



# Is Civil Society Still Alive in Russia?

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## Executive Summary

This report challenges the claims that there is no civil society to speak of inside the Russian Federation and that most of its activists are now in exile. A significant number of independent and democratically oriented initiatives and organizations continue to operate throughout the country to address societal issues through civic engagement. These should be acknowledged. Many of their activities are not highly visible or easily mapped. Given the level of political pressure, the more politically charged initiatives have restricted their visibility or gone underground. Information about their activities is distributed in closed channels. Stating that civic activism has not ceased does not ignore the widespread and increasing atomization at all levels of society in Russia. The point is not that Russian civil society is well organized but that, despite the prevailing trends, there are initiatives worth recognizing and supporting.

The time to act is now as our opportunities to support relevant initiatives are decreasing by the month. Supporting independent journalism and civil society as future watchdogs presents a more reliable approach than engaging with what is often called the opposition in exile. Whatever future scenario is envisaged for a less threatening and more predictable Russian state, structures that foster horizontal ties among independent and active citizens will be crucial to its emergence and sustainability. When discussing exiled actors, it is important to distinguish between initiatives that provide support and build community in their current host countries and those which support and strengthen civil engagement inside the country.

We recommend that cooperation strategies in Europe and North America enhance the capabilities of regional and local information channels across the Russian Federation. These channels command a higher level of credibility due to their proximity and relevance. The lack of visibility of many civil society activities and the need for significant initiatives to remain under the radar make it essential to bolster interregional networking. Much of the support directed to civil society in Russia can be effectively facilitated through strategically selected actors in exile.

## Introductory remarks on antiwar protest

Given the obvious risks of and special scrutiny accorded to antiwar protest, there is minimal civil society activity inside the Russian Federation today that openly opposes Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. This is a point of contention among many Ukrainians, external observers and some activists in exile from the Russian Federation. This report seeks to outline and suggest ways of cooperating with independent citizen initiatives that have the potential to lay the groundwork for an active future civil society. Such a civil society should, among other things, engage in discussions about resistance and accountability in relation to Russia's war in Ukraine, in a more open political climate.

Organizing openly anti-war activities, such as rallies, protests or media statements, poses a direct risk of long-term imprisonment. As a result, activists focused on supporting Ukrainian prisoners, deportees and refugees, or providing legal assistance to conscripts reluctant to fight and aiding deserters, have gone underground. Many of these efforts have been infiltrated and participants have been prosecuted. Engaging in any activities that support the Ukrainian side carries substantial risk, as such actions are often treated as acts of terrorism or treason.

## Haven't most activists relocated abroad?

A substantial number of independent and democracy-related initiatives and organizations remain active across the Russian Federation, which tackle social issues through civic engagement. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has experienced the largest wave of politically driven emigration in its modern history. Among those who have left are a sizeable number of the most experienced civil society activists, as well as those who attended and became involved in civic activities. While many human rights advocates have been forced to relocate abroad, they continue to collaborate with colleagues inside Russia and to work on cases of political repression and discrimination within the country. Similarly, most fully independent media outlets have been pushed out of the country but still rely on collaborators and sources inside the country to continue reporting the news. Networks of this sort, located within and beyond Russia's borders, continue to play an important role in civil society, monitoring events in the country and making it possible to provide some legal, administrative and financial assistance, however limited. It is important to keep these connections in mind as it is easy to think that communication and collaboration have ceased completely following the politically driven migration of so many civil society leaders.

There is definitely a widening empathy gap between activists and opposition opinion leaders within and outside the country. State propaganda benefits from highlighting this divide, and even well-intentioned activists and scholars can get swept up in the intense emotions stirred by the differing viewpoints. Each side criticizes the other for not doing enough. The dividing line often falls between debates on collective responsibility and guilt, as well as the concessions made in the increasingly repressive environment. These perceived divisions matter less in well-organized environments where activists — whether still in Russia or relocated — collaborate closely and trust one another. Those who lack clear affiliation with such networks tend to perceive the gap to be the widest, especially when engaging in discussions on social media.

The activists interviewed for this report showed little interest or trust in what international observers refer to as the Russian opposition in exile or other relocated opinion leaders. They actively distanced themselves from the agendas proposed abroad and argued that those who continue to work in Russia have a better grasp of the situation than those who have left. At the same time, there is a built-in contradiction in the often-quoted slogan: “nothing about us, without us”. There is a strong desire for genuine representation by voices from within Russia in the discussions taking place in Europe and beyond. However, the enormous risks associated with visibility cannot be ignored as visible participation often requires direct association with designated “undesirable organizations”. To navigate this complex landscape, we need to develop practices that allow for the direct involvement of voices from inside

the Russian Federation while ensuring their safety and anonymity – and also that they are representative.

Given all these tensions, it is fair to say that the gap between those inside and those outside Russia presents a tangible challenge, but this should not suggest that for example human rights lawyers and journalists are not working together. This is also the case for many other groups of activists. Many are maintaining or actively seeking collaboration. This teamwork is becoming increasingly challenging due to differing interests, but when it works it is appreciated by both sides.

## Heightened politicization

Civic activities in Russia are becoming more and more politicized. In the past, some activists deliberately steered clear of direct political messages, but their options for doing so are now severely limited because many actions and opinions that were once considered non-political are now viewed as sensitive. Self-organizing has in itself become suspicious. Anyone trying to operate independently of the state or state agendas faces risks, and it can be difficult to discern the red lines in this fickle political landscape. Activists often find it difficult to predict what the authorities might consider threatening or undesirable, and this uncertainty is an essential part of political control.

Repression of civil society and the media has been bolstered by increasingly powerful tools. The label "foreign agent" used to be more of a public stigma, but many now face the threat of prosecution under stricter military censorship and much harsher laws on terrorism, extremism and treason. This is especially true for two "movements" that have been labelled extremist by Russian courts: the "International LGBT movement" and the "Anti-Russian Separatist Movement". Since these designations do not correspond with any recognized movements or organizations, interpretation of this extremist status is entirely arbitrary and can be applied to almost any initiative that organizes members of the LGBTQI community or any of the Russian Federation's nearly 200 ethnic groups. This does not mean that every activity organized from within these two minority perspectives will face prosecution. The unpredictability of who might be targeted and when makes it virtually impossible to plan. Political signals from the federal level are often contradictory and difficult to interpret, and local and regional decision makers may be equally concerned about acting too aggressively as they are about being perceived as inactive.

## To navigate the new landscape of political repression

The changed conditions for civil society and independent media in recent years have created a completely new landscape. While there has been a gradual deterioration throughout Vladimir Putin's time in power, the rules of the game began to shift in a more dramatic way in the year leading up to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. February 2022 marked a watershed moment that led to sharp divisions within civil society. At one end of this spectrum are the initiatives founded or overseen by the state. Alongside these are a variety of movements and projects, some of which are authentically grassroots, that align with the goals and values of the state. These include everything from patriotic youth programmes to efforts to support

soldiers and their families – without the explicit objective of facilitating the return of soldiers from Ukraine. Some activists who previously asserted their intention to remain "apolitical" have opted to collaborate with the state, seeing no inherent conflict with their primary goals or due to a lack of alternative funding sources. While they may not align themselves with the state's objectives, they do not actively oppose or work against them either.

The remaining end of the spectrum can be broadly categorized in three groups: those who need to engage with the state, those who largely ignore it and those who actively oppose it. A large proportion of initiatives views its main mission to be to provide relief and support in areas where the state fails to deliver timely services. These have always considered the state to be inadequate at best. They may, however, need to collaborate with state actors and institutions in order to work effectively. This segment includes a wide range of organizations, such as activists working with victims of gender-based violence, people living with HIV or children with mental or physical disabilities. Other initiatives choose to avoid state actors entirely and operate under the radar. Lastly, a number of activist and initiatives are dedicated to upholding democratic values and human rights, placing themselves in direct opposition to the principles espoused by the state.

It can be difficult for outsiders to tell which initiatives espouse values that differ from those promoted by state propaganda. Some have compromised themselves in ways that clearly align with the state's agenda, while others use neutral language that masks genuinely subversive actions. There is a trade-off between visibility and efficiency, as well as security. Foreign cooperation organizations might require assistance from trusted activists to navigate the complexities and make informed assessments of new or lesser-known initiatives. The risk of supporting the state's agenda unintentionally is low, but many external actors have a vested interest in keeping lines of communication open with initiatives inside Russia. Any such engagements must be grounded in informed evaluations of need and potential risks, as misguided actions can cause significant harm.

The authorities have ample opportunities to surveil and infiltrate civil society, chat groups and media channels. Activists inside the country are usually aware of general security threats, but often seem to worry less about their safety compared to those who have migrated. "You can't live in constant fear and stress; you just get used to it," is a common explanation. For someone on the outside, it can be challenging to reconcile the voices highlighting heightened threats with the seemingly more carefree attitudes exhibited by people involved in similar initiatives. In some cases, this is a defence mechanism intended to convince the activists themselves that they are not politicized and therefore implicitly safe. In other cases, it is almost an incantation that they hope the state authorities that are listening and reading will believe. This incredibly difficult-to-navigate reality leads to a variety of coping mechanisms, which means that relying on statements by a limited sample of activists can paint a misleading picture of the situation.

## **Increased engagement among the young**

The demographic in Russia aged 15 to 25 is often described as apolitical or detached from political matters. This detachment is not surprising, given that for everyone in this age group politics has been synonymous with a system dominated by one leader—Vladimir Putin—throughout their lives. Clearly, the government authorities are eager to influence the views and beliefs of these young people. Some commentators interpret this as evidence that this

generation is being moulded by an official agenda. On the flip side, it is arguable that those in power are concerned about losing their grip on this demographic, and that their intensified efforts suggest that maintaining control is proving challenging.

Detachment from politics is not the same as disengaged from society. Most of the activists report growing social engagement among young people in the Russian Federation, noting a strong desire to contribute positively to society. The Russian government has responded to this enthusiasm by offering various volunteer programmes and generous grants for projects involving youth. This approach not only seeks to divert this commitment away from independent citizen initiatives, but also serves as a means for the state to bolster its legitimacy. It helps to cultivate an image of a government that genuinely cares about its citizens. Despite the state's strong efforts to sway this demographic, many young people remain critical of the country's prevailing direction and actively participate in dissenting initiatives. In fact, most instances of mass protest in Russia over the past 15 years have been led or dominated by this age group. As the Russian state actively seeks to recruit young people to the organizations it controls, supporting trusted independent initiatives and encouraging their engagement with younger citizens could counterbalance some of these trends.

With many seasoned activists having left the country, younger and less experienced individuals are stepping up within the remaining civil society structures in Russia. These newcomers may, due to inexperience and lack of guidance, be more open to collaborating with the state and participating in state-led initiatives. Many of them concurrently express greater openness to the concepts of democracy, equality, solidarity and justice, and are eager to take responsibility for their actions and the future of society. Supporting the remaining independent initiatives to engage more with young people should be a top priority.

## Communication strategies

The more politically sensitive a civil society initiative is, the less it communicates in open channels. Many independent initiatives share very little information with the broader public. More information is given to a close circle of regular participants, volunteers and like-minded partners. Sensitive data is only shared with a core of trusted team members. This layered approach also extends to most event invitations, the use of anti-war rhetoric and all other sensitive content. The downside of these strategies is that while there are numerous initiatives across various regions of Russia, they often remain unaware of one another. This lack of visibility hinders the ability to coordinate collective action or share knowledge effectively. Enhancing collaboration and networking between initiatives and regions is one of the primary challenges facing civil society in Russia today.

Civil society initiatives generally use local media to share less sensitive information, raise awareness and keep the public informed about relatively open activities. Some give examples of innovative ways to engage with community members who are disillusioned with the country's direction, or have become, or always have been, disengaged from politics. Marketing-style strategies are used to craft their messages, which mix familiar themes with more challenging information or subtly incorporate political messages into lifestyle content and neighbourhood chat groups that appear at first to be non-political.

## News and information gathering

Beyond the capital, local media and local social media channels serve as vital sources of news and opinion shaping. Many local media outlets are not fully independent; they adhere to certain restrictions while still engaging in critical journalism that highlights local corruption, shortcomings and abuses of power. Although they may not be as professionalized as better-known independent outlets based abroad, their content has considerable influence and credibility. These sources provide information that is easily verifiable by users and elevates local issues. In addition, there are various social media platforms, both public and closed, that disseminate more free-thinking and critical information to a limited audience, where part of civil society's messaging is conveyed. A recent law aimed at preventing the sharing of content from unregistered social media channels specifically targets this environment.

All of our informants outside the capital identified local media, and local social media and chat rooms as their primary source of information. For many residents of the Russian Federation, information presented from a regional perspective is more trustworthy and relevant than that which speaks with a Moscow voice. Nonetheless, journalism at the local and regional levels finds itself in a difficult situation. The risk of political repression makes many local journalists increasingly reluctant to collaborate with editorial teams abroad. Some have left the profession or are attempting to focus entirely on non-political, neutral topics. The situation varies across regions. Local journalism plays a key role but needs support to maintain its professionalism.

In our discussions with civil society activists regarding their primary information sources beyond local and regional outlets, nearly all the respondents identified [OVD-Info](#) — an organization dedicated to monitoring politically motivated persecution and state abuses—as their most vital resource for tracking political repression and evaluating associated risks. Many activists also cited [Mediazona](#), a media organization that investigates issues of political repression within law enforcement and the penal system, which serves a similar function.

The information-gathering activities undertaken by our informants are closely aligned with their specific areas of activism. They use a diverse range of sources that focus on LGBTQI activism, feminism, advocacy against gender-based violence, the rights of indigenous groups and ethnic minorities, environmental activism, and matters pertaining to ability and accessibility. We also inquired about our informants' news sources in a more general sense. The results may differ from the prevailing perceptions of experts and donors in Europe. For instance, very few of our respondents mentioned watching the [TV Rain](#) (Dozhd) channel and only a small number indicated that they read *Novaya Gazeta Europe*. The primary news source for nearly all the interviewed activists was [Meduza](#), although it was not universally seen in a positive light. As one informant noted, "If you want to ensure the failure of a political initiative in Russia today, just make sure an exiled outlet like Meduza is covering it." It is difficult to generalize about our informants' feelings about Meduza but most regarded it as their primary news source and had strong opinions about its content. Many of these emotional reactions can be linked to the growing empathy gap mentioned above. Other platforms, such as [Proekt](#), [Holod](#), [Verstka](#) and [iStories](#), were named as secondary sources. A significant number regularly watched interviews on the popular YouTube channels of [Yuri Dud](#) and [Katerina Gordeeva](#), as well as content provided by the political activist [Maxim Katz](#).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to access many of these information sources as the Russian authorities become more skilled at blocking content, as well as threatening and prosecuting sources and local co-workers. New legislation has made it illegal to share content from unregistered information or social media sources, regardless of the content's nature. This is compounded by efforts to throttle and disrupt YouTube.

## **The time to act is now**

Even our least anxious informants described a bleak outlook for the near future and the expected level of political repression. Many believe the situation will increasingly resemble that of neighbouring Belarus or Azerbaijan. For this reason, most of the respondents see it as essential to act now and for as long as possible to ensure the long-term survival of civic agency and to harness the enthusiasm that young people currently have for social issues.

We cannot predict when a chance for political change will emerge in the Russian Federation. Eventually, a generational shift will bring about new leaders of some sort. Whether that opportunity arises in four or ten years, the efforts our respondents make today to foster civic engagement and grassroots connections will be crucial for empowering citizens in their communities when the time comes. Russia's war in Ukraine has understandably led to the suspension of many collaborations and support initiatives between civil society in the EU and Russia. While it is important to reconsider many previous approaches, there is little justification for distancing ourselves from antiwar, independent, democratic civil society actors purely on principle or out of fear.

Decision makers and media outlets in Europe are paying considerable attention to what is often referred to casually as the Russian opposition in exile. Its ability to influence Russia's political landscape, however, remains highly uncertain. The outside world should avoid aligning with or supporting individual actors and instead focus on supporting processes. Western leaders have already erred by backing "their democrats" in Russia.

Supporting and engaging with independent journalism and civil society as future watchdogs represents a more reliable approach, empowering Russian society to advocate for political pluralism and diverse interests. Interest groups could play a vital role in upholding and promoting democratic values and human rights among citizens while voicing their grievances. Society in Russia will require strong watchdogs to address its authoritarian and totalitarian past, and break the cycle of impunity.

## **What could strengthen civil society across Russia?**

The key principle now is to do no harm. It is crucial that all support and cooperation are grounded in a comprehensive analysis of risks and opportunities, and developed in collaboration with local activists across the country. The independent civil society structures still standing in Russia are all facing intense pressure. We are seeing a growing atomization across all layers of society, leading to weaker horizontal connections and less self-organization. Russian civil society is not thriving but, despite all the challenges, there are still initiatives that deserve our attention and support.



Civic engagement in the Russian Federation is often tied to regional concerns. Consequently, external efforts to support citizen involvement and civil society should focus on the regional level, including the perspectives of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. This is not about promoting separatism or divisiveness, but about engaging with imagined political communities at the level where they are formed, and supporting initiatives and information channels at the level considered most meaningful and credible.

Inter-regional networking is crucial. There is a strong desire among our informants to foster networking among initiatives that operate within the country. Activists in Russia aim to enhance collaboration with those in exile, forming a unified front and obtaining essential legal, psychological and technical support from networks abroad. Relocated activists can play a vital role in fostering these connections, but this will not be appropriate for everyone and does not happen automatically. Regional expertise and connections are essential.

When discussing exiled actors, it is important to distinguish between initiatives that provide support and build community in their current host countries – best addressed through domestic policy measures – and those activities that align with Nordic, European and Euro-Atlantic long-term foreign and security policy goals concerning a pluralistic and non-aggressive Russia. The effectiveness of these initiatives should primarily, but not exclusively, be evaluated based on their impact and relevance to developments in Russia. This would involve providing hands-on support to initiatives across many regions and enhancing their ability to network and attract young participants.

Access to comprehensive legal support and advice has proved crucial for civil society in Russia. There is a pressing need to build capacity among young activists who have emerged in the Russian civic landscape since the full-scale invasion, as they often lack guidance from more experienced peers. Providing psychological support helps activists to navigate the challenging environment. There is a demand for innovative approaches to alternative funding sources and highly concrete support regarding safety and security. Finally, developing technical solutions for communication and networking and creating or enhancing spaces for activists to share information and engage in meaningful discussions can promote solidarity and collaboration.

## Recommendations

Western decision makers should take a proactive approach to addressing the broader threat to the outside world, as well as large segments of the population of the Russian Federation, that stems from the current policies of the Russian state. Alongside other measures aimed at containing, countering and limiting the hostile actions of the Russian state, it is essential to cooperate with and support pro-democracy initiatives inside the country, as external aggression has been enabled through internal repression.

The main goals of this cooperation should be to assist Russian initiatives in their struggle to: (a) empower civic agency in local and regional communities, including ethnic minorities, and (b) back regional journalism that reveals abuses and flaws in the current system; (c) amplify the voices of civil society and other marginalized groups, while also enhancing their advocacy efforts; (d) emphasize the value of human life to combat the existing culture of

violence; and (e) promote politics and debate as peaceful avenues for citizens to express their interests, resolve conflicts and hold their leaders accountable.

Decision makers, donors and implementing organizations in Europe and North America should acknowledge the numerous independent and democratically oriented initiatives and organizations still active in many regions of the Russian Federation. Their work is vital for fostering a future for Russia that is peaceful, pluralistic and more predictable. The time to find ways to cooperate with and support them is now.

To enhance civic initiatives currently active in Russia, we recommend a focus on collaborations that strengthen interregional networks. It is crucial to facilitate efforts that enable activists from different regions to build trust and collaborate effectively.

Much of the support directed at civil society in Russia can be facilitated through networks of relocated activists and initiatives. It is important to keep these networks as flexible as possible, and to explicitly expect a broad regional span. It will be important to strengthen the capacity of younger, less experienced activists in Russia through such collaborations. Improving the skills, safety and capacity of regional and local information channels is an effective way to strengthen civil society in Russia.

## How we conducted this study

This report is based on semi-structured, qualitative face-to-face interviews with activists who reside and work in the Russian Federation. The participants who took part in five focus groups comprised 47 individuals representing more than 15 regions. Ekaterina Kalinina, in collaboration with Center for Independent Social Research (CISR e.V. – Berlin), met with three of these focus groups, while Stefan Ingvarsson engaged with two. All the interviews were conducted in secure environments outside the country. The interviewed activists represent a wide spectrum of initiatives with varying focuses, from lawyers and human rights defenders to politicized activities. Some of the findings were later verified through subsequent communications with activists in the country via secure channels, as well as consultations with relevant researchers in the field.



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