

## DEFENDING ONE'S BACKYARD: LOCAL CIVIC ACTIVISM IN MOSCOW

ANDREI KOLESNIKOV AND DENIS VOLKOV | MAY 2017

A localized civil society movement in Moscow is pushing for the government to curb unfair urban development practices and give residents greater autonomy over their own neighborhoods.

In March 2017, major Russian cities witnessed their largest anti-corruption protests in years. But the media attention these rallies have garnered should not lead observers to overlook a more long-standing and localized movement for greater government responsiveness in Russia's capital. Moscow has seen a recent upsurge in local civic activism in response to government inefficiency and controversial urban planning projects. For the most part, these local activists have not expressed political ambitions to date, but the more the authorities fail to address the people's concerns, the more political this activism is likely to become.

Civil society is trying to operate without any formal or informal contract with the state, and many individuals feel that the government plays no useful role in their lives. Many Russians are seeking to carve out some sense of local autonomy, not necessarily by emigrating abroad (though a small number do indeed do that), but rather by pursuing a civic space in which they can live separate from or in opposition to the state on their own terms. This social phenomenon was last seen in the late Soviet era, when so-called *neformaly* (informal organizations) offered a more radical agenda than the state did.

Russia's current crop of national and local elected officials, with very few exceptions, is not capable of bridging this gap between disaffected citizens and the state. However, because neither Russia's ruling regime nor its political order can currently be changed by democratic means, social tensions are likely to grow and become more political in nature. The government can perhaps lower tensions by initiating genuine rather than orchestrated interactions with civil society. One potential way of doing this would be to increase the influence of local officials, though until future elections take place, it will remain unclear how likely this limited reform is to be implemented.

### LIMITED POPULAR FEEDBACK AND BACKYARD SOVEREIGNTY

What is fueling this new urban civic activism? New associations and campaigns are developing amid an environment of little confidence in political parties and government institutions in general. There are few opportunities for ordinary citizens to provide feedback to the government. In-depth interviews with people actively involved in various civic initiatives, local and national officials, and average citizens indicate

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that activism in Moscow is becoming increasingly dynamic.<sup>1</sup> There is a widespread sentiment that the government has given ordinary citizens no role in determining either the city's political life—a state of affairs they have grown accustomed to—or issues in their everyday lives.<sup>2</sup>

When Vladimir Putin was first elected president of Russia in 2000, an unwritten social contract was made between rulers and ruled, whereby ordinary people stayed out of politics in exchange for a small share of state oil revenues. But this contract became harsher after Putin returned for a third term as president in 2012, and its terms have become even more explicitly so since Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014. The prevailing sentiment seems to be that Russians must give up their freedom and economic prosperity in exchange for Crimea and Russia's great-power status.

Much of Moscow's current local activism is concerned with far more narrow, small-scale community interests than the broader political grievances that animated the major protests the city saw in 2011–2012, as well as in March 2017. The 2011–2012 protests were called in opposition to falsifications related to the parliamentary elections and the announcement that Putin intended to return to the presidency. At the time, the biggest rallies took place in central Moscow, most famously in Bolotnaya Square and on Sakharov Avenue. The organizers of the rallies employed techniques of civic activism that those who are involved in the current nonpolitical resistance have studied seriously.

The social composition of today's protesters is quite varied, as was that of those on Bolotnaya Square, who were unfairly characterized at the time by the government as privileged “fat cats.”<sup>3</sup> This group largely split from Russia's ruling regime in 2011–2012. Since then, the country's leaders have drawn their core support from lower-income socioeconomic classes, the so-called *byudzhethniki* or public sector workers, who depend directly on income from the state.

Russia's current economic crisis has prompted citizens to focus on how to tackle everyday problems and adapt to the country's new socioeconomic climate.<sup>4</sup> New activists resent the government's attempts to disturb their living

space or interfere in their daily lives. Their efforts, above all, embody a movement led by city dwellers who came of age in the late Soviet period with expectations of better living conditions, stronger environmental standards, and some political rights.

In Moscow, anger is directed in particular at arbitrary plans for urban reconstruction and development. People are appalled to see their backyards invaded by construction equipment, debris, and dust without their permission. It could be said that the activists are interested in claiming sovereignty over their backyards. They organize themselves locally where they can still exert some influence. This fight for backyard sovereignty has the capacity to expand into a fight for a city district, an entire city, or perhaps even the whole country. However, this shift toward such large-scale activism logically would lead to overt politicization and engagement with issues that are not as “close to home,” to borrow a phrase from Nina Eliasoph.<sup>5</sup> Not all activists are ready for this.

The question that rang out from the podium of prominent activist Alexei Navalny during the 2011–2012 protests—“Who is the power here?”—is still relevant.<sup>6</sup> Trust in official institutions of power has eroded, and in response people are developing trust in local organizations that they create themselves. The emergence of these groups—in neighborhoods, municipal districts, or professional associations—makes for a situation in which the government and its agencies become, in the words of Moisés Naím, “like Gulliver, immobilized by thousands of small ‘micropowers’ that tie them down.”<sup>7</sup>

## LOCAL ACTIVISTS AND LOCAL GRIEVANCES

The members of these activist groups are typical middle-class people, and they mutiny reluctantly but stand up for their rights. They expect a better quality of services from the state while still remaining loyal to it. Their outlook could still be described as paternalistic, in the sense that they expect the authorities to resolve their problems. But this paternalism comes from practical experience; in a country where no issue can be resolved without government bureaucracies, one must adapt to the rules of the game. They understand that it only makes sense to appeal to those in power.

These activists are skilled in how they target official institutions. For example, they make use of elections not with the hope of winning them, but to win publicity. They therefore try to stage their protests during electoral campaigns, when their demands cannot be so easily ignored. This is what happened, for instance, when there was a campaign to protect green fields belonging to the Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy that were slated for development. A plea for help was transmitted during the 2016 Direct Line with Vladimir Putin (an annual program that allows citizens to ask the president questions on live television).<sup>8</sup> This enabled them to make their demands to him personally and skip several rungs in the government hierarchy.

It would be wrong to say that the government is uninterested in what is happening on the ground among ordinary Russian citizens. Most citizens who responded to the Levada-Carnegie survey agreed with one respondent's sentiment that Moscow's city government "listens and pays attention to everything." However, the authorities prefer one-sided, top-down communication with citizens, and they try to use artificial feedback channels, such as online voting, instead of public hearings.

Most activists believe that local officials are in cahoots with developers. The authorities tend to use underhanded methods to avoid proper consultations with local civic associations. One activist said, "There are clever provisions in the urban development code that allow certain projects to be exempt from public hearings." Another activist reported an instance in which "a decision to rebuild a hotel was made. . . . However, instead, a completely new building is going up there. This is simply infill development; there are no documents, no blueprints, no public hearings." Another common sleight of hand is to call a meeting but not inform locals about the time and location, and instead fill the room with municipal employees who make sure that the developer gets the results it needs.

In another case, an activist observed, "[Such] construction is absolutely lawless, in violation of all norms and rules, despite all protests by residents and written appeals to the prosecutor's office. [The developers] just openly say that they paid the necessary bribes and will build because they have 'bought permission.'" In one case, an investigation carried

out by Transparency International Russia found that companies affiliated with Moscow's deputy mayor for construction, Marat Khusnullin, played a role in the development of Dubki Park.<sup>9</sup>

Residents say they are often ready to compromise, but their suggestions tend to be rejected. One resident said in one instance, "No one objected to the general idea of building a church. However, . . . this is not the place to build it; there is no reason to mess up a perfectly wonderful, green boulevard." Another resident insisted, "I would like to reiterate that we are not opposed to construction and to the development of Moscow; we are opposed to the violation of the laws and of our rights."

Unfortunately, the opposing side (whether that be developers, church representatives, or city administrators) generally succeeds in forcing through its decision against the wishes of local residents. Survey respondents pointed out that some decisions on sensitive issues were postponed due to the 2016 summer vacation season and the subsequent parliamentary election in October 2016. The activists feared, rightly, that they would face more pressure when the elections were over. Sure enough, subsequently the activists opposing the development of Torfyanka Park were detained and their homes were searched—an episode that could portend the start of a new cycle of repression against self-organizing groups in Moscow.

### LIMITED DEMANDS, ONGOING PATERNALISM

Public sentiment has changed in Moscow since the height of the 2011–2012 protests. Back then, people expressed great disappointment in the authorities, a widespread sentiment that the country had reached a dead end, and a poorly articulated desire for change. This led Russians to convey their discontent first at the ballot box in the parliamentary elections and then through mass protests.

President Putin and his political system regained legitimacy after the Russian government's forcible takeover of Crimea in 2014. The cost of dissent has also risen since then. Some respondents say that since Crimea's reincorporation into Russia, officials have found a good excuse to ignore the demands of active citizens. As one Muscovite observed, "Ever since

the events in Crimea, it is much easier to brand any dissatisfied person as a U.S. agent or a Ukrainian saboteur than it is to deal with the problem at hand.”

Many activists also attribute the proliferation of conflicts to Russia’s economic crisis, which they say is shrinking budget revenues and thus causing more aggressive state encroachments on public property and land. Another common explanation is that authorities at any level tend to fight any independent social initiatives. As one activist put it, “they generally don’t want any seeds of freedom of thought.” Another stated that “social initiatives are always a pain in the neck for them.”

Yet it is important to note the dual nature of citizens’ attitudes toward their rulers. For all of the citizens’ criticisms of the ruling regime, the government also remains the focus of their organized efforts. Most survey respondents said that their main objective was to gain the attention of the authorities by any means possible. One activist noted, “When the authorities actually do get feedback, they do react. . . . When they are flooded with letters from citizens . . . the officials are forced to react.” In the words of another civic organizer, activists are confident that “in any case, the rallies will show up on the radar of the mayor’s office; if the executive branch wasn’t aware that there is a problem, that there is some dissatisfaction, then it will find out—at the very least, there will be a signal that a problem exists.”

This may be a symptom of instinctive deference to authority—some activists really do believe that the government is unaware of all the bad things that are going on. But it can also be seen as a pragmatic attempt to force the authorities into dialogue. As one activist noted, “The main purpose of these kinds of mass events is to use the media to exert more influence over the municipal government. Because if no one is talking about a problem, this means that it does not exist and nothing needs to be done.”

Respondents frequently noted that their victories were incomplete or temporary. Activists often try to insist on implementation of existing law and the constitution as a cover for protest. A recurring theme in many interviews was that

to successfully defend public spaces that are under attack, it is essential to work with documents, review cadastral maps, attend public debates, and interact with officials, as well as to get assistance from lawyers, public relations specialists, journalists, and other experts. Activists said that corrupt officials, developers, and other violators of citizens’ rights tend to briefly back off and just wait—until the end of an election campaign, until activists get tired of rallying or patrolling a development site, or until the media moves on. Once the hubbub dies down, the violators of public rights often resume their attacks.

### THE PROMISE OF ELECTED ALLIES

A new class of people—elected district council deputies—is also helping change the face of civic activism in Russia. Unlike other local officials who are appointed by the city government, these council deputies are elected and are thus more accountable to the people. In Moscow, most of these deputies were elected in large numbers in the March 2012 elections, on the back of the protests during the preceding months. According to one estimate, they received up to a third of the 1,500 seats.<sup>10</sup> As one local deputy explained, “It is easier for a deputy to unite people—you have certain powers, you have been elected by the people, you are not an appointee. You’re independent, and you’re not bound by party politics.” Several deputies have been able to start local newspapers in their districts with support from residents. Municipal deputies also have the right to submit requests for information, which government representatives must respond to within a month.

When it comes to politics above the local level, most activists say they feel uncomfortable taking on the role of the opposition. As one activist put it, “We [citizens] have absolutely no, I’ll say it again, absolutely no politics. Most activists have no politics. For them, the main thing is, so to say, that their rights are being violated locally. . . . Most activists aren’t protesting just to protest. They began protesting when the lawlessness came to their backyards, to speak bluntly.”

Having been forced to get involved in politics, survey respondents spoke of the importance of getting support from the systemic opposition represented in the State Duma.

Many echoed the sentiment of one activist who said, “We tell all parties: we accept help from anyone willing to help us.” A State Duma deputy has the right to launch special inquiries to obtain necessary documents. He or she can also give legitimate cover to public meetings. As one activist observed, “The police can disperse a public gathering, so instead it is conducted as a meeting with deputies . . . everything is legal, but effectively it is the same kind of rally.”

Previously, civic activists pinned their hopes on the Yabloko Party, a liberal Russian opposition party, but its political influence has faded. Most interview participants mentioned deputies from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) as providing the greatest help—despite their misgivings about the party’s hardline ideology. One activist pointed out, “One must give Communists their due, they know how to work with local residents.” Another activist stated, “They [the Communists] attended public hearings, supported us; at the local level, we received very good support from them ... [even though] CPRF ideology is not for everyone.” However, judging from the Levada-Carnegie interviews, the CPRF itself is extremely cautious in its interactions with the protest movements. The party apparently wants to have its cake and eat it too: it wants to be popular with activists, but it does not want to wreck its relationship with the ruling regime. Almost no civic activists expect support from United Russia.

## THE DYNAMICS OF FUTURE CIVIC ACTIVISM

Civic activism in Moscow is growing and changing, but its future trajectory is still unclear.

In 2016, the number of Muscovites who monitored elections or took part in protests was much lower than in 2011–2012. The criminal prosecution of the Bolotnaya Square protesters, stricter laws curtailing public meetings, and a foreign agents law targeting NGOs have led many to withdraw from public activities and sometimes even to leave Russia altogether.<sup>11</sup> Some of the independent municipal deputies who were elected in March 2012 on the back of the protests have left their seats.

Yet it would be wrong to make wholesale comparisons with the mass mobilization that took place in late 2011 and early

2012. Back then, the public—above all in Moscow—was in a state of extreme agitation that by definition could not last long. At the same time, the legacy of that time is still present, as evidenced by the recent March 2017 protests.<sup>12</sup> Moscow’s youngest and most recognizable candidates in the 2016 State Duma election included several individuals who entered the spotlight during the 2011–2012 protests.

Local associations are gradually amassing experience in the fight for civil rights and are beginning to collaborate. For example, organizations such as Committee-42 (named after an article of the constitution) and the Moscow City Coalition have brought together engaged citizens from various city districts. However, these various activist groups lack a shared understanding of the situation at hand and a common vision of the future. It is too early to talk of a unified civil rights movement at the city level. The best-case scenario is that only the birth of such a movement is occurring.

What happens to such a movement depends to a large degree on the actions of the Russian state and the willingness of officials to interact with active members of society. Russia’s rulers have an interest in easing tensions, if only to assure their own survival. This interest will grow if a socioeconomic depression takes hold in Russia and if ordinary citizens continue to be unrepresented in government or elected bodies.

This could be done through limited decentralization, by delegating some power to local administrative levels and granting enhanced powers to municipal deputies. In this way, city residents could be given proper legal protection from arbitrary urban development and interference in their lives.

If the government does not want the current wave of civic activists to become a political opposition movement, it needs to open proper channels of dialogue with them. As activists aim to prompt a greater government response, many believe that empowering local representatives points a way forward. One activist alluded to this by saying, “I believe that the only agenda at the national level should be to demand the return of powers to the municipal level—distributing authority at the local level.” The next landmark event for local democracy will be in the fall of 2017, when Moscow holds its next

municipal elections, in what will be a sort of litmus test for the health of civic activism in the city.

## NOTES

- 1 This article draws on in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted in Moscow by the Carnegie Moscow Center and the Levada Center in the summer of 2016 with a variety of parties, including organizers of civic initiatives and protest movements, local and national government officials and elected deputies, and engaged citizens. Specifically, participants included activists defending Dubki Park, Khodynskoye Pole, and Torfyanka Park; advocates representing defrauded housing investors; truckers protesting toll fees for using federal highways; members of municipal district resident associations in Moscow; activists that favor historical preservation and oppose infill development; and representatives of election monitoring associations, as well as three municipal deputies and one State Duma deputy. This analysis does not paint an exhaustive picture but rather depicts and highlights a broader trend of increasingly dynamic activism in Moscow.
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- 4 See, for example, regular monitoring of social indicators by the Institute of Social Analysis and Forecasting of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, <http://www.ranepa.ru/ucenyiy-issledov/strategii-i-doklady-2/bulletin>.
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- 7 Moisés Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 237.
- 8 “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” press release, Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, April 14, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716>.
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- 10 Maria Zheleznova, “Chto mogut deputaty munitsipal’nykh sobranii” [What the deputies of municipal councils can do], *Vedomosti*, April 16, 2012, [https://www.vedomosti.ru/library/articles/2012/04/16/partiya\\_malyh\\_del](https://www.vedomosti.ru/library/articles/2012/04/16/partiya_malyh_del).
- 11 “Russia: Four Years of Putin’s ‘Foreign Agents’ Law to Shackle and Silence NGOs,” Amnesty International, November 18, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/russia-four-years-of-putins-foreign-agents-law-to-shackle-and-silence-ngos/>.
- 12 Alan Taylor, “Anti-Corruption Protests Across Russia,” *The Atlantic*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/03/anti-corruption-protests-across-russia/520902/>.

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