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State of Civil Society in Russia: The old one is dead, the new one not yet born

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старое умерло, новое ещё не родилось

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Russian society today: the old has died, but the new is not yet born

Over a year after the start of the war, there are significantly fewer opportunities for people to take part in socio-political life in Russia. Dozens of large media outlets and thousands of internet resources have been forced to shut down or halt operations because of repressive new laws. Thousands of activists and politicians opposing the war, as well as independent election monitoring group Golos, have suffered in a widespread political crackdown. Even relatively minor municipal elections in Moscow in September 2022 were marked by the ouster of opposition candidates. Members of professional groups who signed anti-war letters, including charities, have experienced state pressure. Restrictions and repression have even reached loyal, pro-Kremlin movements.

This brief overview shows that socio-political activity independent of the state is practically impossible in Russia today. However, this does not mean that collective action and public politics have disappeared completely. The need for them is still very real — so, people look for accessible and safe alternatives. As a result of mobilisation, two significant new opportunities have appeared: human rights activism helping those threatened by mobilisation; and humanitarian aid for refugees and others who have suffered from the fighting and mobilisation.

The consequences of mobilisation

We can split the impact of mobilisation on Russian society into several categories: mass emigration; deepening inequality between the capital and the regions; and a widening gulf between those 'protected'[1] from mobilisation and those who are not.

Estimates of the number of Russians who left the country after mobilisation was announced on 21st September range from 600,000 to 1 million people. However, it's impossible to get accurate figures because some of those have already returned. It's important to understand that most of those who fled are men aged 19 to 49 — in other words, the most economically active part of the male population. This has consequences for both the Russian labour market and tax revenue collection.

While the first wave of emigration (immediately after the invasion) was mostly highlypaid professionals in business and IT, the post-21st September exodus has been different: many more blue-collar workers went abroad. This means the effect will be noticeable in far more sectors of the Russian economy.

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[1] This means a deferral from conscription, mobilisation and preparations for mobilisation for employees of state agencies, local government agencies, and companies that the government considers critically important

Mobilisation affected Russia unevenly. Topping the table of regions for ratio of mobilised men to number of reservists was Krasnoyarsk Region (5.5%), Sevastopol (4%) and Russia's ethnic republics: Buryatia (3.7%), Dagestan (2.6%) and Kalmykia (2.2%). At the same time, there were more drafted men in regions where the incomes were lower than the Russian average. This is because the promised 195,000 roubles a month for fighting in Ukraine is more appealing to low-income groups than for members of the middle class in large cities. The rationale behind bigger quotas for poor regions is that there will be more people willing to fight.

Mobilisation was also unevenly spread across different professions, above all because of the system, which allowed some people – under certain circumstances – to be ineligible. Those shielded from mobilisation included defence industry employees; IT specialists; staff at 'accredited' companies; communications specialists; staff at major media outlets; and financial and bank workers.

It's important to stress that the total absence of precedence and lack of practical experience meant mobilisation was accompanied by a huge number of legal violations. In particular, enlistment officers collaborated with the police and municipal workers to carry out big raids in villages, at workplaces, building sites, universities, dormitories and – in Moscow – by entrances to metro stations. As quickly as possible, they tried to draw up documents for those they caught and dispatch them to their place of service – minimizing the possibility for resistance. While people often see this as lawlessness and a violation of their rights, they do not necessarily have the skills and experience to object. In such situations, human rights activism has a direct impact on outcomes.

While sending Russians to the front is, obviously, a contribution toward Russia's criminal military assault on Ukraine, not every mobilised Russian supports the war and the Russian regime. Many Russians who are opposed to the war – and speak out against it – often do not have access to the knowledge they need to get out of military service or the financial resources to leave the country. It is exactly for this reason that legal assistance and the support of civil society is so crucial: in the current situation, such assistance is an anti-war act.

You can divide efforts to protect people from mobilisation into the individual and the collective. The individual means individual legal consultations that are mostly organised by the émigré legal community. These include the resources provided by Pavel Chikov (Agora), Perviy Otdel (a project of Ivan Pavlov and the former Team 29), the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, the 'Pryzyv k sovesti' group and others. The individual approach also means leveraging connections – relatives or friends – to avoid mobilisation, as well as other practical tricks like not living at your registered address, moving to another region and so on.

Spontaneous forms of self-organisation can be included in collective attempts to protect against mobilisation – the most visible example of this has been the Council of Mothers and Wives (see below).

It's very difficult to assess the success of such efforts. However, you can assume that qualified legal assistance from human rights groups will be more effective in the short term. In the long term, self-organisation could be a more effective and advanced way not only in specific situations, but for the broader political struggle.

Human rights advocacy

The announcement of Russia's mobilisation in September 2022 led to a rapid rise in donations to human rights NGOs. This affected not only organisations directly helping those at risk of being drafted, but also those engaged in any form of human rights work (at the same time as the charity sector as a whole was experiencing falling donations compared with 2021). Similar spikes coincided with other major incidences of state violence: in February and March 2022 after the start of the invasion and – before that – after the suppression of major opposition protests. From this, we can conclude that the socio-political role of human rights organisations has not changed.

However, we can see that, for many people, human rights activity is now a replacement for the more familiar – but now forbidden – socio-political activism. One lawyer to whom we spoke offered human rights assistance in his small Telegram channel and received a huge quantity of requests. This spontaneous 're-qualification' as a human rights lawyer was, according to him, a way to "do something" and compensate for the lack of opportunities to support political and social groups that advocate for his values. A lot of not-very-public legal groups have emerged since the start of mobilisation and the autumn draft – and they have been in high demand from men and women threatened by mobilisation.

Collecting humanitarian aid

Providing humanitarian aid to those who have suffered in the fighting, or to Ukrainians who have been forcibly relocated, sometimes also serves as a replacement for previous involvement in socio-political life. Public forms of this include collections for refugees and those living in parts of Ukraine that have seen fighting and are accessible to ordinary Russians. There are also non-public options –

like helping those Ukrainian refugees for whom it is dangerous to interact with state agencies with money, accommodation and obtaining documents.

Such collections usually take place as street collections or messages in neighbourhood chats. From an organisational point of view, they are similar to citywide campaigns or recycling drives because they require setting-up collection points and communication with the local community. Several of these campaigns have been organised by pro-regime groups and parties loyal to the Kremlin. In these cases, we are not talking about self-organisation, but about demonstrative bureaucracy designed merely to tick boxes. The self-organised collections are far more interesting. In these cases, local people themselves get in touch with groups helping refugees (for example, Lavka radostei).

Such campaigns satisfy a need to take part in socio-political life. By providing experience of collective action (especially for organisers), they nurture a feeling of being involved in the resolution of social problems and allow participants to express their political beliefs in safe conversations with strangers at collection points or online chats. The organisers of such campaigns are sometimes local deputies or opposition activists.

These campaigns for refugees have become practically the only form of independent self-expression that the authorities permit – because they are usually seen as a form of approval for the government. In Moscow, recycling campaigns previously played a similar role – but, after the defeat of independent candidates at municipal elections, they became much harder to organise because there were fewer environmental activists in local government and local government was generally more hostile.

Spontaneous protests

Despite the violent suppression of protests, there have been continued local outbreaks of collective dissatisfaction. The most significant example in recent months has been the Council of Mothers and Wives movement. What makes this movement special is that its participants are, for the most part, non-political women, who begin to criticise the government as they try and resolve the problems facing the relatives of mobilised men. For the moment, they do not have well-defined political views and their mood and rhetoric only start to acquire an air of opposition when they come up against indifferent officials and the repression of their leaders.

For Russian society, this is a typical path to political activity: people only begin to surmount the de-politicizing barriers erected by the state when they face problems close to home, This has been shown by the experience of the environmental movement and opposition municipal deputies.

he Council of Mothers and Wives have been making demands about how their relatives are being treated in the army and leading a social campaign with petitions and pickets. From their statements, it appears as if they are equally distant from every political group and do not sympathise with any party or individual politician (something typical for apolitical people). But they are loyal to the president – and direct their anger against his subordinates, not directly at him.

From previous experience of how such protest movements develop, it' likely that the authorities will attempt to co-opt the leaders and gently destroy the movement from within. If this doesn't work, they will take a more violent approach, using arrests and administrative (and even criminal) cases. The ability to resist this will significantly depend on the size of the movement. At the moment, it is difficult to asses the number of women who are actively participating in the Council of Mothers and Wives. Their Telegram channel has about 23,000 subscribers (the reactions to posts suggest that these are mostly real people). As hundreds of thousands of women in Russia are in the same situation, their potential audience is much larger.

Russian nationalists who don't have a direct relationship with the Kremlin and criticize the government for failing to properly support the war effort are already attempting to co-opt them. And they may succeed in proposing their ultra-patriotic agenda to such rapidly politicising groups, attracting them with their organisational abilities. In particular, Moscow nationalist Roman Yuneman, who had a career as a moderate right-wing opposition politician and stood for election, now openly participates in a Russian nationalist movement that supports the war and collects money for humanitarian aid for Ukraine's occupied regions.

Possible scenarios

We can suggest several likely scenarios when it comes to the development of the various different ways to resist mobilisation.

1. Individual legal assistance becomes more high-quality and the number of support services offered by the émigré community grows. At the same time, self-organisation in Russia does not have much success and participants become disillusioned and give up. Society remains atomised and selforganised initiatives die down.

Amid the strengthening of the state's repression apparatus, this scenario seems the most likely. But there are two things that could limit the effectiveness of such individual assistance. Firstly, the security services could find a way to disrupt support offered from abroad – blocking internet resources, Telegram channels, bots and so on. Secondly, if mobilisation is broadened, these legal assistance services could be limited by their inability to scale up their work to meet demand.

2. Individual legal assistance becomes more high-quality and the number of support services offered by the émigré community grows. At the same time, self-organisation spreads across Russia, new communities spring up in ethnic republics, depressed regions and other atomised parts of society.

If such spontaneous protests increase in size and scale, their agenda will likely broaden and begin to include political demands. Such a movement would become not only an important factor in Russia's success on the battlefield, but also affect political stability. There could be a demand for anti-mobilisation policies in the summer 2023 electoral campaign. We need to be clear, however, that – at least for the moment – there are no signs of such a mass movement emerging.

3. The provision of legal assistance by individuals stagnates and fades away in the face of repression and restrictions. Social apathy strengthens and the potential for resistance falls to a record post-Soviet low.

These are the risks for Russian society if individual assistance provision collapses.

Conclusions and recommendations

To sum up, after over a year of war, Russian society is in a transitory state. As old political, social and cultural practices die out, people are searching for new ways of operating. In all the areas we have looked at, things could go either way: an atomised society (where mobilisation is seen as a private problem for those who failed to hide properly or couldn't evade the draft) and a possible new form of solidarity (in which mobilisation is perceived as a social problem that requires mutual-help and cannot be resolved through the efforts of individuals).

As a result, the follow areas of mutual cooperation between civil society in Russia and Europe would appear to be the most promising:

1. Openness to cooperation with new groups that have not yet made a name for themselves in civil society circles.

As many old organisations and groups of activists have been forced out of Russia, we need to pay attention to emerging forms of horizontal self-organisation (the current situation provides a fertile breeding ground). One needs to remember that the risks of cooperation with such new groups are that they may be significantly depoliticised and dominated by pro-government sentiment – like the Council of

Mothers and Wives. As a result, they may not display liberal-democratic values or, indeed, hold any properly-formed political views. In addition, they will often not have any ties to previous Russian civil society organisations, which will make establishing communication with them more complicated.

2. Prioritising projects focusing on solidarity and collective action ahead of the atomising practices of self-protection.

Most Russian civil society projects at the moment are based abroad and focused on the protection of individuals – in other words, they help with emigration or finding a legal basis for evading mobilisation and military service. In the short-term, this is extremely important: saving lives and helping people avoid prison. But, considering what we have discussed above, it is not enough. Mobilisation has created the conditions for solidarity and collective resistance against the state among groups that were previously left untouched by the authorities and were, more or less, progovernment. Considering the lack of opportunities to participate in socio-political life because of repression, directing help in this direction could lead to new forms of civil engagement. In the long-term, this could have a significant effect.

3. Strengthening the security of channels of contact between civil society in Russia and Europe.

The Kremlin's political managers understand only too well what has been described above – and they are trying to prevent these new challenges leading to solidarity and collective action. There are reasons to believe that this is particularly true when it comes to foreign contacts. This means that it's necessary to understand the risks to the lives and freedom of those Russians who take a active civil position and maintain contacts with people from European countries. It's essential to study Russia's new repressions very carefully and adapt security considerations accordingly.