

# Russians Find New Ways to Protest

**The wave of landfill protests sweeping Russia is changing the country's political map.**

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Russia's civil society is a split image. One part of it is genuinely independent: thriving or struggling, as the case may be, but expanding its reach well beyond the proverbial Soviet intelligentsia kitchens. The other part is a careful imitation of civil society, created and lavishly supported by the authorities. Civic activists are facing a momentous choice that will help shape the future of Russia.

Until recently, the Kremlin had mostly been challenged domestically by political activists inspired by anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny's campaign. Now another challenge is unexpectedly looming on the horizon. A growing part of society is developing civic consciousness as a result of nonpolitical conflicts in which entities supported by the authorities intrude into ordinary people's private space.

These new conflicts are typically caused by the arbitrary development and reconstruction of

urban space, the closure of hospitals and clinics as part of efforts to optimize the healthcare system, and the issue of transporting garbage from major cities to the countryside for disposal.

The Arkhangelsk region in northern Russia, for example, has seen massive protests since last August against plans to bury trash from Moscow near the former village of Shiyes. In mid-April, protesters in the Arkhangelsk region and neighboring Komi Republic demanded the resignation of their respective governors over the Shiyes landfills. Previously, the inhabitants of these areas were generally not politicized; on the contrary, they were considered the social core of the current political regime.

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These garbage-related protests, which have also broken out in parts of the Moscow region and elsewhere, at first sight appear to be niche events. Yet like the protests against urban redevelopment and the reform of the healthcare system, these seemingly self-contained issues are growing beyond their original roots and acquiring civic importance.

The initially spontaneous protests have in many cases led to the rise of associations of urban residents, some of which have then turned into permanent civic organizations. In the process, these organizations have developed a capacity to mobilize their supporters, push back assertively against developers (who are usually backed by the authorities), and make their case in court. As a result, a new civic consciousness is emerging that expands beyond the individual's private space into the public domain. The collective defense of courtyards, parks, and woodlands is giving rise to a new feeling of citizenship.

This phenomenon, in turn, is leading to the expansion of civil society beyond existing NGOs to include informal associations that seek to protect the urban habitat and the natural environment. These causes are also being taken up by another relatively new group: elected municipal deputies and local councillors who vow to defend residents' rights, often in opposition to the ruling United Russia party.

The backbone of civil society is made up of rights campaigners, who are in a permanent state of conflict with the state, which has a range of instruments at its disposal to control civil society. These tried-and-tested mechanisms include the controversial "foreign agents" law, under which any kind of foreign financing is considered a reason to slap the status of a "foreign agent" on an NGO, making it very difficult or even impossible for it to continue its work, and the other failsafe trick of opening a criminal investigation into alleged financial violations.

Civil action increasingly leads to its participants becoming politicized. For some activists, the pragmatic solution of their problems — or, on the contrary, defeat in their battle with the authorities — signals the end of their civil activities. For others, the outcome only acts as an incentive to continue and expand their efforts. As the politician Dmitry Gudkov noted during a Carnegie Moscow Center seminar, the behavior of some civil activists has changed drastically in recent times: if, previously, in their quest to find a pragmatic solution to their problem they tried to avoid the conflict becoming politicized, now there are few who are afraid of that happening.

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There is another segment of society that is active and prominent, but operates under the supervision of the state. These organizations seek and receive grants, or other forms of support, from the state. In some cases, they replace organizations that have been branded as “foreign agents.” To coordinate the activities of these supervised organizations with those of the state, the authorities have created so-called “public chambers” and “public councils” attached to ministries or other government agencies. In this way, the state imitates and mirrors independent civil society by using its techniques and intercepting its terminology and initiatives.

Official support for the volunteer movement is a good example of how this works. Since 2017, “socially oriented” nonprofit organizations have been granted access to state funding. As of December 1, 2018, 210,000 such organizations had been registered in Russia, and last year they received 1.7 billion rubles (over \$25 million) in the form of presidential grants. In the words of [sociologist Simon Kordonsky](#), “the intent of the state is to find something that is viable or appears viable and to nationalize it, to make it a part of the state. Our state consists entirely of structures that imitate processes occurring outside the state.”

The government responds to people’s initiatives by either creating parallel structures of its own (for example, the influential Military History Society almost completely overshadows the independent Free Historical Society), or appropriating a successful project, such as the Immortal Regiment event, in which people take to the streets carrying portraits of relatives who fought in World War II (the march has since been led by President Vladimir Putin himself).

The state also keeps a close eye on any projects that it doesn’t control and isn’t ready to nationalize. For example, as the Last Address initiative, which seeks to commemorate victims of Soviet repressions by placing memorial plaques at their last known addresses, grows in scale, it is starting to irritate the authorities. In St. Petersburg, for instance, the city authorities have said that the plaques violate local laws.

Russia’s civil society faces a dilemma. One option is to cut a deal with the state, and operate in full compliance with its terms, allowing organizations to continue their valuable activities, but de facto conferring political support on the Kremlin. The other option is marginalization, becoming outcasts destined to be in constant conflict with the state. In the meantime, the result is conflict and potential polarization within Russia’s civil society.

How the authorities will react to these new forms of activism will vary from level to level. At the top, there is an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, the Kremlin can’t accept the possible politicization of civic protests and social groups that were always loyal and passive. On the other hand, it forces local authorities to do everything possible to avoid any social or political tension in the regions, meaning that in some cases, local authorities have backing to suppress the protests. So from the Kremlin’s point of view, the problem is solvable and manageable.

Elections in various regions, including Moscow (for the State Duma) and St. Petersburg (for governor) in September 2019 will demonstrate the level of dissatisfaction of the population. What is already clear is that Russia is entering a new period of civil and political activity.

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