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There is no doubt that the state's destructive policies vis-à-vis civil society will continue. There is no doubt that government agencies will continue to exert pressure on them, including by limiting their access to financing, which has proven the most effective form of pressure. There are no legal or judicial limits to what they could do in trying to break civic initiatives.

So focus instead on how civil society – however primitive and rudimentary it is in Russia – will resist this destructive pressure. I see several important

2013 to create an automated “conveyor belt” that enabled individuals to file civic lawsuits challenging violations during Russian parliamentary and presidential elections, was built the same way. The Blue Buckets movement, where individual drivers mounted a blue bucket on the roof of their car to mimic the infamous flashing lights used by the elite to bypass traffic, is one of the earliest and perhaps most inspiring examples of this decentralized activism. Today, the Redkollegia Award, created to support independent, high-quality journalism in Russia, is another manifestation of supporting society’s access to free information.

One of the primary advantages of such decentralization is that it reduces the organization’s vulnerability to attacks by law enforcement and oversight agencies. It is unclear how to demand official reports from such organizations, file lawsuits against them, or hold them liable for fictitious offenses. One cannot officially label them foreign agents either.

There remains, however, a threat to the founders and organizers of such communities. Someone needs to take the lead in launching such communities. The founders thus bear the risk of being personally targeted.

This approach has an additional crucial disadvantage: it precludes all possible forms of regular fundraising. A non-existent organization cannot apply for a grant, cannot accept funds from donors in a transparent manner, and cannot submit reports to satisfy the donors. Nor can it be a party to a work product or services contract or any contractor agreement, for that matter. Instead, only private persons can act on its behalf, and this does not always sit well with a potential donor or partner.

## “Cling to the Ground”

Civic communities and activist groups are shifting their attention to the grassroots, municipal or “sub-municipal” levels. They engage in volunteer projects that are less ambitious in scale and scope. No longer global or national, they focus instead on a specific city or town, neighborhood, block, or house.

This micro-level work increasingly serves as an entry point for civic activists who in time, depending on a turn of fate and circumstances, might later get involved in larger-scale projects. Not infrequently, the first project for future civic leaders and successful fundraisers is collecting money and signatures to install an automatic entrance gate for their apartment block, or getting fellow dog owners to file a joint petition to put a hot water pipe around, not through, the park where they walk their dogs.

What is important is that many people who volunteer with such grassroots projects continue their involvement in different civic programs in the future. Once they get a taste of such work, or are even “traumatized” by failure, they remain “on reserve duty” for civic activism.



MOSCOW, RUSSIA - FEBRUARY 07: Group of young Russians at a public meeting.

There are two additional factors attracting Russian civic activists to grassroots efforts.

The first is psychological. Working at the grassroots level feels less scary. The risk of “punishment” feels less. The work seems to deal with routine, non-political matters that presumably do not irritate the authorities. In reality, however, certain tasks and directions of work can have a clearly political character: anything having to do with elections, arranging interactions with candidates, dissemination of campaign materials, electoral observation, counteracting government-controlled agents provocateur, etc.

Second, this kind of work actually receives strong support from municipal deputies who value improvements to their district. The success of independent civic projects, I would argue, translated to the success of independent democratic candidates at the 2017 municipal election in Moscow--a major breakthrough. There is hope that it will be possible to reproduce this success, at least to some extent, during municipal elections in other regions.

### “Pitch in!”

As the Russian government intensifies pressure on civil society through the “foreign agent” law and similar regulations, it is likely to tighten restrictions further to target private individuals, not just organizations. At that point, any financial interactions among civic project participants, any sponsorship, or any donation will rightly look risktarget privfq/ e riu/ civic projects, I uca esuml, acash-free orem of iarticipani pooprojects,are tsargtng to dovel op. Pontsig

government) is to change their financial structure. If independent financing makes you a target, then it is better to avoid handling money at all – whether raised in Russia or abroad, and regardless of the donor type (a private individual, another organization, or a charity fund).

In this environment, a supportive donor could purchase something useful for the organization. This may include plane or train tickets, renting space for a conference or a seminar, printing flyers, or providing services from lawyers, consultants, or other professionals. A donor might develop and maintain a website, or pay for collective access to databases or other subscription-based information resources.

This is all especially relevant for foreign donors. Foreign organizations prefer not to bring money into Russia, where not only can it land people in trouble, but is subject to taxation at commercial rates. Rather than send money to where those who need the support are, it turns out to be simpler to bring both the work and those performing it to where the money is. Work that can be performed remotely is thus transferred abroad.

## Conclusion

There are other methods organizations use to survive in the aggressive environment of

governmental pressure that exists in Russia today, and they all share a common aspect: a gradual transition from traditional forms of civic and activist groups organized on corporate or institutional principles toward network structures built on distributed operational ties.

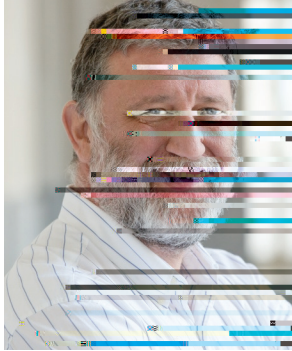
Such a structure obviously has many entry points, where new members can blend into the joint effort and where new tools, directions, and tasks of joint work can emerge. But it is also well-equipped with multiple exit points that provide vectors for disseminating the group's work. All of these characteristics work in concert to not only achieve, but also promote, the result of the joint activity. The network organizes around the task, defines the goals, offers assistance to those members in need, counters threats and obstacles to the work, and ultimately publishes the results the investigation—whether through mass media or individual “likes” or “shares.”

This horizontal approach is not just the model—it is the real practice of civil society in today's (and tomorrow's) Russia. This practice is also in clear conformity with Darwinian teachings on “the origin of species by means of natural selection.” In the “struggle for life,” Russia's best activists and civic activism will endure and, over time, perhaps prevail.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.

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