Russian Civil Society Before, During, and After the War with Ukraine

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PANEL 2:

The Democratic Beachhead: Ukraine and the Future of DDRL

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE:

"The Autocratic Challenge to Liberal Democracy and the Future of Global Development: The World 20 Years After the Founding of CDDRL" was a one-day workshop examining the state of democracy and development today held on November 4, 2022, in celebration of CDDRL's 20th anniversary.

The workshop brought together current and former CDDRL scholars to understand the causes and consequences of these global challenges, and to advance a research agenda that can underpin an era of democratic renewal.

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Memo for the CDDRL's 20th anniversary conference

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 raised many questions, expectations, and disappointments in Russian civil society. In this memo, I will offer a few general points that can help understand the state of Russian civil society right before February 2022, its reaction to the war, and the wider lessons that can be learned from this experience. For the purposes of this memo, I will mean by civil society a wide range of activists, projects, and organizations independent from the state, including the liberal political opposition and independent media but excluding illiberal nationalist groups and pro-regime organizations.

Russian civil society in the decade before the 2022 war

Despite what may seem like a grim picture right now, Russian civil society has made a lot of progress during the last decade. Since 2011-2012, when large protests against electoral falsifications broke out in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and across the country, Russian civil society became more sophisticated, better organized, and able to survive and work in the increasingly repressive environment.

The development that was most noticed by Western observers during this period was the rise of Alexei Navalny as the leader of Russian liberal opposition to Putin's regime. But even beyond the activities of Alexei Navalny and his team, there were many other grassroots projects that developed during the past decade. Some of them were non-political, such as many charities and social projects; others clearly targeted the defense of political rights and freedoms. All of them, though, shared some key characteristics: they were increasingly relying on horizontal social connections, volunteer networks, and crowdfunding. Public opinion polls by Levada Center showed an increased sense of responsibility among the public for both their local community affairs and for the country.

Simultaneously with the development of civil society, Putin's regime had been developing its repressive apparatus. This included increasingly repressive laws that gradually made any public activity not allowed by the regime more and more difficult, as well as increased expenses on the security apparatus and the means of suppressing street protests. Until the fall 2021, the pressure had been growing steadily, allowing civil society to adjust, regroup, and continue working. In the fall 2021, however, a few months before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin's regime started an especially wide repression wave against civil society and independent media, which undermined financial streams available to them inside Russia and forced many activists to leave the country. As a result of this last repression wave, by late February 2022, some of the most experienced and known to the public activists, including those at the regional and local levels, were either under arrest or outside of the country.

The anti-war resistance in Russia

The anti-war resistance emerged in Russia immediately after February 24th, 2022. The repression wave of late 2021 resulted in this resistance being very uncoordinated and decentralized compared to any previous protest campaigns. OVD-Info coordinators[1] say that this was by far the biggest grassroots protest in the country that had a wide geographic spread and little to no organization. In the first days and weeks we saw street protests, especially in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and many public petitions calling for an immediate stop of the war. The street protests mostly faded away after the regime enacted laws criminalizing "the discreditation of the Russian armed forces" punishable with several years in prison. Over the course of the next weeks and months we saw the development of new forms of resistance led by the actors that were previously much less known to the public.

These new actors were mostly depersonalized horizontal networks coordinated through Telegram channels. By early June, there were an estimated 55 channels with about 250,000 subscribers across them. Their coordinators, especially those who were physically in Russia, conceal their names for security reasons, and many of these networks work with maximum anonymity of their members. Some of the most known networks are the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, Vesna, and Stop the Trains.

Their methods or resistance are also new. Many activists stopped viewing traditional street protest as effective and switched to less visible forms of resistance. These activities fall into two broad categories. The first one is related to a pragmatic effort to reduce harm done by war. Civil society networks help Ukrainians who fled or were deported to Russia to leave for Europe. After the announcement of mobilization in Russia, similar groups help Russian men who do not want to be drafted to the war leave the country. Some resistance also takes more radical forms, such as railroad sabotage. Guerilla groups mostly led by anarchists and inspired by similar groups in Belarus have been derailing trains transporting supplies for the Russian army in Ukraine, which resulted in a significant increase in the number of railroad accidents.

The second group of resistance methods aims to maintain the anti-war agenda in the public space while keeping their members relatively safe. These methods included anti-war slogans on money bills, anti-war price tags, green ribbons symbolizing the anti-war resistance, public performances of "Women in black," wooden crosses reminding about war victims in Bucha and Mariupol, and others. All these public actions aim to show Russians with anti-war position that they are not alone and to remind those who are trying to isolate themselves from bad news that the war is going on.

Could the anti-war resistance be larger and help stop the war?

The question that begs an answer here is whether this kind of resistance even matters given the scale of suffering in Ukraine. Could Russian liberal opposition and civic activists lead a wide-scale anti-war movement in the early days of the war that could force Putin to stop it? I would argue that, unfortunately, Russian civil society was not in the position to do so. In the early days of the war,

[1] OVD-Info is the biggest grassroots initiative that emerged after the 2011-2012 protests and has been providing legal help to protesters since then.

expectations and hopes of external observers were high, which is understandable given how much of a shock were the first days and weeks of the invasion. But now, several months into it, we can have a more realistic look at what was possible.

There are many reasons for why Russian civil society could not stage a wide-scale resistance and why we see instead an 80% approval of Putin's decision to start the war in the polls. One of the most important ones, to my mind, is that the war and its representation by the Russian state media resonated with the widespread anti-Western sentiment and the value of collective security. Even though there are many manifestations of anti-Ukrainian attitudes in the Russian culture and political rhetoric, they do not seem to be the main driver of the declared public support of the war. In the months prior to the war, polls did not show any increase in anti-Ukrainian attitudes among the Russian public, and the support of the military invasion in December 2021 was at 8%. What the polls did show, though, was an increased fear of a new world war and a nuclear war. Among the many narratives and explanations thrown into the public space by the Russian state media in the first weeks of the war, the ones that were most picked up by Russian social media users were about the threat of NATO and the West to Russia. According to this narrative, the Ukrainian government is a mere puppet of the US and the West, whose goal is weakening and destroying Russia. The Russian public for the most part uncritically believed such statements, which confirmed their already existing fears.

The widespread anti-Western sentiment in Russian society makes it extremely difficult for civil society actors to counteract state narratives. Unlike domestic political issues, national security in Russia is an exclusive realm of the state rather than an arena of debate between the state and civil society. Civil society and independent media could have done more had they not been severely repressed right before and immediately after the beginning of the full-scale war. But even then, a wide-scale anti-war movement that would influence Putin's decision making would have been unlikely.

What does it mean for the future of Russia, Ukraine, the West, and democracy?

Several conclusions that follow from the ideas above:

First, we should not expect an organized and highly visible anti-war resistance in Russia even after a much higher number of casualties. There are many reasons to believe that the resistance will be growing but the forms of this resistance will remain decentralized and hidden from the public eye. We are likely to see local uncoordinated protests and a lot of individual acts of sabotage, such as the refusal to fight in this war. These forms of resistance will gradually undermine the ability of the Russian state to govern, but the process of weakening the Russian state political monopoly may take a very long time.

Second, in the long term, the Russian liberal opposition and civil society may have to rethink the discursive connection of their agenda to the West. It is unlikely that anti-Western attitudes among the Russian public will significantly weaken after the war. Thus, to have a chance that a democratic political agenda will resonate with the Russian public, it should be framed as an authentic one. This is a very non-trivial task.

Third, anti-Westernism, the importance of the collective security agenda for the Russian public, and the historical pattern of political monopoly of the state calls for extreme caution in developing future relations with Russia. Even after eventual state weakening and potentially a more open political period, Russia may be vulnerable to a statism rebound unless robust institutions limiting state power obtain stable public support. It is possible, but development of any institution, by definition, takes a long time. Thus, any rapprochement with Russia must be slow, phased, and conditional on developing political institutions that restrict the power of the executive. Without such institutions, any reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine will not guarantee security for Ukraine and Europe even if the regime in Russia changes, reparations are paid, and all the right words are said by future Russian leaders.

ABOUT CDDRL

Since 2002, the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

CDDRL bridges the worlds of scholarship and practice to understand and foster the conditions for effective representative governance, promote balanced and sustainable economic growth, and establish the rule of law. Our faculty, researchers, and students analyze the ways in which democracy and development are challenged by authoritarian resurgence, misinformation, and the perils of a changing climate.

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