

How you can help persecuted Russian LGBT+ activist, Yulia Tsvetkova

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By the end of 2018, at the age of 25, Yulia Tsvetkova had already made some of her dreams come true: opening a theatre for kids, launching a sex-ed project for teenagers, and creating feminist resources online. A year later and ever since, this feminist and LGBT+ activist is facing up to six years in prison, is receiving death threats, and cannot leave her town in Russia's Far East. Only in 2021 the long and torturous investigation led to a trial and in October she had a first administrative win among the many charges she's facing. Read on to learn more about Yulia's story and the ways you might help her.

** Updated in November 2021*

This is Yulia Tsvetkova from Komsomolsk-on-Amur in Russia's Far East. Yulia is a feminist, an LGBT+ activist, an artist, and a founder of a theatre studio for teenagers.

"I am a scary woman," she says.

Wondering why? Read on and judge for yourself.

Yulia began 2019 having achieved a lot and with big plans in store. To mark the first day of that year, and to take stock of the past 12 months, she posted this online:

"2018 became a year of a major shift for me. It happens sometimes that important things arrive all at once. This year, I opened my own theatre, a community centre and an online group. Towards the end of the year, I launched a project that I had dreamed about for many years – sex-ed for teenagers. If somebody had told me a year ago that it would have turned out like this, I'd have laughed wholeheartedly...

Many of these things would not have happened without the examples of the amazing people who came into my life and showed me that dreaming about a better world is both possible and necessary, and that we all are able to change what's around us."

Fast-forward to the first day of 2020 — and Yulia celebrated New Year under house arrest, with a tracking bracelet on her ankle.

What happened in-between?

During 2019, Yulia carried on with her freshly-launched activist and theatre initiatives. She hosted events at the LGBT-friendly community centre. She contributed lots of content to her online awareness-raising projects: [Vagina Monologues](#) on destigmatising women's bodies; [Komsomolka](#) on feminism; and [Dandelion](#) field on

sex-ed for teenagers. Together with the young members of her [theatre group, Merak](#), she had a youth theatre festival in the making with four plays to present that coming March.

Then, just two months into 2019, anonymous complaints, threats, and calls from the police began creeping into Yulia's life. She was forced to cancel the theatre festival, due to pressure from the local authorities. Visits to the police station for questioning quickly became a routine and constant part of her days.

On one of her visits to the police, she learned that her drawings promoting body positivity were deemed "pornography" by law enforcement agents. Concerns were raised about her "A woman is not a doll" series, in which schematic depictions of women are accompanied by affirmations like: "Living women have body fat, and that's normal;" "Living women get wrinkles and grey hairs, and that's normal;" and "Living women have muscles, and that's normal". A couple of teenagers from Yulia's theatre group and some followers of her online communities were called in for questioning too.



Drawings from "A woman is not a doll" series by Yulia Tsvetkova

The ["Vagina Monologues" online community](#) that Yulia led drew the attention of the

police as well. It's community featured abstract depictions of female sexual organs and educational drawings of women's bodies.

Invitations from the local police for 'informal questioning' stopped later in the fall of 2019.

But Yulia's story was about to take a darker turn.

Informal questioning soon gave way to formal interrogations. On 20 November 2019, Yulia Tsvetkova was arrested and put under investigation for "distribution of pornography".

Yulia was under house arrest for almost four months, from 23 November 2019 until 16 March 2020.

She went through dozens of interrogations and was ordered to undergo a psychiatric examination.

She was fined for "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" twice: in December 2019 and in July 2020. In both cases "propaganda" was found in her online content: first in the feminist and LGBT+ communities that she ran, then — in a drawing featuring LGBT+ families and a slogan "Family is where love is. Support LGBT+ families!"

Currently, Yulia is appealing these two decisions. She is also facing a third charge of "propaganda" based on an online post with illustrations in support of LGBT+ families in Russia.

She continues to regularly receive death threats, and her formal complaints to the police are met with complete indifference and inaction.

On 12 January 2021, she was again charged with 'distribution of pornography' in connection with online dissemination of her feminist drawings. This is the fourth time that the Investigative Committee indicts Yulia on these charges. "It's the same case, just the prosecutor's office does not send the case to court, but returns it for further investigation", says Yulia's mother Anna Khodyreva.

She is still under gag order and cannot leave her town. Yulia's trial in the "pornography" case started on 31 March 2021, and she is set to appear in court several times throughout April to June. The trial is happening behind closed doors, contrary to Yulia's defense demands.

In protest, and after two years under investigation that have been already taken away from her, Yulia went on hunger strike on May 1 to demand an open trial and a speedy process. An endless delay of the process and its secrecy are taking a toll on Yulia and go against her right to a due process. Yulia decided to stop the strike on May 7 because of health considerations and care for her family and close ones.

In October 2021, the Khabarovsk Regional Court overturned the decision of the Komsomolsk Court to close the Vagina Monologues social media group. The case was sent for a new consideration to the court of first instance due to violations of Yulia's rights during the consideration of the case. If the case would have been lost, it would

Have a look at Yulia's hearings in the pornography case timeline in 2021

- 31 March: Preliminary hearing
- 12 April: Pre-trial motions
- 1 May to 7 May: Yulia goes on hunger strike
- 6 May: The judge denied Yulia's request to bring in a public defender. After the announcement of charges, the hearing was postponed once again due to absence of prosecution's witnesses.
- 24 May: To be confirmed
- 15 June: To be confirmed
- Check out this blog regularly for more updates!

Here's how you can help Yulia Tsvetkova

Today, Yulia needs as many eyes as possible on her case and as many messengers as possible for her story. Your attention and your action matter.

- Write, talk, tweet, draw about Yulia's story, and invite your friends and social media community to join.
- Browse [the FreeTsvet website](#), launched in Yulia's support by activists in Russia, for complete details and solidarity action ideas.
- Get creative with your own solidarity action.
- Use the hashtags #?????, #?????????????????, #????????????????????, #???????????????????? on your social media platforms
- [Sign this petition.](#)