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Krymsk Unites OMON and the Opposition

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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The recent flooding in Krymsk reminded me of the smog disaster two years ago when Moscow and surrounding regions were overcome by summer forest fires. The geographical scale of the disaster was far greater at that time, although it didn't lead to high casualties — unless, of course, if you count the people who later died of lung disease or other harmful effects from the fires and smog.

A rising volunteer movement has been society's response to these disasters, unexpected in a country with a very low level of volunteerism and solidarity. It's entirely possible that it was precisely that volunteer movement from two years ago that laid the foundation for the mass protests in major Russian cities 1½ years later. People actually felt a sense of responsibility for what was happening and acquired the basic skills of self-organization.

After the flooding in Krymsk, a new surge of volunteerism appeared almost automatically. This time around, however, the volunteer movement is unfolding amid an awakened sense of civic engagement. The disaster led to cooperation not only between citizens and the state, but also between government supporters and opposition activists.

Members of United Russia and the organizers of the recent protest rallies wound up together in Krymsk. They might not have worked side by side, but at the very least they worked for the same goal.

At Vorobyovy Gory, OMON policemen helped opposition activists load a truck with goods meant for the victims of the floods in Krymsk. But Gazeta.ru journalist Sergei Smirnov called this a "premature fraternization," noting that those very same OMON officers would most likely end up dispersing demonstrations again in the fall. Regardless, the existence of a kind of civil reconciliation is still encouraging.

The actions of the volunteers themselves, however, have few political motives. People are simply trying to help those in trouble, relying on both pro-government organizations and the opposition. Not all members of the volunteer movement are interested in politics. And this awakening of grassroots initiatives is much more important than any political battles. Society is showing that it is still very much alive and capable of collective action.

It would be premature to get overly sentimental over this reconciliation, given that none of the parties to the conflict is ready to come to an agreement or even negotiate. And it's not even clear whether an agreement between opposition leaders and the government is really what most Russians need.

Meanwhile, the actions of the authorities, particularly in the social sphere, guarantee an increase in problems and conflicts. The struggle to preserve free education and health care, as well as protect nature preserves and cultural landmarks will undoubtedly continue. That struggle will not stop, even during the summer holidays. But the practice of spontaneous civil action that we saw in 2010 and are seeing again now is valuable in itself, regardless of the political situation. Society has acquired the skills of solidarity.

Apathy and a lack of grassroots movements have always helped strengthen authoritarian rule, corruption and bureaucratic lawlessness. Today, we are witnessing a change in society that has nothing to do with politics, which is exactly why political life will now inevitably change as well.

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