

OSF Russia Strategic Planning Meeting Notes

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Purpose: Identify joint priorities for OSF's Russia activities in the coming year. How can we most effectively collaborate, considering the deteriorating political environment for our partners?

Political Context

The human rights context has greatly changed from 2006 to 2012: the Medvedev period allowed for a number of improvements and significant openings for NGOs. Amendments to the NGO law in 2006 led to campaigning on behalf of NGOs; many of our grantees benefited during this period. Surkov established ties with many groups that were willing to cooperate with the state and our partners served as experts in key processes like police reform. A space was created for modernization and for the inclusion of civil society during Medvedev's term. However, pressure has come back very quickly in the short time that Putin has been back in power.

The Russian protests deeply affected the life of NGOs. The state had been providing money for self-organization, thinking this would defuse the possibility of large-scale opposition. But by encouraging self-organization, they had opened up a Pandora's Box. People became active and began to feel that it was possible to change something; the door was opened for self-mobilization.

The state has responded with repression and political prisoners, in order to instill fear in the population. The state is also working to undermine social support for the protests. Its support of socially-oriented ("good") NGOs is a way to divide the community, while the foreign agents law frames the protests as foreign money undermining Russia.

Main types of NGOs:

- Social oriented-NGOs: new growing class, receiving and regional federal money to provide social services that can be described in economic terms – elderly, kids, health, media, etc. These groups accomplish a lot; need more monitoring and study of results to understand the progress that's been made. State has said these will survive and won't be bothered.
- Analytical centers: questionable how they will survive and be able to openly promote future policy changes.
- Human rights NGOs: the field has become more nuanced than in the past. The Presidential Council on Human Rights has some good people, but Putin may have diminished the Council's

potential power by widening the group: pro-Kremlin voices were brought in, while older members with dissident backgrounds left the council. There is a “second generation” of human rights players who remain on the Council; it will be important to see if these people can continue to receive foreign money.

We need to focus on new organizations and new people who can form basis for future activists, *after* this second generation. Thematic groups (such as LGBT, HIV groups) can become very strong human rights activists and play a wider role, as Stephania Kulaeva (ADC Memorial) did.

There are many young people in the regions who would really like to change things, but it’s hard for them to find a community and they’re under great pressure – important for us to consider them as well.

Q&A:

Elizabeth: Are human rights groups investing enough in the next generation – the “middle generation” of younger leaders in traditional organizations? Are there leadership roles for them in current human rights organizations? Are these individuals being nurtured? Are they a missed opportunity that we could be supporting?

Lena: Some organizations do have young people engaging in their activities, but they don’t take leadership positions. This is a competitive sphere because the state is very active with engaging young people. We need to focus on groups that have the potential to more deeply engage with young people.

In terms of the “middle level,” institutional support to organizations creates a space for this level of positions. However, we also need to allow new organizations to appear, as some groups don’t have this space.

Iva: Concern about the Duma’s push on internet censorship – heard that people who comment online need to register or that this kind of communication would be blocked. Is this still happening, and can we send targeted messages to youth?

Lena: Visited Kirov, where we funded a social marketing program, and met with young people who can’t imagine their lives without the internet. There are important programs engaging on this topic. The influence of Putin among this population is diminishing day by day.

DC Update

Magnitsky: The House is voting today on its version of Magnitsky (which applies globally rather than just to Russia), then will go to the Senate – Administration says Senate will probably vote on the Russia-centric version in December and President will probably sign. Russia has promised retaliation, but unclear how they will react. OSJI is carrying the Magnitsky legislation – we are very much exposed as an institution.

USAID: USAID's kick-out didn't end all US-funded activities, so the USG has mechanisms to continue funding. They want to dilute the bilateral component, so are looking at opportunities to take the US face off of funding (through an international foundation like European Endowment for Democracy). Some of the profit from the US-Russia Investment Fund set up the US-Russia Foundation; there is \$100 million leftover, half could go to fund civil society in Russia.

Foreign Agents: It's unclear what the situation will be after the 21st. Only major organizations could be shut down, or not. But it's important to remember, as Masha Lipman said, that if the Russian government wants to shut down an NGO, it can do so anytime, legally or illegally.

Advocacy

As the International Advocacy Office is closing, the International Advocacy strategy will likely migrate into regions and programs. Over time, there may be a Eurasia program, and lots of Advocacy Office activity is included within this region. Therefore we should think beyond the country-specific in a broader way.

International advocacy – Good news: with Europe looking to stand up more to Russians, there are new opportunities and new allies for us. Bad news: Russian is much less willing to listen to outsiders this time around – our advocacy targets are more closed than they have been in past.

Multilateral advocacy – Trying to work in places where Russia values its membership (Council of Europe). Seeking to do so through the Solidarity Platform and put an east-of-Vienna face on the problem of Russia.

Domestic advocacy – Impressed by the inventiveness of Russian groups met during the advocacy training. A lot of knowledge is still needed for groups to do advocacy targeting the government. Groups don't work together sufficiently and need to cultivate allies.

Small changes at the end of Medvedev era – new political parties, election of governors – could be advocacy targets? These officials could potentially care more about the people who elected them as opposed to those who are above them. We should take advantage of this additional opportunity, focusing on local government advocacy. Right now we are much better at making noise internationally than at making advocacy local.

There was an idea to use Sochi as a way to work positively with government on xenophobia – big events like this can get people to coalesce around a (positive) message. Sochi is very controversial, World Cup could be better. Nevertheless, Olympics could still be a way to get issues in the media. Should talk to SHARP about their experience with World Cup in South Africa.

Trainings: After groups have a basic level of understanding of advocacy principles and tactics, they need project-based support focused on local issues, in order to learn by doing. Need to establish advocacy culture across the organization and create more systematic approach to advocacy training within OSF.

Local experts should be involved in the training, not necessarily as core trainers but to provide expertise on particular issues or for role-playing, as they know the local context well; they help bridge the “outsiders” and the local community. This is also a good way to work with young people and invest in the new generation. More sophisticated trainings could be done to create new trainers – but this would be a different training if it was passed on to a local group. Something is gained by the donor role in leading a training. (Lena suggests that Russian groups – Kozlov, Dzhibladze, Sutyazhnik – could do at least the basic trainings, and then OSF could go in-depth with more experienced people.)

Solidarity Platform – A crucial coalition, as it’s very important that advocacy on the region comes *from* the region. It takes time for the work to progress and for the region to own the advocacy, so we are waiting for results to show. There is a need for an incubation period – OSF needs to continue funding this, hopefully in conjunction with DRL (which has indicated interest in continuing to fund) and others. For now, the Solidarity Platform can’t take funding (not a legal entity), the members have to do it themselves. Debate about whether to actually create an established organization – fear of getting too bureaucratic too fast.

Why Russia?

Why is it still important for OSF to fund in Russia? What can we hope to effect in the region?

- Key open society themes and issues are highly relevant in Russia
 - Transparency and accountability (anticorruption)
 - Rights and justice (i.e., criminal justice, policing, rule of law, LGBT, women's rights)
 - Migration
 - Inclusive education (disability, Roma)
 - Media freedom, access to information
 - Health (access to medicines, HIV, harm reduction)
- Copy-cat problem: Russian tactics are picked up by Central Asia (ie, anti-extremism law in Kazakhstan)
- Russia's influence in UN Human Rights Council – pushing resolution that says human rights should take into consideration traditional values of country in question – very few HR orgs that are following the council saw this coming – has large implications beyond Russia
- Participation in global international regimes (G20, ICC, WTO) – a more open Russia creates changes in international governing bodies
- European Court litigation

What must be done?

- **Support core human rights agenda**
 - Ensure well-organized & effective human rights groups (and individual activists) have financial and legal support
 - Security
 - Maintain a flexible approach, depending on how new laws will be implemented
 - Fund those orgs that have no chance of getting state money (e.g. LGBT)
 - Maintain “base tier” of essential groups (core funding), without whom the third sector could not effectively function, and then provide project funding for expert groups on particular themes; enable the work of independent activists
- **Responding to the “worst-case scenario”**
 - Continued monitoring and follow-up on procedural implementation of the laws
 - Could the Solidarity Platform be a structure to put aside funds from all our programs for potential of negative outcomes in the near future?
 - Other international examples we can learn from?
 - Closed Societies Working Group
 - What are our obligations to targeted groups?
- **Enable self-organization and self-mobilization**
 - Enable the work of independent activists

- Platforms for organization – physical and virtual
 - Legal support and security
 - Don't force them into organizing into an NGO
 - Do “graduates” of programs like YHRM and HRRC schools need seed funding?
 - Know-how and resources for those that want to engage in activism
 - Peer learning from those who already have the skills
 - Encourage pre-political activity
 - Citizen interest in “ordinary” issues (fix my street etc.)
 - CAVEAT: Young activist groups are actually the ones that are often at odds with and threatening to minorities/marginalized populations. Local activism can draw upon themes of national and Russian exceptionalism
- **Integrate Russia into global debates**
 - Address Russian detachment from international political realities
 - Provide a wider platform for Russian voices on issues beyond Russia
 - Link with colleagues who work in fSU region AND look beyond the fSU (for example, growing conservatism in Europe – parallels on some issues)
 - Potential topics: Internet freedom, global warming, ...
- **Advocacy**
 - International
 - Engagement with Europe & the EU
 - Pressure on Russian officials has more impact from Europe than from the US
 - Germany has been tightening its stance on Russia; Poland's growing weight
 - Council of Europe (other “closing”/closed countries also members)
 - Russia's new membership in WTO (push rule of law or corruption work?)
 - Link with Eurasian partners
 - Domestic
 - Local government (post-Medvedev opportunities – political parties; election of governors); potential for change at the very local (village!) level
 - Training on basic skills, followed by support for specific projects/campaigns
- **Capacity building and strengthening the third sector**
 - Fundraising
 - Increasing organizations' fundraising skills, esp. domestic fundraising
 - Supporting resource centers that assist NGOs
 - Getting more EU money to Russian partners (difficult application process)
 - Influencing other donors
 - Enabling a culture of philanthropy (still at low levels – no tax breaks for donations – but evolving) - CAF
 - Security
 - Addressing threats to activists and organizations
 - Physical security, digital security, executive security – tying security to the org's mission
 - Link to OSF-wide initiative on security (Elizabeth & Vera)

- Networks/coalitions
 - Bring together actors, alliances from different spheres (ie, Navalny & PHP)
 - Maintain links between groups, in the face of state attempts to divide the sector
- Public outreach
 - Improve NGOs' reputation within society, raise public appeal (state less likely to target groups with popular support) – *Agency for Social Information does this*
 - Engaging business communities and others outside of traditional HR circles
 - Changing attitudes, inculcate inclusivity (*caveat: we are not Madison Avenue*)
- Increasing org transparency
- Governance structure and diversifying boards
- Financial and human resources management
- **Themes**
 - Political prisoners (Bolotnaya, etc.)
 - Media censorship and control (pressure in independent media – work w/ NMP)
 - Surveillance
 - LGBT (push against propaganda laws, which are driven by local officials, not by the federal gov't)
 - Women's rights
 - Disability rights and inclusive education
 - Prisons
 - Lots of funding is going to monitoring; where is our money best placed?
 - ONKs don't have sufficient \$ for travel and legal representation
 - Policing and police violence (*Public Verdict, Man and Law, etc.*)
 - Migrants
 - Transparency and accountability
 - State spending – monitoring, analysis
 - Tracking cross-border transactions and business purchases
 - Connections between accountability, human rights, and ordinary citizens' interests

Tools and tactics

Chris Stone's list of OSF tools: (1) grantmaking, (2) direct advocacy, (3) litigation, (4) scholarships, (5) financial investment, and (6) direct assistance to governments

Tools available to us – current and potential (tools we do **not** currently used are marked with an *)

- **Institutional support/core funding** give organizations the flexibility to grow, develop new directions/priorities, respond to opportunities, and nurture younger staff
- **Project funding** allows us to focus on particular issue areas; orgs build expertise
- * **Fellowships** promote individual leadership, including for those not part of a formal org.

- **Convenings and trainings** create cross-sectoral links and alliances
- **Capacity building** on governance, fundraising, strategic communications, advocacy, & outreach improves the effectiveness of the work and raise the reputation of the sector
- * **Challenge fund** encourages fundraising – additional support to match funds raised
- * **Litigation** (we don't currently cooperate with OSJI's work in Russia, and they do not work with our partners)
- **Funding analytical research** on, e.g., implementation of new laws, new political parties

Next Steps

- Finalizing “Why Russia”
- Finalizing shared goals
 - Key shared priorities for next year
 - Individual program strategies
 - What are we doing next year that will trickle over into 2014?
 - What are we incubating for the future? (“would like to see”)
- Establishing shared criteria for our “base layer” of core support
 - Ability to break out of the org's silo; good links out ‘outside world’
 - Advocacy ability
 - Relationship w/ local officials
 - Participation in wider networks of NGOs/key players
 - Reputation
 - Contribute to domestic dialogue
 - Links to media
 - What else?
- Is there a network-wide strategy that would be Russia-germane? (must be ambitious, impactful and time-bound)
 - Closing societies
 - Inclusion and migrants
 - Enabling pre-political civil society activity
 - What else?