

Alexandra Talaver

Triumph of the Women?

*The female face of
right-wing populism
and extremism in
selected countries*

09

*“Defending” the Nation?!
Women, Gender Politics, and
Mobilization in United Russia*

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Editor's Foreword

Since the 2010s, we have been observing a dynamic in many countries that was considered unlikely for a long time: right-wing, right-wing populist and authoritarian parties are not only gaining influence – they are also deliberately winning over women voters, integrating women into their organisational structures, and increasingly presenting themselves to the public with visible women leaders. This is precisely why, since 2018, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) has been conducting a series of country studies entitled “*Triumph of the Women? The Female Face of Right-Wing Populism and Extremism*”, in order to examine the political offers right-wing actors make to women – and how anti-feminist strategies operate as a force for division. (↗ <https://www.fes.de/themenportal-gender-jugend/gender/triumph-der-frauen-ii>)

The two studies presented here on Turkey and Russia build on this perspective, yet they deliberately shift the lens away from the sole question of electoral success and representation – towards the mechanisms of political order-making and the role of (governing) parties.

Gender politics is not a marginal issue; but a key arena of power politics. It is used to define belonging, to frame social conflicts, and to delegitimise opposition.

A central finding shared in the studies¹ by Alexandra Talaver and Selime Büyükgöze is this: in authoritarian and right-wing-conservative politi-

cal projects, “the family” becomes the guiding political formula. What sounds like caring is often a programme for recalibrating social power relations. In Russia, the party United Russia does not position itself as a moderniser on gender issues, but as the guardian of a “normal” order: equality is rhetorically sidestepped or translated into a policy of the “strong family”; women appear primarily as mothers, caregivers, and bearers of social stability. A similar trend can be discerned in Turkey: over years, women’s policy is reinterpreted through a family-centred lens; “women’s and children’s protection” and the reference to the family as the societal core of the nation simultaneously legitimise conservative role attributions.

In both cases, this focus on the family is linked to a second pattern: externalisation and scapegoating. Gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are labelled as “imports” or “foreign interference” – and thus pushed out of the sphere of legitimate democratic negotiation. In Russia, “sovereignty” is staged as a shield against “the West”; feminism and LGBTQ+ activism do not appear in the official narrative as part of plural societies, but as externally steered threats. In Turkey, a similar rhetoric serves to delegitimise criticism and to organise a morally charged mobilisation – culminating in an openly anti-LGBTIQ+ family agenda.

Thirdly, both studies reveal how women’s rights are addressed and limited at the same time. Visibility, participation and recognition do not auto-

¹ Volume 09: Alexandra Talaver; For the ‘protection’ of the nation? Women, gender politics and mobilisation in the United Russia party, FES 2026; Volume 10: Selime Büyükgöze, Shifting Gender Regimes: AKP, Right-Wing Populism, and Women’s Political Participation in Türkiye, FES 2026

matically emerge as expressions of equality, but are often part and parcel of political mobilisation. In Russia, a state-led and party-aligned orchestration of women's mobilisation is also used to relativise the existence of independent feminist critique – according to the motto: if women are 'represented after all,' there can be no structural disadvantage. In Turkey, women's party structures fulfil central functions for social mediation and mobilisation, but remain politically tightly controlled. The common finding of both studies is uncomfortable – but analytically crucial; in authoritarian contexts, 'women's advancement' can become an infrastructure of domination without questioning power relations.

And yet, both studies do not end with a diagnosis of repression and co-optation. They also show the persistence of feminist and civil-society counterforces – whether in visible waves of protest, in alliances, in local support structures, or in resistant practices that keep spaces open despite restrictions. In Turkey, this is evident, for example, in the wide-spread protests surrounding the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. In Russia, even under the conditions of a war of aggression, there are fractures and counterpositions that do not fit entirely into the offi-

cial family and sovereignty narrative.

Taken together, these two studies therefore offer more than two country analyses. They illuminate just how closely current struggles over democracy, social rights and social cohesion are intertwined with questions of gender, family and belonging. They reveal why a democratic counter-strategy can only be viable if it recognises these lines of conflict, takes them seriously, and responds to them politically.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the authors for their courageous analyses, and my colleagues in international cooperation for their outstanding support in this publication project.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation continues to work within its networks and through its country projects to strengthen democratic resilience and to effectively counter anti-feminist divisive strategies.

Dr Stefanie Elies
Gender Coordinator, FES

Berlin, March 2026

Introduction

On the night of 31 December 2022, as fireworks lit up the sky above Moscow and families settled in front of their televisions to watch Vladimir Putin deliver his New Year's address to the nation, the Russian president appeared not in front of the traditional Kremlin backdrop but surrounded by uniformed soldiers – women and men kitted out in identical military gear. The image was staged as a show of national strength. Yet, it conveyed something more pointed: a vision of gender equality that exists only when it is part of the state's militarised narrative, where parity is acceptable as long as everyone marches in the same direction and under the same command. This image might surprise those who know Russia as a fortress of “traditional values”, but in fact it reflects the complexity of the Russia's current gender regime and, importantly, the significant intersection with national security.

Since February 2022, the Russian leadership has framed the conflict not just as a geopolitical confrontation but as a full-blown “clash of civilisations” – a cultural war in which gender identity, sexuality, reproductive rights and bodily autonomy allegedly distinguish “us” from “them”. The “West”, Putin insists, promotes gender transition, same-sex marriage, and “parent 1/parent 2 degeneracy”, while Russia defends “the natural order”. Russia's attack on Ukraine is thus couched in the Kremlin's rhetoric as defending the country against this dangerous interference from the West.

This framing has not, however, emerged in a vacuum. It is the culmination of Russia's political evolution over the past three decades from a chaotic post-Soviet democracy to a consolidated authoritarian regime. Through this transformation, United Russia – formally a political party, in practice an extension of presidential power – has become the main mechanism for converting cultural anxieties into law.¹ Its role is not ideological but infrastructural: it absorbs grievances, converts them into administrative language, and translates them into policy.

The current article first examines United Russia's mix of populism, technocratic language, and “sovereign democracy”, a formula that claims to rise above ideology, while excluding any genuine political pluralism. Second, it analyses United Russia's strategy of producing the country's sweeping anti-gender policy framework.² Third, it focuses on the Women's Movement and the Eurasian Women's Forum, two venues which promote a positive image of women's empowerment while steering them into roles defined by patriotism, family duty, and state needs. Lastly, it explores the cracks and resistance within this system – from the small number of dissenting voices inside United Russia to the persistent regional, grassroots, and transnational feminist groups that continue to push back against the party's control over gender politics.

1 Ora John Reuter, *The Origins of Dominant Parties: Building Authoritarian Institutions in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316761649>.

2 Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, 1st ed. (Rowman & Littlefield International, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017); Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga, eds., *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe* (Routledge, 2020); Yulia Gradszkova, “Maternalism and New Imperialism in Russia: ‘Good Mothers’ for a Militarizing State—Expectations, Implications, and Resistances,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 8 (November 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1192822>.

United Russia's political programme: Balancing Russian conservatism and populism

In 2001, United Russia was established as a political party that aimed to position itself as a “catch-all” formation seeking to “transcend ideological myths” and thus not subscribe to the traditional left/right scheme. At the same time, however, in its first manifesto, “Path towards National Success” (April 2003), the party promoted an “ideology of consolidation and solidarity”.³ This reflected what can be described as a typical trait of Putin-style policies or simply a wolf in sheep's clothing: present yourself to the broader public as a technocratic and anti-ideological organisation, but in reality promote a nationalist, neo-conservative agenda.

By the mid-2000s, as Putin consolidated power, Russia's political and intellectual circles had turned to debating the country's ideological future. A flood of conservative manifestos promised to cure the nation of its liberal hangover with talk of patriotism, protectionism and moral revival. United Russia experimented with these ideas in formats such as the “liberal-conservative platform” and the “social-conservative wing”, but such initiatives remained loosely defined and soon disappeared.

Outside the party, the conservative camp grew more vocal and eccentric: Orthodox revivalists, nostalgic monarchists and professional patriots preached about the “Russian soul” and “the evils of the West”. United Russia, ever pragmatic, kept its distance. Instead, the party followed a different formula: “sovereign democracy”, a concept that emphasised state control,

stability and modernisation without overt ideological commitments. United Russia did not adopt the “conservative” label until 2009, and even then refrained from defining it as a political doctrine, revealing the party's strategic avoidance of deeper ideological engagement with the diverse and often conflicting conservative currents emerging in Russia's intellectual landscape.⁴

When it comes to gender politics, academic and feminist analyses usually present Putin as the embodiment of conservative machismo. The irony is that once you move past the familiar memes and isolated quotes, his public rhetoric turns out to be thicker, more contradictory and far less predictable.⁵ A large-scale study of 80 of the president's speeches over two decades shows that ultra-right statements are statistically negligible and traditionalist remarks are generally used as occasional signals to political groups he prefers to wink at rather than serve. Instead of the expected performance of a “warrior against Western decay”, we see a calculated balancing act: a handful of nods to “family values” on the one hand, and on the other, commentary on pay gaps, skewed domestic labour and a steady stream of gender-neutral formulations and framings where for instance the term “parents” is preferred to “mothers”, and the neutral frame of “people serving in the army” replaces “male soldiers and officers”.

Equally crucial is the tenacious Soviet narrative running through Putin's gendered rhet-

3 Katharina Bluhm, “Russia's Conservative Counter-Movement: Genesis, Actors, and Core Concepts,” in *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, 1st ed., eds. Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga (Routledge, 2019), 29, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351020305>.

4 Bluhm, “Russia's Conservative Counter-Movement”, 30–2.

5 Janet Elise Johnson et al., “Mixed Signals: What Putin Says about Gender Equality”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 6 (2021): 507–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2021.1971927>.



Screenshot of Putin's New Year Address to the Nation, 31.12.2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70315/videos>.

oric. It is this legacy – a cocktail of maternity, obligatory labour heroism and declarative equality – that Putin reproduces most consistently, almost automatically. Unlike the imported anti-gender arsenal of the global right, the Soviet template requires no ideological exertion: it is hardwired into the generational socialisation of security elites and bureaucrats and thus functions as a kind of ideological autopilot. These statements contain neither vocal calls to restore patriarchal law nor demands to chain women to the kitchen. What emerges instead is a late-Soviet hybrid – women as both “chief caretakers” and “pillars of the workforce”.

The takeaway is not that Putin's regime is somehow gender-progressive. Far from it. The point is that his rhetoric is far more complex than the crude binary of “patriarchy versus feminism”. His public statements do not map neatly onto state policy – which is far more conservative – and they do not endorse the anti-gender

panic of right-wing ideologues as straightforwardly as often assumed. Since the start of his third term, which marks a decisive turn towards “traditional values”, Putin has reduced the frequency of egalitarian signals that are not accompanied by an increase in ultra-traditionalist ones, opting instead for the safer, more recognizable Soviet gender script. This slightly outdated ideological grammar allows him to keep multiple audiences on side without slipping into either ultraconservative fervour or militant liberalism.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin shifted his rhetoric even more sharply toward confrontation with anyone associated with “Western values”. His threat to the “admirers of gender freedoms” was a particularly clear indication of this turn.⁶ Yet, these attacks did not prevent him from presenting his usual commitment to formal gender equality. He held his 2023 New Year's address surrounded by men and

6 <https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putin-the-czar-of-macho-politics-is-threatened-by-gender-and-sexuality-rights-180473>

women in uniform, as if to underline that gender parity remains intact as long as it is channeled into state-approved roles. The message was straightforward: equality is acceptable when it serves the state, and suspect when it comes from anywhere else.

United Russia's platform document the "People's Programme" follows the same logic, containing very few explicitly ideological statements. Instead, it presents the party as pragmatic and results-oriented, focused on "tangible steps" to improve daily life. The narrative of participation – the claim that the programme draws on 2.5 million citizens' proposals – wraps technocratic governance in populist packaging. "It is the people's – because it comes from the people, works with the people and benefits the people", it declares. Statements and remarks by Putin and Medvedev frame this supposed responsiveness as a sign of "responsibility and maturity", measured not by ideas but by deliverables. The party's website reflects the same balancing act:

*As a patriotic force, we see it as our mission to resist any attempts to restrain Russia's development or divide our people. "UNITED RUSSIA" rejects all forms of social and economic populism, nationalism and radicalism. The sovereign right of Russia's citizens to determine their own future is absolute. Any external interference in our internal affairs is unacceptable.*⁷

This rhetorical twist – borrowing populist language while renouncing populism at the same time – reveals the party's main formula: ideology without ideology. Any doctrine can be appropriated, provided it reinforces the idea of unity under centralised control and sovereignty is at its ideological core.

The phrase "the sovereign right of Russia's citizens to determine their own future" condenses the logic of contemporary Russian conservatism. Here, freedom is not about individual autonomy or pluralism, but about collective

resistance to external interference. The notion of sovereignty functions as both shield and weapon: a justification for insulating Russia from "foreign influence" and a means of delegitimising any domestic dissent that can be framed as external interference. Feminists, LGBTQ+ activists and human rights groups are rejected not for what they advocate, but because they are portrayed as foreign imports.

Within this framework, "freedom" operates as a collective defence mechanism, not a civic or social practice. It demands unity. Society is imagined less as a self-organising community and more of a family under siege, bound by loyalty rather than rights. The only legitimate unit is the family – strong, reproductive, patriotic – while broader notions of solidarity or community are treated with suspicion unless they are legitimised by the powers that be.

Gender and family politics illustrate how this logic works in practice. United Russia's "People's Programme" avoids the word "gender" or "gender equality", against which ultra-conservative groups have been successfully fighting,⁸ and mentions "women" only in medical or demographic contexts – women as a separate category of citizen only exist in the form of "pregnant women" or "mothers". Questions of equality are reframed through the lens of the party's "strong family" policy, which, albeit heteronormative, still depicts various family constellations: large families, families with working parents, student families, pregnant women and mothers "facing difficult life circumstances", orphans. This emphasis mirrors the broader conservative agenda that juxtaposes gender roles with demographic reproduction.

Another of the programme's concessions to conservative activists is the introduction of "Father's Day" in Russia. A coalition of ultra-conservative figures has advocated for strengthening the role of the father in the family since the early 2000s.⁹ This new vision of fatherhood has

7 "Narodnaia Programma 'Edinoi Rossii,'" 2025, <https://er.ru/party/program>.

8 Katharina Bluhm and Martin Brand, "'Traditional Values' Unleashed: The Ultraconservative Influence on Russian Family Policy", in *New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe*, 1st ed., eds. Mihai Varga and Katharina Bluhm (Routledge, 2019), 238, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351020305-11>.

9 Bluhm and Brand, "'Traditional Values' Unleashed", 227.

little to do with sharing care work or household responsibilities. Instead, it reinforces paternal authority within the family – granting the father moral and decision-making power, including, for instance, the right to determine whether a pregnancy should be terminated.¹⁰

“Traditional values” only appear in the part of the *“People’s Programme”* devoted to “civic solidarity and youth politics”, where they are formulated as an instruction “to assist in the achievement of the goals of state policy aimed at preserving and strengthening traditional Russian spiritual and moral values”. The programme thus referenced the Presidential decree “On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values”, issued in November 2022.¹¹ The document treats “traditional values” in an explicitly technocratic fashion, translating ideological concepts into a set of quantifiable performance metrics: number of events attended by “heroes” of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, number of institutions implementing state-approved programmes. This approach illustrates United Russia’s distinctive mode of governance – depoliticising ideology by reducing it to bureaucratic reporting units and administrative efficiency indicators.

More broadly, this development reflects Russia’s post-Soviet political trajectory: from the neoliberal 1990s to Putin’s consolidation of power and the gradual departure from liberal values. What began as technocratic governance under formula of “sovereign democracy” now employs the rhetoric of “traditional values” to legitimise its isolationist and aggressive policies, both domestically and internationally.

¹⁰ Anastasiia Vetkina, “Papa Možet? Začem Otcam Hotjat Dat’ Pravo Golosa Pri Rešenii Ob Aborte [Can Dads Decide? Why Fathers Want a Say in Abortion Decisions],” *M24* (Moscow), October 20, 2025, <https://www.m24.ru/articles/obshchestvo/20102025/839783>.

¹¹ Vladimir Putin, “Ob Utverždenii Osnov Gosudarstvennoj Politiki Po Sohraneniju i Ukrepleniju Tradicionnyh Rossijskikh Duhovno-Nravstvennyh Cennostej [On the Approval of the Fundamentals of State Policy for the Preservation and Strengthening of Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values],” September 11, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/48502>.

United Russia: The backbone of Russian anti-feminist policies

United Russia is staffed by strongly ideological actors whose legislative work has become the backbone of Russia's conservative gender regime. This system was codified in targeted legislation which, over a period of nearly two decades, steadily reframed gender, sexuality and family life as matters of national security, in line with Putin's public statements.¹² Although some bills originated outside United Russia, nothing became federal law without the party's approval. The party's parliamentary dominance functioned as both filter and amplifier: if a bill passed, it was because United Russia allowed it to pass; if it became national policy, it was because the party made it so.

The conservative crackdown on Western liberal values began in the late 2000s, when regional assemblies run by United Russia started testing out their first anti-LGBTQ+ restrictions. Between 2006 and 2012, Ryazan, Arkhangelsk, Kostroma and St. Petersburg rolled out local bans on "homosexual propaganda" that targeted minors. These served as legal prototypes for a future federal regime. No one embraced the experiment more eagerly than St. Petersburg's United Russia politician Vitaly Milonov, who paired his legislative crusade with vocal personal harassment of LGBTQ+ activists.¹³

These regional experiments paved the way for national legislation and another member of United Russia and Speaker of the Federal Coun-

cil, Valentina Matvienko, proposed that a federal-level law be discussed.¹⁴ In 2013, the Duma approved the federal law banning "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" among minors – effectively outlawing Pride events, health education and any non-stigmatising representation of LGBTQ+ people. In the same year, United Russia backed another set of restrictions: a ban on adoption by foreign same-sex couples and citizens of countries recognising same-sex marriage. Officially this was framed as "child protection". In practice, it served as geopolitical signaling – another marker of Russia's self-declared cultural sovereignty. In 2022, the ban of so-called "LGBTQ+ propaganda" was extended beyond minors, effectively prohibiting any type of positive public display by LGBTQ+ people. United Russia once again framed the discussion in geopolitical terms, representing LGBTQ+ people as an intrusive foreign import aimed at destabilising the Russian demographic situation. Thus, Vyacheslav Volodin, notorious United Russia MP and Duma Speaker, directly addressed the US government while giving a speech about the law in the Duma:

¹² Dmitrii Dorogov, "Russia's Biopolitics of Sexual Sovereignty: A Genealogy" (PhD thesis, Central European University, 2022), https://www.etd.ceu.edu/2023/dorogov_dmitrii.pdf.

¹³ Tanya Cooper, "License to Harm", *Human Rights Watch*, 15 December 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/12/15/license-harm/violence-and-harassment-against-lgbt-people-and-activists-russia>.

¹⁴ "«Peterburgskij Zakon o Zaprete Propagandy Gomoseksualizma Možet Byt' Prinjat v Masštabah Vsego Gosudarstva»[«Peterburgskij Zakon o Zaprete Propagandy Gomoseksualizma Možet Byt' Prinjat v Masštabah Vsego Gosudarstva»], *KP.Ru*, November 17, 2011, <https://www.kp.ru/online/news/1021410/>.

*Don't impose your alien values on us; you've destroyed your own. We'll see how it all ends, but it's definitely sad because it's sodomy, there's no other way to put it, and the US has become the centre of sodomy in the world. Let them live there, but don't impose their values on us because they can't even be called values.*¹⁵

In 2023, the Supreme Court designated the non-existent “international LGBT movement” as an extremist organisation, effectively criminalising any public expression of queer identity, giving police broad authority to monitor and punish anyone they saw as suspect due to their use of the rainbow flag or feminines [gender-specific job titles]. In a similar vein, proposals to criminalise feminism, which the party has declared an extremist ideology, also came from the ranks of United Russia, in the form of Oleg Matveichev, an MP and philosopher associated with the ultraconservative pro-Kremlin think tank Izborsk Club.¹⁶ His initiative has not yet been passed. But United Russia MP Elvira Aitkulova as already paved the way for another method of restricting feminism: the criminalisation of what has been dubbed “childfree propaganda”, meaning any positive portrayal of childlessness.

Moreover, in 2023, the most restrictive gender policy package to date came into force: a total ban on gender-affirming medical care for adults and minors, a ban on legal gender change and retroactive annulment of marriages involving a trans spouse. Vyacheslav Volodin, notorious United Russia MP and Duma Speaker, presented the bill as an urgent defence against the Western “transgender industry” which allegedly sought to destabilise Russian society.¹⁷ Another United Russia MP and Deputy Chairman of the

State Duma, Pyotr Tolstoy, also endorsed the legislation, warning: “Erasing the natural biological and spiritual boundary between the sexes is a dangerous endeavour.”¹⁸ Together, these measures sketched the contours of a system where gender diversity is treated not as a part of social development but as a national security breach, a secret weapon used by Western states against the Russian population with the aim of corrupting it, destroying it, and ultimately leading the country into decline. Notably, despite their confrontation with Western “enemies”, United Russia borrows vocabulary and issues from Western far-right movements: Russia itself has not seen a huge number of LGBTQ+ Pride marches or a wave of gender transition among minors – Russian conservatives a merely tilting at windmills with all these phenomena they are allegedly fighting.

A similar pattern is now shaping the increasing restrictions on abortion access. Much like in the fight against “LGBTQ+ propaganda”, the Kremlin is first testing restrictions at the regional level. At the same time it clearly channels the dominant issues in Western conservative movements. Yet, as Nadezhda Belyakova notes, this anti-abortion language has little to do with Russian tradition. Indeed, throughout the entire Soviet period – when abortion functioned as the primary method of contraception – neither the Patriarch, nor his predecessors condemned the practice. The modern rhetoric about protecting “unborn life” is a late-20th-century import, borrowed by the Russian Orthodox Church from Catholic and American Evangelical circles after the collapse of the USSR, and bears little resemblance to the Church’s historical stance.¹⁹ On paper, abortion in Russia remains

¹⁵ Sergei Katsuba, “Gomofobnaja Pravovaja Politika v Rossii i Ee Posledstviia: Diskriminatsiia i Nasilie v Otnoshenii LGBT-Liudei [homophobic legal policy in Russia and its consequences: Discrimination and violence against LGBT people],” Memorial, 2024, 25, <https://memorialcenter.org/analytics/gomofobnaya-pravovaya-politika-v-rossii>.

¹⁶ Dmitry Kaverin, “V Rossii Hotjat Priznat' Feminizm Ėkstreizmom [V Rossii Hotjat Priznat' Feminizm Ėkstreizmom],” *Gazeta.Ru*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2023/04/04/20134009.shtml>.

¹⁷ Editorial, “Russia Considers Adoption Ban for ‘Gender Swap’ Countries,” *The Nordic Times*, June 12, 2023, <https://nordictimes.com/world/russia-considers-adoption-ban-for-gender-swap-countries/>.

¹⁸ “Izjaščno: Tolstoj Ob'jasnil Navjazvanie LGBT, Feminizma i Čajldfrii [Elegantly: Tolstoy Explained the Imposition of LGBT, Feminism and Childfree],” *Regnum.Ru*, September 9, 2021, <https://regnum.ru/news/3365813>.

¹⁹ Anna Sidorevich and Nadezhda Belyakova, “Zashchita Zhizni s Momenta Zachatiia. Antiabortnaja Ritorika RPTS Kak Chast' Global'noi Traditsionalistskoj Povestki [protecting life from the moment of conception. The anti-abortion rhetoric of the ROC as part of the global traditionalist agenda],” *FAR*, n.d., <https://femantiwar.org/ru/life-from-conception/>.

legal up to 12 weeks (and in some cases up to 22), but since 2023, a wave of regional measures has begun to restrict access. Currently, various restrictions have been implemented in 30 Russian regions. These involve either a ban on “coercing a woman into abortion” or a complete ban on abortion in private hospitals.²⁰ The political framing mirrors the rhetoric around LGBTQ+ restrictions: officials present these measures as safeguarding women from external manipulation, obscuring the fact that the practical consequence is reduced access, longer wait times and increased health risks. Because the policies are adopted in the name of “protection”, direct opposition is politically challenging – yet, despite censorship and repression, feminist organisations still manage to mobilise public campaigns, gather signatures and document the impact of these regional rollouts.

²⁰ Sofia Shoshina, “Bol’she 30 Regionov Rossii Ograničili Aborty. Infografika [Bol’she 30 Regionov Rossii Ograničili Aborty. Infografika],” *Rbc.Ru*, November 15, 2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/11/2025/691704ba9a7947703cac84dc>.

Time/Year	Restrictions/Consequences
2006–2012	<p style="text-align: center;">Regional LGBTQ+ “propaganda” bans</p> Ryazan, Arkhangelsk, Kostroma, St. Petersburg led by Milonov
2012	<p style="text-align: center;">“Foreign Agent” Law</p> Targeting NGOs, incl. women’s and LGBTQ+ organisations
2013	<p style="text-align: center;">Adoption restrictions</p> Ban on adoption by foreign same-sex couples
2017	<p style="text-align: center;">Decriminalisation of domestic violence (first offence)</p> Domestic violence reclassified as administrative infraction
2019–2021	<p style="text-align: center;">Anti-“childfree” propaganda and anti-“gender ideology” proposals</p> Calls to classify radical feminism as extremist
2022	<p style="text-align: center;">„Expanded LGBTQ+ propaganda ban</p> Applied to all ages, bans films, online media, books, ads; marriages annulled
July 2023	<p style="text-align: center;">Total ban on gender transition</p> Medical and legal gender change
Nov 2023	<p style="text-align: center;">Supreme Court designates “international LGBT movement”</p> as extremist, criminalising symbols (rest illegible)
2023–2024	<p style="text-align: center;">Regional abortion restrictions</p> Renewed attacks on “childfree ideology”: demographic securitization

To sum up, on the policy level, through its dominant position in the federal and local parliaments and administrations, United Russia plays a key role in implementing restrictions on bodily autonomy and sexuality as a coordinated project built around the idea of “sovereignty”. Anything that challenges the conservative version of the biological or social order is framed as Western interference meant to weaken Russia. What makes this strategy effective is how gradually it

unfolds: the party tests new limits in the regions, shapes public opinion with talk of external threats and presents each new ban as a protective measure. This steady pace, combined with patriotic language and claims of “defending” the population, has allowed United Russia to turn conservative fears into a legal system that tightly controls gender, sexuality and reproductive rights under the banner of national security.

United Russia: For women’s rights without feminism

United Russia’s conservative policies do not imply the exclusion of women – rather quite the opposite. The discussion about a ban on “child-free propaganda”, which stigmatised childless women clearly illustrates United Russia’s strategy regarding women’s rights. The ban was introduced by United Russia MP Elvira Aitkulova and enthusiastically supported by a prominent United Russia politician Valentina Matvienko, who used the debate to attack contemporary feminism. In Matvienko’s view, feminism has abandoned the “noble idea of women’s equality” and now mobilises women for what she described as absurd causes, far removed from Russia’s “true” values:

Feminism has indeed become militant, and this seemingly noble idea – the struggle for women’s equality – has long been consigned by them to the archives. It has turned into an opposition movement, a movement against men and traditional values. Now it’s about all sorts of “genders” – more than 50 of which are invented. Or, for example, the childfree movement, which, in my opinion, should be banned by law. So, the original meaning has long since lost all relevance and no longer corresponds to the current expectations and agenda of women.²¹

Matvienko’s statement epitomises United Russia’s efforts to reclaim the discourse of women’s rights by redefining it within a patriotic frame-

²¹ Lilia Pashkova, “Matvienko Vystupila Za Zapret Čajldfri v Rossii [Matvienko Spoke in Favour of Banning Childfree People in Russia],” *Rbc.Ru*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/18/09/2024/66ea7f0a9a79473617a3e2cc>.

work – another version of the notorious “import substitution” policy. It depicts progressive movements as having been overrun by “gender madness” and having forgotten their “original purpose”. Matvienko – once active in the Soviet women’s movement – positions herself as the guardian of this supposedly authentic legacy, thus helping the party to recast equality not as a demand for rights, but as a duty of loyalty to the state.

Gender entrepreneurs and United Russia’s Women’s Movement

“They [women in Russia] must be confident that **gender discrimination** is a thing of the past. They have completely equal rights and opportunities with men for professional self-fulfillment, career growth and active participation in the socio-political life of the country”,²² proclaims the website of United Russia’s (UR) Women’s Movement, testifying to the absence of gender discrimination in Russia by its very existence. Launched in late 2022 under State Duma deputy Natalia Poluyanova, the UR Women’s Movement functions as yet another party project: a carefully managed vehicle for implementing the National Strategy for Women 2023–2030 and mobilising women in line with state priorities. Its fixation on quantifiable outputs – number of participants (in thousands), legislative sessions and standardised initiatives – reveals a model of civic engagement that is choreographed rather than autonomous, extensive in scale yet with a tightly controlled purpose.

This triumphant rhetoric sits uneasily alongside the structural inequalities it attempts to obscure and the need for dedicated support for women in politics, business and society, which it declares as its key goal. Indeed, at

around 35 percent, the gender pay gap is higher in Russia than in any other Eastern European countries.²³ The list of prohibited jobs for women still includes 100 occupations.²⁴

The UR Women’s Movement targets four main areas: political engagement and mentorship, female entrepreneurship, women’s health and humanitarian work with families of soldiers stationed in the occupied territories. Its methods include establishing a nationwide network of women’s clubs, delivering leadership training through the Women’s Political School and encouraging participation in lawmaking through the “A Woman’s Voice” initiative. The latter project encourages female politicians to pursue legislative initiatives, mostly focused on the social sphere. One of the flagship initiatives, “You Are Not Alone”, even reproduces the name of Alyona Popova’s earlier anti-domestic violence project,²⁵ but replaces its feminist advocacy with modules on “harmonious family relationships”, personal development and socially acceptable forms of initiative. Overall, the movement programme emphasises neoliberal female self-realisation, accompanied by a strong patriotic commitment, which includes demographic reproduction. Most of the activities of its regional branches are dedicated to developing personal brands, leadership, time management, personal growth, and combining motherhood and career.

This image of a neoliberal self-sufficient female is the perfect citizen for a militarised state, which places the social consequences of war onto women’s shoulders. Appropriately, the launch of the movement in Belgorod and Kursk – regions bordering Ukraine – signalled its war-time purpose. A local broadcast framed women as guardians of the “reliable rear”: “During the special military operation, women remain on the home front [...] They collect humanitarian aid,

22 “Ženskoe Dviženie Edinoj Rossii [United Russia’s Women’s Movement],” n.d., <https://proekty.er.ru/projects/zhenskoe-dvizhenie-edinoi-rossii>.

23 “Issledovateli Sravnili Gendernyj Razryv v Zarplatah v Rossii s Vostočnoj Evropoj [Researchers Compared the Gender Pay Gap in Russia with Eastern Europe],” Tass.Ru, February 10, 2025, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/25223747>.

24 “Russian Federation: Government Shortens List of Professions in Which Women’s Employment Is Restricted,” web page, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2019-10-07/russian-federation-government-shortens-list-of-professions-in-which-womens-employment-is-restricted/>.

25 “Ty Ne Odná [You Are Not Alone],” n.d., <https://tineodna.ru/>.

sew clothing for servicemen, write letters and send video messages.”²⁶ Here, women are mobilised to create a logistical and emotional infrastructure, supporting the war not through formal political participation but through labour couched as care.

United Russia officials present this arrangement as supportive rather than exploitative. In the same broadcast, the party’s deputy secretary-general, Daria Lantratova, stresses that assistance to soldiers’ families should be “close by, here and now”,²⁷ highlighting the state’s reliance on the stabilising role of women in everyday life. As political scientist Valeria Umanets argues, Soviet and post-Soviet authoritarian regimes have long depended on women at the municipal level: their strong sense of social responsibility and dependence on public employment make them responsive, compliant and reliable actors. By consistently addressing everyday needs at the municipal level, women help sustain the stability and legitimacy of authoritarian systems from within.²⁸

Support for the wives and families of soldiers accounts for the majority of the news on the movement’s website, with 10 of 18 recent posts dedicated to aid for the Russian army, events for soldiers and their families or activities in the occupied territories.²⁹ Despite the strong militarisation of its agenda, the movement positions itself in a superior position above the families of soldiers — providing humanitarian assistance, organising events and offering training. Its members do not see themselves as being on the same level as the wives of servicemen, instead guiding and supporting them from a position of authority, as the charity framework implies. A vivid example of this distance is a video posted on United Russia’s YouTube channel featuring a support event the UR Women’s

Movement organised for soldiers’ wives. In the video, the wives of the servicemen are portrayed not merely as passive figures waiting at home, but as active contributors. In their words: “We volunteer, we hold the home front, we are raising the next generation.” The initiative seeks to restore a sense of “normality” by helping women regain their traditional femininity – something that was supposedly lost amid the hardships of daily life – and encouraging them to send beautiful photographs of themselves to their husbands at the front. Remarkably, however, the representative of United Russia who appears in the video does not identify with these women. She talks about them with respect but distances herself, describing the goal of the action as being “[t]o lift **their** spirits and ease **their** worries about **their** husbands.”³⁰ Make-up and photo-shoots as a means of empowerment align with United Russia’s neoliberal agenda. Ultimately, the video underscores the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the UR Women’s Movement and the soldiers’ wives: the movement offers symbolic empowerment via makeovers while reinforcing a structure in which the wives’ agency remains carefully steered and contained within a patriarchal framework.

I propose that the leaders of the UR Women’s Movement – Natalia Poluyanova, Galina Karelova and Daria Lantratova – be seen as gender entrepreneurs. Here I draw on Roger Brubaker’s definition of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs as individuals who “[b]y invoking groups, [...] seek to evoke them, summon them, call them into being. Their categories are for doing—designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilize, kindle and energize” for “[r]eifying groups is precisely what [they] are in the business of doing. When they are successful, the political fiction of the unified group can be momentarily yet powerfully real-

26 «*Ženskoe Dviženie Edinoj Rossii* | Start Pervyh Meroprijatij [United Russia Women’s Movement | Launch of the First Events], directed by Victor Apalkov (BelgorodMedia, 2022), <https://youtu.be/z0i8w0qXsr0?si=wLieLut1zb9ORqVl>.

27 «*Ženskoe Dviženie Edinoj Rossii* | Start Pervyh Meroprijatij [United Russia Women’s Movement | Launch of the First Events].

28 Valeriia Umanets, “Political Participation of Women in the Soviet Union and Russia: From State-Sponsored Feminism to Putin’s Machismo” (Ph.D., 2024), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/3097389219?sourceopen=Dissertations%20&%20Theses>.

29 *Novosti [News]*, n.d., <https://zhenskoe-dvizhenie.er.ru/news?page=1>.

30 *Edinaja Rossija Organizovala Professional’nuju Fotosesiju Dlja Žen Učastnikov [United Russia Organised a Professional Photo Shoot for the Wives of Participants.]*, 2023, <https://youtu.be/ZpeuQ5aZE5s?si=hSkrOm5VePxx7S5N>.

ized in practice.”³¹ The UR Women’s Movement plays a constitutive role within United Russia. By ostensibly promoting women’s self-realisation and professional empowerment, the movement’s activities construct an ideal type of new Russian woman during wartime. These initiatives have created the image of an empowered, entrepreneurial woman, embodying an ideal neoliberal femininity that aligns individual self-sufficiency with patriotic duty, including demographic reproduction. This model is inseparable from the wartime state: female empowerment is intertwined with patriotic service and social responsibility, transforming women’s agency into a mechanism of support for the state’s militarised and authoritarian order. Their service also pays dividends when it comes to their careers, as research shows that support from United Russia is the only significant factor influencing whether or not a woman politician’ will run in the next elections.³²

Eurasian Women’s Forum: Mere international window dressing

In July 2025, Valentina Matvienko, Vladimir Volodin and other Russian politicians were invited to the Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, which took place in Switzerland.³³ Valentina Matvienko, who endorsed Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territories and subsequent war against the country, addressed the Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament, where she invoked UN Resolution 1325, claiming that “peace should definitely have the face of a woman”.³⁴ This demonstrated how Russian officials use international platforms to legitimise

state narratives – in particular, operating through transnational gender programmes.

The flagship vehicle for this strategy is the Eurasian Women’s Forum (EWF), initiated and chaired by Matvienko. Founded in 2015 – immediately after the annexation of Crimea – the EWF presents itself as an inclusive, international women’s platform, but in practice serves as a diplomatic instrument to soften Russia’s image abroad. The international focus of the first EWF discussion platforms was designed to signal Russia’s intention to reassert its position as a global voice on women’s issues and other matters of international significance.³⁵

The inaugural EWF gathered over 1,000 “female leaders” from 80 countries across four thematic tracks: women and power; women in the changing economy; women in global health; and women in humanitarian cooperation. Gender scholar Yulia Gradszkova writes that the “EWF seems to be mainly aimed toward the advancement of a specific type of woman—one who is presumably more affluent and better educated than the average Russian woman and who is pursuing a career as a civil servant or business-woman.”³⁶

Since its first iteration, the EWF has convened every three years, maintaining a similar thematic structure while expanding its network through various awards, side events and projects. The 2024 EWF in St. Petersburg, held under the banner “Women for Strengthening Trust and Global Cooperation”, showcased Russia’s ability to attract delegates from 125 countries despite its geopolitical isolation.³⁷ Its five thematic pillars ranged from peacebuilding and

31 Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*. *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 166–67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975602001066>.

32 Olga A. Avdeyeva et al., “Gender and Local Executive Office in Regional Russia: The Party of Power as a Vehicle for Women’s Empowerment?,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 6 (2017): 431–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2017.1365806>.

33 Feminist Anti-War Resistance, “Protest Against the Invitation of the Russian Delegation to the Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament and The Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament,” 2025, <https://femantiwar.org/en/protest-against-the-russian-delegation/>.

34 “Valentina Matvienko: The Time Has Come for Those Who Will Help Humanity Find the Right Path to Peace, Where the Security of Each Nation Is a Condition for the Security of All | Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,” accessed January 9, 2026, <http://www.council.gov.ru/en/events/news/168608/>.

35 Yulia Gradszkova, “From Defending Women’s Rights in the ‘Whole World’ to Silence About Russia’s Predatory War? The (Geo)Politics of the Eurasian Women’s Forums in the Context of ‘Traditional Values,’” *Sustainable Development Goals Series* (2023): 41, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-38066-2_2.

36 Gradszkova, “From Defending Women’s Rights,” 43.

37 “Četvrtýj Evrazijskij Ženskij Forum [the 4th Eurasian Women’s Forum],” accessed January 9, 2026, <https://eawf.ru/about/četvertij-evrazijskij-ženskij-forum/>.

diplomacy to climate, innovation, cultural heritage and public health. The programming drew heavily on liberal feminist ideals – female excellence in business, social and political life – which it appropriated to serve the goals and interests of the state. The EWF also included the BRICS Women’s Forum to highlight its ethnic and cultural diversity, capitalising on the Soviet contribution to the international women’s movement and independent movements worldwide to serve Russia’s current imperial ambitions.

Like many other authoritarian leaders, Putin uses women’s rights as “window dressing” to create an appealing international image and conceal human rights violations, such as the persecution of LGBTQ+ people and political opposition, behind the glossy ideal of a successful and empowered woman.³⁸

Dissident voices within United Russia

Sometimes such window dressing also opens up a window of opportunity for the women in United Russia.³⁹ Ekaterina Lakhova – long-time chair of the Union of Women of Russia – became a polarising figure among conservative groups, who attacked her for supporting “family planning” lessons in schools during her tenure as head of the State Duma Committee on Family,

Women and Children in the 2000s.⁴⁰ Some even labelled her the “spiritual guide” of the famous feminist punk band Pussy Riot, accusing her of promoting “tolerance towards homosexuality” and reproductive rights.⁴¹ Under increasing pressure, Lakhova embraced hardline positions: calling for the shutdown of gay clubs in 2009 and denouncing the “Rainbow” ice cream brand in 2020 as covert LGBTQ+ propaganda.⁴² Today, both Lakhova and the Union of Women of Russia also actively support the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine by sending aid to the frontline.⁴³

Another rare dissenting figure was Oksana Pushkina, former deputy head of the State Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children. Pushkina publicly advocated for a domestic violence law which had long been blocked⁴⁴ and defended LGBTQ+ rights⁴⁵ – anomalous positions within United Russia.⁴⁶ As a result, she was made a scapegoat by conservative groups, who even produced a fake ad featuring a gay couple adopting a child in a room with her portrait on the wall – supposedly depicting a future Russia under Pushkina. In 2021, she was then prohibited from participating in the elections, which saw the end of her political career.⁴⁷

These cases highlight the tight constraints on women’s agency within United Rus-

yskiy-zhenskiy-forum/.

38 Elin Bjarnegård and Daniela Donno, “Window-Dressing or Window of Opportunity? Assessing the Advancement of Gender Equality in Autocracies,” *Politics & Gender* 20, no. 1 (2024): 229–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000496>.

39 Bjarnegård and Donno, “Window-Dressing or Window of Opportunity?”

40 Bluhm and Brand, “‘Traditional Values’ Unleashed,” 227.

41 Nikolay Bondarenko, “Deputat Ekaterina Lakhova i Feministki Iz «Pussy Riot» Za Skorejšee Prinjatje Zakona o Gendernom Ravenstve [MP Ekaterina Lakhova and Feminists from Pussy Riot Call for the Swift Adoption of a Law on Gender Equality],” *Russkaja Narodnaja Linija*, March 20, 2012, https://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2012/03/20/deputat_ekaterina_lahova_i_feministki_iz_pussy_riot_za_skorejshee_prinyatie_zakona_o_gendernom_ravenstve/.

42 Irina Popova, “Glava «Sojuza Ženščin» Rossii Ekaterina Lakhova Požalovalas’ Prezidentu Vladimiru Putinu Na Moroženoe «Raduga» [The Head of Russia’s Women’s Union, Ekaterina Lakhova, Complained to President Vladimir Putin about Raduga Ice Cream.],” *Ritmsk.Ru*, March 7, 2020, <https://ritmsk.ru/news/2670707-echo/>.

43 “Akcija Sojuza ženščin Rossii ‘Zaščitnikam s ljubov’ju!’ prodolzhaetsja [The Russian Women’s Union’s campaign ‘With love to our defenders!’ continues],” accessed January 9, 2026, <https://www.wuor.ru>.

44 Anastasia Kharlamova, “«Rožat’ Skoro Budet Nekomu»: Oksana Puškina Rasskazala o Sud’be Zakona o Domašnem Nasilii [‘Soon There Will Be No One Left to Give Birth’: Oksana Pushkina Spoke about the Fate of the Law on Domestic Violence],” *Vm.Ru*, November 7, 2022.

45 *Deputat Gosdumy Oksana Puškina — o Sem’jah s LGBT-Det’mi i Kaming-Aute. 18+ [State Duma Deputy Oksana Pushkina on Families with LGBT Children and Coming out. 18+]*, (Novaya Gazeta, 2020), <https://youtu.be/42n5RXDrKak?si=jsUGZ5qMpGwY6iGL>.

46 Notably, Valentina Matvienko had established a Duma working group to draft a law against domestic violence. Kharlamova, “«Rožat’ Skoro Budet Nekomu»: Oksana Puškina Rasskazala o Sud’be Zakona o Domašnem Nasilii [‘Soon There Will Be No One Left to Give Birth’: Oksana Pushkina Spoke about the Fate of the Law on Domestic Violence].”

47 “Puškina rešila ne idti na vybory v Dumu «protiv svoej prežnej komandy» [Pushkina decided not to run for the Duma ‘against her former team.’],” *rbc.ru*, March 14, 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/03/2021/604e50599a794750b0abcd89>.

sia. When women's initiatives challenge the ideological pillars of Putin's system – or risk mobilising constituencies outside state control – they are swiftly suppressed. A less vocal figure, lawyer and United Russia politician Irina Rukavishnikova, has participated in expert groups discussing domestic violence legislation.⁴⁸ She also mentioned it as a problem in one of her interviews.⁴⁹ Her role remains marginal, however, and she has so far avoided the kind of backlash faced by Pushkina, largely because her involvement has been less public and more administrative.

Further insight into internal dissent comes from survey conducted in 2025 among participants of United Russia's Women's Political School. This anonymous online survey was launched by independent journalists in June 2025 after they discovered a QR code during a televised report about United Russia's Women's Political School in Dagestan. Scanning the code led them to a private Telegram chat created by UR Women's Movement, which included over 1,200 members from across the country who had participated in party training courses and seminars. The researchers posted a link to their anonymous questionnaire in this chat, assuring participants that, to protect their identities, they would not reveal their affiliation or collect any personal data.

Over a period of 12 days, 64 women responded – 48 members of United Russia and 9 official party supporters. The survey is not representative, but it provides a rare insight into the opinions of women directly involved in the party's educational projects and also active enough to participate in the poll. Its results revealed striking deviations from official party ideology. A total of 61 participants (98%) rejected the notion that banning abortions increases birth rates; 52 (81%) supported the law on domestic violence prevention that been blocked for a protracted

period; and 58 (91%) favoured reintroducing criminal penalties for first-time assaults. Moreover, 45 respondents (70%) believed that women can be successful without being married or having children, 46 (72%) thought women were inadequately represented in the State Duma, and about half reported encountering sexist jokes or discrimination in the workplace.⁵⁰

Despite the party establishment's rhetoric about "traditional family values", these responses reveal a more complex, less compliant reality among its female members and supporters. The survey's findings suggest that United Russia's efforts to shape women into loyal, self-disciplined and ideologically aligned subjects through its political schools have in fact achieved limited success. When allowed to speak anonymously, many of these active women express attitudes that contradict the state's patriarchal and conservative narrative. These results highlight a divide between the party's conservative messaging and the pragmatic aspirations of the politically engaged women within its ranks.

48 "ROI :: Prinjat' Zakon o Protivodejstvii Domašnemu Nasiliju [ROI :: Pass a Law to Combat Domestic Violence]," accessed January 9, 2026, <https://www.roi.ru/121941/>.

49 "Denis Novak i Irina Rukavishnikova o edinom portale juridičeskoj pomošči [Denis Novak and Irina Rukavishnikova on the only legal aid portal]," *Associacija juristov Rossii*, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://alrf.ru/news/denis-novak-i-irina-rukavishnikova-o-edinom-portale-yuridicheskoy-pomoshchi/>.

50 Andrej Soshnikov et al., "'Sliškom Mnogo Rukoprikladstva'. Učastnicy Politškoly 'Edinoj Rossii' – o Domašnem Nasilii, Zarplatah i Gendernom Neravenstve [‘Too Much Physical Violence.’ Participants in the United Russia Political School Discuss Domestic Violence, Salaries, and Gender Inequality.]," *Https://Www.Currenttime.Tv/*, October 7, 2025.

Feminist opposition to United Russia

The UR Women's Movement has more resources at its disposal than any of the numerous grassroots feminist groups and NGOs in Russia. Yet, the latter still find ways of opposing United Russia's legislative initiatives and activities, even at the international level. For example, in August 2025, Feminist Anti-War Resistance, one of the most vocal Russian feminist initiatives, sent a letter of protest to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In their letter, the members of the initiative highlight that Matvienko, as the Chairwoman of the Federation Council, endorsed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the persecution of feminist and LGBTQ+ activists in Russia.⁵¹ This letter is just one example of the vast feminist resistance to United Russia's conservative policies, which goes far beyond the activities of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance alone. **The expansive network of regional feminist initiatives regularly organises gatherings and lectures, festivals and charity events, psychological support and assistance to survivors of violence, and runs small media and public campaigns – all contesting the United Russia's "common sense" in a multitude of ways.** Under constant threat of repression from the state and violence from right-wing groups, feminist activists across the country steadfastly continue their work.⁵²

Another form of opposition to the support the UR Women's Movement provides for soldiers' families can be found in the activities of some of the Soldiers' Mothers Committees and the "Way Back Home" women's initiative, which

focus on helping bring men back home from the frontline. As research conducted by Public Sociology Laboratory (PS Lab) shows, in Russian society, mothers and wives hold a special social status that gives them confidence in their right to defend their loved ones by any means. During wartime, this position allows the mothers of conscripts and the wives or partners of mobilised men to come together, forming groups that can evolve into social movements.⁵³ These women do not publicly identify as feminists but do sometimes cooperate with feminist initiatives.

Finally, there are female political opposition leaders such as Yulia Navalnaya, who inherited the political project of her husband, Alexej Navalny, and Yekaterina Duntsova, who was a candidate in the 2024 presidential elections and is still actively building her political party, *Rassvet* (The Dawn). Based on a number of interviews with activists in Russia, the independent social research initiative "Solution Lab" found that the Navalny project lost its relevance after his death, and the activists interviewed were ambiguous about its current leadership. At the same time, however, Yekaterina Duntsova is generally perceived positively and described as a credible, respectable figure, albeit with limited political weight. She lacks the institutional backing and organisational resources necessary to exert real influence within Russia's political system. While *Rassvet* has largely lost both its support base and internal cohesion, Duntsova nevertheless retains symbolic significance. However,

⁵¹ Feminist Anti-War Resistance, "Protest Against the Invitation of the Russian Delegation to the Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament and The Summit of Women Speakers of Parliament."

⁵² "Telegram: View @regfem," accessed January 9, 2026, <https://t.me/regfem>.

⁵³ Aida Belokrysova et al., "THE REBELS: How Women Fight for Their Loved Ones Who Ended up in the Russian Army," Public Sociology Lab, 16 January 2025.

based on the more than 50 interviews conducted across six regions, there is no clear evidence of her active participation in domestic political life today.⁵⁴

In sum, some parts of the opposition recycle the language of neoliberal self-fulfilment or promote their own versions of “proper” womanhood, but there is also a growing segment of the anti-war opposition that explicitly identifies anti-feminism as one of the ideological pillars of Putin’s rule and of Russia’s aggressive external actions. For these actors, gender is not a secondary terrain of struggle but the central fault line that reveals how the regime governs fear, controls bodies, and mobilises society for war – meaning that any credible alternative to Putinism must confront the gender order head-on rather than reproduce it in a softer form or delay addressing the problem.

54 Solution Lab, “Red Lines: Activism in Today’s Russia,” 2025, 32, <https://www.solutionlab.site/red-lines>.

Conclusion

The analysis of United Russia's ideological and organisational practices reveals the paradoxical nature of gender politics in contemporary Russia. The party's conservative discourse does not constitute a coherent ideology. By combining neoliberal ideas of self-reliance with appeals to patriotism and family duty, United Russia constructs a model of the "ideal woman" – active, successful and loyal to the state. These ideals merge empowerment with subordination, turning women's agency into a resource for authoritarian stability.

Projects such as the Eurasian Women's Forum and United Russia's Women's Movement illustrate how the regime instrumentalises women's rights in its war against "gender equality" and Western hegemony by developing a conservative version of women's emancipation. These initiatives create an image of a progressive and humane Russia for both domestic and international audiences, masking the regime's repressive and patriarchal foundations – the criminalisation of LGBTQ+ people, gender-affirming healthcare and childlessness. Yet, beneath the surface of managed participation, dissenting voices persist. Anonymous surveys, civic initiatives and the work of independent feminist groups demonstrate that many politically active women do not fully buy into the state's conservative message.

The coexistence of these contradictory tendencies – symbolic empowerment and systemic repression – defines the gender order of Putin's Russia. Women may occupy visible public roles and speak in the name of the nation, but only insofar as their words and activities reaffirm the authority of the state and the morality of its war. The state's attempt to monopolise the language of women's rights

reveals not only its capacity to instrumentalise feminism but also its underlying insecurity – a fear that genuine female agency, once articulated beyond the boundaries of loyalty, might become a force of political change. Ultimately, gender is not a side story of Putinism – it is the system's core. To imagine a post-Putin political future without dismantling this gender order is to leave the authoritarian infrastructure intact. Any credible alternative must therefore confront not only the Kremlin's geopolitical violence, but also its far-reaching governance of everyday life and instrumentalisation of women's agency.

In the international arena, Russia's gender conservatism is not an isolated phenomenon. United Russia's narratives resonate with and borrow heavily from far-right movements globally, from Hungary's Fidesz to US evangelical networks and the Vatican's anti-gender campaigns. Its legal "innovations" – such as the criminalisation of "LGBT propaganda" or the targeting of "childfree ideology" – have already begun circulating among illiberal actors abroad. Conversely, Moscow eagerly imports strategies from its ideological peers, adapting Western and Central European anti-gender rhetoric for its own doctrine of "sexual sovereignty". This transnational right-wing ecosystem is not incidental but central: it anchors Russia ideologically at a time when formal diplomatic ties have been destroyed by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

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Gender and family policy are not a side issue in authoritarian and right-wing populist or ultra-conservative projects, but rather a strategic instrument of power: in Russia the ruling United Russia party specifically addresses women as social stabilisers and rhetorically translates gender equality into a policy of 'strong families'. Motherhood, care and 'tradition' become political leitmotifs. At the same time, feminist and LGBTQ+ positions are labelled as 'foreign influence' and thus increasingly suppressed from public discourse with repressive measures. Women's visibility and participation are only promoted where they ensure mobilisation, loyalty and social infrastructure, not where they could shift power relations. Author Alexandra Talaver shows how the gender order in Putin's Russia oscillates between symbolic 'empowerment' and systematic oppression.

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