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Green loopholes

The pressure on Russian civil society is enormous, but there is still a little room for environmental activism — for now

While the Russian regime is tightening its grip on civil society, banning international environmental NGOs and persecuting regional activists, environmental issues remain an important field for civil society actors — even during the war in Ukraine. Local green groups are quite successful in addressing and solving certain environmental problems. Above all, however, they are important for strengthening the country's shattered civil society structures. The Russian state responds to this by suppressing the largest movements and/or attempting to hijack and instrumentalise their agendas.

Environmental and urban activism played an important role in pre-war Russia, raising hopes that it could become the basis for a truly successful democratic transition in the country. Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, most environmental groups initially put their activities on hold. After a few months, however, many regional and national environmental campaigns have resumed and new ones have emerged. There are several reasons for this.

Why environmental protests remain relevant

Since the beginning of the war, almost all public anti-war statements and protests have become highly dangerous. According to the monitoring centre OVD-Info, more than 1 000 people have been persecuted and more than 300 jailed. Nevertheless, there still seems to be some room for protest in Russia today — if it is about issues other than the war. In many cases, these are local environmental problems that were often considered 'apolitical' before the war: air and water pollution, access to information about the local environment, the demolition of urban parks and other green spaces, the protection of nature reserves, waste management (including pollution from landfills or plans to build incinerators) and polluting enterprises.

At the same time, concerns about local environmental problems also demonstrate a certain degree of (supposed) normalisation of everyday life in most parts of Russia. This reinforces the feeling that the war is taking place 'far away'. Groups with different political views (those who support the government's actions, those who protest against them, or even those who prefer not to think about the war at all) still have to go about their daily lives — and they often express concern about the immediate environmental situation in their direct neighbourhood.

Many of the local campaigns directly target corrupt government officials or polluting companies, while appealing to the president or federal parliamentarians for help. As a result, these campaigns are often considered by the authorities to be 'authentic' grassroots movements, uninfluenced by 'foreign forces' and therefore apolitical.

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However, even these groups are sometimes suppressed, their leaders expelled from the region or country and legally prosecuted. Experts from the Environmental Crisis Group estimate that in 2023 there were at least 156 new cases of repression against environmentalists in 36 regions of Russia; 'In total, over 174 eco-activists and 29 environmental associations (15 organisations and 14 initiative groups) were put under pressure during the year, 32 activists were physically attacked, 10 new criminal proceedings were initiated, and five activists received criminal sentences (one fine and four suspended sentences).'

However, all these statistics only reflect pure environmental activism and do not include cases where environmental activists have been prosecuted for their anti-war or other political activism. Further data from Important Stories media shows that in the two years of the full-scale war, almost 500 environmental experts and activists were prosecuted, more than 70 of them explicitly for their anti-war stance. Five people were imprisoned for long periods of time.

But in some cases, local environmental campaigns have also been successful. The Environmental Crisis Group counted more than 70 successful campaigns across Russia in 2023. In some cases, local environmental protests have even led to changes in regional governments.

Further

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criticism of these campaigns. It was argued that many groups were only tolerated by the government as an 'outlet' to 'let off steam' rather than channelling the protest energy into political action. This criticism is still valid today. In order for these grassroots movements to truly professionalise and have a greater political and social impact – potentially becoming the basis for the much-needed political change – they need to politicise their actions. Under the current restrictive conditions in Russia, this can of course be extremely difficult.

Further professionalisation is also hampered by the fact that many professional actors, including international NGOs such as Greenpeace, WWF and Bellona, have been classified as 'undesirable' organisations and have had to cease their activities in Russia (although in some cases their former employees have set up new environmental organisations in the country). In the pre-war years, professional experts, lawyers and communications specialists from major NGOs often helped local Russian grassroots movements by providing free legal assistance, organising media and public information campaigns and lobbying at various political levels. This support is now gone, and there are very few critical independent lawyers left who are willing to help environmental activists (especially free of charge), or independent media who dare to report on the respective case.

There are, of course, exceptions. For example, some Russian environmental experts and lawyers (both in Russia and abroad) are still trying to support groups in the areas of civil society environmental expertise, environmental campaigning or legal proceedings. One example is a collective lawsuit by climate activists and experts, including representatives of some indigenous communities, against the Russian authorities in both national and international courts. The plaintiffs criticise that the country's current climate targets do not meet the requirements of the Paris Climate Agreement, to which Russia remains a party. Russia's domestic climate legislation is therefore not in line with international climate protection goals and the well-being of its own people.

Controlling the narrative

In recent years, there have also been numerous attempts by state actors to instrumentalise and hijack the environmental agenda in Russia. This often takes the form of creating their own fake NGOs or supporting

those that take a pro-government stance. These include working groups such as the Narodny Front, the environmental movement Ecosystem, the so-called Clubs of Young Nature Defenders of the Movement of the First (Dvizhenie Pervykh), the youth movement Eko-molodezhka, and foundations such as Kompas and Nature and People.

Although most of these organisations lack the professionalism and expertise of independent environmental experts, they have the competitive advantage of having access to thousands of people, especially the youth, to whom they can promote 'safe, state-approved environmental activism'. As a result, this type of activism is seen by many people in various regions of Russia as a way to make a career in the state system. Some analysts close to the government have also recommended that regional authorities should co-operate with the 'genuine' grassroots environmental movements, thus containing and co-opting them rather than fighting them.

Following the start of the invasion of Ukraine, many environmental and climate experts, activists and journalists left Russia. As a result, the environmental movement is also divided between those who have stayed in the country and those who continue their work from outside Russia. Within the country, an unspoken agreement has emerged among most grassroots environmental groups and campaigns not to discuss the political situation in the country (although heated political debates still occur at times).

Whether local protests can professionalise, institutionalise and lay the foundations for future real civil society and political structures is still an open question.

Overall, the groups in exile and in Russia keep in touch with each other, sometimes meet (mostly online, much less often offline in third countries), organise (sometimes secret) trainings and capacity-building events, exchange information and generally just try to help each other. The experts and analysts outside Russia conduct research and lobbying activities (also in cooperation with international NGOs) and maintain international contacts. Some groups are also working specifically on the environmental and climate impacts of the war in Ukraine. Those active in Russia continue to work with the general public, engage in advocacy, provide local expertise and support activists in court cases.

'The political movement created and led by Alexei Navalny has helped bring environmental issues to the forefront in Russia — and could have

played a key role in its future progress if the opposition politician had not died', commented Russian experts and activists in exile following the politician's death in mid-February 2024. Still, most *political* opposition groups operating outside Russia don't perceive the environmental agenda as a priority and don't integrate it in their programmes or visions for a future post-war Russia.

Building a political opposition or developing political forces from regional grassroots movements is extremely challenging under the current repressive conditions in Russia. Whether local protests can drive forward professionalisation and institutionalisation and thus lay the foundations for future strong civil society and (potentially) political structures remains an open question for the time being. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to monitor these developments, to maintain international contacts and interactions, and to support critical voices inside and outside Russia.



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