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# Coping With Cancer: Russians Show Generosity to Sick Compatriots

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Rita Alkayeva

This article is the third in a series. See below for related articles.

When classmates of 17-year-old Rita Alkayeva found out she had been diagnosed with bone cancer and needed millions of rubles for treatment, they were stunned.

Russian doctors said they had done all they could for Rita, but her family found doctors in Switzerland who said they could treat her for $260,000.

"We couldn't even imagine how to collect this money," Rita's classmate Anna Antipova said.

"Even if her mother had sold their apartment, she wouldn't have saved very much money," Anna said, adding that Rita's mother was a single parent with two children.

Her classmates decided to try to help, and at first they turned to the resource modern teenagers know best: a social network. They created a page on VKontakte to raise money, but they didn't attract many people to the cause, and the Web page was soon closed over violations of VKontakte rules.

The teens then appealed to the charity section in Komsomolskaya Pravda, the popular tabloid, with a request to write about Rita. The newspaper's article in early October sparked a wave of other newspaper and television reports, which made Rita famous nationwide and allowed her classmates to collect the money for her treatment in about a month.

Rita's story is one of many that highlight the growing public spirit of Russians, a phenomenon social scientists say is a result of people's distrust of the authorities, the rise of the middle class and the ease of gaining publicity through the Internet, among other things.

"After being liberated from humiliating and involuntary poverty and from the need to survive ... and after acquiring a certain level of freedom, Russians are attracted to other people," said Boris Dubin, head of social and political research at the independent Levada Center pollster, RIA-Novosti reported earlier this year.

In mid-November, Rita returned to Moscow in critical condition after chemotherapy in Switzerland. She is now recovering ahead of another expected round of treatment.

### Generosity on the Rise

The number of volunteers in the country is growing, according to the perceptions of 103 leaders of nongovernmental organizations, with civil and youth charity initiatives aimed at helping strangers or animals seeing particular growth.

The NGO heads in six large Russian cities were interviewed by the Levada Center between October 2010 and February 2011. The survey did not provide any figures, however.

Activists are motivated by "the understanding that the state will not help you or others or will help [but] not immediately and on a small scale," survey respondents said. Activists work either to compel authorities to fulfill their responsibilities to citizens or to fulfill the authorities' duties themselves.

Some activists are inspired by the belief that they "can improve the situation in some sphere," even if it is only their neighborhood or town, the survey concluded.

Young respondents told Levada that the Internet helps them to connect with like-minded people.

Dubin said that in modern Russia there are three main social groups that do charity work: low-income Orthodox believers, very wealthy people and their relatives, and the nascent middle class.

Donations by low-income Orthodox believers are hard to track, since they act locally and without much fanfare, Dubin said. The group of very rich people who donate to charity is smaller than that of low-income religious people. The group with a growing desire to help people regularly is the middle class, he said.

But the trend of public giving seems to be only starting to grow in Russia.

According to a 2011 Levada poll, 5 percent of Russians had volunteered at a nongovernmental organization once in the previous three years, 2 percent had volunteered two or three times, and 1 percent had volunteered more than three times.

The poll was conducted in July 2011 among 1,600 Russians. It didn't say where it was conducted or indicate its margin of error.

By comparison, according to an article published by Levada in February, 77 percent of people in Norway took part in NGO activities in 2009, and 13 percent in Poland in 2006.

### Maria's Story

The experiences of Maria Gritsai and people's reactions to her story illustrate many of Levada's conclusions about the reasons for the Russian public's growing generosity.

Gritsai, a 35-year-old woman from the Moscow region, died earlier this year after a battle with cervical cancer.

After Russian doctors at a state clinic said they couldn't cure her cancer, Gritsai looked for treatment opportunities abroad. An Israeli clinic offered to treat her for about $200,000, while a German clinic quoted a lower price but also in the thousands of euros.

Lacking the money to pay for such treatment, Gritsai's family appealed to several charities for help. But she was told everywhere that she would have to wait several months for her appeal to be publicized because there were many other people who had already requested the charities' assistance.

So Gritsai's relatives persuaded her to publicize her case on her own and ask for donations.

"I was ashamed. They had a lot of trouble making me do it," she said in an interview in late September. The interview was done at her home, and Gritsai was accompanied by her husband, Yevgeny.

In online forums, Gritsai described her travails with the Russian health care system. Hundreds of comments were posted on her husband's blog and a VKontakte page.

She wrote that her doctors at a state clinic had told her that her cancer was incurable and that getting vital drugs she was supposed to receive free would take months.

Some Internet users responded to her story with diatribes against the authorities.

Svetlana Chernova, the grandmother of a boy who was undergoing cancer treatment in Israel after Russian doctors said they could do no more for him, wrote on the VKontakte page that Russian people had "no respect" for the authorities.

Chernova said her grandson was being treated with money collected through donations after her daughter posted their story online.

Yelena Fisyuk, another VKontake user, accused health care practitioners of being focused

on making money.

"Maria, fight!" she wrote. "The high-and-mighties of the medical sphere only see dollars in their eyes. Hope to God you don't fall seriously ill."

Other users delved into the details of how to help Maria reach her goal.

Igor Parfinenko said that if every one of her supporters at VKontakte donated 1,500 rubles ($49) for each of the chemotherapy courses she needed, she would be "saved."

Bina Pylyu urged other users to bring five to 10 people to Maria's page.

"We will at least distribute the information, and then things will get rolling," she wrote.

Some people who gave money had relatives who had died from cancer, Yevgeny Gritsai said.

Alyona Sukhareva, a friend of Gritsai's who founded and moderated the VKontakte page for Maria's supporters, said that it was "easy" to create a page at the social network but that the site enforces certain rules to make sure a case is genuine.

Specifically, Sukhareva had to post scans or copies of identification and medical documents and bills for treatment as well as reports about Gritsai's progress.

Gritsai collected just less than $60,000 in about seven weeks and traveled to the Grosshadern Clinic in Munich for treatment. She died there in late October after three weeks of treatment.

Gritsai's story "has changed a lot in my life," Sukhareva said. She said she intended to quit her job as a sports coach and work full time for a charity helping women with the same diagnosis Gritsai had.

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