

Dozens of Volunteers Look for Missing Woman

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Missing Moscow State University student Irina Artyomova.

Dozens of volunteers took to Moscow streets each day this week to look for a missing history student, combing streets, distributing posters and questioning taxi drivers on the whereabouts of Irina Artyomova.

[Artyomova's page](#) on the Vkontakte social networking site, complete with a "missing" ad after her disappearance, numbered more than 10,600 subscribers as of Thursday afternoon.

Search advertisements were placed on all leading social media and blog platforms, including Vkontakte, LiveJournal, Facebook and Twitter, as well as YouTube. Activists have even managed to place announcements in the airports around Moscow and put an ad on the front page of the prominent news aggregator Newsru.com.

The campaign is unprecedented for a city of 12 million, where 20 to 25 people go missing

daily, according to an article [published](#) by Bolshoi Gorod magazine in July. However, it reflects a growing nationwide trend for grassroots activism, unusual and welcome in a country where all activity is traditionally dominated by the government.

Artyomova, 22, a student at Moscow State University, was last seen exiting a gym on the university's premises on the evening of Sept. 13. She had contacted her mother and a friend, but never arrived at home.

Her mother informed police the same night. Though officials reported launching a search, it produced no results, RIA–Novosti [said](#) Tuesday.

Relatives have voiced no ideas about the reasons for Artyomova's disappearance. Her older sister Ksenia described her to The Moscow Times as a very sociable woman with many friends and dreams of travel.

In addition to police, Artyomova's mother contacted family friend Alina Pavlyukova, a coordinator for the nongovernmental group [Liza Alert](#), which searches for missing people.

The group, in coordination with fellow organization [The Search for Missing Children](#) soon launched another search operation, much more sweeping than the one police had mustered.

"I don't know what we would do without Liza Alert," Ksenia Artyomova said by telephone Wednesday.

"Everyone knows how the police work," she added contemptuously. "Liza Alert searches on dark streets at night — something we'd be scared to do by ourselves."

"Each evening, 30 to 40 volunteers gather in different districts of Moscow to assist in the campaign," Pavlyukova said by telephone Wednesday.

Both groups are fairly young: The Search for Missing Children was founded in May 2009, and Liza Alert grew out of last September's search operation for the 4-year-old Yelizaveta Fomkina and her mentally handicapped aunt Maria, who got lost and froze to death in a Moscow region forest. Though an official search was also launched, it was the volunteers who discovered the bodies at the time.

Liza Alert's Pavlyukova said the group is seeing a definitive rise in volunteers in recent months. A co-founder of The Search for Missing Children, Gayane Stepanyan, confirmed the trend in a telephone interview and said the group's offices currently number 100 volunteers in Moscow, more than 200 in St. Petersburg and a further 23 in Novosibirsk, Siberia's largest city.

Neither activists nor the Artyomovs could say why the search for Irina turned out so large-scale, but Olga Kropotkina, a volunteer, pointed out that the student community is especially prone to taking up a cause, especially for one of their own.

But other causes have also seen an influx of volunteers in Russia lately. Thousands went into the countryside to fight last year's devastating wildfires; environmentalists are waging drawn-out battles to protect Moscow region's Khimki forest and wildlife at the Sochi Olympic site; and the Blue Buckets motorist rights community has, since its inception in 2010,

hounded dozens of officials who abuse their traffic privileges.

There were no reports about Irina Artyomova's fate as of Thursday. But more than 1,000 people join the Vkontake group daily, and searches are continuing.

Any information about Irina Artyomova's whereabouts can be reported at 8-(929)-678-17-40 or 8-(495)-646-86-39.

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