



Following One's Conscience, Part 2: A Quest for Democratic Citizenship

By Leon Aron

Last July, Daniel Vajdic and I traveled through Russia to interview leaders of six grass-roots organizations and movements. Among the many fascinating themes that have emerged from the nearly forty hours of interviews, perhaps the most powerful is these individuals' conviction that the meaningful and lasting liberalization of the country may be ensured by only a mature, self-aware civil society, able and willing to control the executive. The main avenue for such a change would not be a political revolution in the conventional sense, nor would it be brought from above by a good tsar or a hero. Instead, the hope is predicated on a deeply moral transformation from within. Effecting such an evolution toward enlightened and morally anchored democratic citizenship appears to be the overarching meta-goal of the organizations, above and beyond their daily agendas. This objective is all the more remarkable because it diverges from the Russian historical tradition and political culture.

How close these and many other grass-roots organizations and movements have come to achieving the goal of democratic citizenship may be tested very soon as the Vladimir Putin regime appears to be headed for a political crisis: when "sovereign democracy" falters under the pressure of the expanding and radicalizing protests, as it is bound to, will it be replaced by an imperfect and evolving but stable liberal democracy, as happened in most of postcommunist Eastern Europe and seems to have happened in Tunisia—or will civil society again prove ill-equipped to control and reverse Russia's authoritarian political tradition?

"Overflowing into Politics"

At first blush, little that is overtly political can be found in the agendas of all six groups and movements whose leaders we interviewed.¹ "We are nonpolitical," Federation of Automobile Owners of Russia (FAR) president Sergei Kanaev told us,²

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Key points in this Outlook:

- Grass-roots leaders are convinced that lasting Russian liberalization will come not from violent revolution or a great rupture imposed from above but from a mature civil society with the courage to control the executive. Thus, their work is not geared toward political change, but inner moral transformation, self-organization, and self-reliance.
- Because hopelessness and passivity have shackled Russian society, a radical shift in attitudes is required.
- We may be present at the birth of something new in Russian political tradition, at least since its evolution was interrupted by the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. It is hard not to hear echoes of the civil rights movement in the United States.

and if asked directly, most of the others would have agreed. Indeed, national politics, not to mention regime change, seems to be completely outside their daily activities, which include stopping the pollution of Lake Baikal (Baikal Ecological Wave), improving road safety and helping automobile owners to fend off the rapacious traffic policy (FAR), fighting corruption (TIGR and Spravedlivost'), saving historic buildings from demolition (Bashne.net and Zhivoy Gorod), and protecting the Khimki Forest from development (ECMO). While TIGR and Spravedlivost' have occasionally strayed into politics by attempted to prevent fraud in elections, their efforts have been limited to local polls.

Moreover, all the movements have, with various degree of collegiality and effectiveness, cooperated with local authorities. Baikal Ecological Wave and FAR regularly produce data about pollution or road hazards and disrepair. Some leaders and activists (for instance, Marina Rikhvanova of Baikal Ecological Wave, Maxim Vedenev of TIGR, Sergei Kanaev of FAR, and Konstantin Doroshok of Spravedlivost') even have been invited to join "expert groups" or "consultation committees" advising mayors or governors.

Yet our interviews also made clear that, in the end, none of the organizations can avoid grappling with the nationwide issues rooted deeply in the nature of the regime. It is as if, having resolved to clean up your small apartment, you are almost immediately confounded by problems—faulty designs, leaking ceilings, lack of heat and hot water, crumbling walls—that are beyond your control and require a capital repair of the entire building. As the leader of ECMO, Evgenia Chirikova, told an interviewer last year, "I have no intentions of going into politics. It is the regime functionaries that make me into an opposition leader."³

Bashne.net and Zhivoy Gorod activist Dmitry Lynov called this phenomenon "overflowing over into politics" (*peretekanie v politiku*). Confronted with the regime's congenital defects, every leader we interviewed appears to have undergone a similar evolution. For instance, Chirikova denounced the absence of a normal judicial system and pointed out, "For the first time in Russian history we have in power people whose sole goal is personal enrichment at the country's expense." The leader of Baikal Wave, Marina Rikhvanova, condemned the "merger of power and property" as the key obstacle to environmental progress.⁴

In the same vein, a regional leader of the human rights and anticorruption watchdog group TIGR, Maxim

Vedenev, saw one of the key goals of his movement as "working against the stranglehold (*zasil'e*) of corruption and the rampant lawlessness (*bespredel*) of state bureaucracy." (At the time of our interview, the Maritime [Far Eastern] Chapter of TIGR, headed by Vedenev, was preparing "huge [documentary] evidence" for a suit in the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, charging President Dmitry Medvedev with "violating his own laws.")

Interviewees laid most of the blame for structural problems at the door of the civil society that allowed the present regime to be established and to continue.

FAR's Evolution

Perhaps the most telling example of these organizations' encounters with national politics has been the evolution of FAR, which should have been the least "political" organization in the sample. Likely the largest grass-roots organization in Russia, FAR's agenda includes redressing two major gripes of millions of Russian car owners: very high gasoline prices, almost identical to those in the United States though salaries are orders of magnitude lower, and the so-called "transportation tax" levied on every car in Russia. "Where does all this money go?," FAR began to ask, and instantly was confronted with two hallmarks of Putinism: lack of transparency and rampant corruption.

Officially, the taxes and the duty collected at the pump are supposed to be spent mostly on improving highway safety and building more and better highways. Yet FAR quickly has established that these claims are largely bogus: the length of new roads constructed since 2000 has been miniscule, and Russia's traffic fatalities per one hundred thousand vehicles (seventy) remains the second highest in Europe (after Albania) and almost five times the US rate of fifteen. Instead, FAR concluded, the price of gasoline was inflated by the "corruption component": the between 20 and 30 percent (and sometimes as high as 50 percent) of the price of goods and services known as "administrative rent" and "kickbacks" (*otkаты*). This component is particularly large in heavily regulated industries such as oil.

Furthermore, as the organization's home page points out, the one trillion rubles (over \$30 billion, or 12 percent, of the Russian state budget) that, according to President Medvedev, is stolen from the Russian treasury every year is twice as much as the transportation tax and the gasoline tax combined. Hence, FAR demands "the end of corruption and [the introduction of] transparency, and public control over everything that is connected to the formation of monopolistic prices, state regulation, and duties."⁵ They add, "It is not just the price of gasoline that will depend on how we act, but to what extent the authorities will take into consideration our interests in the future."

Similarly, highway safety has been compromised, often fatally, by another of the Putin regime's structural features: flagrant inequality before the law. In this instance, the law permits ill-defined categories of government officials to drive with blue flashing lights (*migalki*) and violate the rules, including driving on the wrong side of the road against the traffic. A source of many accidents, quite a few of them lethal, the law has been targeted for repeal by FAR's national campaign. The organization has sought, without success, to strictly limit the use of lights and allowable traffic violations to clearly defined and sharply reduced categories of top officials and medical and police emergency personnel.

While the movement thus far has failed to repeal or change the law, it has expanded its campaign into a broader affirmation of human dignity. One of FAR's most popular national campaigns has been the "blue buckets" protests: throughout the country, children's beach toys on cars' antennas and racks or protesters' heads have mocked the lights of the Russian officials' corteges. Popular bumper stickers that we saw in FAR's headquarters in Moscow tell a similar story: "For Equality and Security," "I Don't Give Bribes!," and "Flashing Lights Are Russia's Shame!" Shortly before our visit, FAR had released a letter to Putin demanding his resignation if he is unable to meet FAR's demands and improve the country's general economic conditions.

A Surprising Culprit: Civil Society

Although they almost daily confront structural problems that may be addressed only by radical reforms of the political system, for most respondents the regime was not the main culprit. Instead, they laid most of the blame at the door of the civil society that allowed the present regime to be established and to continue. In the words of

a TIGR leaflet, "We have no civil society that would keep politicians to their promises . . . and would make government functionaries remember that they are servants of people who pay their salaries."⁶

The respondents saw this lack of a mature, self-aware and self-organized civil society able and willing to control the executive as the key obstacle to the country's meaningful and lasting progress. Those we interviewed articulated this theme with remarkable clarity, passion, and consistency. "Public control [over the executive] is the key," FAR's president, Kanaev, said:

The system that we want to construct is a system of public control that would work no matter who is in power. Without this, nothing will change in the country. Everyone thinks that if only they [personally] come to power everything will change. But I tell them: by the time you get to power, you will already be just as the system wants you to be. . . . It seems to us that if we manage to work out a [new] system of control not by the state but by the society, everything will fall into place. We say, so long as there is no such control, no matter how many elections we hold, the power system will always remain the same [as it is now].

Chirikova's diagnosis was similar. She observed that the Soviet Union had collapsed because it was founded on violence, but was replaced by "a veritable kleptocracy," the "regime of swindlers and thieves." She added, "This is scary. I think the only way [out] is for our citizens to become real citizens. And in that case, we will be able to change the regime." At the moment, Chirikova continued, it would be "useless" to exchange Putin for someone else, "no matter who that person might be." Only when "people develop political will, if they are not indifferent to their fate, if they actively participate in the life of their country—only then we will have an entirely different regime in power."

Vedenev considered where the regime's impunity (*beznakazannost*) comes from: "It is a function of our indifference. Indifference breeds impunity, and impunity destroys everything. If people respected themselves more, we would have never had such impunity."

In the end, it is not change of regime, per se, that emerged from the interviews as the overarching "strategic" metagoal, but an enlightened, active, and informed citizenry that would effect civic change and then remain vigilant. "Russia today does not have a mechanism for the

effective defense of people's rights," TIGR states. "To create such a mechanism is precisely what constitutes our agenda. And this mechanism is called 'civil society.' . . . And then either the civil society will force the regime to pay heed to its demands—or it will change the irresponsible regime."⁷

The Metagoal: "Changing People's Mentality"

The leaders and activists we spoke to had no illusion about the tall obstacles that must be overcome on the road to a mature democratic citizenship. For instance, calling on its members and supporters to participate in a March 2011 national protest against the gasoline prices, FAR's home page declared, "Nothing [provokes] the authorities [toward] lawlessness and impunity as the silence of society. . . . The parasite inside [us] thwarts all the attempts at civic activity. . . . Despair and laziness have shackled our society."⁸

The same reasons, according to Chirikova, accounted for the difficulty in mobilizing people for the defense of the Khimki Forest. "People are not ready to fight for their rights," she said. "Why do we have a situation where the 'party of thieves and swindlers' [United Russia] has a majority in the parliament? Because people cannot tear themselves from their sofas to vote in the right way or to [help] register a new party."

A consensus emerged among the respondents that lasting, effective change in the country can come only from *within* society. Nothing short of an evolution in people's attitudes—and, through it, of the country's political culture—will do. "The change of political regime is possible only through the change in people's mentality," said Chirikova.

"The main thing is that people who come to us begin to think differently, begin to believe that everything is possible and the key is not to be afraid," Vedenev told us. "For Russia to become a country I dream of . . . the Russian people must wake up and begin to think within a different mental framework, to be guided . . . by such notions as honor, conscience, camaraderie, duty, . . . and, most importantly, free will. Don't confuse [free will] with freedom. Freedom can be taken away, delimited, but [free] will either exists or not. It can be subverted only by its owner himself."

No matter what their daily activities and short-term goals, the respondents see inculcating a new mentality as the essence of their effort and its ultimate moral justification. "We are no longer fighting just for the forest,"

said Chirikova. "Our struggle is a struggle for people's minds. . . . We are making [real] citizens out of citizens, which is why we publish newspapers, blanket the town with leaflets. . . . This is more important than any seizure of power, because this is the foundation for serious and long-term changes in the country."

The new civic mentality was defined, first and foremost, as self-respect⁹ and personal responsibility¹⁰—whether for one's neighborhood or for the entire country. Among several strategies to promote these attitudes, our interviewees judged self-organization and self-help to be the most effective. "Self" was the operational term. All were vehemently opposed to what Vedenev described as "dragging people along" toward any political or social order, no matter how progressive. Instead, they were determined to inculcate active, democratic citizenship through actual participation. Above and beyond any advance in their organizational agenda, this citizenship by action and by example was their ever-present objective.

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"People come to our organization and ask for help," explained Vedenev. "I say, 'No, we can't help you.' They don't understand [and say], 'We know that you help people!' And I say, 'I help you to help yourself. . . . I can explain what can be done and how we can help you do it. But it is you who must help yourself!'" Similarly, according to the regional leader of FAR, Anastasia Zagoruyko, by increasing car owners' "legal literacy" (knowledge of laws), the group is able to "teach people how to defend their rights and to achieve justice."

The respondents believe that far more than informed civil society comes out of such efforts: these voluntary collective actions in pursuit of deeply moral objectives are key to building civic self-confidence and cohesion. In the words of Vedenev:

We 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. . . . This gives people faith. They understand that if we have achieved something here, why can't we try it somewhere else? Someone must do

something to demonstrate that we are citizens. If we were to sit idly and wait until civic activity emerges, this will not happen because it does not just appear out of nowhere.

The Cells and the Molecules: A Moral Contagion of Citizenship

Tellingly, several interview subjects (or their organizations' Internet posts) described their movements as "cells" (*yacheykas*) out of which a new civil society could spring. If everything his organization does makes it a "cell of civil society," said Kanaev, FAR's president, he would be very pleased. "I cannot say that by our actions we are changing the system," Kanaev continued. "We are not there yet. Instead, we are creating a situation in which people understand that, having defended their rights even in a small way, they need to go further." TIGR describes its role in very similar terms:

We are not aiming at the instant transformation of the entire society. We are beginning with the defense of our rights. We will stand up for our rights and our dignity. We will involve more and more people in this process. We want to construct a "small civil society" and gradually expand it to all of Russia. And then either the civil society will force the regime to pay heed to its demands—or it will change the irresponsible regime.¹¹

Most of all, our interlocutors wanted to see their "cell" organizations become magnets for the like-minded, a kind of laboratory of civil society in which values and convictions are strengthened and ideas developed for dissemination. "The organization is to become a cell around which consolidate those who are not indifferent to the fate of their city, their country," Vedenev wrote in response to our questionnaire. "[It] is an association in which a person stops feeling himself alone, where he finds like-minded people, acts on and implements his plans. And most importantly, he feels an active, real support when he starts to battle rampant lawlessness (*bespredel*) of police, procuracy, and bureaucrats."

Vedenev likened the consolidating role of these organizations to water crystallization, which occurs when a particle of dust is introduced into sterilized, absolutely clean water. "It creates the point of unification" of molecules, he said, with the extent and the pace or crystallization

depending "on what we do next." Similarly, Kanaev compared the process to organic chemistry, in which new materials are created and "go on engaging new molecules ad infinitum." He contrasted this practice with the nonorganic chemistry of "regular politics of interests," in which coalitions come and go without making the society richer and more complex. He also pointed out a very important advantage of the former method over the latter: the organically created societal "molecules" will continue to exist even if the initial element (the organizer) is detached, but the nonorganic units are likely to fall apart if the regime manages to "take [the leader] out of the chain."

Toward "Peacefully Changing the Conscience"

Whatever other impact they seek to achieve in their work, by far the most satisfying effect for most respondents seems to be the change in their compatriots' attitudes. "I feel huge satisfaction when a man begins to talk seriously about the things that he considered foolish and impossible only a short time ago," Vedenev told us. "We have grown into a kind of family: we are family, we are friends, we . . . are a collection of individuals with [common] goals and ideas. . . . [In the end] I don't do what I do for the organization. The organization is only an instrument. The key is to forge a circle of people with a similar perspectives on life, mentality, and understanding." In the expansion of such "circles," respondents saw hope for a peaceful and lasting change. "Many [like-minded people] gathered in one place can change a great deal," one of them said. "If people begin to self-organize, we won't need any revolutions. This will be the most peaceful revolution of all: people will simply stop submitting and begin to demand."

Chirikova saw "frightful historical parallels" in the current political regime, which is becoming "so deaf to the needs of the people, so incapable of meeting their demands, that the society could blow up." Such an outcome, she continued, "would not be good either for the people or the country," which in the past one hundred years have lived through "too many catastrophes."

"We've made this mistake once [in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917], but we are more experienced now," she said. "Our condition is different. The world has changed, and so have our modes of communication, which is why I think that the key element of [political] change consists of citizens themselves changing. I think

the chances are good to be able to change the structures of power regime by peacefully changing the conscience of our citizens.”

Such change will not come overnight. It requires patience and steadiness of purpose. “It is paramount not to relax, to understand that this struggle may last our entire life,” said Chirikova. A mother of two young children, she added, “It’s like pregnancy. It will last nine months. No matter what you do, the baby will be born only in nine months. Laws of nature cannot be changed, and neither can the laws of societal development. We cannot skip over some processes; this is physically impossible. So all these quick, enthusiasm-fueled revolutionary transformations that many are dreaming of today—they will come to nothing. Only gradual change [will be effective]—and only work with individuals at every level we can.”

Russia’s Civil Rights Movement

In a break with the national tradition of political change born mostly out of violent political upheavals, the six organizations and movements we studied aspire to effect lasting progress by assisting in the emergence of informed, active, and self-confident citizenship. Again, in contrast to their political culture, which has prized quick—and usually illusory—results and what Stalin called “great ruptures” (*velikie perelomy*) imposed from above, most respondents were convinced that needed change would come only through a sustained moral education. It is in educating their fellow citizens, through self-organization and self-help, that they see their most important contribution to the emergence of a new, dignified, and prosperous Russia.

It is clear that we are present at the birth of something new in Russian political tradition, at least since its evolution was interrupted by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. No historic parallel is perfect, but it is hard not to hear echoes of the civil rights movement in the United States. Of course, differences are many and formidable: from religious inspiration behind the movements (central to the US civil rights movement, but not present in Russia) to the institutional settings (a mature liberal democracy in the United States, as opposed to the authoritarian subversion of Russia).

Yet similarities are just as stark. Like its US counterpart more than half a century ago, the Russian movement’s ultimate goal is dignity and equality for all people before the law. And just like the leaders of the civil rights movement, Russia’s activists seek to effect vast political and

social change by an example of personal and deeply moral effort. Both movements have rejected violence in principle.¹² Both have or had no time limits in which to achieve their goals, their supporters displaying quiet but unyielding determination and patience to persevere as long as necessary.

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If Russia is lucky, another parallel may hold as well. In the beginning of the US civil rights movement, not even its leaders and most ardent supporters anticipated how quickly, by historical standards, their goals would be realized. At a time when deep and widening cracks are becoming visible in the icy carapace in which Putinism has enveloped Russian politics, the citizenship ethos spread by the movements we studied, and dozens like them throughout Russia, could provide the moral foundation for Russia’s second breakthrough into democratic modernity in the past twenty years. It is far from a coincidence, then, that one of the most passionate advocates of democratic citizenship among our respondents, the thirty-four year old Evgenia Chirikova, has emerged as a leader of the unfolding protest movement, which deserves to be called Russian Spring even if it was born in December.

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Notes

1. See Leon Aron, “Following One’s Conscience: Civic Organizations and Russia’s Future, Part 1,” *AEI Russian Outlook*, (Summer 2011), www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/europe/following-ones-conscience-civic-organization-and-russias-future-part-1/.

2. All uncited quotations in this piece come from personal interviews with the author and his research assistant, conducted in July 2011.

3. See “Oolichniye aktsii: naskol’ko i komoo oni noozhni?” [Street actions: How much and for whom are they needed?],

Ekho Moskvyy, August 23, 2010, www.echo.msk.ru/programs/albac/706566-echo/ (accessed January 19, 2012). Chirikova has accused Vladimir Putin of having “blatantly violated and continuing to violate the laws of the Russian Federation,” and in December 2010 she announced that “we are starting political struggle and will be insisting on the change of the current regime.”

4. In the interview, I quoted to Rikhvanova her own statement: “The merger of state and business engenders conflicts of interest. And no matter how prettily the environmental policy is formulated, the state functionaries will not be interested in defending and expanding our common natural [and] cultural treasures.” See “Marina Rikhvanova: ‘Sliyanie gosudarstva i biznesa porozhdaet konflikt interesov’” [Marina Rikhvanova: ‘The merger of state and business engenders conflict of interests’], December 15, 2010, www.sibinfo.su/person/19.html (accessed June 3, 2011). Rikhvanova answered me, “When I’ve tried to delve deeply into this, I understood that the merger (*sliyanie*) of [political] power and business is a real and serious conflict of interests.”

5. Federation of Automobile Owners of Russia, Home page, n.d., www.autofed.ru (accessed January 19, 2012).

6. TIGR, “Prinuzhdenie k otvetsvennosti” [Forcing responsibility], *Gazeta Tovarishchestva initsiativnykh grazhdan Rossii* [The Newspaper of the Fellowship of Self-Motivated Citizens of Russia], February 14, 2009, www.phokprf.ru/info/9496 (May 12, 2011).

7. Ibid.

8. Federation of Automobile Owners of Russia, “20 marta—Vserossiyskaya aktsiya protesta protiv tsen na toplivo” [March 20—is the all-Russian protest event against the prices of gas], www.autofed.ru/?p=3863 (accessed May 15, 2011).

9. “If people had even a little bit of self-respect, then we would not have the impunity,” said Vedenev.

10. Citizenship means “responsibility for what is happening in the country,” said Chirikova. A citizen, she added, is someone who “to the best of his abilities does everything he can to ameliorate the situation in the country, in his yard, in his town, in his country—as far as he can reach.”

11. “Prinuzhdenie k otvetsvennosti” (emphasis added).

12. Said Chirikova, “I think we look more like the Gandhi movement in India. . . . We lead many regular, rank-and-file people who understand that, to continue the parallel, we are not worse than the British, we are not worse than our authorities, that we are not slaves, and that, although the empire humiliates us, we continue to resist and do not respond with violence. . . . We quite consciously avoid violence, never resort to violent means in our struggle [because] when you don’t respond to violence with violence you avoid multiplying evil. . . . If some of the people whom we support begin to resort to violence, of course we sympathize with their [personal plight] after they are repressed. But . . . I always tell them, ‘Guys, I am very sorry that you are being punished like this, but our way is a way of peaceful resistance and it is the only way to change anything in the world.’”