest against the law in Russia. “Women in Irkutsk [one of the largest cities in Siberia] decided to support us and they have their own meeting on 28 January. In several other cities there were protests too,” Kogan said.

The Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko, a centre-left opposition party with currently no representation in the parliament have launched a campaign against the law. They invited people to speak out on social media, using the hashtag: “I’m against the law on decriminalisation of domestic violence”.

Other activists have staged one-person protests, standing

outside the Duma holding signs against the law. "I give birth to you, I kill you," read the sign held by women's rights activist Alena Popova, who plans to protest outside the parliament on the day of the second reading. The activist's banner, cited statistics stating that, of the 50,780 people suffering from domestic violence in 2015, 11,756 were minors. The same statistics show that 36,493 were women, and 5% were men.

According to official figures quoted by the UK foreign office, 12,000 women are killed in episodes of domestic violence in Russia, one every 40 minutes. The scale of the problem is slowly gaining momentum in the country. In 2016, a social media campaign invited people to share their experiences of sexual assault, domestic abuse and gender-based violence using the hashtag: "I am not afraid to speak." Thousands of stories poured in, breaking the wall of silence.

A growing movement

The progress in openly talking about abuse has also helped highlight cases of historical sexual assault. At the end of August, journalist Ekatina Kronhous published a post on Facebook about an investigation conducted by a former alumna of School 57 in Moscow, revealing that a history teacher had sexual relations with underage students for 16 years. A month later, the authorities opened a criminal case against the teacher, Boris Meyerson. The school is a mix-gender institute where the Russian elite send their children, and is comparable to Eton's status in the UK. The scandal could no longer be ignored and it shook Russian society.

"This is an unprecedented and momentous event," Maria Mokhova, a director at Moscow's women's refuge Syostry (meaning 'sisters' in Russian) told the Moscow Times in July. "It is a big step forward for society as a whole to finally get rid of the taboo of talking about sexual abuse."

The massive scale of the women's marches on Saturday has impressed and inspired the women's group. In Russia, such protests are increasingly difficult to organise, partly due to the bureaucratic obstacles and partly because many have lost faith in the power of protest to achieve change. The women's group, however, have not lost all hope. "We were really glad to see so many women unite under the idea of standing up for their rights," Kogan said. "We are all full of enthusiasm and we do not intend to give up the fight."

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