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The Power of Russia's Black Sea Clean-Up Volunteers

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Installation of booms in the Krasnodar region during an oil spill response operation. **Sergei Malgavko / TASS**

The oil spill in the Black Sea, caused by damage to two Russian tankers in mid-December, also brought thousands of volunteers from all over the country to come and help address the aftermath of the disaster. Many of the volunteers spoke critically of the authorities to tackle the oil spill, while also trying to bring public and political attention to the problem and call for action.

Grassroots environmental movements are one of the few remaining civil society initiatives still present in today's Russia. However, if the volunteers want to have a bigger impact they will need to transform from an emergency-response group to a more professionally operating civic or political structure, which can be challenging at the moment. Such a task will be extremely difficult.

Following the slow and what some experts describe as an inadequate reaction from the regional and federal Russian authorities, thousands of volunteers headed to the affected regions. They helped purify the beaches, removed oil from the sand, cleaned the feathers of contaminated seabirds and ran volunteer facilities to feed injured wildlife. In the first weeks following the disaster, some 2,000-3,000 volunteers came daily to work on the beaches and in wildlife rescue centers. That number fell significantly around mid-January after the holiday season was over.

In addition to grassroots volunteers, environmental NGOs, pro-government NGOs and state environmental and youth organizations also brought people to help deal with the consequences of the oil spill. Regional authorities sent along students of military and marine academies, city and regional administrators and personnel from the emergencies ministry.

At first glance, such social mobilization reminds us of many similar stories when thousands of people organize emergency rescue and relief campaigns when the reaction of authorities is too slow or insufficient. Examples include volunteer efforts during the 2010 forest fires in Central Russia or the 2012 Krymsk flood.

However, this volunteer movement is also part of the larger environmental movement, which, surprisingly, still exists in today's Russia.

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In the few years before the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, environmental and urban development grassroots movements were notably strong and often effective in achieving their goals. Many researchers and analysts viewed them as a sign of a healthy civil society that could provide a basis for further democratic reforms.

But after February 2022, these hopes were dashed as the government cracked down on civil society, restricting their freedom of speech and ability to cooperate with international partners.

Activists have faced repression and prosecution with most international environmental NGOs (like Greenpeace and Bellona) being designated "undesirable" in Russia, rendering their work illegal. At the same time, numerous pro-government NGOs and environmental movements emerged or were created by the state to provide a supposedly safe alternative to green activism in an attempt to hijack the environmental agenda for the Kremlin's benefit.

All these trends created serious challenges for the environmental movement in Russia. In addition, organizations have suffered from the loss of international contacts and cooperation programs and restrictions making it harder for them to secure stable financing.

Predictably, this recent wave of environmental activism around the Black Sea oil spill also provoked a mixed response from the authorities. Many of the volunteers were openly critical of the way rescue efforts have been organized and about how slow and inadequate first recovery measures were. Many of them hoped that calling out local authorities would lead to the federal authorities stepping in to provide support.

Some volunteers already report barriers or even oppression from regional authorities or emergency response agencies. In mid-January police issued a warning to Krasnodar resident Yana Antonova for cleaning up heavy fuel around the Black Sea. The warning states that Antonova "engages in volunteer activities related to animal rescue" and "actively encourages citizens to mass gatherings in order to draw attention to the problem," creating public discontent and "conditions for protest." The activist wrote on social media that she was neither a volunteer nor someone encouraging citizens to form mass gatherings. In reality, she was mostly active in social media commenting on videos featuring local authorities.

Recently, a new Telegram group that gathers complaints from activists about similar cases of oppression appeared.

Related article: Why Has the Black Sea Oil Spill Been So Devastating for Seabirds?

Local authorities do not necessarily need such volunteer activists who also ask inconvenient questions. Some experts argue that authorities only have the energy to exercise direct control, not to work with civil society, even within the restrictive permitted framework.

Local bureaucrats may have some reasons to worry. There are rumors that the governor of the Krasnodar region might soon be replaced, potentially by the current environment minister. This is reminiscent of how the governors of the Archangelsk region and the republic of Komi were fired following massive protests in Shiyes against a new landfill that was supposed to accept household waste from Moscow.

The ongoing case of independent social mobilization around the oil spill in the Black Sea, along with continuing environmental protests across the country, including some successful green campaigns demonstrate that even during a time of increasing political repressions, there is still some space for civic dissent and activism.

It should be noted that not all environmental activists share all further values with oppositional political or human rights activists. Some of them might even have a different view about the war in Ukraine or other domestic or international political issues (even though some environmental activists have also been prosecuted for their anti-war protests).

Still, participation in a grassroots movement or volunteer campaign does provide civic experience, allows people to unite, teaches them to coordinate their actions, formulate their demands, and interact with the media and fellow citizens. It also leaves them space to speak and act critically at a time when doing so is becoming more and more difficult.

It also allows activists and volunteers to discuss topics that represent the common good, seemingly unpolitical. But, of course, the environment is political. Paradoxically, if these groups and people would like to strengthen civil society and even have political influence, they would have to become more openly political, growing from an emergency-response group to a more professionally operating civic or political structure.

As difficult and personally dangerous as that is at this moment, that could change one day.

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