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Ukraine's topless group widens political role

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By [Richard Balmforth](#)

KIEV (Reuters) - Brazenly provocative, the bare-breasted young women of Femen are becoming an eye-catching -- if unsolicited -- fixture on Ukraine's political scene.

Anna Hutsol, Femen's spikey-haired 26-year-old leader, says she commands a small army of 300 mainly student activists ready to peel off in public to support Ukrainian women's rights.

As the group broadens its activities to embrace wider causes, she says Femen is undeterred by increased police action. "We plan more protests this year," Hutsol told Reuters.

Femen activists caused a minor diplomatic stir last month during a visit by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with a topless street protest in which they made raunchy references to his personal life.

Last week two semi-clad Femen members disrupted an Iranian exhibition with a protest in support of an Iranian woman held in jail for adultery and complicity of murder.

The Ukrainian authorities, who once laughed off Femen's activities as cheeky but harmless antics, may now be losing patience after the anti-Putin demonstration which touched a raw nerve in sensitive ties with a powerful neighbor.

"The police are becoming more aggressive now. But at least that shows we are being taken seriously," Hutsol told Reuters in an interview in a downtown Kiev cafe.

UKRAINIAN WOMEN'S PLIGHT

Established in 2008 by a group of Kiev university students, Femen says its main aims are to improve the role of women in Ukraine's male-dominated, post-Soviet society.

"We want to show that our women have a demeaning role in our society. Their place is seen as in the kitchen or in bed," said Alexandra Shevchenko, a 22-year-old economics student who regularly plays a leading role in topless protests.

Sex tourists and visiting foreign businessmen who feed Ukraine's sex industry are the group's main targets.

It has also campaigned against sexual harassment of students in universities and railed against international beauty contests such as the Miss Universe competition.

Even Mykola Azarov -- the country's dour, grey-haired prime minister -- found himself an unlikely target of Femen when he drew fire by naming an all-male government.

But this is no classic women's movement.

In conversation, Femen activists invoke no role models. Ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, Ukraine's best known woman, is for them just another actor on a stale political scene.

The explicitly sexual nature of Femen's protests -- young women stripping to the waist, cavorting provocatively and chanting near-obscene slogans -- raises the question of whether its activists are not undermining their own movement's values.

But they themselves see no contradiction. "We started out being dressed but we found nobody took any notice. I'm a big fan of taking off our clothes. It's how we get attention for our views," said Shevchenko.

"It's all we've got, our bodies. We are not ashamed of this," said 20-year-old Inna, a journalism student.

Hutsol says about 300 young women take part in protests, but Internet and email contacts indicate a support base of about 25,000 people.

Financing, she says, comes from businessmen and local entrepreneurs who sympathize with their cause.



TARGETS WIDENING

Femen's first topless actions in mid-2009 targeted the sex industry, prostitution and the spread of Internet pornography.

Early this year the group widened its agenda when Femen activists, protesting about vote-rigging in the presidential election, staged a topless demonstration at a polling booth as President Viktor Yanukovich himself turned up to vote.

Since then it has held about 30 protests in the capital Kiev including one outside the government building.

Many of them are short-lived: a flash of skin and a hurriedly-squawked slogan before security men move in to hustle the Femen activists off-stage.

When Putin visited in late October, six Femen activists stripped to the waist near the statue of Soviet state founder Lenin and chanted sexually-charged slogans, telling the Russian leader to keep his hands off Ukraine.

"Ukraine is not Alina," read one -- a reference to Alina Kabayeva, the Olympic gymnast whom media speculation links romantically to Putin.

Hutsol said the Putin action clearly ruffled feathers and police had since questioned many of those who took part.

Its small support base, meager resources, limited agenda and a "young-centric" membership suggest Femen has little prospect of broadening into a political movement.

But in a country deeply cynical about politics, Femen represents -- albeit on a modest scale -- one of the few regular street protest movements. Asked if Femen had a political agenda for the future. Hutsol said: "We do have some ideas, some plans. We are working on them."

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