



REPORT

IS THERE LIFE IN THE DESERT?

RUSSIAN CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER THE FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

| IGOR GRETSKIY |

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Cover page photo: A Russian opposition activist holds an empty paper during a one-person picket against the exclusion of some city council candidates from Moscow's upcoming election in central Moscow on 17 August 2019. Photo credits: Kirill Kudryavtsev / AFP / Scanpix

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
FBK	<i>Fond Bor'by s Korruptsiyey</i> (Anti-Corruption Foundation)
GONGO	government-organised non-governmental organisation
HIV/AIDS	human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
HSE	Higher School of Economics
RUR	Russian ruble
MGER	<i>Molodaya gvardiya Yedinoy Rossii</i> (Young Guard of United Russia)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NOD	<i>Natsionalno-osvoboditelnoye dvizheniye</i> (National Liberation Movement)
Roskomnadzor	Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media
Rosstat	Federal State Statistics Service
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report focuses on the state of Russian civil society at the outset of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, as well as on how it was affected by the war and what are the prospects for its development in the future. The study was conducted on the basis of interviews with representatives of independent Russian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from various regions who, as of February 2022, were based in Russia. The geography of this survey was expanded as much as possible to make the study more reliable and better reflect the content of the processes underway in the country.

Since Vladimir Putin came to power, Russia has been moving along the path of creating a fully state-controlled civil society in which the political potential of independent civil activism would be completely undermined. To achieve this goal, the Kremlin proactively advanced its network of government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) while simultaneously limiting foreign funding for NGOs and thus encouraging their dependence on state-sponsored grants. Those who did not abide by the Kremlin's rules were systematically discriminated against and persecuted under the so-called "foreign agent" laws. Meanwhile, local authorities have stopped all formal and informal interaction with "politicised" civil actors. By the end of 2021, all leading independent NGOs and individual human rights activists had been completely suppressed, and all issues deemed inconvenient for the Kremlin had been removed from the agenda of those still operating. Communication between the government and the public was increasingly resembling a monologue – or even a dictate.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine added further impetus to these trends and strengthened the Kremlin's resolve to root out any sources of potential defiance. The independent professional NGOs that remained were in a deep crisis. Since February 2022, they have switched to survival mode. In all likelihood, they will either be co-opted by the state through a centralised system of financial support or cease to exist in the near future. The niches that they have left – including in the field of human rights advocacy – are being quickly filled by GONGOs. With their colossal resources, wider media access, and connections in the government, GONGOs are able to attract more young people to join their ranks. In many regions, even the scanty of organised independent civic activism that existed before the war was neither there nor likely to re-emerge in the coming years.

In Russia, the level of involvement in NGOs has always been low and the population at large indifferent to the problems of civil society. Therefore, one should be wary of inflated expectations when contemplating the future of Russian civil activism. Even if Putin's regime collapses, one can hardly anticipate a quick transition towards a truly independent and vibrant civil society.

This analysis also shows that representatives from Moscow, large provincial cities, and the North Caucasus differ significantly in their perception of the current situation with civil society, whereas their visions for the future diverge considerably. A profound lack of communication among them only amplifies the divisions and fragmentations in Russia's civil society.

The situation in the North Caucasus is of particular note. Albeit being severely weakened, local independent NGOs and activists are – in contrast with the rest of Russia – more disapproving of the war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine but more optimistic about the future of their home regions. They pin their hopes on the revival of indigenous languages and cultures with the help of diasporas abroad and the emergence of civil society.

INTRODUCTION

Within the Russian expert community, the prospects for Russia's democratisation are usually associated with stronger civil society.¹ However, interim assessments by the respective institutions in Russia are generally controversial and always give grounds for scepticism.

Many authors emphasise that such factors as a repressive environment, a deeply rooted paternalistic culture, a deficit of civic engagement, and a thin layer of the economically independent middle class have severely limited progress in this field.² Other researchers believe that the natural process of generational change, as well as the apparent inability of the Russian government to cope with economic challenges and meet growing social needs, could eventually trigger tectonic political changes.³

¹ Vladimir Petukhov, "[Civil Society and the Democracy of Participation](#)," *Russian Social Science Review* Vol. 49, No. 4 (2008): 4-13; "Правление Путина и стабильность России [Putin's Rule and Russia's stability]," *Voice of America*, 11 November 2005.

² Anders Uhlin, *Post-Soviet Civil Society: Democratization in Russia and the Baltic States* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 153-154; Sarah L Henderson, "Selling Civil Society: Western Aid and the Nongovernmental Organisational Sector in Russia," *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 35, No. 2 (2002): 139-167; Alexey Levinson, "Заметки о бюрократии в социальной структуре современного российского общества [Notes on bureaucracy in the social structure of modern Russian society]," *Вестник общественного мнения* [Bulletin of Public Opinion] No. 3-4 (2017); Jo Crotty, "Making a Difference? NGOs and Civil Society Development in Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 61, No. 1 (2009): 85-108; Sabine Fischer, "[Repression and Autocracy as Russia Heads into State Duma Elections](#)," *SWP Comment*, June 2021.

³ Stefan Meister, "[Stably Instable: Putin's Reelection Will Not Stop Social Change in Russia](#)," *DGAPstandpunkt*, March 2018; Maria Snegovaya, "[Putin's New Generation: Will Russia's 'Digital Natives' Change their Country's Future?](#)" *CEPA*, April 2018; Pavel Baev, "[Disappointed and Stagnating 'Stability,' Russia Years and Braces for Change](#)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol. 16, Issue 158 (12 November 2019).

The Bolotnaya Square rallies of 2011-12, the vigorous activity of Alexey Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), as well as some sporadic protest outbreaks in distant provinces, created an illusory appearance of Putin's regime's instability and reinforced a deceptive belief in Russia's democratic transition.⁴

Some even expected NGOs to determine the political agenda in post-Putin Russia and become "incubators of the future elite."⁵ Such an optimistic outlook on civil society began to be – radically – reconsidered only after the invasion of Ukraine and the attempt to seize Kyiv, with the footage of Russian atrocities in Bucha spreading all around the world. The Russian invasion was followed by a mass exodus of the population from large Russian cities to foreign countries, repressive legislation, stricter censorship, and brutal suppression of student protests.

Those developments lead to three main questions. First, in what state is Russian civil society now? Second, does it even exist in the current circumstances? And third, what is the future of Russian civic activism in such political atmosphere?

To answer these questions, starting in August 2022, twenty-two semi-structured interviews with civil society members from Russia who represent various fields were conducted. The fields include defending the rights of ethnic minorities; campaigning against torture by law enforcement agencies; promoting civil education; protecting the environment; advocating sex workers' rights; assisting in HIV/AIDS prevention; popularising urban activism, etc.

Until February 2022, all interlocutors resided in Russia. Four later decided to leave the country. The majority of them are leaders, coordinators, or co-founders of movements well-known in Russia. These include civil initiatives and NGOs that have successfully argued lawsuits in the ECHR, presented expert reports at the UN, launched major charity projects, drafted

⁴ Ksenia Kirillova, "[Poverty and Passivity: Are New Protests Expected in the Russian Regions?](#)" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Vol. 18, Issue 38 (8 March 2021); Andrei Kolesnikov, "[Protests in Russia: Between Civil Society and Political Opposition](#)," *ISPI*, 30 October 2020.

⁵ Kadri Liik, "[How to talk with Russia](#)," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 December 2015.

federal laws aimed at the “humanisation” of Russian legislation, etc.

Since Russian civic activism predominantly concentrates in large cities, we focused on interviewing activists and NGO employees from Moscow, St Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Perm, Chelyabinsk, Yaroslavl, Penza, and Irkutsk, as well as from the regional capitals in the North Caucasus (i.e., Stavropol Krai and ethnic republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria).

Of twenty-two respondents, eight have been labelled “foreign agents” either as individuals or employees of legal entities. Having expanded the list of criteria for granting this status in July 2022, the government toughened up the “foreign agents” legislation. Therefore, in order not to expose the respondents to undue risks for ethical reasons, this report does not disclose their personal data.

Structurally, this report contains seven sections. The first section summarises the respondents’ thoughts on what path Russian civil society has taken after the collapse of the USSR; what turning points can be identified along this path; and when those occurred.

The second section presents the interviewees’ understanding of the term “civil society” and the main obstacles to its development in Russia. In the third section, the respondents share their assessment of the damage inflicted by the “foreign agents” laws, both before and after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The fourth section identifies the major repercussions for Russian civil society caused by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The fifth section provides readers with the most popular answers to the widely asked question of why the Russian population supports the war. The sixth section allows the respondents to ponder the questions of what future awaits Russia and whether it is possible to build a consolidated civil society in the country. The seventh section zeroes in on the state of civil society in the North Caucasus.

1. SLIDING DOWN TO CATASTROPHE

Most respondents tend to believe that when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia inherited a terrible legacy of widespread poverty, low-quality education in humanities, and a politically indifferent populace. These phenomena and their continued negative influence on Russia’s democratic transformation are yet to be overcome. However, the activists interviewed admitted that the current deplorable state of civil society was due not only to the Soviet legacy but also to the policies pursued by the government and the choices that Russians themselves made over the past 30 years.

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Summarising their opinions, several key milestones can be identified to illustrate this downward trend: 1) two Chechen wars in 1994-96 and 1999-2000; 2) mass protests in 2011-12; 3) adoption of the “foreign agents” laws; 4) annexation of Crimea; and 5) the government’s campaign against large professional NGOs in 2019-21.

1.1. THE CHECHENISATION OF RUSSIA AND THE 1990S

The early 1990s are praised as the “golden age” in the history of Russian civil society.⁶ Those years were characterised by a surge in the numbers of grassroots civil initiatives and professional NGOs. That period was interrupted by the First Chechen War, after which the old practices returned to everyday life. The activists interviewed considered the Chechen wars to be the starting point for the

⁶ Vladimir Avdonin, “Давление советских традиций на гражданское общество в регионе: случай Рязанской области [The pressure of Soviet traditions on civil society in the region: the case of the Ryazan region],” in *Гражданское общество и политические процессы в регионах* [Civil society and political processes in the regions] (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2005), 11.

restoration of totalitarianism. By sending the army to storm the city of Grozny, the Russian government set a pernicious example of unpunished violence and undermined the process of building civil society institutions in Russia.⁷

[R15]: Who now remembers that back then [in Chechnya], many children died? The bombings were terrible, yet the Russian society approved of them.

By sending the army to storm Grozny, the Russian government set a pernicious example of unpunished violence and undermined the process of building civil society institutions in Russia

Russia, a country with underdeveloped democratic institutions, thus asserted the right of the strong, which was further solidified as a social norm. A significant number of Russian soldiers went through two Chechen wars. About 50 000 civilians were reported dead, and thousands more were missing, having been detained by the Russian armed forces.⁸ Since then, the federal and regional authorities have widely resorted to discriminatory practices and demonstrated, through their actions, that violence is the main argument in any dispute.⁹

When active hostilities had ceased, a “neo-feudal state within a state” was established in Chechnya. Meanwhile, in Russian society, the practice of resolving any conflict with brute and lawless force became widespread. Human rights activists noted that the Chechen wars normalised the ill-treatment of people among the Russian security forces and called this phenomenon the “Chechenisation of Russia.”¹⁰ At the same time, the tolerance to violence and torture by law enforcement agencies

remained consistently high.¹¹ As Yan Rachinsky, chairman of the International Memorial board, summarised in his Nobel speech, Russian society failed to break the tradition of state violence.¹²

1.2. THE REVOLUTION THAT NEVER WAS

The next turning point in the devolution of civil society was the outbreak of mass protests against voter fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections. For the Moscow authorities, those protests came as an unpleasant surprise. Sensing the Kremlin’s confusion and dismay, some intellectuals began to speak out about the imminent end of Putin’s political regime, expressing confidence that it was a matter of one or two years.¹³

Most of the respondents recalled the events on the Bolotnaya Square with undisguised disappointment. They believed it to have been an “unfinished revolution” and the last real opportunity to steer the country back on the democratic course. Among the principle reasons why that chance had been lost, they named the infantilism and indecisiveness of Russian society.

[R15]: What is important is not only how many people take to the streets but what they do out there... [Our] People have failed to understand that waving balloons and flags is not enough to bring about change. We should have stayed at the [city] squares till the bitter end.

Indeed, the demands stopped at the revision of the election results and the resignation of the then-chairman of the Central Election Commission, Vladimir Churov. There was no intention to challenge the political regime or Vladimir Putin’s “vertical of power.” In

⁷ R2, R3, R9, R11, R12, R15.

⁸ World Organization Against Torture. *Чечня: без средств для жизни* [Chechnya: no money for life] (Geneva: World Organisation Against Torture, November 2003), 18.

⁹ Aleksandr Tarasov, “Порождение реформ: бритоголовые, они же скинхеды” [The product of reforms: skinheads, they are skinheads], *Свободная мысль – XXI* [Free Thought – XXI] No. 4-5 (2000): 40-53.

¹⁰ Viktor Vasilyev, “Чеченизация России” [Chechenisation of Russia], *Golos Ameriki*, 21 January 2011.

¹¹ Lev D Gudkov, N A Zorkaya, and E V Kocherigina, *Пытки в России: распространенность явления и отношение общества к проблеме* [Torture in Russia: the prevalence of the phenomenon and the attitude of society to the problem] (Moscow: Levada Center, June 2019), 64.

¹² Current Time, “Настоящее время. Нобелевская премия мира 2022 – церемония вручения” [Present tense. Nobel Peace Prize 2022 - award ceremony], streamed live on YouTube on 10 December 2022.

¹³ Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

addition, sociologists studying that experience noticed that even if Russians had wanted some fundamental changes in the 2010s, they were not inclined to systematically invest that time and sacrifice their comfort to alter that reality on their own.¹⁴

In contrast to Georgia and Ukraine, neither the protesters nor their leaders were ready to raise the issue of a change of power

In December 2011, the number of people who took to the streets was unprecedented in the post-Soviet period of Russian history and could evoke parallels with the “colour revolutions.” In contrast to Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), neither the protesters in Russia nor their leaders were ready to raise the issue of a change of power. Moreover, even in Moscow, the protests were sporadic, with only three major rallies held during the three winter months. It gave the authorities the time necessary to recover from the initial shock. By the summer of 2012, small political concessions and targeted repressions allowed the Kremlin to regain the initiative and take control of the situation back into its own hands.

1.3. CREEPING TOTALITARIANISM OF 2012-19

After the wave of rallies had abated, Vladimir Putin returned to the presidential office in the spring of 2012 as a result of the so-called “castling” with Dmitry Medvedev. He began a radical overhaul of the state’s relationship with civil society. The presidential administration initiated the gradual criminalisation of virtually all forms of independent civic and political activity. The main symbols of this period were 1) the terms “foreign agent” and “undesirable organisation;” 2) *Rosgvardiya* (the National Guard), with a clear function of suppressing mass protests; and 3) the brazen murder of Boris Nemtsov, one of the most famous opponents to Putin, in the immediate vicinity of the Kremlin walls.

[R21]: For a long time, we continued to enjoy some elements of public politics and did not feel that sense of danger. [Boris] Nemtsov’s murder made it clear that Russia had already embarked on the path of a new terror.

As follows from the interviews, most of the regions have reported a gradual fading of civil activism since 2012.¹⁵ One of the clearest signs that the political environment changed for the worse was the introduction of the status of “foreign agent.” However, very few activists believed at the time that it would eventually become an effective tool for the authorities to establish total control over civil society. It was taken seriously only after Russia had already occupied the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. That year, the government tightened restrictions on holding mass events, and the Ministry of Justice became increasingly active in assigning “foreign agent” status to disloyal organisations.

At first, NGOs tried to challenge the designation of a “foreign agent,” as well as the numerous bans on holding mass events. They burnt through their already scarce resources in the endless court trials – a meaningless ritual with a predetermined outcome. In the end, NGOs were forced to make a choice: either to shut down or change their profile.

The annexation of Crimea was a powerful manifestation of the idea that might makes right, which was overwhelmingly and enthusiastically supported by the Russian people. It was a strong blow that greatly demoralised the already shrinking number of civil activists. Many respondents noted a

The annexation of Crimea marked the moment when Russia’s turn to the totalitarian practices of the past became irreversible

sharp decrease in the number of volunteers thereafter. Moreover, the annexation helped Putin to legitimise pressure on the very few “non-systemic” political opponents and independent NGOs. In fact, it was at that

¹⁴ Elena Chebankova, *Civil Society in Putin’s Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 165.

¹⁵ R7, R10, R16, R20, R21.

moment that Russia's turn to the totalitarian practices of the past became irreversible.¹⁶

Against this background, activity in the “non-politicised spheres” of social life intensified. It coincided in time with the sporadic outbreaks of protests in several regions (e.g., riots against a landfill in Shiyes in Arkhangelsk Oblast in 2019 or in support of the democratically elected governor in Khabarovsk in 2020) and the anti-corruption campaign by Alexey Navalny's FBK.

The greater visibility of projects in the field of environmental protection, urban activism, and charity misled many experts to believe the illusion that Putin's regime was in a “low-resource state” and that Russian civil society was on the rise.¹⁷ However, the reality was the opposite. By 2019, the Russian state had completed the processes of tweaking the legislation and strengthening repressive tools to effectively segregate and suppress any forms of independent political activism.

1.4. LIQUIDATION OF THE NETWORK NGOS IN 2019-21

The summer of 2019 marked the beginning of the terminal stage of the institutional degradation of the remnants of Russian civil society. Respondents associated that process

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with 1) the case of Ivan Golunov, a well-respected investigative journalist who was set up by the police and arrested on trumped-up drug charges, caused a wide public outcry; 2) the 2019 rallies in support of the opposition

¹⁶ Lev Gudkov, “Патриотическая мобилизация и её последствия [Patriotic mobilisation and its consequences],” *Вестник общественного мнения* [Bulletin of Public Opinion] No. 1-2 (2018): 81-123.

¹⁷ Yekaterina Schulman, “[Демократизация по ошибке. Как самосохранение власти приводит к переменам](#) [Democratisation by mistake. How self-preservation of power leads to change],” *Carnegie Moscow*, 7 December 2017; Félix Krawatek, “[Enraged Young Russians?](#),” *ZOIS*, 3 May 2017; Yegor Gaidar Foundation, “[XI Премия Егора Гайдара. Интервью с Екатериной Шульман](#) [XI Yegor Gaidar Prize. Interview with Ekaterina Shulman],” Yegor Gaidar Foundation, 25 November 2021.

candidates whose constitutional right to participate in the elections to the Moscow City Duma was unlawfully denied. The spearhead of state repression was directed against the so-called “network NGOs” (i.e., NGOs that had branches and coordinators in many regions across the country). The goal was to disorganise them so that the “uncontrolled outbreaks” of civic activism would be easier to localise, thus preventing the spread of potential protests to other regions through a domino effect.

The state-owned media launched a campaign to discredit eminent human rights organisations and their representatives. Seminars and courses on human rights advocacy were portrayed as training classes for the future leaders of the “colour revolution” planned in Russia. The laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organisations” were widely applied, with NGOs' offices often searched and raided by law enforcement agencies.

By the beginning of 2022, there had not been a single large, independent, and popular inter-regional NGO left intact in the entire country. For instance, Memorial, Golos, FBK, Legal Initiative, Open Russia, For Human Rights, and others were either self-liquidated, banned, or forced to minimise their activities and go underground.

Curiously enough, although Memorial never claimed the status of a mass political movement and positioned itself exclusively as a historical, educational, and human rights community, it was liquidated anyway. It was the event that made some

respondents finally realise that the state was targeting not only its political opponents and potential contenders for power but all forms of dissent.¹⁸

[R6]: An important signal was sent out to us when Memorial was shot down. It meant that the government policy had [once again] changed for the worse, and the final assault against civil society had thus begun.

Nevertheless, against the general negative background, some noted two positive developments on a local level in the 2010s

¹⁸ R6, R15, R20.

and early 2020s.¹⁹ First, Russian provinces saw a noticeable increase in donations from small and medium-sized enterprises. However, those donations were, as a rule, intended exclusively for charitable purposes, while the entrepreneurs preferred to distance themselves from the “politicised” organisations and events.

Second, the rapid spread of social networks and platforms for online communication contributed to improving the efficiency of NGOs. It was often the case that regional authorities and law enforcement agencies obstructed independent NGOs from organising offline gatherings. With the advent of Zoom and MS Teams, many activities moved online. People were learning about the activities of NGOs through social networks, which partially contributed to the influx of volunteers and donations.

2. OBSTACLES TO DEVELOPMENT

Conversations with the respondents began by asking to share their understanding of civil society. Although their answers varied greatly, there was one peculiar commonality: no one used the terms typical of Western political discourse. When speaking about the definition of civil society, the respondents neither resorted to such notions as “democratic norms and values” and “social capital” nor mentioned such function as protection against tyranny.²⁰ Most agreed that civil society was “a voluntary association of citizens to achieve various goals and objectives without help from the state,” without specifying the kinds of goals.²¹ Similar definitions are extremely widespread in Russian opinion journalism and are used by many well-known Russian political scientists.²²

¹⁹ R7, R10, R14, R18.

²⁰ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions In Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 167; Henry Hale, “Civil Society from Above? Statist and Liberal Models of State-Building in Russia,” *Demokratizatsiya* Vol. 10, No. 3 (2002): 306-321.

²¹ R14.

²² Yegor Gaidar Foundation, “XI Yegor Gaidar Prize. Interview with Ekaterina Shulman.”

[R14]: If the imperialists and [radical] nationalists raise money for the war cause, this may also be considered a manifestation of civil society. Even though the goals may be the most idiotic, it does not negate the fact that this is what the citizens want.

The interviewees listed a large number of obstacles to the development of civil society in Russia. Having analysed their answers, the most frequently mentioned were 1) the deeply rooted paternalism; 2) economic inequality and low incomes; 3) excessive state interference in the work of the NGOs; and 4) different “optics” with regards to human rights. This chapter examines them in detail.

- **Paternalism.** The respondents noted that when Russians faced a problem – rather than look for systemic solutions or cooperate with other people who face the same problem – the first reaction was to write a letter to “Vladimir Vladimirovich in the Kremlin,” the governor, or the mayor in order to find a unique solution to their case. Many members of society, especially the older generations and residents of the peripheral regions, demonstrate little responsibility for their fate and shift it onto the state. This partly explains why the participation of Russians in volunteering is poorly institutionalised and remains at a low level. Official data says Russia has only 3.9 million volunteers in registered organisations.²³

Economic disparities contributed to all Russian civic activism being concentrated in cities with population of over one million

- **Economic inequalities and low levels of income.** The interviewees were in consensus on the fact that the colossal economic disparities in the income distribution among regions contributed to all Russian civic activism being concentrated in cities with a population of over one million, among which Moscow especially stood out. Compared to Moscow,

²³ Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, *Доклад о развитии добровольчества в Российской Федерации в 2021 году* [Report on the Development of Volunteering in the Russian Federation in 2021] (Moscow: Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2021).

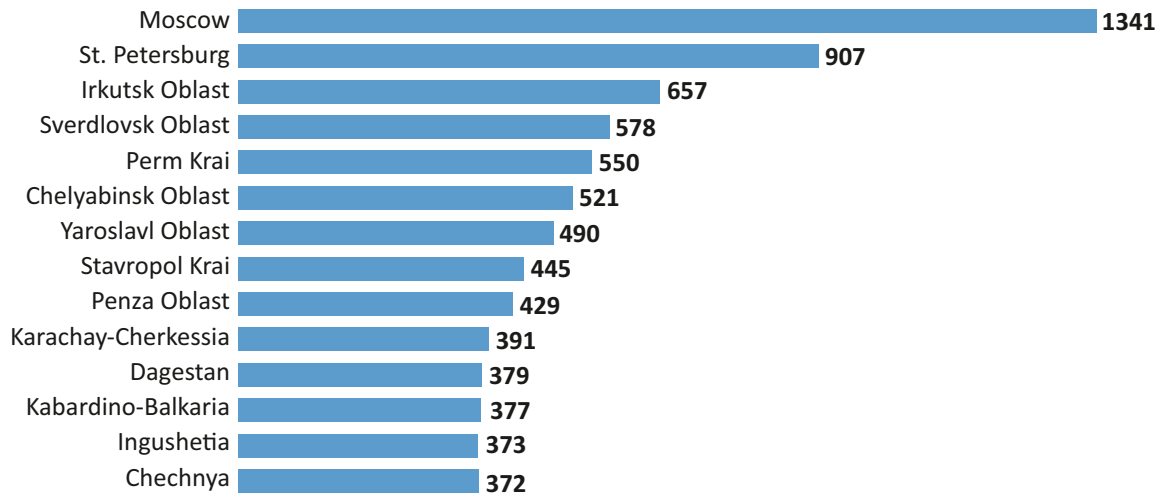


Figure 1. Average monthly salary per capita by region in 2021 in EUR (at the exchange rate of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation as of 31 December 2021). Source: Rosstat.²⁵

other regions have much lower average monthly incomes per capita. Consequently, there are far fewer representatives of the middle class and far less competition among regional business and political elites. By the same token, regional capitals absorb human resources from smaller towns and villages (i.e., “inner provinces”), from where people moved in search of better job and education opportunities. To those who stay, the extensively centralised state gives no opportunity to realise their potential by working with NGOs – one would hardly find any hint of civic activism in those parts of the country.

The submissiveness and inertia of Russian society are also explained by the fact that the state plays too large of a role in the country’s economy. Indeed, up to 70% of jobs are connected with the state in one way or another, while a significant share of real incomes relies on social security payments.²⁴ Such overdependence on the state conditions people to avoid confrontation with it and prevents them from showing solidarity with those whom the state considers its enemy.

²⁴ Andrei Kolesnikov, “How Russians Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the War,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1 February 2023; Olga Soloviova, “The share of the state in the economy was assessed in a new way,” *Rossiyskaia Gazeta*, 26 December 2018.

²⁵ Federal State Statistics Service, *Регионы России. Социально-экономические показатели* [Regions of Russia. Socio-economic indicators] (Moscow: Rosstat, 2022), 202-204.

- **Interference in the NGOs’ affairs.** Respondents from Russian provinces complained that the state was discriminating against independent NGOs and informal associations on political grounds. For instance, if a regional organisation publicly raises some acute issues before the authorities, generating a wide resonance in society, it becomes an “object of special attention” from the state agencies. Government officials and security forces immediately put pressure on the NGOs’ biggest vulnerability – their income sources. In the vast majority of cases, the primary sources are either state funding or (less frequent) foreign donations. Among the respondents, only one represented a regional NGO that had its own private sources of stable income and had never received grants from the government or foreign donors. Beyond Moscow, this is a very rare phenomenon.

[R1]: As a private entity, we are free to decide which events and agendas we choose. We worked with Memorial when nobody else would... That feeling of independence from government funding was very encouraging. [Knowing that] You work for your audience and your people, not some [government] officials.

- **Different optics.** Some interviewees confessed that the population, the NGOs, and the state have very different priorities when it comes to human rights. The state has focused on “protecting the rights of compatriots abroad;” human rights activists

try to defend the rights of minorities and individuals discriminated against by the state; and the population itself talks about their rights only in the socio-economic context (pensions, benefits, salaries, etc.). As a result, it turns out that each of these three actors speaks about human rights in their own language, which magnifies the issue of misunderstanding.²⁶ Therefore, what the civil activists might consider important often happens to be a secondary issue for “ordinary Russians.”

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[R20]: We, the human rights defenders, have always considered Memorial to be one of the symbols of Russian civil society. Yet, when the government shut it down, we realised that an average Russian was not particularly interested in its fate. The news about Memorial’s liquidation went largely unnoticed by the general public.

Alienation between civil society organisations and the population increases when – in case of a public conflict between activists and officials – the people either demonstrate apathy or sympathise with the government. Interviewees sometimes felt that their activities were not in

Interviewees felt that their activities were not in great popular demand and that in the state – population – civil society triangle, they were the third wheel

great demand: in the state – population – civil society triangle, the latter was the proverbial third wheel.

Many NGOs often receive commendations for their work. Yet, they are also aware that in a confrontation between the state and an activist, public opinion will always be on the side of the state. Respondents attributed it to Russians’ understanding of justice based on the cult of power. That is, if one has to choose between two conflicting sides, one prefers to support the side better able to assert its rightness through coercion and violence.

²⁶ R7.

3. THE FOREIGN AGENTS

The notion of a “foreign agent” appeared in federal legislation in 2012. The scope of its application gradually expanded so that it could be widely applied as an instrument of pressure and discrimination against the most “annoying” NGOs, journalists, and civil activists (see Figure 2).

In December 2020, criminal liability was introduced for its violation.²⁷ As of 31 March 2023, the Unified Register of Foreign Agents contained 570 organisations, media outlets, and individuals.²⁸ All of them are thus deprived of their basic constitutional rights, and interaction with them can bring harm to those

who come into contact. In particular, “foreign agents” are prohibited from receiving state financial support or conducting educational activities in state institutions, as well as providing services for federal, regional, and municipal needs.²⁹

Many respondents initially believed that the Kremlin had introduced the status of a “foreign agent” only to “neutralise” Alexey Navalny’s FBK and the Golos movement (an election monitoring watchdog). For that reason, at first, they had no major concerns about those innovations and treated them with great irony.

[R10]: In 2012, when the law on “foreign agents” was being passed, we used to joke about it publicly and hold flash mobs. We used to believe that it was just another instance of some frivolous nonsense by the “crazy printer.”

In 2015, however, the Russian Ministry of Justice began to grant the status of a “foreign

²⁷ President of the Russian Federation, [Федеральный закон No. 525-ФЗ «О внесении изменения в статью 330 – 1 Уголовного кодекса Российской Федерации» от 30 декабря 2020](#) [Federal Law No. 525-FZ “On Amendments to Article 330-1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation” dated December 30, 2020] (Moscow: The Kremlin, 2020).

²⁸ Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, [Единый реестр иностранных агентов](#) [Unified register of foreign agents] (Moscow: Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2023).

²⁹ President of the Russian Federation, [Федеральный закон No. 255-ФЗ «О контроле за деятельностью лиц, находящихся под иностранным влиянием» от 14 июля 2022](#) [Federal Law no. 255-FZ “On the control of the activities of persons under foreign influence” of July 14, 2022], (Moscow: The Kremlin, 2022).

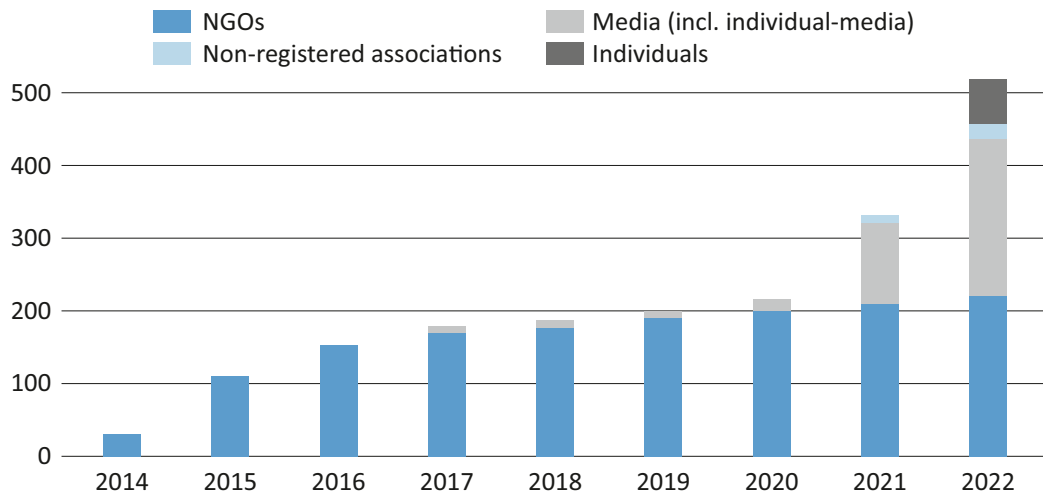


Figure 2. Number of NGOs, informal associations, media, and individuals registered as “foreign agents.”
Source: Annual reports by Russia’s Ministry of Justice

agent” to dozens of NGOs. Since 2017, this humiliating label has been applied to the media outlets and, from 2021, to individuals. “Foreign agents” spent a great deal of time and resources on litigating in courts and filing reports to the Ministry of Justice. Once in the Ministry’s register, they immediately fell under both formal and informal restrictions. The public in provincial cities began to treat the events organised by “foreign agents” with growing suspicion, while the authorities became less and less willing to make informal contact.

As respondents recalled, it was through personal interaction with officials, inspectors, prosecutors, and investigators that NGOs managed to – at least occasionally – achieve positive results, while seeking justice. However, since early 2021, authorities and security officials, especially at the lowest ranks, have grown afraid for their careers and practically ceased all interactions with “foreign agents,” including through unofficial means of communication.³⁰

[R19]: Ordinary people associate “foreign agents” with espionage. Besides, they have started to avoid foreign-funded events, which never happened before.

Contacts with “foreign agents” have become toxic not only for citizens and authorities but also for colleagues from the “third sector.” Many

also tried to distance themselves from “foreign agents” and stopped interacting with them in public. By the same token, the “foreign agents”

Contacts with “foreign agents” have become toxic not only for citizens and authorities but also for colleagues from the “third sector”

themselves either reduced cooperation with independent NGOs to a minimum or stopped advertising it so as not to become a source of problems for the latter.

[R18]: You have to know the rules of this game [set by the authorities]. If an organisation works with government-tabooed issues, sooner or later, it will be labelled as a “foreign agent.” Unless you stand up for yourself or make some noise, you are safe.

The state can deem it to be a “foreign influence” if a Russian citizen visits a foreign country or watches a Hollywood movie and shares their impressions on social media

In the summer of 2022, the legislation on “foreign agents” was supplemented with the concept of “foreign influence,” which essentially meant that any contact with anything foreign may become a legal basis for entering an entity or individual into the “foreign agents” register. For example, all Russian scientists involved in international research cooperation projects are obvious candidates for this status.

³⁰ R12, R16, R19, R20.

Technically, the state can deem it to be a “foreign influence” if a Russian citizen visits a foreign country or watches a Hollywood movie and then shares their impressions on social media. And, of course, this status can also be assigned to those who maintain close ties with relatives and colleagues living abroad.³¹

The 2020-22 legislative innovations hit hardest on the NGOs and activists engaged in educational work, meaning those who organise events to promote legal literacy, interethnic dialogue, disease awareness, and violence prevention, as well as provide psychological assistance to victims of illegal actions by legal authorities. It has become extremely difficult for any of these groups to find venues for offline meetings, as they are forbidden to work with state universities, libraries, and museums. They can only interact with private organisations that are not afraid to take on the corresponding risks. Not surprisingly, the fear of being recognised as a “foreign agent” often makes civil activists terminate their participation in international initiatives and engage only in state projects instead.³²

[R20]: The trend is clear: the state has simply decided to get rid of the most active NGOs. Under this political regime, no independent human rights organisation has a future.

It has also become much more difficult for HIV/AIDS-service organisations to operate, especially if they are based outside of Moscow.³³ The first among them were labelled as “foreign agents” back in 2017. Most have always relied on foreign funding, as the Russian state has chronically allocated insufficient funding to support people affected by HIV/AIDS. However, the most painful consequence of this status is that it makes it impossible for them to cooperate with state medical and penitentiary institutions, thus depriving HIV/AIDS-service organisations of the opportunity to carry out their mission, even if they have the resources. Therefore, the “foreign agent” status most often leads to their closure.

³¹ R3.

³² R11, R12, R19, R20, R21.

³³ R4, R17.

4. THE 2022 INVASION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not significantly change the institutional design of Russian civil society since the main developments had already taken place before Vladimir Putin sent his tanks to Kyiv. All key and influential “network NGOs” had already been suppressed, whereas smaller organisations went into survival mode, saving efforts and resources to simply wait out the turbulent times. Most foreign organisations operating in Russia were squeezed out under various pretexts.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not significantly change the institutional design of Russian civil society

In institutional and structural terms, by February 2022, Russian civil society was already a civil desert. Organised civic activism continued only in those areas that the regime considered harmless. Philanthropists, environmentalists, and urbanists demonstrated ultimate humility and loyalty, having long distanced themselves from politically sensitive topics and accepted the Kremlin’s “rules of the game.”

The non-institutionalised, informal part of civil society was strongly influenced by increased censorship and pressure from law enforcement agencies. For example, in March 2022, criminal liability was introduced for “discrediting” the Russian army and state bodies and publicly calling for sanctions against Russia.³⁴ In

³⁴ State Duma of the Russian Federation and Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, [Федеральный закон от 04.03.2022 № 32-ФЗ “О внесении изменений в Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации и статьи 31 и 151 Уголовно-процессуального кодекса Российской Федерации”](#) [Federal Law No. 32-FZ of March 4, 2022 “On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 31 and 151 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation”] (Moscow: State Duma of the Russian Federation and Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2022); State Duma of the Russian Federation and Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, [Федеральный закон от 25.03.2022 № 63-ФЗ “О внесении изменений в Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации и статьи 150 и 151 Уголовно-процессуального кодекса Российской Федерации”](#) [Federal Law No. 63-FZ of March 25, 2022 “On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 150 and 151 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation”] (Moscow: State Duma of the Russian Federation and Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2022).

addition, security agencies adopted a practice of “preventive conversations” with individual activists who had previously participated in pickets or appeared in regional and federal media.³⁵

Many respondents believed that although these restrictions in the information field created certain inconveniences, one could adapt to them. On their social media, they have either been speaking the Aesopian language or avoiding politically sensitive topics entirely. For them, mass emigration, a sharp drop in donations, and the rise of GONGOS have become much greater challenges.

4.1. MASS EMIGRATION

One of the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the mass exodus of Russians abroad, which depleted the civil society. A large number of projects – and activists doing them – have left the country, as have those people for whom assistance to and cooperation with NGOs were a routine

One of the consequences of the invasion of Ukraine was the mass exodus of Russians abroad, which depleted Russian civil society

practice. Among them, there were many intellectuals, academics, students, and entrepreneurs. Most of these emigrants were residents of megacities who had a better command of foreign languages and used to frequently travel abroad. There is no precise number of those who left; however, approximately 400 000 – 700 000 people were estimated to have fled Russia by the end of 2022.³⁶

Emigration had a brutal impact on regional NGOs. With opinion leaders, experts, intellectuals, and human rights activists departing *en mass*, many cultural and

educational events, too, have either moved online or been cancelled.³⁷ For instance, HIV-service NGOs have lost experienced and highly qualified employees.³⁸ The human rights sector – in which many things have rested on the people heading the NGOs – has also suffered greatly. Major regional centres might have some skilled lawyers capable of helping the unlawfully detained, yet the vast majority of human rights activists left Russia in the first months of the full-scale war. The respondents estimated that only one or two in the six or seven most prominent civil activists in Perm remained.³⁹

Due to this mass exodus of activists, the communications framework between the “third sector” and its external environment has been collapsing. Inter-regional horizontal ties between NGOs have been cut as well. It is unclear how long it will take to restore them given that activists must rebuild trust and interaction in a far more hostile atmosphere. The last opportunities for formal and informal interaction between NGOs and regional authorities have largely disappeared. For example, emigration disabled the Council for the Preservation and Development of Cultural Heritage under the Head of Yekaterinburg (informally called “The Council of Caring Citizens”) which united well-known city defenders, ecologists, and bloggers. By the summer of 2022, about two-thirds of the Council members had fled the country.⁴⁰

4.2. FINANCIAL DRAIN

The mass exodus of the urban middle class, sanctions on the banking system, withdrawal of international payment systems from the Russian market, and economic degradation have predictably resulted in financial troubles for the entire “third sector,” pushing many NGOs to the brink of survival.⁴¹ Falling incomes and a growing sense of uncertainty made the

³⁵ R3, R11, R14.

³⁶ Yulia Starostina, “[Можно ли все-таки как-то выяснить, сколько россиян погибло на войне? А к чему приведет эмиграция из России — и была ли она по-настоящему массовой?](#) [Is it still possible to somehow find out how many Russians died in the war? And what will emigration from Russia lead to - and was it truly massive?],” *Meduza*, 13 December 2022.

³⁷ R1.

³⁸ R4, R8, R17.

³⁹ R7

⁴⁰ R5.

⁴¹ Olga Allenova, “[Если мода на благотворительность в бизнесе сохранится, это нас спасет](#) [If the fashion for charity in business continues, it will save us],” *Kommersant*, 28 August 2022.

population cut discretionary spending such as donations. Surveys conducted by the Higher School of Economics (HSE) suggested that 46% of Russians made no donations in 2022, and only 0.4% continued regular contributions to charities.⁴²

Falling incomes and growing sense of uncertainty made the population cut discretionary spending such as donations

Traditionally, “subscriptions” (i.e., recurring payments) are more valued as a form of donation since they enable better budget planning. Even large Moscow-based civil actors – such as *OVD-Info* (a media project aimed at combatting political persecution) and *Golos* that used to receive a relatively high share of recurring payments – saw their revenues drop by 30% in 2022. For the first time in many years, they faced a monthly budget deficit.⁴³

However, in February and March 2022, Moscow and St Petersburg reported instances when large Russian and foreign companies – while anticipating a protracted period of financial turbulence – agreed to transfer funds in advance, which they otherwise planned to spend within the framework of annual corporate social responsibility programmes. This helped many NGOs survive and adapt to new severe realities with far smaller losses.

The NGOs’ financial potential has been constrained by the repressive environment and the laws adopted by the State Duma, which make it possible to label virtually any entity as a “foreign agent” or “extremist organisation.” Following such designation, any donor can be charged with promoting extremism. Moreover, by cutting their financial support via grants, Russian authorities reacted to cases where NGOs signed anti-war open letters and petitions.

New regulations dealing with foreign donations are particularly distressing, with interviewees claiming that such donations

essentially disappeared. They attributed it to the termination of services by the VISA and Mastercard payment systems in Russia coupled with restrictions on international SWIFT payments. Today, private individuals have lost the technical means to donate to Russian organisations. Alternative ways to transfer money (e.g., cryptocurrencies) remain in theory, but in practice, few are ready to make extra efforts to use those.⁴⁴

As for foreign charitable foundations, many of them have suspended their programmes in Russia in order to assess reputational and sanctions risks. The same has been done by the subsidiary structures of large Western industrial and pharmaceutical companies that used to regularly donate to Russian NGOs. Therefore, the year 2022 ended with less uncertainty and frozen funding for most programmes. Yet, Russian NGOs have been losing opportunities and tools to interact with foreign organisations every month.⁴⁵

4.3. THE DARK CIVIL SOCIETY

The longer the hostilities dragged on in 2022, the more visible Russian GONGOs became. Moscow-based respondents, however, believed that GONGOs could not compete with NGOs since “only careerists” come to them, while their functions were often limited to siphoning budget funds.⁴⁶ From the Russian provinces, things were seen somewhat differently. Since early February 2022, GONGOs’ presence on social media has increased considerably. They made efforts to consolidate local grassroots activism – while engaging the municipal authorities – to promote Russia’s war against Ukraine, as well as to fundraise for the Russian army. Moreover, they tried to occupy niches left by the emigrated NGOs, for example, by providing consultations about conscription into the army.⁴⁷ Interestingly, having noticed a sharp outflow of human rights defenders from the country, the state immediately indicated its

⁴² Yegor Gubernatorov and Anastasiya Boyko, “[За последний год большинство россиян почти не помогли другим деньгами](#) [Over the past year, most Russians have hardly helped others with money],” *Vedomosti*, 27 February 2023.

⁴³ R6, R14.

⁴⁴ R16, R18.

⁴⁵ R4, R17.

⁴⁶ R14.

⁴⁷ R16.

intention to fill this gap with “positive initiatives without any political context.”⁴⁸

Following the outbreak of the large-scale war in February 2022, not all NGOs managed to maintain a balanced budget and keep the cash flow at a level sufficient to survive. Most had to tighten their belts and conserve their activities. Many found themselves in a difficult financial situation and expanded cooperation with the authorities. Gradually, they adopted the Kremlin’s political agenda and narratives, thus reformatting themselves into GONGOs.

In the autumn of 2022, the authorities began to recruit GONGOs for mobilisation and propaganda projects in the newly occupied territories of Ukraine.⁴⁹ The only exception to this trend is the large HIV/AIDS-service organisations that, so far, have not traded loyalties since the damage to their international reputation would inevitably entail the cessation of foreign funding.⁵⁰

In the meantime, the local budgets’ expenditures to support non-profit organisations have spiked. In 2022, Krasnodar Krai’s annual spending intended for NGOs skyrocketed by 73%.⁵¹ In Penza Oblast, these expenses spiralled from RUR 3 000 000 in 2021 to RUR 19 000 000 a year later. Worth mentioning is the fact that the projects designed to support refugees from the Donbas region and families of the servicemembers who took part in the “special military operation in Ukraine” accounted for 70% of all grant

applications.⁵² Hence, GONGOs were absorbing more and more state funding. It allowed them to undertake massive projects, for which NGOs did not have sufficient resources.

Furthermore, it has become difficult for independent NGOs to compete with GONGOs for young people’s minds. There were dozens of cases where former GONGO activists moved to work in regional parliaments, large state corporations, and the presidential administration. Conversely, working for independent NGOs is associated with a professional impasse: there are no success stories of former civil activists making brilliant careers. GONGOs may seem more promising to the younger generation since they offer better career prospects. Hence, the youth increasingly prefer to avoid events with a perceived anti-government agenda and stay in tune with mainstream Kremlin narratives.

Many interviewees admitted that they had believed the movements patronised by the presidential administration – *Nashi*, *Mestnye*, Young Guard of United Russia (MGER), National Liberation Movement (NOD) – to be simulacra of real civil society – a form without content. But now, they acknowledged the rise of GONGOs and called them the “dark civil society.”

5. EXPLAINING POPULAR SUPPORT FOR THE WAR

After the annexation of Crimea, some experts suggested that the escalation of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine could lead to a political or social crisis in Russia.⁵³ However, that prediction was erroneous, as nothing of that kind happened post-February 2022.

⁴⁸ Vmeste RF, “[Заседание Временной Комиссии СФ по защите государственного суверенитета и предотвращению вмешательства во внутренние дела РФ](#) [Meeting of the Interim Commission of the Federation Council for the protection of state sovereignty and the prevention of interference in the internal affairs of the Russian Federation],” live broadcast, Vmeste RF, 22 December 2022.

⁴⁹ R7, R16.

⁵⁰ R4.

⁵¹ Press Service of the Krasnodar Krai Administration, “[В 2022 году социально ориентированные некоммерческие организации Кубани получили более 230 млн рублей из краевого бюджета](#) [In 2022, socially oriented non-profit organisations of the Kuban received more than 230 million rubles from the regional budget],” Portal of the Executive Branch of the Krasnodar Krai Government, 7 January 2023.

⁵² “[Секция 3. Взаимодействие государства и общества: институты гражданского общества, национальные и молодёжные объединения в сфере реализации государственной национальной политики](#) [Section 3. Interaction between the state and society: institutions of civil society, national and youth associations in the field of implementation of the state national policy],” Всероссийская конференция «Россия: единство и разнообразие» [All-Russian Conference “Russia: Unity and Diversity”], accessed in April 2023.

⁵³ Pavel Felgenhauer, “[Russia’s Future: A Stability That Will Not Last, a Revolution That Will Not Win](#),” *Jamestown Foundation*. 6 July 2016.

Instead, polls showed that Russian society rallied around the president and endorsed the war of aggression against Ukraine.⁵⁴ Moreover, that consolidation began in November 2021, against the backdrop of the Kremlin's hardened foreign policy rhetoric. In the three months leading up to the invasion, support for Vladimir Putin grew from 63% to 71%.⁵⁵ Small towns, provincial areas, older generations, and TV audiences exhibited the highest levels of support for Putin. The Russian population blamed Ukraine – as well as the US, EU, and NATO – for the escalation.

Even following the unprecedented cruelty and rabid behaviour of Russian troops – the Bucha massacre and annihilation of Mariupol, the abduction of Ukrainian children, and the massive rocket attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure during the cold season – nothing aroused sympathy for the Ukrainians in Russian society. In this context, interviewees were asked 1) why the Russian population approved of and supported the war against Ukraine; 2) how to explain the indifference to the atrocities committed by the Russian army; and 3) how to assess the effectiveness of the educational efforts of Russian NGOs in the light of those developments. Their responses can be summarised as follows.

- **Propaganda.** The most common answer referred to the state monopoly over mass media, which heavily facilitated the indoctrination of the Russian population with anti-Ukrainian propaganda. According to the respondents, Russians simply do not have reliable information about what is happening in Ukraine and the atrocities committed there by the Russian army. Propaganda consistently claims that it was not Russia that attacked Ukraine, but “Ukrainian Nazis” and “Western Satanists” who provoked Russia. Most interviewees were convinced that had it not been for the plethora of lies on mainstream TV, the reaction of Russians to the war in Ukraine would have been different.
- **Fear.** While it is difficult to overestimate the importance of propaganda in maintaining the public sentiment that the Kremlin needs, some interviewees were certain that it is the fear that was the primary factor contributing to both passivity and support for the war. Indeed, according to *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media), 85% of Russians use the Internet.⁵⁶ Hence, they can easily find verified information about what is really happening in Ukraine in the public domain. This led respondents to conclude that the Russians understood that war was evil but were afraid to publicly challenge the official line and thus risk being taken to jail or losing their job and income.
- **Escapism.** A large number of respondents stressed that Russian society was psychologically exhausted from living in a negative information environment. They pointed out that many people in Russia were simply struggling to make ends meet, had no savings, and were overburdened with bank loans. When it came to the war in Ukraine, no one wanted to leave their comfort zone and sacrifice their emotional wellbeing. Instead, people distanced themselves from the disturbing news and continued with their daily lives. Moreover, when state TV broadcasts talked the new round of Western sanctions or more heavy fighting, the Russians would switch to a source that offered more positive information. Proponents of this explanation believed that only some powerful push – or economic collapse – could end such a hypnotic state.
- **Soviet habits.** Russian sociologists believe that people's perception of the war against Ukraine is shaped not by the fear of getting into trouble with the authorities but by a social norm that functions on the same principles as taboos in archaic cultures.⁵⁷ Submission to the will of the powerful and social hierarchies built on violence have

⁵⁴ Levada Center, “[Конфликт с Украиной](#) [Conflict with Ukraine],” Levada Center, 31 March 2022.

⁵⁵ Denis Volkov, “[Возможны ли опросы в сегодняшней России?](#) [Are polls possible in today's Russia?],” *Levada Center*, 10 February 2023.

⁵⁶ “[Число пользователей интернета в России достигло 124 млн](#) [The Number of Internet Users in Russia reached 124 million],” *TASS*, 19 October 2021.

⁵⁷ Lev Gudkov, “Patriotic mobilisation and its consequences”: 81-123.

long been the norm in Russian society. This means tens of millions of Russians are not forced to but sincerely support the “special military operation.” Some respondents were congruous with this theory, accepting that the old Soviet cognitive patterns had predetermined how Russians would think about the military intervention in Ukraine.⁵⁸ Absent the concentrated efforts by a new and progressive state, they suggested, this “slave mentality” could not change.

All the interviewees mentioned that their NGOs were quite successful in representing the opinions of the Russian population on certain issues in their area of expertise that they dealt with on a regular basis. Despite condemning the Russian war against Ukraine, they admitted that they were a small minority facing the overwhelming majority that passively supported what the Kremlin called “the special military operation.” Such an obvious discrepancy between the views of civil society and the population regarding the war in Ukraine raised the question of how much support there was for the civil society structures in Russia before the invasion and whether one could even speak of its existence today.

6. LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

When asked about how they felt on 24 February 2022, the most frequently used words were “stress,” “fear,” and “depression.” Some admitted to having been deeply frustrated

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by the high levels of popular support for the war and the impotence of independent NGOs. The negative background was so strong that only constant thoughts about a positive future allowed them to remain in a resourceful state and continue with their professional activities.⁵⁹ Therefore, regarding the present and the future

⁵⁸ R15, R18.

⁵⁹ R8, R9, R11, R14, R19.

of Russian civil society, respondents expressed both deep frustration and enormous optimism.

All interviewees except one agreed that it was hardly possible to talk about the existence of civil society in Russia in 2022. The institutions were lying in ruins, and the prospects for restoration were unclear. Structures that could function without relying on the state were completely suppressed. Charitable, environmental, healthcare, and city protection NGOs accepted the “rules of the game” and were avoiding conflicts with the authorities in every possible way. Although many respondents witnessed some sporadic non-institutionalised grassroots initiatives to help Ukrainian refugees and Russian emigrants, everyone recognised that the scale of this activity was insignificant.

Respondents placed all their hopes on a quick military victory for Ukraine. Most of them steadfastly believed that it would happen within the next two to three years – i.e., by the end of 2025. In their opinion, Putin’s autocratic regime made a fatal mistake by invading Ukraine, which would result in an abrupt collapse of the entire “vertical of power” – as described by Daniel Treisman.⁶⁰ Respondents expected that after the end of the war, the authoritarian institutions would be dismantled and that civil society would get a chance of revival.

[R1]: We may now have a “dormant civil society” as was the case of Italy in Mussolini’s times. Once the regime has collapsed, it may turn out that we – the democratically minded people – are many.

Not everyone, however, was convinced that positive changes would follow the end of hostilities in Ukraine. Some feared that Russian society would have suffered too heavy losses due to emigration and that most entrepreneurs, academics, journalists, and activists would not return. They doubted that restoring civil society amid economic degradation and international isolation would be possible. Most believed the population would remain almost entirely inert and even more inclined to accept a new authoritarian regime.

⁶⁰ Daniel Treisman, “Democracy by Mistake: How the Errors of Autocrats Trigger Transitions to Freer Government,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 114, No. 3 (2020): 792-810.

They were very reluctant to talk about what would happen if Russia kept the occupied Ukrainian territories under its control. On the one hand, they recognised that, in this case,

If the military conflict dragged on for more than three years, there would be no foundation left for the rapid revival of civil society

the Russian political regime would become even more oppressive. In their opinion, if the military conflict dragged on for more than three years, there would be no foundation left for the rapid revival of civil society. On the other hand, they supposed that a military disaster would bring new leaders to the surface and new blood into civic activism. Many noted that in February 2022, the few rallies against the invasion of Ukraine had mostly been attended by students.

Those with experience in organising educational activities with volunteers noted that, on the one hand, young people aged 20–35 were less inclined to support discriminatory practices and more tolerant. But on the other hand, they were very passive and indifferent to the events around them. Therefore, civil educators believed that the future of civil society belonged to Russians aged 14–20 who had not yet been indoctrinated by the propaganda and had advanced Internet skills. The only problem was that, due to mass emigration, there was no one left to educate those young people who might want to try their hand at civic activism.

Due to mass emigration, there was no one left to educate those young people who might want to try their hand at civic activism

Another potential driver of pro-democratic change were the “non-emigrated” – i.e., the civil activists “resistant to repressions” and the representatives of the lower middle class who stayed in Russia. The interviewees guesstimated that this group comprised about 30% of the Russian population.⁶¹ When challenged with the polling data that indicated a constantly high level of anti-Western

⁶¹ R6, R17.

sentiment, support for the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine, and Vladimir Putin’s popularity ratings, respondents claimed that they did not trust those numbers since surveys conducted in dictatorships were irrelevant.

[R17]: The Russian civil society has a very bright future. It is now deep under the ground; in due time, it will not rot but sprout.

7. THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Due to its ethnoreligious diversity, peculiarities of regional governance, and the uniqueness of cultural norms and political practices, the North Caucasus stands out from the rest of Russia so distinctly that it is sometimes called “Russia’s internal abroad.”⁶² Consequently, the concepts of human rights and civil society have different connotations there.⁶³ For those reasons, this report, too, considers the case of civil society in the North Caucasus separately.

This report was able to interview seven activists representing all regions of the North Caucasian Federal District (except for North Ossetia). From the materials collected, there appear to be significant differences between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia regarding the structure of civil society, the perception of its future, the operational environment of NGOs, and attitudes towards the war. However, there is also no homogeneity on these issues within the region itself.

All respondents stated that an institutionalised civil society had never existed in the North Caucasus and that local independent NGOs had always been weak. Local civil society has long been dominated by GONGOs, among which state funding is distributed to promote the so-called “patriotic agenda” and organise thematic mass events. There are very few independent human rights associations, and they are chronically underfunded for full-fledged functioning. Thus, cases and complaints

⁶² Uwe Hwalbach, “[Russia’s Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe](#),” *SWP Research Paper*, November 2010.

⁶³ Irina Kosterina, “[Civil Society in the North Caucasus](#),” *CSIS*, January 2020.

were often redirected to Moscow or other regions.

North Caucasian NGOs face systematic pressure from the authorities. In recent years, there have been cases of threats coming from regional security forces against activists, as well as attacks on them by unknown persons. For example, in Grozny in 2014 and 2015, the offices of the Committee against Torture were ransacked and set on fire; in 2016, a press tour organised by the NGO was attacked, with participating journalists severely beaten.⁶⁴ Human rights activists and organisations involved in promoting the national language and culture claimed that they had been registering increased pressure from the security services since 2017.

The specific cultural context has influenced the work of independent NGOs in the region. For example, the traditional understanding of women's roles and their social status is entrenched in the North Caucasus. Criticism of the patriarchal ways and gender inequality is perceived as a direct affront to Islam and often provokes anger. Campaigning for women's rights has been discouraged as shameful. Thus, feminist activists are forced to operate in the shadows. The discriminatory restrictions and anti-LGBT laws find approval in the local communities. It is important to mention that conservative values prevail not only in the ethnic republics but also in Stavropol Krai – the only region of the North Caucasus Federal District with a predominantly Russian population.

The attitude towards human rights activists in the North Caucasus is either sceptical or outright negative

The attitude towards human rights activists in the North Caucasus is either sceptical or outright negative. They are viewed not as professionals performing a duty but as preachers of an alien and hostile religion. Nevertheless, people still turn to them from

⁶⁴ Elena Shmareva, "Пожар на КПП [Fire at a Checkpoint]," *Mediazona*, 15 December 2014; Yegor Skovoroda, "Ложись, убью! Пресс-тур в Чечню [Get down, I'll kill you! Press tour to Chechnya]," *Mediazona*, 15 March 2016.

time to time, for example, on the issue of handing over the bodies of dead relatives killed by law enforcement agencies during counter-terrorist operations. The local population doubts the legality of these operations since people are basically executed without a trial. It is nearly impossible to shed light on the causes of those deaths – even more so to acquit the dead. Less frequently, human rights defenders are approached on issues related to domestic violence and police brutality. At the same time, people avoid contacting well-known organisations to avoid publicity and direct conflict with regional authorities.

People do not look for systemic legal solutions and willingly take advantage of the shortcomings of the corrupted state

There are traditionally strong interfamily ties between members of society that are conducive to corruption and patronage practices in power structures, law enforcement agencies, courts, and educational or medical institutions.⁶⁵ This predictably contributes to a high level of distrust in institutions of power among the population. However, in everyday life, people do not look for systemic legal solutions and willingly take advantage of the shortcomings of the corrupted state. The norm is to find a relative or an acquaintance in one of the corrupt branches of government to quickly solve the issue on an individual basis – be it obtaining a foreign passport or escaping a queue for a doctor's appointment.

However, such strong clan-family ties contribute not only to corruption and nepotism. In the republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia, stable traditional structures that unite several clans and families, called *teips* and *tukhkums*, have been preserved. Paradoxically, the main – if not the only – quasi-civil society institutions, where there is regular horizontal interaction between Ingush and Chechens, are informal meetings of *teips* on such occasions

⁶⁵ Anna Matveeva, "Угрозы миру и безопасности: основные выводы [Threats to Peace and Security: Key Findings]," in *Северный Кавказ: Взгляд изнутри. Вызовы и проблемы социально-политического развития [North Caucasus: A look from within. Challenges and problems of socio-political development]* eds., A G Matveeva, A Yu Skakova, and I S Savina (Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012), 19.

as weddings or funerals. As a rule, elders gather and discuss various socio-political and economic issues of local importance. The opinions voiced at the meeting are widely circulated among all clan members and subject to strict observance, especially if a decision (*vaad*) has been passed. Although the elders seldom discuss the Kremlin's or federal policies, there is persistent dissatisfaction with the fact that Moscow is dismissive of the needs of the North Caucasus. Noteworthy is the fact that it was the *teips* that contributed to rallying thousands of Ingush during the 2018 protests against the regional authorities' decision to transfer a part of Ingushetia's territory to Chechnya.

7.1. ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INVASION

In different parts of the North Caucasus, there are very different views among the population of the war against Ukraine. Symbols of Russian neo-fascism (letters "Z" and "V") can be seen on administration buildings, central squares, universities, and theatres, as well as banners and vehicles belonging to state authorities and law enforcement agencies. In the respondents' subjective assessment, the "patriotic semi-swastika" is the least common in Ingushetia and is noticeably more widespread in neighbouring Chechnya and North Ossetia. In Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia, the number of Z-stickers on private cars was initially significant but began to gradually decrease in the summer of 2022. In Stavropol, Z-symbols were reportedly seen on every fifth car, and support for military operations against Ukraine was much stronger. The majority sincerely believes that the war is needed to protect Russia – and Ukraine – from NATO and the "Nazis," while gloating over missile attacks on Ukrainian cities and energy infrastructure.

- **In Chechnya**, however, the war in Ukraine is not widely popular as it resonates strongly with the two Chechen wars of the 1990s. Footage of victims of war crimes against Ukrainian civilians evokes the memory of

the Russian troops' atrocities in Chechnya. The local population – even Chechens loyal to both Kadyrov and the Kremlin – does not consider Russia's war against Ukraine

In Chechnya, the war in Ukraine is not widely popular as it resonates strongly with the two Chechen wars of the 1990s

to be their war.⁶⁶ The local sympathy with Ukraine is partially attributed to the fact that the country received thousands of Chechen refugees in the 1990s.⁶⁷ Dmitry Kiselev, Vladimir Solovyov, and Margarita Simonyan – the TV personalities popular elsewhere in Russia – are less trusted in Chechnya. Moreover, according to the respondents, an average Chechen would perceive Ukraine's victory as a fair outcome.

- **In Ingushetia**, the perception of the war in Ukraine is driven by the collective memory of Russia's colonial policies and ruthless counter-terrorist operations, as well as a deeply shared religious and ethnicity-based ethics that does not justify wars of aggression.⁶⁸ Ingushetia is one of the three poorest and most disadvantaged regions in Russia, where the vast majority of the population lives on pensions and social benefits.⁶⁹ Those who enlist to fight in Ukraine – either as volunteers or under a contract – do so predominantly for financial reasons, although they publicly validate the decision with patriotic slogans.
- As to **Dagestan**, out of approximately 1 400 soldiers from the North Caucasus Federal District officially recognised as KIA, most

⁶⁶ Vladimir Sevrinovskiy, "[Я двести процентов говорю: нет другого такого антивоенного региона. Почему большинство чеченцев против войны в Украине](#) [I say two hundred percent: there is no other such anti-war region. Why most Chechens are against the war in Ukraine]," *Cherta Media*, 3 April 2023.

⁶⁷ F Düvell, "Ukraine – immigration and transit country for Chechen refugees," in *Chechens in the European Union* eds., Alexander Janda, Norbert Leitner, and Mathias Vogl (Vienna: Österreichischer Integrationsfonds, Federal Ministry of the Interior), 79-92.

⁶⁸ Zarina Sautieva, "[Sabotaging Putin's Mobilization as a Form of Social Protest](#)," *Wilson Center*, 6 October 2022.

⁶⁹ "[Итоговый рейтинг регионов России – 2022](#) [The final rating of Russian regions - 2022]," *RIA Novosti*, 26 December 2022.

came from the region – 357 casualties.⁷⁰ As a rule, young men go to war to earn money to feed their families. Many of those killed at the front came from the Tabasaran district, where the birth rate was high and the standard of living extremely low. Even in Makhachkala, the average income tends to be very modest – i.e., the monthly salary of a doctor and a university professor is approximately EUR 250 – 310.

GONGOs in Dagestan tried to fundraise for the needs of the Russian army, but the process was sluggish. Donations are now “voluntary-compulsory” and collected through budgetary organisations, whereas the attitude towards the war in Ukraine is still apathetic and non-caring. Though people in Dagestan do not sympathise with the Ukrainians, they do not believe that “Nazis” are in charge in Kyiv either. That is why spontaneous protests in the cities of Makhachkala and Khasavyurt did not take place in the spring but began only in September 2022 after the launch of the mobilisation campaign.

- **In Kabardino-Balkaria**, many political events are viewed through the prism of the “Circassian issue.” There is a strong memory of the genocide of the Circassians during and after the Russian-Caucasian War of 1763–1864. There were neither celebrations nor mass joy over the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The fully “Kremlinised” local government used the invasion as an excuse to cancel memorial ceremonies commemorating the genocide that used to take place in Nalchik on 21 May. Officials claimed that amidst the war in Ukraine, Kabardino-Balkaria should “demonstrate complete solidarity and not remind Moscow of pages of history that are inconvenient for it.”⁷¹ Despite the authorities’ efforts to organise events and flash mobs in educational institutions to support the “special military operation in Ukraine,”

⁷⁰ “Число погибших на Украине военных с юга России превысило 1400 [The number of soldiers killed in Ukraine from the south of Russia exceeded 1400],” *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, 21 February 2023.

⁷¹ “Почему 21 мая — день траура для черкесов? [Why is May 21 a day of mourning for Circassians?],” *Holod Media*, 21 May 2022.

they failed to arouse much enthusiasm among young people.⁷² The absence of serious support for the war is also evidenced by refusals on the part of law enforcement officers to go to fight in Ukraine.⁷³

The specificity of Kabardino-Balkaria also lies in the fact that there is a large Circassian diaspora outside of Russia, a significant part of whom lives in Türkiye. The diaspora cooperates most closely with Kabardino-Balkarian NGOs that promote the Circassian culture and language, and its representatives are well incorporated into the Turkish political and military elites. The Turkish Circassians did not support the annexation of Crimea nor the invasion of Ukraine and provided great assistance to those Circassians who, fleeing from mobilisation, decided in 2022 to leave Russia through Georgia.

7.2. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

While activists based in Russian megacities remained optimistic – despite the extremely negative trend in the development of civil society – their colleagues in the North Caucasus painted a rather gloomy picture of Russia’s future. They believed that the invasion was an irreparable mistake and were discouraged by the overwhelming public support for the destruction of the Ukrainian people. They considered fundamental political changes in Russia very unlikely but doubted that – even if such changes occurred – it would subdue Russian imperial thinking.

The North Caucasian civil activists believed that liberalism ends with the “Caucasian issue”

The North Caucasian civil activists looked at representatives of the Russian political opposition with great suspicion and distrust.

⁷² “Студенты в Кабардино-Балкарии отказались от участия в акции в поддержку войны в Украине [Students in Kabardino-Balkaria refused to participate in the action in support of the war in Ukraine],” *Kavkaz.Realii*, 13 April 2022.

⁷³ “Суд подтвердил законность увольнения 115 росгвардейцев за отказ ехать на Украину [The court confirmed the legality of the dismissal of 115 National Guardsmen for refusing to go to Ukraine],” *Interfax*, 26 May 2022.

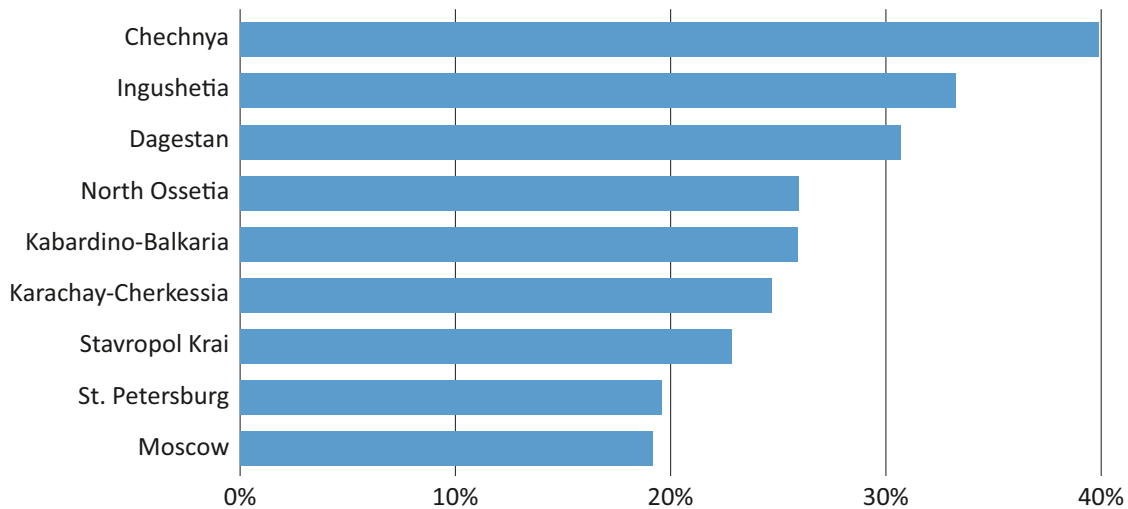


Figure 3. Share of children and teenagers under the age of 19 in the population of the North Caucasus, St Petersburg, and Moscow. Source: Rosstat

They believed that their liberalism ends with the “Caucasian issue.” Many remembered that Alexei Navalny had participated in rallies under the slogan “Stop feeding the Caucasus!” and allowed himself some chauvinistic remarks about other nationalities. Whatever the sympathy for the FBK’s efforts to expose corruption, it seems that Navalny will never have a significant number of supporters in the Caucasus because of his past ethnophobic statements.

North Caucasian interviewees hoped that the demand among people under the age of 20 to learn their national languages and cultures would generate a new wave of civic activism.

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In the interviews with representatives of the North Caucasian NGOs, one could clearly hear resentment at the snobbery and arrogance of the Moscow intelligentsia. They were very disappointed that when local activists of Chechnya or Kabardino-Balkaria were brutally persecuted by the law enforcement agencies, big Russian cities remained silent. When, in the autumn of 2018, the desperate Ingush were rallying against the illegal alienation of their republic’s territory, civil society in Moscow did not show any noticeable solidarity.

[R3]: If Moscow had considered the problems of the North Caucasus as its own, and vice versa, Russia would have been a different country.

This lack of regular communication with counterparts from big cities reinforces the sense in the North Caucasus that there is no one common civil society in Russia. At the same time, there is growing confidence that “national civil societies” can be formed on the basis of ethnicity and local culture. All

They believed that the cultural and national revival of the North Caucasian peoples would birth new leaders, whose voices would be louder and more insistent.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this interview-based research allow asserting that since the mid-1990s, despite sporadic bursts of civic activity, the state of Russian civil society has been steadily deteriorating. Throughout this period, the state increasingly resorted to violent practices to resolve conflicts. Under Putin’s rule, the government carried out targeted repressions of independent NGOs and constantly created obstacles to obtaining funding from alternative sources. The state media campaigned to discredit and vilify their activities. By the fall of 2021, with the exception of some very rare oases, Russia and its civil society were essentially a civil desert.

According to the respondents, the main milestones in this downward trend were the Chechen wars of the 1990s, the protests of 2011-12, the annexation of Crimea, and the massive attack on the remaining “network NGOs” in 2019-21. However, the greatest damage to the structure of civil society was done by the 2012 adoption – and subsequent tightening – of the “foreign agents” laws. Civil society actors initially underestimated its destructive potential and did nothing to stand against it in solidarity. The legislation on “foreign agents” made it considerably more difficult for NGOs to perform their functions, whereas the state succeeded in segregating “political” activism from “non-political” activism.

Russian private and corporate sponsors became less willing to donate money to NGOs; in order to exclude any risk to their careers, public officials preferred to avoid even informal contacts with “foreign agents.” In the meantime, the Kremlin highly centralised the system of state grants, which became the single available source of funding for the third-sector organisations. It was only in the spring of 2021 – when law enforcement agencies had almost defeated the last authoritative “network NGOs” – that the civil activists started talking about the “cold civil war” unleashed against them by the state. It was already too late.⁷⁴

The invasion of Ukraine has made the situation for Russian civil society even more precarious. Many representatives of the small urban middle class left the country. Along with the turbulent economy, it created inextricable financial problems for NGOs and left many of them facing a dilemma: either eventually switch to the Russian government grants or shut down. Thus, local and inter-regional horizontal ties between NGOs have been almost ruined.

Now we are witnessing the consolidation of what some researchers called the civil society *po-russki*, or Russian-style civil society.⁷⁵ The state seeks not so much to destroy civil society

⁷⁴ Robyn Dixon, “[Russia’s ‘foreign agent’ law now threatens rights group that survived even Soviet pressures](#),” *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2021.

⁷⁵ Sergej Ljubownikow, Jo Crotty, and Peter W Rodgers, “The state and civil society in Post-Soviet Russia: The development of a Russian-style civil society,” *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2013): 153-166.

as to slowly and reliably bring it under its control – that is, to “re-etatisé” it.⁷⁶ It co-opts NGOs, taking away their political potential in exchange for access to state funding. Organisations that do not accept the “rules of the game” are quickly marginalised. Moreover, it is difficult for them to compete with GONGOs that have huge advantages in financial resources and access to state media. They are patronised by regional and federal authorities, which attracts young people, especially in poor regions.

This study also allows formulating of some observations about the atmosphere within Russian civil society. There are visible signs of disappointment amongst independent NGOs. On the one hand, when it comes to the reasons for the Russian populace’s support for the war, respondents tend to de-subjectify the population of Russia and shift all responsibility for the invasion onto the proliferating fear by the political regime, poor education of the masses, and all-pervasive propaganda. On the other hand, some civil activists admitted that they felt that their work was not in demand – not only by the state but also by people. They saw almost no support from the population, which was especially noticeable during conflicts between civil activists and the authorities. At these moments, society either remained indifferent or took the latter’s side.

In addition, there is dissatisfaction among regional activists with the fact that the Moscow intelligentsia ignores the voices of the provinces and has little interest in what is happening there. Moreover, there are notable differences between representatives of NGOs from Moscow, metropolitan areas, and the North Caucasus, as well as between activists who have emigrated and those who remain in Russia, in how they see the causes of the current catastrophe and the future of Russian civil society.

First, of all the respondents, only Muscovites believed that the dynamics of the development of civil society had been positive before the invasion. Most often, they referred to the surge of protests in 2019 that were related to the “Ivan Golunov case” and the elections to the

⁷⁶ Andrei Kolesnikov, “[Три фронта «общества граждан»: усиление конфликтности](#) [Three Fronts of the Society of Citizens: Increasing Conflict],” *Moscow Carnegie Center*, March 2019.

Moscow City Duma. However, the rest thought that the dynamics of the development of civil society in the Putin era were predominantly negative.

Second, the respondents remaining in Russia are much more optimistic about the future of Russia, expecting fundamental changes after Russia's military defeat in Ukraine, which they hope to see within the next two or three years. It can be assumed that the optimism of the remaining is a psychological defence in conditions of severe stress. Far more pessimistic are the opinions of activists in the North Caucasus and those who have emigrated.

It is also noteworthy that in some republics of the North Caucasus, the mass perception of the war against Ukraine is quite different than in most other regions of Russia. The February invasion invokes the memories of atrocities committed by the Russian army in the 1990s and the subsequent "counter-terrorist operations." The collective memory of the horrors of the Chechen wars not only makes the local population immune to the Kremlin narratives about "Kiev Nazis" but also fuels the demand for the revival of local languages and cultures, which allows the few local activists to hope for the emergence of strong organised civil society structures in the future.

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