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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Meyer-Olimpieva, I. (2023). Is Civil Society in Russia Really Dead? *Russian Analytical Digest*, 302, 5-10. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000636200>

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ANALYSIS

Is Civil Society in Russia Really Dead?

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000636200

Introduction

On June 23, the NYU Jordan Center for Advanced Study held a discussion about the impact of the war on Russian civil society (United States Institute of Peace 2023). Participants were unanimous in their opinion that the war had finally buried civil society in Russia. This is in line with the general consensus among experts on Russia that civil society is dead.

It is hard not to agree with expert opinions about the institutional weakness of civil society in Russia and its inability to organize a concerted effort to put pressure on the political regime. The repression, which escalated with the start of the war, has quite literally destroyed the most influential and visible independent civil society organizations in the institutional field.

At the same time, if we look at grassroots civil society—the various manifestations of civil activism in Russian regions outside of Moscow and bottom-up social initiatives, often informal networks of people that

do not openly oppose the political regime but are still constantly challenging local power structures—a different picture emerges.

In this article, I offer commentary on a few issues and claims made in the course of this debate from the perspective of grassroots civil society. I rely on data from three studies conducted by CISRus. The first is an attempt to map Russian anti-war civil activism, the second focuses on informal volunteer networks to help Ukrainian refugees, and the third analyzes the changes that have taken place in Russian universities since the outbreak of the war.

“The Demise of Civil Society Didn't Start with the War, It Started Long before the War...”

Over the past few decades, independent civil society in Russia has been systematically destroyed by the regime. Since the early 2000s, nonprofit organizations (NPOs)

have become increasingly dependent on the state, while their scope for influencing public policy has gradually decreased. Demonstrating loyalty to the regime and not interfering in political processes has incrementally become a requirement for NPOs to participate in social policy and partner with government institutions. The adoption of the law on foreign agents in 2012 marked the beginning of an outright purge of those spaces occupied by independent civil society. Organizations that received the stigmatizing label of “foreign agents” became “toxic” partners; it became impossible for them to continue working in Russia, and many were forced to dissolve or go under.

While organized civil society activity has declined, the dynamics of grassroots activism over the same period demonstrate a strikingly different trend. At the end of the 2010s, a wave of local social protests took place in the Russian regions, some of which developed into political activism that addressed demands to the federal authorities, including demands for political changes. The most striking of these are protests against the construction of a landfill in Shiyes, the “garbage protests” in the Moscow region and other cities, protests against the construction of a temple in a park in Yekaterinburg, and protests against “renovation” (i.e., the demolition of five-story apartment buildings) in Moscow and other cities, among others. In parallel, researchers note a surge in local civic initiatives and social movements that, although they have not taken on a broader political meaning, have managed to successfully solve local problems.

A recently published book, *Varieties of Russian Activism*, edited by Jeremy Morris, Andrei Semenov, and Regina Smyth, focuses on the increase in grassroots activism in different spheres and localities in the years before the war. The book urges people to reassess the importance of bottom-up local activism and breaks down traditional notions of Russian society as “largely passive.”

Our research into anti-war civic initiatives suggests that the growth of grassroots activism at the local level did not stop with the outbreak of war. Although the study does not claim to provide an exhaustive description of grassroots civil society in Russia today, it revealed an extremely wide range of anti-war activism (Meyer-Olimpieva 2023a), most of which are not overt anti-war protests, but something more akin to Scott’s “silent resistance” and sabotage of the state military policy, which is becoming increasingly pervasive in the everyday lives of Russian citizens.

Among the instances of anti-war civil activism, there are:

- resistance in the information field—the emergence of a huge number of anti-war information chan-

nels on Telegram and YouTube, as well as new discussion platforms and podcasts, which continue to mushroom online

- individual and collective anti-propaganda campaigns
- graffiti and street art
- examples of professional anti-war solidarity—initiatives to sign anti-war petitions organized by representatives of professional groups and implemented outside trade union organizations that either support the war (Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia) or refuse to take a public position on the war (“free” trade unions)
- humanitarian volunteer initiatives, such as helping Ukrainian refugees who want to leave Russia
- ethnic groups organizing in national republics to protect those who have been drafted (these efforts are very effective)
- teachers and university professors sabotaging the state-mandated “lessons about what is important” and the ideologization of teaching
- women’s resistance
- student initiatives to protect their rights and oppose the war, among others

New instances of civic activism that arose in response to the war and patriotic propaganda do not supersede the previous, pre-war examples of activism. On the contrary, it can be assumed that as the authorities’ attention shifts to military matters, local problems, which usually serve as the main trigger for grassroots activism, will only continue to accumulate.

“Civil Society in Russia Is Dead...”

This statement may be absolutely true in relation to institutionalized civil society, but it is at least not an obvious truth when talking about grassroots activism. Whereas organized civil society is in the public eye and its downfall has been significant and visible, grassroots activism takes hidden and more localized forms, which makes it invisible without concerted efforts to study it.

Listed below are some of the features of new civic initiatives that explain why they are invisible:

- *Informal mode of operation.* Because of increasing repression, nascent civic initiative groups or networks do not want to formalize or widely advertise their activities. They prefer to remain invisible—to “lie low” and “stay under the radar”—to avoid being noticed by the state monitoring agencies. This strategy is employed not only by overtly oppositional initiatives, but also by seemingly harmless groups and networks, such as volunteer networks helping Ukrainian refugees get from Russia to Europe. While helping refugees aligns with the state’s official goal of welcoming people fleeing Ukraine, the leaders of these groups prefer to operate clandes-

tinely because the state “wouldn’t like any successful self-organization of the population that is outside the state’s control” (activist of a volunteer network). Even the most successful civic initiatives—those with thousands of participants, an effective structure, and well-functioning interaction mechanisms—continue to operate through online networks and chats, not creating their own organizations because they are afraid to fall under the state’s control if they become organizationally visible.

- *Local character.* The focus on local communities is another reason why grassroots initiatives are invisible from the federal perspective. Campaigns implemented in small towns do not pop up on the federal news feed; numerous alternative information channels are focused on local communities, initiatives led by parents of children at a local school, students at a particular university, etc., but these are invisible on a country-wide scale.
- *Digital civil society.* Another reason for this low visibility is that civic activism has moved online. While the physical space of cities has become too dangerous for civic initiatives, the internet provides a digital arena to exchange information, search for like-minded people, and demonstrate civic solidarity, thereby facilitating the implementation of in-person grassroots activism. Here, it is difficult to overestimate the role of Telegram, which remains accessible in Russia. This opportunity to communicate with like-minded people inspires protest solidarity and a sense of unity, as well as faith in one’s own power and ability to influence the situation.
- *Trans-border civil society.* The transnational nature of their work is another feature of new civic activism. Although many activists have left the country, they continue to work abroad and maintain ties with those who remain in Russia. It is often difficult to determine the location of civic initiatives, since members are located on different sides of the border. This is true, for instance, of independent municipal legislators, a cohort of democratically elected enthusiasts who seek to improve municipal governance and demonstrate to the people the real advantages of their participation in governance. Many of these individuals, who represented the “last bastion” of democratic governance in Russia, have had to leave Russia because of the threat of political prosecution. However, they maintain close connections with their colleagues in Russia, participating and initiating joint projects aimed at countering corruption in municipalities. The Anticorruption Academy created by online activists is intended to help the remaining municipal deputies in Russia fight for transparency and better governance.

“Oppositional Politicians Have Either Left or Been Detained for Their Antiwar Stances...”

Indeed, since the beginning of the war, Russian civil society has lost many political leaders. At the same time, it is important to understand that it is not only well-known politicians who are ending up in prison, but also ordinary citizens who openly oppose the war. According to the Russian human rights organization OVD-Info (2023), about 20,000 people have been arrested and punished for their anti-war stance since the beginning of the war.

The rise in persecution and the number of political prisoners has produced a surge in bottom-up initiatives to provide financial and legal assistance to those who have suffered from political repression. In addition to well-known human rights organizations such as OVD-Info and Agora, which are able to operate largely thanks to charitable donations, other grassroots initiatives have arisen during the war, among them *Rosshtraf*, created to help pay fines for political offenses, and *Antifond*, which provides support to those who have faced consequences for expressing their opposition to the war. Many groups and networks of civil activists on Telegram advertise fundraising campaigns to support people under investigation or in prison. Unfortunately, it is impossible to estimate the exact sum of donations made to these organizations, but the scale of assistance they provide is impressive. In February and March 2022 alone, during the peak of requests for legal assistance, lawyers from OVD-Info answered 27,000 hotline calls and provided assistance to almost 4,000 detainees in police stations, as well as to more than 3,000 people in court hearings.

The success or failure of the political opposition in Russia is inevitably tied to the (de)politicization of grassroots activism. As in other authoritarian states, most local civic activists distance themselves from institutionalized politics, considering politics to be a “dirty business,” and define their actions as non-political (Morris, Semenov, and Smyth 2023). In parallel with the social protests of the late 2010s, citizens’ political engagement grew as people realized the impossibility of solving their daily problems without involving political mechanisms or resorting to political means. Politicization occurs when solutions to local problems are impeded by political constraints that force activists to orient their demands toward politicians. This was the case in the aforementioned “garbage protests” in Shiyes and in the Moscow region, as well as in the protests against “renovation” and development. Politicization also quickly followed disasters that occurred due to criminal negligence or corruption within power structures. In 2018, after a fire broke out in the “Zimniaia Vishnia” shopping center in Kemerevo and killed 60 people, including 41 children, thousands of citizens took to the streets call-

ing for the resignation of the regional governor, Aman Tuleyev.

With the outbreak of war, the politicization of grassroots activism took on more covert forms. In conditions when open protest becomes impossible, indignation at the policies pursued by the authorities finds an outlet in various types of outwardly non-politicized activism—for example, volunteering to help Ukrainian refugees who want to leave Russia (Meyer-Olimpieva 2023b), organizing “lessons about peace” (7x7 2022) for children as opposed to the propagandistic “lessons about what is important,” sabotaging the mobilization campaign, etc. The prevailing motif in many interviews with activists from volunteer networks is the idea that volunteering has become a way to protest against the war unleashed by the Putin regime.

“Where Are the Soldiers’ Mothers?”

In the abovementioned discussion at the Jordan Center, Angela Stent, Professor Emerita of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University, pointed out the passivity of soldiers’ mothers throughout the war in Ukraine. She remembers that active protests by groups of soldiers’ mothers and their appeals to Gorbachev were a powerful civil force that led Gorbachev to put an end to the Afghan War. Stent sees the absence of open women’s protest in response to the announcement of mobilization and the increase in the number of dead and wounded as further evidence of the disappearance of civil society in Russia.

When assessing the civic activity of mothers, it is necessary to take into account, first, that Putin is not Gorbachev, and the political context of the early Gorbachev era was fundamentally different from that of the late Putin era. While the Gorbachev era made oppositional civil activism possible, in Putin’s Russia, openly expressing disagreement with the position of the state has become a crime. With the intensification of repression since the start of the war, open anti-war protests in any form are akin to self-sacrifice or social suicide.

Indeed, Putin has met with soldiers’ mothers, and this meeting was the highest expression of cynicism and hypocrisy. During the meeting, the president reasoned, for example, that death on the battlefield is more worthy than death from alcoholism. It is also telling that at least half of the “mothers” invited to the meeting were government officials and representatives of pro-government political organizations (ONF, United Russia, patriotic NGOs).

The lack of open protests by mothers does not mean that women are not organizing to save their sons, just that maternal activism has taken different forms in the Putin era. Women have no faith in the effectiveness of open protest, so they choose different strategies to pro-

tect their sons, hiding them in the countryside or sending them abroad. To this end, mothers have united in informal mutual aid groups or turned to established activist or volunteer organizations. In our interviews with those volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees, they note that, at the request of groups of mothers, they organized buses to transport young people to Kazakhstan after the mobilization was announced.

Organizations of soldiers’ mothers that predate the start of the war, such as Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, provide legal assistance to military conscripts and explain the rights of conscripts and the possibility of legally refusing military service.

With the outbreak of the war, communities of women and mothers emerged, joining together in efforts to protect young people who had already been sent to the front. Mothers visit the areas where hostilities are still in full swing, collect information about the dead and missing, organize assistance to draftees who do not want to participate in the war, and spread truthful information about the war and the number of casualties. The Union of Mothers, a social movement led by mothers of conscripted soldiers in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, was created on February 24, 2022. The Council of Mothers and Wives, an organization created in anticipation of Putin’s meeting with the mothers of servicemen, have demanded their own meeting with Putin.

Mothers whose sons have already been deployed are recording video messages to the president, as well as representatives of the regional authorities, calling on them not to break the law, not to send unprepared conscripts to the front lines, and to provide soldiers with the necessary medical care, food, and clothing. No matter how strange these video messages may look to Western experts, this is the form of protest (a “kneeling protest”) that is most often used in Putin’s Russia.

However, there are also more stringent forms of women’s and mothers’ protests that have been especially adept at self-organization and resistance in the national republics, such as Buryatia and the North Caucasus, which have borne the brunt of the mobilization.

“There Has Been a Sharp Drop in How Much Russian People Trust Each Other...”

I cannot help but react to the remark made during the discussion by Timothy Frye, Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy at Columbia University, about the low generalized level of trust, and especially institutional trust, among Russian society, which is demonstrated by public opinion polls. Intriguingly, this contrasts sharply with the high level of cohesion, mutual assistance, and support within civic grassroots networks, especially those that have emerged during the war.

The informal and hidden nature of civic activism presupposes a high level of trust between participants, without which effective civil interaction is impossible under a repressive regime. Volunteers from the network helping Ukrainian refugees note as a feature of their community an unusually high level of interpersonal trust, which not only predetermines the high efficiency of this organization, but also makes the very existence of the network possible. Volunteers leave keys to apartments for strangers so that refugees can spend the night in them, provide their personal cars for transporting refugees across the border, transfer money literally on good faith to strangers' accounts to help provide for refugees, etc.

Most people who join the Ukrainian refugee help network have never volunteered before. The network brings together very different people with different views but a common goal: to help—and on this foundation of trust, they develop completely trusting relationships. In this sense, the volunteer network to help Ukrainians, according to one informant, represents “a prototype of civil society” (Anna, volunteer, 27 years old).

According to the volunteers themselves, these communities are unlikely to maintain the same format after the end of the war. Nevertheless, people who have gained experience of successful collective action based on trust “understand how this can be done, and it will be much easier for them to get together and demonstrate their civic initiative in the future” (ibid.)

“Good” and “Bad” Civil Society

Timothy Frye rightly notes that there is civil society that is good for democracy and civil society that is bad for democracy. In addition to stimulating positive and constructive civic activism, the war has served as a trigger for civic activism that can be labeled as negative from the perspective of democratic values. At universities, alongside anti-war student initiatives, pro-war groups are emerging, such as the militant patriotic group White Raven, created by students at Moscow State University in March 2022. White Raven not only spreads military propaganda within universities, but also collects

money to buy weapons and drones for those fighting in Ukraine. There is also a branch of the movement in Perm. In October 2022, a further branch of White Raven emerged at the Higher School of Economics, a university that until recently was considered the most liberal in Russia.

Other patriotic and pro-war civil initiatives include groups collecting aid (clothing, food) for Russian soldiers at the front, volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees in temporary accommodation centers, caring for the wounded in hospitals, providing assistance to the families of military personnel fighting in Ukraine, and others.

The war has stirred up and intensified the grassroots movements that arose in Russia during COVID. These informal associations gained momentum during the COVID era, to the point of effecting political change. Thus, the Russian political scientist Ekaterina Shulman, who has studied anti-COVID civil activism, claims in many interviews that it was the grassroots resistance of citizens that blocked the implementation of the law on the introduction of QR codes in Moscow (Pirogova 2021). The “non-democratic” layers of grassroots activism have been poorly studied, even though they could tell us a lot about civil organization in Russia.

Conclusion

Russian civil society has disappeared from the institutional field as a force that influences political decision-making, but it persists and continues to develop at the grassroots level as people organize themselves into autonomous groups and networks that are independent from the state. Due to state repression, these nascent civic groups and initiatives do not solidify into formal organizations and therefore often remain invisible to the federal government and observers across the border.

Although grassroots movements are atomized, localized, and have little impact on politics, they are significant in that through participation in collective activities, people gain experience of successful collective action and how to form civic solidarity.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

“No Wobble”: Anonymous Anti-War Street Art in Russia, 2022–2023

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000636200

Abstract

In March 2022, Alexandra Arkhipova asked the subscribers to her Telegram channel, “(Non)entertaining anthropology,” to send examples of anonymous anti-war street art, on the condition that they had personally seen the pictured object. This request spread widely, and people sent photos from across Russia. The photos have now been compiled into an online exhibition available at www.nowobble.net that features 471 exhibits from more than 50 Russian cities. This contribution provides an overview of the context of ideology, censorship, and repression in Russia and describes the types of messages presented by the pieces included in the exhibition.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A few weeks later, one of the authors of this exhibition found a small, hand-painted “No War” sticker on the floor of his home in Moscow. The sticker had been dropped by his 14-year-old daughter. It turned out that she had been drawing them and, together with her friends, sticking them in the subways and on the streets (taking all possible precautions). After hearing his daughter’s story, he asked her to give him the remaining stickers and decided to put them up himself. His daughter gave the stickers to him with pride (they were well drawn) and relief (as he would come to understand).

While sticking the first sticker at the Leningradsky train station, he experienced a great fear: What would happen if, right now, a policeman, a vigilant patriot, or the lens of a video camera linked to a facial recognition system were to see him? His hands were shaking and sweating, his legs were cotton wool, his mouth was dry. Having placed the sticker, he left at once, trying not to run. There were still a few of them in his hands; they

were burning a hole in his pocket and he wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible. But he also wanted to place them effectively, so that the inscription would be seen by as many people as possible and they would realize that someone else was against the war—that it was possible to be against it.

This case is not unique and this fear is not accidental.

People who want to speak out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine (and have no other means to do so) have started to paint graffiti, stick stickers, and create installations—and have been seriously punished for it. In an attempt to avoid punishment, they use various methods of disguise. In September 2022, Tyumen resident Alisa Klimentova wrote “Нет в***е” (Net v***e—no to war) on the pavement. She was arrested by the police. When the case was heard in court, Alisa stated that she had actually written the phrase “No to wobble” (*Rutilus caspicus* or “Caspian roach,” a type of fish) because she did not like that fish. In Russian, “war” (*voina*) and “wobble” (*vobla*) sound similar and have the same number of letters, which is important for the coded language.