

A Transgender Activist's Surprisingly Cordial Capture by Donetsk Rebels

A Russian LGBT 'actionist' tries and fails to stage the mother of all battlefield art performances

February 16, 2017



Oleg Vasilyev / Facebook

Two Russian activists tried to enter rebel-controlled Donetsk last month, and then they disappeared for two weeks. Oleg Vasilyev and Victoria Miroshnichenko finally resurfaced on Feb. 14, when soldiers from the self-proclaimed Donetsk's People's Republic (DNR) released them beyond rebel-held territory. In an [interview](#) with the news site Meduza, Vasilyev — a transgender woman who also identifies as “Maria Shtern” and “Gray Violet” — described her failed effort to stage a war-zone art performance in support of LGBT rights.

Vasilyev chose Ukraine's war zone because it resonates with transgender people who

face similar dangers

Vasilyev told Meduza that her original plan was to travel to Avdeevka, but organizing a performance in Ukraine turned out to be more difficult than arranging a trip to rebel-held Donetsk, she said.

Part of the reason to stage an art performance in eastern Ukraine, Vasilyev said, was the region's "trans-border history," where she planned to work with a group of ideologically diverse people from Russia, the DNR, and Ukraine. The "ruptures of war," Vasilyev explained, mirror the shocks of gender dysphoria.

"In war, volunteers from both sides die, and at the same time 40 percent of transgender people end their lives in suicide. When you're at war, you don't know if the next Grad missile is coming for your home. Every time a transgender person steps outside, they don't know if they'll be beaten up or killed," Vasilyev said.

Vasilyev planned to castrate herself "on the field of battle" and feed her testicles to stray dogs

A practiced "art actionist," Vasilyev went to Donetsk hoping to perform an orchiectomy on herself (surgically removing her own testicles) on an active battlefield. She then planned to feed her testicles to a pack of stray dogs. Vasilyev's traveling companion, Victoria Miroshnichenko, was supposed to film the gruesome ordeal.

Vasilyev told Meduza that she'd made all the necessary preparations to carry out the surgery, arranging for doctors and first aid, in the event of complications. "The operation itself," she explained, "is pretty simple. You can do it with local anesthesia, and it doesn't risk a fatal loss of blood."

Vasilyev said the DNR military doctor treated her with more respect than she's encountered in Europe

Donetsk rebels apparently held Vasilyev and Miroshnichenko so long because they were convinced they were disguised intelligence agents from Ukraine, Israel, the U.S., Russia, or some organization. While in custody, a doctor from the DNR interrogated Vasilyev about her gender identity, demonstrating a surprising understanding and respect, she said.

"The military psychiatrist from the DNR declared me a nonbinary transgender person. It turns out that his position is ten times more liberal than what you find in official psychiatry in any European country," Vasilyev said, adding that she wasn't even asked any insulting questions about "playing with dolls as a boy."

According to Vasilyev, the fundamental reason for the long detention was the DNR's suspicion that she and Miroshnichenko (who tried to enter Donetsk using informal contacts with a former Kremlin youth activist) were foreign agents.

Who is Oleg Vasilyev?

Vasilyev is a former member of the political art group "Voina," known for its provocative

performance art. The group's most famous alumnus is Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, who's known internationally today as the face of Pussy Riot.

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In 2008, Vasilyev participated in the performance "In Memory of the Decembrists," a protest against homophobic and racist remarks by then Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Voina raided a downtown department store and pretended to hang two gay men and three Central Asian migrant workers. Vasilyev portrayed one of the gay men.

In 2014, Vasilyev received political asylum in Finland, after claiming that she faced persecution for her participation in demonstrations in favor of LGBT rights.

Read Meduza's full interview with Oleg Vasilyev [here](#) in Russian.

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