

I want to show a different face of Russians

**An interview
with
Yevgeniya
Chirkova,
Russian Peace
Advocate**

**Interview by
Lori Shorr,
Temple
University**

Abstract

The present article features an interview with the Russian peace advocate, Yevgeniya Chirkova. In the interview, Chirkova reflects on her leadership in founding the grassroots group “defend Khimki Forest” and organizing extensive advocacy campaigns in response to logging plans of the Russian state. Chirkova also led protests against Russian Parliamentary elections. Her activism resulted in her receiving the Women of Courage Award by then Vice-President Joe Biden.

Chirkova also shares insights on civic activism based on her work in 20 countries. In the interview, she emphasizes the healing power that resulted from supporting Ukrainian refugees. She discusses her approach, motivation, and intentional efforts in showing “a different face of Russians” through sharing stories about Russian activists’ work worldwide and their attempts to provide support for refugees.

**WAR, RUSSIA, UKRAINE, CLIMATE CHANGE,
ACTIVISM, REFUGEES, ADVOCACY**

Yevgeniya Chirkova is a Russian peace advocate.

In 2007, Chirkova created the grassroots group, Defend Khimki Forest, in response to noticing a red “X” painted on many trees. She soon discovered there were plans to build a motorway through forests. The “X” was marking which trees would be cut down. Defend Khimki Forest soon discovered the funds for the motorway would benefit a Putin-aligned oligarch. A national and international pressure campaign to block the motorway followed, exposing Chirkova and her family to great personal risk. It was during this period, Chirkova helped to create Activatica.org, a Russian “non-profit organized by activists and journalists”, which works in over 20 countries to provide information on civic activism.

In 2011, Chirkova became a leading figure in the mass protests against Russian Parliamentary elections, for which she became the target of the state-controlled media. That same year, then Vice-President Joe Biden awarded Chirkova the Women of Courage Award. One year later, Chirkova was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize.

In 2012, Foreign Policy named her one of the top “Global Thinkers”. Despite this public profile, Chirkova still faced targeting within Russia, and has moved to Estonia.

Since the Russian attack on Ukraine, Chirkova has worked to provide support to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. As she notes in this interview, “I want to show a different face of Russians”.

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Lori Shorr: Transformations is a journal dedicated to connecting individuals and communities working to resolve conflict, create peace, and expand democracy. For our first issue, we wanted to talk to someone who has been actively working on all these issues, specifically in a context that is the focus of global attention. We were hoping to learn from such individuals about what is happening on the ground as they try to organize, to make daily life better, and to create communities and nations where peace exists. Given your extensive work in across all these concerns, beginning in Russia and now focused on the Ukrainian conflict, we immediately thought of you. We are very grateful that you are taking time from your important work to talk with me today.

Perhaps the best way to begin is start at the beginning. Can you share story of what motivated you to begin your advocacy work? What was that moment where you decided you had to become publicly involved? That you had to act on an issue?

Yevgeniya Chirikova: That is a very good question. My current work started approximately one year ago, after this disgusting war against Ukraine began. It's really changed my life. Before that, of course I was an environmental activist with my husband. Sixteen years ago, around 2007, we had organized one of the first grassroots movements in Russia to defend the Khimki Forest. After the Khimki Forest campaign, we then organized an effort with other Russian activists against the unfair Russian Parliamentary elections in 2011 and 2012. It was a huge campaign within Russia. This led to the Russian Duma adopting the disgusting Russian Foreign Agent Law in 2012, which required any organization receiving outside funding to register as a "foreign agent". When in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, we had to register our non-governmental agency, Activatica. Soon after, my husband and I decided to move our family to Estonia because it was becoming impossible to organize within Russia. We continued to help for dozens of grassroots groups, organize independent media, and disseminate information about grassroots activities within Russia. When the Russian war against Ukraine began, we had useful skills. We had knowledge how it's possible

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to attract money for the needs faced by Ukrainians. We knew it was possible to organize a campaign because, if you are activist, you can organize what you need.

The Russian invasion has led to thousands of Ukraine refugees being deported from occupied territory in Ukraine to Russia. We were in a unique situation because our anti-war network was located in different parts across the globe. We had locations in the U.S.A., Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, Georgia, Armenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Kazakhstan, and, of course, Estonia. And we had activists who were still in Russia. Thanks to these collaborations, this network, we were able to help people who had been deported to Russia without any support or money. We were able to help them escape and find refuge in safer countries. We also organized different kinds of support. For instance, we have seven shelters across the world, in places such as Poland, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Bulgaria. We help refugees with staff, food, and medical support. We also support some on-line schools for the children of Ukrainian refugees. And, we also try to help Ukraine directly. We send cars carrying special generators to ensure their heating systems will work and devices for cooking in case their family don't have electricity. Through these programs, we have helped thousands and thousands of Ukraine refugees.

And for me, at this moment, such work is my opportunity to survive. After this war began, it was a very depressing moment for me. My roots are in Ukraine. My grandfather was from Ukraine, from the Shostka in the north-east of Ukraine. There is a huge sense of shame for me, for my husband, because it's our "Motherland" that is destroying Ukraine every day and killing Ukrainian children every day, and raping women and young girls. It caused us immense pain. For us, it was an absolutely a form of therapy activity to provide help for Ukraine refugees. It helps us to survive.

Shorr: This is an incredible story of commitment and courage. I'm sure others will be intimidated by all you have accomplished as they think about their own possible contributions. So, let's step back just a bit. Many people see injustice in the world. They read it in the newspaper. They see it online. They think this isn't right. Something

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should be done. But not everybody mobilizes people to address injustice. If you look back, what do you think it was that led you to actually do this work? Where do you think it came from? Why did you say to yourself, "No, it's not okay for me just to disagree, I have to do something?"

Chirikova: This is a very good question because I'm from Soviet Union originally. I'm 46. I was a Young Pioneer, which was a program for young children similar to the U.S. Scouts programs. I remember the Soviet Union very well. I remember Cold War. And I remember that during this time it was absolutely unusual for anyone to decide to say "no" out of disgust for a decision by the authorities. When 16 years ago, I decided to organize one of the first grassroots environmentalist groups in Russia, to my relatives, it was absolutely crazy decision. My brother invited me to café, and he asked me many times, "What has happened to me?". He thought I might have some mental problems. "Why did I decide to protect the forest"? It's so unusual, it's so strange. He was really concerned about me because my relatives decided that I'm really crazy. It was absolutely unusual situation for normal Russians.

But step by step, we were able to show a new pattern of behaviour for other Russians. We showed that it's possible to say "no". In the past, our mentality had been to think it was really strange to say "no" to authorities because it's extremely dangerous in Russia. The Soviet totalitarian regime had absolutely changed the behaviour of normal people. I think that our normal human behaviour is to protect our rights. It's our biology. It's normal. Animals protect their rights, their territory. It's normal. Then the Soviet Union collapsed. I'm the generation who observed the change of political systems. I remember Perestroika. I remember how my childhood values changed. And maybe because of this experience, I realized that it's possible to say "no". Of course, we still have authorities, but they are not Gods. We have Putin, but he's not Tsar. He is only a manager. He's a disgusting manager. He's a crazy man. But he is not Tsar. So, I believed it was possible to organize a campaign against him. It's possible to object any disgusting decision by Putin's regime as well as any disgusting decision of North Korea's disgusting regime, and any other regime.

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Shorr: You began your work in Russia, but now live in Estonia. You have suffered real life consequences for your work. I'm wondering if you would share some of the difficulties you faced in taking public stands in Russia. How has your work changed since your move to Estonia?

Chirikova: Of course, in Russia it is very dangerous for us. I have two girls, 21 and 16 years old. It was when I was pregnant with my second girl, I found strange marks on my lovely Khimki Forest. At the time, I was very busy businesswoman. My husband and I have an engineering business in Moscow. I was having a difficult pregnancy. But I had a time to walk in the forest where I observed the strange marks. We then found out about a strange plan to destroy Khimki Forest for building a new motorway and infrastructure and development on our forest.

But as an act of revenge, the Federal Security Service (FSB) tried to take my kids away. It started after the FSB knocked my door. My babysitter had to hide my small children under bed, where they had to stay for several hours. After that, she observed FSB guy under our windows on the street and how they followed me with my children. It was a huge shock for my girls. But, thanks to my sharing broadly this information with the public, I was able to protect my children. It was at that point, we decided to organize media to support activists and grassroots organizations. We realized that it's a very good opportunity to save our lives and their lives. That is why Activatica.org. was created. And our mission was to organize services for grassroots groups in Russia. I think, though, that my daughters have continued to pay a price with their mental health. After the FSB incident, my older daughter had a big problem with depression. We organized for her to receive therapy in Estonia, to send her to a psychiatry hospital, to have medication for a year. Even now, at this point, she is still recovering. I'm very concerned about her all the time. I think it's really very high price for me, like, for mum.

And then there is the story of my good friend journalist, Mikhail Beketov. He decided to share information about our activity. He lived in my town in Khimki, near the Khimki

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Forest as well. When I shared information with him, he started to publish different articles about our activity. One day, authorities decided to take revenge and organize a huge physical attack against him. He became an absolutely disabled person. I remember the first time I found Mikhail in the hospital. He had lost 50 kilos because doctors had to amputate parts of his legs and fingers. I could not stand. I fell down on the floor. It was a shock for me because it was my friend. He was a tall man and very tough. A tall, big man. And he became an absolutely disabled person. He could not speak normally. And he never returned to his normal life. He died five years later at the age of 55. He paid a very high price for his support of independent media. He was the first reporter who explained that the authorities had decided to cut down forest for building motorway and infrastructure. That it was a case of corruption. He shared true information about our activity. He disseminated this information very loudly and authorities took revenge him. I realized that it's extremely dangerous to be activists in Russia.

Maybe because I have this experience, I understand other Russian people who are really afraid to say no to authorities. I'm very concerned about other people, those who live on North Korea, for example, and other countries where people organize struggle against their regimes. I understand that sometimes it's extremely dangerous. And it's interesting where we had experience in Russia where we worked so hard and sometimes forgot about our conditions and conditions of people on our team because for us, it's very important to do our activity. But we don't concern ourselves about psychological condition of our team. And I think it's a huge mistake because in Europe, people are very concerned about their teams and about the people on their teams. And, of course, in Estonia, it is a very safe and very calm country. And thanks to these very good conditions, we were able to organize a lot of programs for support to Ukraine and Ukraine refugees. Because we're never concerned about police who knock at our doors.

Shorr: That makes a big difference in your life, right?

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Chirikova: In Russia, I was seen as an enemy of the country by Putin and his government. I remember after Joe Biden, who was then Vice-President, gave me an award for courage, I became enemy of Russia immediately. I remember the hate campaign that followed on television. I remember when some Kremlin people followed me, shouting horrible things at me. It was very uncomfortable to feel that I was very good at work, but, in reality, the authorities and society was reacting so negatively. But in Estonia, I feel support of people. For example, a couple days ago I published on my Facebook page a post about a man from Mariupol. He had a huge problem with his health. He had a piece of bomb shrapnel hit him in his head. He can't see or hear well. I ask help of people to send money to our NGO so we could support his surgery in Turkey. Over two weeks, we got USD 4,000, which we then supplemented with a USD 10,000 mini-grant.

Shorr: You had this experience where you see something that you think is an injustice. You start to organize one of the first grassroots campaigns in Russia in response. Now 16 years later, you're organizing around the globe to support Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. What do you see as being a difference between when you organized 16 years ago and what you're doing now? What's changed in the world of organizing in your sense of things?

Chirikova: Of course, even today, I still use my skills as a business manager, skills learned earning my MBA, because it's the same skills when you organize something. I use skills from my business school, from my MBA. My husband, he has a PhD in math. He has the skills of a researcher and scientist. And he has managerial skills because he was also head of our engineering company in Moscow. We used these skills for our activist work in Russia. Now we use these organizational skills in Estonia, where we opened a non-governmental organization. We are learning every day something from our Estonia organization because it's really, very great when you have this opportunity to learn something new about organizing in Europe.

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But, since our first campaign, we have also moved to incorporate the possibilities of social media. I use Activatica, our social media information network, to disseminate information. And, of course, I use our network, anti-war network where I ask different activists to share information. And together, we collected this money. At this moment, we are sending this money to the hospital in Turkey. It was absolutely amazing. But in Russia, such activity is very dangerous because the authorities can come after people in Russia who supported us. They can come to organizations in Russia that protect Ukrainian refugees. It's extremely dangerous. It's impossible within Russia. But in Estonia, it's absolutely normal. I feel that in Estonia I can organize any campaign for support to Ukraine and Ukraine refugees. It's absolutely exciting.

Shorr: Many advocates who have had to leave their home countries still want to support people back home. Given how powerful social media is, in general, and the possibilities of certain technologies, such as Zoom, they can continue to have an impact as well as maintain connections with the people back in your country. Do you find that to be the case? How have different social media platforms informed your work?

Chirikova: We use independent media and different social media networks. And through our network, we disseminate information about anti-war campaigns. At this moment we are seen in Russia and outside Russia. We have collected a million views together on Instagram, on TikTok. In fact, my older daughter helped me by organizing the Tik Tok channel, where she disseminates true information about our anti-war campaign within Russia as well as other important news. She has garnered over a million views at this point. I think that at this moment activists have a lot of opportunities to share information through social media. It's helped activists to survive in any places thanks to the internet. It's possible to share any information and it's extremely important for us.

And at this moment, for example, we decided to organize a new project, an anti-propaganda project. We decided to organize information about Putin within Russia on

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different Russian social media platforms. In Russia we have a special social media and special website, so we want to push this information to the people. And at this moment we are trying to find money for our ambitious plans. And I would be very grateful if, through this journal, donors might learn about and support this campaign, about our efforts to support Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. And, of course, through this effort we will be able to give jobs to activists and journalists who were able to escape from Russia, who came without money to Europe, to Georgia, to Armenia. We give them a job, a salary. And, of course, it's a win-win strategy because we work against Putin's regime and help for people to survive, help activists to survive.

Shorr: Through Transformations and Generations For Peace, we will be able to reach young people who are starting to consider being civically engaged in their communities, working for peace and reconciliation. Young people who strive to be somebody who makes a difference in this world. What advice would you give them?

Chirikova: I very much like this young generation. It's a lovely generation because it is the same age as my kids. They are amazing people, very empathetic, and very concerned about the conditions in the world. I think that my advice to them is to care for themselves. It's the first step. If you feel good yourself, then you can share your good emotion with other people. It's a big problem for activists who too often burn out because they don't take care of themselves. I notice a lot of activists with this problem. It's a very important resource to have energy. And sometimes activists absolutely forgot about sleeping, food, and exercise. I think that that would be my advice. Be concerned about your condition, because if you have an energy, you have energy for sharing with other people. My second piece of advice is to learn the new technologies. Thanks to technology, it's possible to change the world. But they're very smart children, a very smart young generation. They know that it's possible to change the world. They know it without me telling them. Unfortunately, though, they not concerned about themselves and forgot about their health which is a key resource. And when you're so young, you are not concerned about health because you think it's a normal, I can work without sleeping. But after 40 years old, you realize it's impossible.

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Shorr: I am sure young people would wonder how you have managed to continue to do this work, given the emotional costs you have talked about in this interview. The impact on your children. Or seeing your friend in the hospital, where you fell on the ground with grief. I can imagine someone might think, "I'm not going to do this work anymore because look what's happened". But that wasn't the reaction you had. That moment, did it catalyze you? How were you able to continue?

Chirikova: Of course, I am concerned about safety. I live in a safe country now. So, for me, personally, I don't have any risk and I realize it. But I am very concerned about refugees from Ukraine. I remember one case this past summer, I bought tickets for a family from Ukraine, one of whom was young girl, five years old. She had lost her leg in a Russian bombing attack. Her mother was pregnant, but lost her baby. I bought tickets for this family and organized our network to provide medical support. My task was to buy the tickets for them. And when I was doing it, I cried because it was impossible to do so with the normal feeling of buying tickets. I remember that afterwards, I could not sleep. And I had a similar moment after Bucha in May, when we received information about torture, about the crimes of Putin's army. For me and for my husband, it was so painful. We could not breathe normally. It was so impossible. It was so disgusting. I don't have the words for this crime. We decided to give our Jeep to Ukraine army. We sent our car to the Ukraine army. And only after that could we breathe normally because, I feel, by doing this we were supporting Ukrainians. We are doing something against this disgusting regime. Such actions help us to survive. For us it's like therapy. It's the best therapy to organize some activity to help Ukraine and to help other people. For us, our NGO activity is not just a job. For us, it's like a therapy and we are really happy people, because we can realize our dreams on our job. And I'm absolutely happy woman at this moment, because I have very good family, a very good work helping others, and live in a village in a forest. It was my dream.

Shorr: I think it is important for young people to hear that deciding to be engaged and to organize against injustice and for peace doesn't mean you have to be an unhappy person for your whole life. In fact, you're saying it's just the opposite, that you can find

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happiness in doing something that is for sure very, very difficult and very, very, brave work, but work also can bring happiness.

Chirikova: Absolutely. And it's a great opportunity to know and learn from exciting and very interesting people. At this moment, I'm so happy because I had an absolutely excellent opportunity to speak every day with such interesting and good people. For example, today I had an interview with a very interesting person. He's a journalist from Russia. He escaped from Russia because he was not allowed to write about the "special operation". It was impossible to write the truth about the war, so he escaped. He's really a hero. We talked for an hour. It was so exciting for me. I have this privilege to speak with interesting people and to invite interesting people into conversation every day. So, it's so good, because it changed the condition of my life. Absolutely. It's changed condition of my life. Gave me and my husband new opportunities.

Shorr: You've been so generous with your time, but one more question. As a Russian citizen, you're working to help Ukrainians as they are being victimized by this war. What's the message about reconciliation that's part of this work? Do you think of your work as part of peacemaking and reconciliation as well as just being triage for people who are in such pain? Do you also think longer term about it in that way?

Chirikova: Yes. I think that as this moment for any Russian activist, it's like therapy to organize campaigns for support Ukraine refugees and to support Ukraine. For us, it's really therapy. I realize that for me, it's like survival method. I think it is the same story with other activists. It helps you and, because of this work, we keep our activist skills. And I believe, I really believe, that in case Putin regime collapses, destroys itself, thanks to our activity, Russian activist activity, we will be able to return and organize a normal democracy country. So, it is really very important to keep our activist skills.

And, of course, we have demand for democracy. It's very important point because thanks to this demanding for democracy, we have other values. We want to change the situation. We want to organize a normal country. And for many activists who escape

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from Russia, Russian activists who escaped to other country, we have a unique situation because we can learn how it's possible to organize a democratic society. It's unique experience and we can share this experience in the future with Russian society because people in Russia don't have any experience of democracy. We never had in our story democracy in a life, never.

Shorr: Anything else you'd want to share with either people who are doing research on this, so the professors or the students and those who are thinking about getting involved? Any last things you'd want to mention?

Chirikova: I want to say thank you for your attention and I kindly ask to share information about our anti-war network because I think it's extremely important to share information to the world that Russians activists are working to provide a lot of support for Ukraine refugees and for Ukraine. And I think we show another face of Russia. And I want to explain that Russia is not represented by Putin's face. I want to show a different face of Russians. And I want to highlight that I am only one through the many, many activists who every day organize activity for support Ukraine and Ukraine refugees. And for me, it's extremely important to share this information through journal. And thank you a lot for your interview. For me, it's very, very important.

Shorr: It's a privilege for me to talk to you. You're a brave and wonderful woman.

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