

# Orthodox-Va

## Or How to “Steal” and Sabotage a Pro-Life Action

In Russia, despite the consistent violations of human rights and freedom, abortions are fortunately still allowed and accessible. Nevertheless, various public figures, politicians, and Russian Orthodox Church representatives frequently appear in the news and social media with their unwanted thoughts on the subject: should abortion be removed from the list of free medical care services – or is it better to fully ban it? The frequency of these reflections disturbs feminist activists, and neither are there any positive effects when also the president agrees with statements that women need to be more actively dissuaded from abortion when attending consultations ahead of the procedure, as a way of solving the demographic problems in the country.

In 2017, I found out about the “Warriors of Life” – an ultra-conservative Russian Orthodox movement of “pro-lifers” who stand for a total ban on abortion, against IVF, and against birth control pills. A friend of mine shared a link to an article which said that the “Warriors of Life” would embark on a ceremonial anti-abortion boat-trip through the centre of Saint Petersburg. The idea that a boat with pro-life symbols and banners would float freely through my hometown led me to a decision: this pro-life boat-party had to be disrupted. How could it be done efficiently and without direct confrontation? What if we “stole” their event by gathering a group of feminist activists, dress up as Orthodox “pro-lifers”, rent a tourist boat a few hours earlier, arrange our own version of this ceremony, draw ironic posters, take pictures, and send it to the press? The second I imagined this I grabbed my phone and immediately started texting Leda Garina.

Text:  
Lolja  
Nordic

Photos:  
Dave Frenkel

Leda is a feminist activist and co-founder of

Eve’s Ribs, a prominent feminist community space in Russia.

Leda and the activists from Eve’s Ribs have a huge number of brilliant, daring protest actions behind them, so I knew right away that we would collaborate on this. Leda was also excited about the idea and started gathering others – there were less than two days left for the preparations, but almost 15 people showed up ready to join. We started working immediately.<sup>1</sup>

### Safety issues

I busied myself by working out a strategy for security: I had to find a boat and organize everything in such a way that our names or phone numbers could not be traced. I turned to non-activist friends to help me make everything look as if we were just passing by a boat station and decided to buy tickets spontaneously, without pre-booking. It was crucial for us to take good quality pictures, so

# ginal Control



we invited a reliable and trusted photographer with a lot of experience in working with activists – it was important to us to shoot everything as quickly and efficiently as possible in order to immediately share it with the press. We created a new email account under the “Warriors of Life” name and set up a newsletter which would be sent to all local press.

## Social media

We had to pretend to be Warriors of Life not only during the boat trip, but also online. To make our press release more convincing, we needed to include some actual links. A coder and feminist activist, Margo joined us for this task: overnight she created several fake Warriors of Life public pages, ordered hundreds of bots to make the pages appear to have subscribers, and even made a fake account for the main leader of this movement. All posts on these pages duplicated the originals, with one exception – we changed the announcement of the boat trip. The real Warriors of Life planned to start their event in the afternoon, but we were planning to start early in the morning, to ensure that by lunchtime the news was flooded with our pictures. Our press release, written as the Warriors of Life, was filled with pro-life theses and ideas brought to the grotesque and absurd: we compared masturbation with infanticide, urged all men to abandon masturbation and save their sperm, because it is “a whole army of taxpayers and soldiers”: “every seed spilled during masturbation, outside of the vagina, is to God the same as genocide.”

## Costumes and props

The night before the action, Leda, Dasha, Varya, and other activists gathered in Eve’s Ribs to craft costumes and props. They recreated Orthodox activists looks, drew posters and banners, brainstormed on how to remake the pro-life slogans as funny as possible to uncover their absurdity and misogyny.

We were very impressed that the real Warriors also planned to drown an outrageous wreath with an embryo symbol as a part of their ceremony. We, therefore, decided that we also needed to create a symbolic object: we created a huge penis sculpture, made of white fabric. According to our press release, the drowning of the penis sculpture was supposed to symbolize the “seed, which failed to fertilize the egg and was shed in vain.”

Staying up all night turned out to be productive.

In addition to the ridiculous press release, we came up with a huge number of absurd slogans

for our posters and banners: “Orthodox-vaginal control”, “Ban abortions! Bring back mass shootings! Fill the gulags!”, “Masturbation is not Orthodox”, “We have wonderful orphanages!” (see photograph on the right), “A woman should give birth, not think”, “Masturbation is genocide”, etc.

## Public reaction

The next morning, we were all set and ready for our mission to steal the Warriors of Life event. We looked very comfortable in our Orthodox-style clothes – even the boat crew did not seem surprised or suspicious when we introduced ourselves as an Orthodox tourist group. We sailed through the central rivers and channels, took pictures, got off the boat, and dispersed. Margot and other activists stayed home to send a press release to the media immediately after receiving the photos. We had a lot of fun during the boat spectacle. It was very empowering to take up the space, ideas, and images of those who oppress us, and to turn them all upside down by making their ideas look absurd.

By lunch, the first articles began to appear in the press, and after a few hours it went viral. Our photos were all over social media and even drew the attention of state television channels. Some wrote about us as if we were the real



Warriors of Life, others stressed that this was a parody. In both cases, many people on social media took our photos and slogans seriously – some of them laughed at our ridiculous looks and posters, others were sharing angry comments about how the pro-lifers had completely crossed the line with their nonsense. The real Warriors of Life were furious, they saw a huge number of publications about “their” action before they were even ready to go out for their real ceremony. They were completely distracted by this social media storm around their name, making our sabotage a success.

The story ended with us being sued for “insulting the feelings of religious people” – a criminal article that was invented following Pussy Riot’s imprisonment for their legendary dance inside

the church. Fortunately, none of us were found guilty under this article. Looking back at this five-year-old story, this now seems like a miracle. Today, Russian feminist activists get regularly preventively arrested and are in danger of being imprisoned for any kind of protest – from Instagram posts to street actions. Nevertheless, every day we continue to take risks and to fight against patriarchy, inequality, discrimination, political repressions, war, and violence of all kinds.

### Endnotes

- 1 The collective are: Lolja Nordic, Eve’s Ribs, Daria Apakhonchich, art group {rodina} (“{motherland}”), Tansulpan Burakaeva, Narnia Catflat.