

## Russians organise themselves to protect their interests

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The beginnings of a new kind of social self-organisation have been apparent in Russian society since 2005, when Russians across the country took to the streets to protest against government attempts to cut social benefits. Signs of this include the emergence of informal grassroots social movements, which are mainly aimed at protecting private property, consumers' rights and living standards. Such initiatives are usually local, and concern the specific problems of residents in a given region or place. Social activity of this type is apolitical, does not as yet engage the masses, and is mainly based on the determination of the protest group's leader. It is usually short-lived; most movements of this kind end their activity once the given problem is resolved, and they rarely turn into officially registered non-governmental organisations.

The scale of such self-organised activity is rather small as yet; most Russian people remain passive which is an inheritance from the Soviet past. However, the new phenomenon of social activism is a sign of major changes in the mentality of part of Russian society, as a consequence of gradual improvement of living standards and sense of financial stabilisation. The Russian people, whose living standards have regularly improved since 2000, are increasingly prepared to stand up for their rights and interests.

### 1. Self-organisation by Russian people: the scale of the phenomenon

Passivity and a demanding attitude towards the state are traditionally deeply rooted in Russian society, mainly as an inheritance from the Soviet times. The view that the government is obliged to provide extensive social care to citizens and resolve any social problems, from healthcare and education to general improvement of the living conditions, is widely shared by Russians.

Although passivity is the predominant approach, a new phenomenon of social grassroots initiatives, related indirectly or directly to the protection of property rights, has arisen in Russia over the past few years. Spontaneous initiatives to protect residents' rights, as well as protest movements against controversial decisions by local authorities, the corruption of state officials and agitating for the protection of consumers', patients' and workers' rights, have started emerging in various regions of Russia, both in Moscow and in other smaller regional cities.

Although no precise survey which could provide an overall summary of the phenomenon has been carried out, an attempt to assess its scale may be made on the basis of data from various sources, which either describe or support this type of social activity in Russia.

The non-governmental foundation National Assembly estimates that 228 social self-organisation groups had appeared and nearly 100,000 people had taken part in actions they organised between January 2005 and December 2007<sup>1</sup>. The Institute for Collective Action, which monitors protest activities in various regions, lists dozens of manifestations a week on its website<sup>2</sup>. Between several and several hundred people take part in the protests, making various social and economic demands. Another form of grassroots activity is the operation of independent trade unions which struggle for higher wages and the improvement of working conditions. Even though official statistics noted as few as 8 legal strikes in 2007<sup>3</sup>, according to unofficial data from the Institute for Collective Action, there were approximately 35 strikes, the longest of which lasted 3 weeks. LABOURSTART, the website which informs on activity of trade unions all over the world noted up to 25 various kinds of strikes and hunger strikes in Russia in April 2008 alone<sup>4</sup>.

The aforementioned data indicates that initiatives of this kind currently **are not happening on a mass scale**. From the perspective of the whole country, a relatively small group of people are engaged in this sort of activity. Most of them can be classified as members of the middle class, which is just emerging in Russia and which accounts for 10% to 20% of the Russian society, depending on the methodology used<sup>5</sup>. The number of Russian self-organisation movements seems quite modest in comparison to the thousands-strong demonstrations of youth associations inspired by the government, or in the light of the existence of over 243,000 non-governmental organisations registered across Russia<sup>6</sup>. However, in contrast

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to pro-Kremlin organisations and even to many Russian NGOs<sup>7</sup>, **their activity is authentic and grassroots**.

Regardless of its small scale, the phenomenon of Russian self-organisation is receiving increasing attention from the media

and minor political parties (mainly the opposition), which hope to gain more support by making 'catchy' social demands. An example of such activity was the engagement of the opposition parties Garri Kasparov's United Civil Front, Yabloko and the Communist Party in protests held on 25 October 2008 in a dozen or so Russian cities as part of the so-called National Day of Rage. Local protest movements, which demanded solutions to local problems and social issues, were the main organisers of those actions.

The federal authorities are rarely interested in this type of movements, treating them rather neutrally, and do not see them as a political threat. However, in some cases the federal government has evaluated the activity of some of these social movements positively, appreciating their role in resolving local problems, and Moscow sometimes even supported selected initiatives.

## 2. Special features of grassroots social movements in Russia

The phenomenon of self-organisation in Russia is significant not because of its scale (which is currently small) but rather as a representation of the **changes happening to the mentality of part of Russian society, whose living standards have improved over the past few years, and whose awareness of economic rights has increased**. Economic data shows that the real income of Russian citizens has been rising by over 10% annually since 2000<sup>8</sup>. People who became involved in the activity of grassroots self-organisation movements cannot really be classified as representatives of the poorest layers of the Russian society. They are people who already have 'something to lose' (such as their own savings, or their comfort of living) or who want to get something more than what they already have

<sup>1</sup> Data from the report 'Obshchestvennoye obyedineniye novogo tipa: sozdaniye banka dannykh, analiz i perspektivy dalneyshego razvitiya' from the Russian foundation National Assembly, developed with support from the Dynasty Foundation and the Open Society Institute, Moscow 2008.

<sup>2</sup> [www.ikd.ru](http://www.ikd.ru)

<sup>3</sup> Russian labour law imposes very restrictive requirements on organising a legal strike. For example, the Labour Code of 2001 states that one of the conditions for a strike to be deemed legal is that the workers or their corporate organisation should be a member of the All-Russian Trade Unions, which is often a serious limitation to newly-created regional organisations. Employers and local authorities often use various forms of pressure on the strikers (in some cases, the organisation of the protest was even deemed to constitute extremist activity).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Greene, Graeme Robertson, 'Novoye rabocheye dvizheniye v Rossii', *Pro et Contra*, March-June 2008, Moscow Carnegie Centre.

<sup>5</sup> In 2007, the Russian Centre on Living Standards ([www.vcug.ru](http://www.vcug.ru)) estimated that the middle class accounted for 10% of society, using an income of at least US\$1,000 as a benchmark for its estimates (<http://www.trud.ru/issue/article.php?id=200705170830401>). In turn, the Centre for Macroeconomic Research estimated that the middle class in Russia constituted approximately 20% in 2007 (assuming an income ranging from US\$300 to US\$400 per family member) (<http://www.rustrana.ru/article.php?nid=22392>).

<sup>6</sup> The number of NGOs registered by the Federal Registration Service by 1 December 2007 <http://www.oprf.ru/files/final.pdf>

(for example, better working conditions). Most of their demands boil down to the protection of rights to the private property they have acquired; at the same time, their demands also illustrate their increasing expectations concerning their living standards. This also provides grounds for the thesis that there is a **relationship between the improvement of living conditions in Russia over the past few years and the increase of Russians' activity aimed at protecting their rights and economic interests.**

### *The nature of the movements*

It is characteristic of the self-organisation movements that in their struggle for their interests **they refer to the applicable laws** and usually strive to enforce the existing legislation (quite rarely they aim at introducing some minor amendments to legal regulations). The use of other forms of struggle, such as demonstrations, strikes, hunger strikes, etc., is principally aimed at giving publicity to the problem, attracting the authorities' attention and enforcing their rights

**The key features of Russians' social activity are: political neutrality, appealing to the applicable laws, and the determination of the protest group's leader.**

on the basis of binding legal regulations.

Those initiatives are **apolitical** in their nature; the protesters struggle for particular economic interests, and do not make any political demands (and even distance themselves from formal politics). If they criticise any authorities, these are usually local or

regional entities, and the criticism concerns a specific issue. Only if they do not manage to solve the problem at the local level do they start appealing for help to the federal authorities. The activists themselves try not to support any political factions, and usually refuse to join political parties, when offered.

At the same time, the range of this activity is very small as it is limited to a local problem and **rarely produces any bonds of solidarity** with other protest movements. It hardly ever leads to the formation of coalitions aimed at the solution of similar problems which are founded on any level broader than local. The self-organisation movements usually **operate informally**, without officially registering their activity, and take the form of support groups consisting of a small number of individuals engaged in the protection of their own interest. Their activity usually ends once the matter for which they have been struggling is settled. As a rule, they do not have their own permanently established offices; their meetings are often held in private flats and the costs of operation are funded by members' contributions. Initiatives of this kind usually emerge thanks to the **determination and devotion** of a single person who becomes a natural **leader of the group**, and often devotes his/her family life and professional career to a given matter.

### *The main motivations*

Russian self-organisation movements are extremely diversified, in terms of both the problems which they want to solve and the forms of their activity. Social initiatives of this kind are usually stimulated by issues such as gross violations of ecological standards (for example, the development of urban green and recreational areas with buildings, and the pollution of the natural environment caused by industrial plants), housing problems (frauds committed by developers, the terrible conditions of housing infrastructure, evictions from buildings allocated for other investments) and the protection of workers' social and economic rights.

**Struggle for the protection of flat ownership.** There is a number of grassroots social committees which have been founded by people cheated by developers. It is estimated that over the past few years nearly 100,000 people have been aggrieved all over Russia as a consequence of imprecise regulations (including legal loopholes), negligence, corruption and building company frauds<sup>9</sup>; the victims who purchased flats, usually lost their whole life savings. Social 'housing' committees consist of such people, and they attempt to enforce their rights in courts, and to force through resolutions to such problems at the local and federal government level. They have also organised

<sup>7</sup> The 'Nashi' (Our Folk) youth movement, operating under the auspices of the Kremlin, has organised several large demonstrations on such occasions as Victory Day or National Unity Day. However, such large numbers of demonstrators were mainly achieved by offering them various kinds of bonuses, such as cinema tickets, free excursions to Moscow or opportunities to go to summer camps. In turn, some NGOs in Russia have aimed at obtaining financial grants (which are also offered by the state) rather than at stimulating social grassroots initiatives.

<sup>8</sup> According to data from the Russian Statistical Yearbook 2007.

<sup>9</sup> 'Obmanutyie soinvestory nazvali sebe tsenu', *Kommersant*, 20 February 2007.

a number of protest actions and hunger strikes to attract the Russian government's attention to the problem over the past two years. One successful initiative of this type led to the launch of proceedings against the Social Initiative company on charges of cheating nearly 6,000 people from several regions of Russia. In turn, following an intervention by housing committees in Nizhny Novgorod, the regional authorities have paid out compensation to victims of crooked developers, and have been trying to complete the initial investments by using regional budget funds<sup>10</sup>.

**Protecting living standards and the environment.** One of the most common forms of Russian self-organisation is the formation of residents' committees to protect green areas and resist the development of recreational areas and free spaces within housing estates, as well as pollution of the natural environment. Residents' committees have been created in many cities in Russia. They usually gather signatures to protest against unwanted local investments and organise demonstrations and other actions. One of the most widely publicised initiatives of this type is the eighteen month-long struggle by the residents of Khimki (a suburb of Moscow), to protect a forest which is to be cleared and replaced with a highway and new housing estates. This summer, the residents organised a protest action by setting up two tent camps in the forest. Then, as their actions appeared to have been unsuccessful, they lodged a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg<sup>11</sup>.

**Against official lawlessness and regulations which adversely affect consumer interests.** One of the best examples of such movements is the car owners' movement Freedom of Choice protecting the interests of Russian drivers, which was established in 2005. The movement

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appeared as a protest to government plans to impose a ban on using cars with right-hand drive, which are very popular in the Asian regions of Russia. They launched a spontaneous protest with columns of cars driving through the centre of Moscow and other Russian cities (especially in the Far East, where most cars are imported from Japan). The protest turned out to be a successful

media event and made the government give up its plans of imposing the ban. Later, the car owners' movement held protests against petrol price rises, fought for the rights of handicapped drivers and protested against the lawlessness shown by the drivers of 'privileged' cars (most of which belong to state officials and representatives of law enforcement agencies), who regularly violate traffic regulations and cause numerous accidents. The car owners' movement is one of the few to have formally registered its activity as an NGO<sup>12</sup>.

**Demands to raise wages and improve social conditions.** Protests by employees working for large and profitable enterprises have become increasingly common over the past few years in Russia. For example, in 2007, strikes took place at the Ford factory in Saint Petersburg and at the Surgutneftegaz oil corporation, and in April 2008 access to Moscow was blocked as a consequence of a one-day strike by commuter-train workers. Such actions were often organised by **small, newly-created trade union organisations** independent of the all-Russian Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (which, contrary to its name, is a structure loyal to the authorities, and is the successor to the Soviet-period organisation). The features which makes trade unions similar to social protest movements (regardless of the differences resulting from the special conditions in which trade unions operate, such as attempts to formalise their activity) is the fact that these are authentic grassroots initiatives from the workers. Unlike in the second half of the 1990s<sup>13</sup>, when Russia was the scene of massive strikes by people demanding the payment of outstanding wages, the workers now demand wage raises and improvement of their working conditions. Another reason for the change of the workers' demands are intensifying contacts between Russian activists and international organisations which support trade unions, as well as increasing knowledge of the working conditions and standards prevalent outside Russia.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the problem of people deceived by housing estate developers, see <http://www.help.su/>

<sup>11</sup> For more information on this subject, see <http://www.ikd.ru/node/7607>

<sup>12</sup> The website address of the car owners' movement is <http://www.19may.ru>

<sup>13</sup> The last time when mass strikes were held in Russia was during the economic crisis of 1997–1999. The strike of desperate miners, who struggled for payment of outstanding wages in 1998 reached the largest scale.

## 3. Conclusions

1. Grassroots social movements to defend property and social rights are mainly the effect of the **improvement in living conditions** over the past eight years. The unusually high demand for oil & gas during that period has led to a general increase in wages in Russia, giving rise to expectations of further improvement. Russian appetites have also been whetted by the government itself by its pro-social rhetoric and promises of vast budget expenditures on social policy and the sustainable growth of wages and pensions. The improvement in living standards has modified the motivation of the grassroots movements. Unlike in the previous decade, popular activity is being triggered not by desperation (such as demands for the payment of outstanding wages) but rather by the desire to protect property or economic rights which have already been acquired.
2. The change in the nature of grassroots social activity illustrates a **significant change underway in the mentality of part of Russian society as a consequence of the improvement in living standards and financial stability**. The struggle to protect property acquired and living standards is proof of **increasing economic and legal self-awareness** among some social groups in Russia, mainly among the emerging middle class. At present, most of Russian society seems to have accepted selected elements of the capitalist economy, including the right to private ownership, especially as regards personal property. This acceptance does not always extend to the property of other people (especially the enormous fortunes of the Russian oligarchs), but it nevertheless demonstrates that Russians now have a different attitude to private property in comparison to the Soviet period, or even the 1990s.
3. Many social protest movements have emerged **in reaction to the inefficient operation of state institutions** (the lawlessness of officials, corruption and a lack of any opportunity to enforce one's rights in court), which has become especially deleterious to people who seek to protect their own economic interests. The social activity of Russian people often begins at the moment when they are facing the loss of their property or the violation of their economic rights. Thus, paradoxically, the inefficiency of state institutions and the pathologies in the country's bureaucracy have come to stimulate social activity by the Russian people. In the longer term, this 'struggle for my own' may give rise to more active civil attitudes in Russian society.
4. Although many self-organisation movements have to overcome the incompetence and corruption of lower-level authorities, **they often treat the federal authorities as an important instance of appeal** on whose assistance they rely. In turn, the federal government shows little interest in those movements, due to their dispersion and apolitical nature, and do not see them as a serious social and political force. However, in some cases, the state authorities seem to perceive this type of activity as a way of giving vent to public dissatisfaction, and as a method to solve many local problems.

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