

**Statement of Evgenia Chirikova
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before the**

**Subcommittee on Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related
Programs**

of the Senate Committee on Appropriations

March 29, 2017

Recently the image of Russia in the world has been very depressing. Russian Federation is perceived globally as aggressive and not very intelligent. And, actually, it's *not* very intelligent to conduct two wars at the same time under the conditions of growing economic crisis. As a result of almost 20 years under Putin, Russia is rapidly becoming an outcast.

It may seem like there is no civil resistance in Russia. That opposition activists have either been killed, arrested, or forced to emigrate. It may seem like the people are intimidated by propaganda or afraid of being arrested. Putin has taken on the image of an unpredictable bandit in Russia and in the world. Unfortunately, this image is effective. After the annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine, it has become clear that Putin's Russia is able to take any vile or unpredictable step. Within Russia, Putin's entire political machine behaves like an unpredictable bandit, too. For example, dozens of Russians have been imprisoned for simply liking an online post of which the authorities disapproved.

But apart from these disturbing trends, there are also some very encouraging ones. Since 2010 Russian grassroots movements have become more common. Ten years ago, finding examples of grassroots movements in Russia was almost impossible. For example, the movement "Save Khimki Forest" generated great interest in the community and in the media because it was a rare example of a grassroots movement in post-Soviet Russia. It was quite unusual: ordinary citizens decided voluntarily to protect their environmental rights without any direction from government authorities.

Why is this grassroots activity so unusual in Russia while in the West it is a standard phenomenon? The answer can be found in Soviet history, where any activism that was not approved by the state was severely punished.

One hundred years ago, in 1917, political power in Russia was essentially seized by

terrorists. Many Communists had a criminal past, including Stalin who was once involved in a bank robbery. Imagine that in a large country like Russia, a terror group came to power and held that power for 70 years. This was the monstrous experiment that citizens endured in my country. The results were terrible - mass repressions, murders of those born into wealthy families and arrests of people whose families were disliked by those in power. But the most important consequence was that the mentality of the people changed. People became passive; they understood that to survive they had to sit quietly, not criticize the government, and not attract attention. Russians and Russian society are the victims of terror under the Soviet Union and now, again, the leader of Russia is a person from another important terror organization – the KGB.

In the Soviet Union, it was impossible to create even a Marxist-Leninist club if it was at the initiative of ordinary citizens. Active people capable of self-organization were dangerous to the Soviet regime because they were able to think independently. Many active citizens were arrested, tortured, and killed in prison. Under Soviet rule, people stopped being independent and active. That is why for so long after the fall of the Soviet Union there were not many grassroots groups in Russia. And that is why I am so glad that now the number of grassroots groups is increasing. If you look at the map of social and environmental activism on the website activatica.org you will see a lot of points across different parts of Russia. Each of these points represents some kind of social or environmental problem that is being solved by ordinary citizens.

This situation with grass roots activity started to change in 2010. It was a year of horrible environmental catastrophe, when a forest fire near Moscow caused the city to fill with smog. It was impossible to breathe and many people became sick from inhaling the smoke.

Very soon people realized that the authorities would not solve the forest fire problem. As a result, people were forced to organize to put out the forest fires themselves. That same year, thanks to the increased visibility of this forest fire problem, the movement “Save Khimki Forest” was able to organize the first big demonstration in recent years, gathering a crowd of more than 5,000 people. As a result, the president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, publicly admitted that that the highway project through Khimki forest was unpopular and called for a moratorium. It was a major victory for civil society. After that, even though the highway was eventually built, many people understood that they too can stand up and say “no” to unfair government decisions.

This began a new era of grassroots activism in Russia, culminating in mass protests around the Russian elections.

Putin's regime answered this activism with repressive laws against civil society. The Russian parliament adopted laws to limit protest demonstrations and a law labeling NGOs that receive foreign funding as "foreign agents". As a result of this law, many NGOs have closed. An organized campaign against NGOs is underway, including open criminal cases against NGOs and TV shows attacking NGO leaders for their Western and liberal values.

Because of these criminal cases, some NGO leaders have fled to Western countries. For example Nadia Kutepova from the environmental NGO "Planet of Hope" sought political asylum and now lives in France:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/3019/title/priznaniya-inostrannogo-agenta>:<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/3019/title/priznaniya-inostrannogo-agenta>.

Other members of NGOs have gone to prison, such as Yuriy Dmitriev from Memorial in Karelia.

Dozens of activists have been arrested and imprisoned:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/3043/title/proshjol-mesyac-so-dnya-aresta-glavy-karelskogo-memoriala-yuriya-dmitrieva-cto-izvestno-na-segodnyashniy-den>.

Some activists were even imprisoned for attending an anti-election demonstration in Bolotnaya Square on May 6, 2012. Despite the repression, however, the authorities have failed to strangle Russian civil society and the number of grassroots movements continues to grow.

Why are people beginning to organize grassroots movements? After oil prices collapsed, many Russian authorities began to have money trouble. In order to enrich themselves, these officials began to allow construction of commercial buildings in parks and green zones. As a result, ordinary people are losing their public green spaces and are now organizing to defend their territory.

In addition to seizing green spaces, the authorities have also introduced unfair taxes. For example, Moscow highways adopted a new toll system, Platon, which forced long-haul truck drivers to pay for their use. The beneficiary of this system is the son of the oligarch Arkady Rotenberg, who is a close friend of Putin. Truckers responded and organized an all-Russian movement against the Platon tax system. In a way, these unfair public policies are encouraging grassroots activism.

Today, there are several grassroots movements around Moscow, including many environmental movements for the protection of green spaces. As I mentioned before, this is a response to the greedy policies of Moscow authorities to allow the construction of commercial buildings in parks, violating laws that should protect and preserve the green space. People use a variety of methods, sometimes desperate, to protect their rights. For example, defenders of Torfyanka Park and Park Druzhba organized protest camps with volunteers keeping watch for several months in the parks, not allowing construction crews to cut down any trees.

In Park Druzhba, thugs from a private security company were hired to beat up the activists. As a result of this attack, one young park activist was hospitalized. A journalist at activatica.org conducted an investigation and found that the head of the private security organization was involved in the genocide in Bosnia and recruited volunteers to fight in the war against Ukraine:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/1160/title/izbieniyami-v-parke-druzhby-rukovodil-glavar-boevikov>.

The spread of this news story helped to cause a scandal that stopped future attempts at such attacks.

Defenders of Torfyanka Park have protested for several years against the construction of an Orthodox church in what should be protected park land. They also organized a protest camp in the park and stayed there day and night to protect the trees. Again, hired thugs came to attack the protestors in the camp. They even attacked a 70-year-old woman who was hospitalized with eye damage. The police arrested 12 of the park defenders including their children and elderly disabled parents:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/2560/title/nochnoy-naezd-policii-na-zashchitnikov-torfyanki-s-chey-podachi>

Despite other offers of places to build the church, the Orthodox Church continues to insist upon building the church in the park and so the confrontation continues.

Grassroots movements in Russia happen not only in the big cities, but also in far-off regions. Right now, in a small village in Karelia, where it is snowy and cold, elderly pensioners are staying day and night in a protest camp. These people, the “Suna Partisans,” are protecting their local forest from a company that wants to cut down the trees for a quarry mining project. There are no big population centers near this forest, only a small village inhabited by elderly pensioners. Even elderly villagers are

organizing to protect their rights in today's Russia:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/3050/title/zashchitniki-sunskogo-bora-v-karelii-pobedili>.

Another example of grassroots activism in remote parts of Russia is a movement against the construction of the Tominsky mining and metallurgical plant in Chelyabinsk. Chelyabinsk is a large industrial city in the Ural Mountains with a history of devastating environmental problems. Although state propaganda portrays the citizens of Chelyabinsk as loyal to Putin, people in Chelyabinsk are organizing to take action against this environmentally hazardous project. More than 5,000 people gathered in the central square of Chelyabinsk to protest the plant. For a remote Russian town with a long history of environmental and human rights abuses, this level of mobilization is incredible:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/3212/title/razgon-kruglogo-stola-po-probleme-tominsko-go-goka>

Russia's indigenous populations have also taken part in grassroots activism. The views of indigenous people are often ignored as Russian companies exploit oil, gas, and other minerals from native territory. But lately indigenous protests against oil and gas companies are increasing. For example, the Komi-Izhemtsy nation has engaged in a protest campaign against pollution caused by Lukoil. In another region, the indigenous Khanty-Mansi people are protesting to protect a sacred lake from destruction by a planned oil and gas extraction project:

<http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/3206/title/v-respublike-komi-prodolzhitsya-borba-za-pravedenie-jekologicheskogo-referenduma>

All across Russia's regions, people are gathering into grassroots movements to protect their rights. It is important because participation in grassroots movements changes people's mentality as they start to have a demand for democracy. They begin to understand why they need elections, normal media, courts and police. Activists from grassroots movements themselves are beginning to participate in local elections. There are four people from our movement "Save Khimki Forest" who have been elected members of the local council in Khimki. I think that grassroots movements are the true hope for democratic change in Russia, because this network will be able to support civil society despite political stagnation. Our task is to help grassroots movements in Russia and don't close the door on Russia.