



## Following One's Conscience: Civic Organizations and Russia's Future, Part I

By Leon Aron

*Last July, Daniel Vajdic and I traveled through Russia to interview leaders of six grass-roots organizations and movements. In three weeks, we traversed Russia from the far east to the westernmost city of Kaliningrad, 4,600 miles and nine time zones away. We recorded more than forty hours of interviews, and early in the trip it became clear that the product would exceed expectations. Answering questions without a shade of fear or reticence and with remarkable thoughtfulness and self-awareness, the men and women we interviewed revealed deeply personal, passionate commitment to dignity in liberty and citizenship.*

Our summer field trip grew out of my “new protesters” research that examined trends in Russia’s civil society, which I began to explore in the aftermath of the Winter-Spring 2010 mass protests.<sup>1</sup> That research and these new interviews revealed that grass-roots groups all over Russia are poised to play a major role in the country’s political and civic future. As the interviews and other materials gathered on this trip are being transcribed and analyzed, this *Outlook* recalls some of the most memorable moments and themes of the trip. Part II (to be published as a future *Outlook*) will detail major findings derived from the fully explored material.

### The “Battle Sites” Tours: Baikal and Khimki

The activists we interviewed during our trip were eager to provide guided tours of the scenes of past or ongoing protests: the “battle sites.” Although our subjects’ efforts could be considered antigovernment, we did not notice any interference from the authorities, which does not mean that they

were unaware of this research: one respondent said that the Federal Security Service had contacted him two weeks prior to his interview. He shrugged off the warning, and apparently, no sanctions

#### Key points in this *Outlook*:

- Despite harassment and detentions, Russian grass-roots leaders and activists remain utterly fearless and unyielding in their quest to elevate civil society to the point of equality with the state.
- What the activists perceive as the moral imperative of their struggle ensures that their grass-roots efforts to enlarge the sphere of self-government will endure and makes them Russia’s best hope for a path away from Putinism.
- Grass-roots groups are witnessing firsthand the waste, corruption, and outright theft that attend big, government-backed construction projects like the one marring Vladivostok’s rugged beauty.

Leon Aron (laron@aei.org) is a resident scholar and the director of Russian Studies at AEI.

ensued. Whether other respondents were similarly alerted is not clear. If so, their reactions would have almost certainly been similar: from the initial interview requests to the final arrangements and meetings, their complete absence of fear or concern about the authorities' reactions was among the most striking impressions from this trip.

Our subject in Irkutsk was the Baikal Ecological Wave (*Baykal'skaya ekologicheskaya volna*). Part of the international Save Baikal! coalition, the organization has for years conducted a very well-organized campaign of civic outreach, informed citizenship, and activism. Although its primary goal is to shut down the Baikal Pulp and Paper Plant (BPPP), which leaks toxic waste into Lake Baikal, the movement has become an ecological watchdog for the entire region and has advanced sophisticated and practical suggestions for "clean" industries and retraining and alternative employment for BPPP workers.

---

TIGR has evolved into a nationwide populist movement that aims to encourage and sustain civic activism by exposing and protesting corruption; bureaucratic malfeasance; and the curtailment of democratic liberties, self-rule, and popular sovereignty.

---

After interviewing him in the office of Baikal Ecological Wave, we accompanied Maxim Vorontsov, the movement's coordinator, to a fishing village on the Baikal shore as he collected evidence of continued waste dumping by the BPPP. To the fishermen's indignant clucking and head shaking, Vorontsov extracted what looked like tiny pieces of paper sludge from the nets and carefully placed them in plastic sample bags.

Next, he examined a young girl's hand, covered in blisters. "She got them while collecting weeds near the shore," her mother explained. Moscow just "steals our money," thundered an elderly lady we spoke to next. "They just don't pay attention to our problems!"

In the Khimki Forest outside Moscow, we met with a dozen activists from the Ecological Defense of the Moscow Region (ECMO) group—mostly men and women in their twenties—who kept a round-the-clock

vigil, ready to throw themselves in front of forest-clearing bulldozers. Here, the mood was just as angry but considerably more proactive. ECMO (*Ekologicheskaya oborona Moskovskoy oblasti*) is one of the most visible protest movements in Russia today. The group seeks to stop the destruction of the forest in the Khimki district and many other ecological and historical sites along the route of the prospective Moscow-St. Petersburg highway.

The ECMO activists have been (and continue to be) subjected to physical assaults more brutal than those meted out to any other group selected for this study. They were beaten by the ChOP (the Russian acronym for Private Defense of Enterprise) guards or, of late, by thugs with unknown affiliations (while the police look on, if they come at all). That evening, they were getting ready to prevent the widening of the already enormous highway. According to a rumor, the work was to start later that same night. Activists were texting calls for reinforcements, summoning friends and relatives, and gathering recording equipment. "Don't worry about it being destroyed [in a melee]," a just-arrived young man said as he handed over his video camera to those who planned to stay in the camp that night, "so long as you video those bastards beating people."

## St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad

In St. Petersburg, one of the battle sites included a vast, empty lot behind a ten-foot fence, where the Gazprom Tower would have been erected had it not been stopped by Bashne.net activists. Bashne.net, or "No to the Tower," is an historical preservation movement and part of a larger "Live City" (*Zhivoy gorod*) coalition in St. Petersburg. Initially spawned from widespread resistance to the tower, Bashne.net has transformed itself into a much broader interest group.

For several years, Bashne.net has battled the mayor's office and Russia's largest company, Gazprom, to thwart the construction of the natural-gas giant's seventy-seven-story, 1,322-foot headquarters, the so-called Okhta Center. The group organized several large rallies, including one on October 9, 2010, that gathered 3,000 people—very large for Putin's Russia—and collected more than 48,000 signatures on an Internet petition.

Although Bashne.net has succeeded in its key objective—on December 8, 2010, the government of St. Petersburg withdrew Gazprom's construction permit for the Okhta Center—as posts on its website declared (and our interviews confirmed), the Bashne.net activists have no plans

to disband. As part of Live City, they are determined to continue as a kind of permanent preservationist watchdog. The group's website called on its members and supporters to continue to "defend our city together!"<sup>2</sup>

In Kaliningrad, the leader of Justice (*Spravedlivost'*), Konstantin Doroshok, talked to us about the rally he organized in Central Square on January 30, 2010. It was one of the largest protest demonstrations ever held in Putin's Russia, with between 10,000 and 12,000 people demanding the resignation of the provincial governor, Georgi Boos. Eight months later he was dismissed by the Kremlin—the first and, so far, only sacking of the head of the regional administration in response to direct popular pressure since the governors' elections were abolished in 2004. Doroshok's group has also challenged Kaliningrad city and regional authorities on a broad range of issues, including import duties on cars, corruption, health care, education, veterans' benefits, urban and green space preservation, and honest elections.

## Vladivostok: Bridges, Steering Wheels . . .

We were guided through Vladivostok—a hilly city that is one of Russia's largest ports; the headquarters of the Pacific Fleet; and, during the Cold War, one of the Soviet Union's largest submarine bases—by the head of the Maritime Chapter of the Fellowship of Active Citizens of Russia (*Tovarishchesvo initsiativnykh grazhdan Rossii*, TIGR), Maxim Vedenev. Vedenev, a descendant of the first Russian settlers three centuries ago, drove up winding streets and then beckoned us to follow him on foot as he climbed to the city's highest point, where a ten-foot Orthodox steel cross honored their memory.

TIGR was founded in Vladivostok in December 2008 to protest a sharp increase in import duties on Japanese cars. The organization has evolved into a nationwide populist movement that aims to encourage and sustain civic activism by exposing and protesting corruption; bureaucratic malfeasance; and the curtailment of democratic liberties, self-rule, and popular sovereignty.

Vedenev's pride in the city's vitality and rugged beauty was tempered by his apologies for the disrepair wrought by the seemingly chaotic construction all around us as the city prepared to host the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in September 2012. He was convinced that the project has been attended with horrendous waste, corruption, and outright theft.

Among other instances of alleged malfeasance and incompetence, he pointed to the construction's

centerpiece and putative Exhibit A of Russia's technological and engineering prowess: a 3,631-foot bridge connecting Russkiy Island, where the summit is to take place, to the city's mainland (the Nazimov Peninsula). The bridge is to become the longest cable-stayed bridge in the world, surpassing the one over the Yangtze River in China (3,570 feet). According to Vedenev, the bridge, which is being built across the widest part of the Eastern Bosphorus Strait, has been plagued with all kinds of design and construction problems. The only signs of the bridge we saw were V-shaped pairs of piles, about ten stories high. (Two other, shorter bridges are also planned.)

Vedenev's stories also explained a great deal of what we had seen on the way from the airport to the hotel. For one thing, we saw only right-hand-drive cars (including ambulances), despite the ban on right-hand-drive vehicles and the sharp increase in import tariffs on used Japanese cars that, in December 2008, led to thousands-strong protest rallies. (The panicked local authorities had to request the dispatch of riot police from Moscow, 4,000 miles away, to disperse the demonstrators, as the local police reportedly refused to bash heads.) Out of this revolt, TIGR was born, and our respondents in Vladivostok—Maxim Vedenev and Anastasiya Zagoruyko—were among several who organized and led the protests.

## . . . and the President

On the same road from the airport, signs of the hectic and wasteful APEC construction rued by Vedenev were everywhere. Cars were enveloped in a fog that turned out to be fine cement dust. Hundreds of workers were drilling with jackhammers, laying down asphalt or shoveling dirt. The reason for this cresting wave of labor enthusiasm became clear when we saw a cortege of SUVs, black and with darkly tinted windows, zoom by in a gaggle of police cars with flashing lights: a segment of President Dmitry Medvedev's retinue on the move.

A report the next day in *Kommersant*, one of Russia's leading independent daily newspapers, confirmed Vedenev's suspicions. Reporting on Medvedev's visit, the paper recalled that since January 2007, when Vladivostok was chosen as the summit site, construction cost estimates have gone up more than sixfold: from 100 billion rubles (\$3.5 billion in the current rate of exchange) to 667 billion rubles, or \$23 billion.<sup>3</sup>

Thus far, according to *Kommersant*, this astronomical sum has bought Medvedev the road from the airport, the bridge piles, and two concrete cubes, the latter constituting

“20 percent” of several five-star hotels to be built. Overall, of the ninety-six items to be constructed for the summit, six were finished, sixty-nine were “in the process,” and thirteen were still being designed.<sup>4</sup> “This mess [*bardak*] must end!” the Russian president reportedly thundered, threatening to “get to the bottom of it” and to punish the culprits.<sup>5</sup> Vedenev was right about the bridges, as well: according to *Kommersant*, their construction had “not even begun,” and just in case they were not completed, several ships had been bought to ferry the summit participants to and from Russkiy Island.<sup>6</sup>

## Awareness and Insight

At some point in each interview, nearly every respondent linked the organizations’ immediate objectives to an overarching metagoal of building and maintaining a civil society capable of and willing to defend itself and share with the state responsibility for the country. Thus, to a regional leader of the Federation of Automobile Owners of Russia, “increasing legal literacy (knowledge of laws) by the automobile owners [means] defense of one’s rights: we teach people how to defend their rights and to achieve justice.”<sup>7</sup> “The Khimki forest is the symbol of the resistance of our civil society,” ECMO leader Yaroslav Nikitenko writes on his blog. The fight for it, he continued, “has become the most important instance [in] the contest (*protivostoyanie*) between Russian civil society and the state.”<sup>8</sup>

Maxim Vedenev compared his movement to a crystal in a glass of water around which other particles coalesce.<sup>9</sup> Explaining the plank in his movement’s statute that calls for “assistance to the emergence and development of civil society,”<sup>10</sup> Vedenev said that the goal was “to use our own example to demonstrate that the banding together of citizens can have a real impact on the fate of their district, city, country—especially by forcing the authorities to defer to the people’s opinion.”<sup>11</sup>

## Determination and Moral Imperative

The most striking trait of these men and women was their determination to go on. Nearly all of them have been arrested and held in overcrowded cells in the notorious “pretrial detention facilities” for long hours, sometimes days, often without water or food, a bed, or even a chair. (In an interview, one leader recalled asking a guard for water and being told to drink from the cell’s washbasin. He said, “It was clogged and full of blood and

human detritus, most likely from prisoners washing up after beatings, with [excrement] floating on top.”)

Most of our subjects have been roughed up by the police. A few days before we arrived, Evgenia Chirikova, the leader of ECMO, was hit in the head by a heavy piece of wood shot from a giant wood chipper that highway construction crews deliberately aimed at protesters. One of the Khimki Forest activists we interviewed, thin and intense historian Sergei, had been accosted by thugs who broke his nose; another, Oleg, was taken to a hospital a month before, after an assailant’s fist dislocated his jaw.

Yet, not one of the people we interviewed showed any sign of abandoning his or her cause, or even of taking a respite. Their determination was quiet yet absolutely unyielding and appeared to stem from a moral imperative that was discernible in every interview. The word “conscience” (*sovest’*) sooner or later sounded in every interview. They viewed their struggles as an existential necessity.

---

These men and women are determined  
to persist in the crusade for a mature,  
organized, enlightened, strong, and  
self-aware civil society, willing and able  
to control the executive branch at  
both the national and local levels.

---

In one instance, at a construction site in St. Petersburg, one of the Live City activists who took us around the city asked a watchman who in the past had harassed the protesters, “How can you live with your conscience?” The same point was made by a Spravedlivost activist who, despite his immense frustration with “the system” and his lack of hope for any short-term change continued his struggle. “How can one live otherwise?” he asked.

## Russia’s Best Hope

This project has been a purely inductive exploration: it did not seek to confirm any theory but, rather, to be guided by the findings. It was also a qualitative study: any patterns and themes we arrived at should be interpreted only as preliminary insights, perhaps a framework that may suggest venues for further, quantitative research that will enable us to generalize.

Still, one generalization might be ventured because of the uniformity and strength of evidence: these men and women are determined to persist in the crusade for a mature, organized, enlightened, strong, and self-aware civil society, willing and able to control the executive branch at both the national and local levels. They are resolved to change the way Russia is governed by elevating civil society to the point of equality with the state, no matter how long the effort takes.

Whether they will succeed and at what pace is, of course, unknown. Yet, undeniably and consistently, in a sea of cynicism, callousness, mistrust, thievery, and incompetence, they forge and enlarge the islands—perhaps archipelagos—of self-organization, trust, self-reliance, self-governance, and responsibility for oneself, one's fellow citizens, and one's country.

Russia's only hope for a sustainable resumption of nonauthoritarian modernization seems to stem from precisely this kind of grass-roots civic organization. Judging by what we saw and heard on our trip, such organizations and movements are especially crucial today, when the political and economic model of Putinism seems so close to exhaustion.

---

*For their assistance in researching, editing, and producing this essay, the author is grateful to research assistants Daniel Vajdic, Kevin Rothrock, and Julia Friedlander; interns Lara Johnson and Valentina Lukin; and senior editor Christy Sadler.*

## Notes

1. Leon Aron, "Russia's New Protesters," *AEI Russian Outlook* (Spring 2010), [www.aei.org/outlook/100964](http://www.aei.org/outlook/100964).
2. Bashne.net, Home Page, <http://bashne.net> (accessed October 25, 2011).
3. Olga Shkurenko, "Kak Rossiya gotovitsya k sammitu ATEs" [How Russia Is Getting Ready for the Summit of the APEC], *Kommersant-Siberia*, July 2, 2011.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Anastasiya Zagoruyko, written responses to the author's questionnaire, June 1, 2011.
8. Yaroslav Nikitenko, "Zashhitniki podmoskovnih lyesov sbrosili s syebya odyezhdoo v poddyerzhkoo lyesov Amazonki" [Defenders of Moscow Region Forests Took off Their Clothes in Support of Amazon Forests], August 22, 2011, <http://yaroslavn.livejournal.com/30668.html> (accessed October 21, 2011).
9. Maxim Vedenev, interview with the author, July 2, 2011.
10. Oostav Tovarishshyestva Initsiativnih Grazhdan Rossii [Constitution of the Fellowship of Active Citizens of Russia], [www.tigru.org/index.php/2010-02-04-12-32-38](http://www.tigru.org/index.php/2010-02-04-12-32-38) (accessed October 21, 2011).
11. Maxim Vedenev, written responses to the author's questionnaire, July 2, 2011.