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The Hannah Arendt research center, 2025

Solidarity Under Pressure: A comprehensive study of Russian civil society based on data from 2024, Hannah Arendt Research Center, 2025.

The report examines the state of civil society in Russia based on data from 116 interviews, digital ethnography, and automated social media analysis.

The study offers an overview of existing areas of civil society work and shows how practices of **reflexive solidarity** are forming in response to challenges such as **increased repression, lack of resources**, and **isolation**.

The report also describes everyday strategies that enable civil society initiatives to survive, regroup, and evolve, and offers recommendations for supporting these strategies.

The study proposes moving beyond normative conceptions of civil society and instead approaches it as a rhizome, where solidarity is practiced as a flexible, situational, and ethically grounded practice capable of sustaining political agency in conditions of state violence.

Authors of the study: Vlada Baranova, Maria Bunina, Maria Vasilevskaia, Daria Rud, Anna Kalinina, Iuliia Kuzevanova, Yakov Lurie, Nadia Polikarpova, as well as Elena, Anna, and Marina, who have chosen not to disclose their surnames for security reasons

Text: Maria Bunina, Maria Vasilevskaia, Daria Rud, Iuliia Kuzevanova, Yakov Lurie, Anna, and Marina.

Editing: Maria Vasilevskaya.

The Hannah Arendt Research Center is an independent collective of researchers and experts that has been active since 2022.

The Center's work focuses on civil society, state violence, and resistance. Adopting an intersectional and critical perspective, its projects bring together diverse disciplines and apply mixed methods of data collection and analysis.

The Center's practical goals include advocacy, expert support, and infrastructural assistance for civil

society initiatives. Its theoretical contribution lies in demarginalizing the Russian context as a valuable source of empirical data for rethinking concepts such as civil society, human rights, solidarity, resistance, and agency.

Other research and projects:

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email: contact@tharesearch.center



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Contents

About the Study	4
Key Findings	5
Background and Objectives	9
Study Rationale.....	9
Theoretical Background.....	10
Data and Methods	13
Detailed Findings	24
Map of Russian Civil Society at the End of 2024.....	24
Analyzing the Digital Footprints of Civil Society Work.....	26
The Challenge to Civil Society: Political Pressure.....	40
The Challenge for Civil Society: Lack of Resources.....	50
The Challenge to Civil Society: Communication Difficulties.....	57
Bibliography and References	64

About the Study

115 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of various initiatives¹

- 15 focused on trends in civil society in general
- 100 focused on the status of specific initiatives

12 online communities were studied through **digital ethnography**.

4 offline and 5 online conferences were examined using **ethnographic methods**.

6,500 online communities² (Telegram and VK) were **analyzed quantitatively**.

23 experts contributed to **foresight analysis**, including forecasting trends, refining conclusions, and developing recommendations.

- 16 of the experts were Russian-speaking
- 7 of the experts were English-speaking

¹ The sample was selected using a snowball sampling method, starting with the personal contacts of the researchers and continuing through recommendations. There was variability in a number of parameters. See the Data and Methods section for more details on the sample design.

² They were selected based on 54 keywords and phrases. From the resulting set of over 100,000 communities, active communities that fit the definition of civil society for this study were selected using a neural network. We tested the accuracy and completeness of the final filtering and analytical markup on a separate sample for each keyword. See the Data and Methods section for more details on the quantitative analysis methodology.

Key Findings

Following a surge in 2022, anti-war protests and other political actions in Russia have largely disappeared from the public sphere. Why has this happened?

Expressing anti-war and opposition views on the streets, on social media, and in public spaces has become too dangerous in the face of growing repression. Activists and initiatives based outside of Russia can openly express their criticism of the Russian government. Against this background, the silence of those remaining in the public sphere may suggest an absence of condemnation of the state's actions.

Does this mean that Russian civil society has normalized the actions of the Russian political authorities?

No, it does not. Today, participation in any collective action outside the control of the Russian state poses a risk of persecution for participants—both organizations and individuals. Under such conditions, the line between political and civic activism becomes blurred. For many of the protagonists in our study, activism serves as an opportunity to make their position known by effecting change at the local level—that is, contributing to an ethical confrontation with the state.

In what directions does civil society in Russia operate today? What does it do?

As a result of visual analysis of community graphs in social networks and data from expert interviews, we identified six main clusters of civic activity, the details of which we formulated thanks to interview and observation data:

1. Explicit anti-war and pro-democracy activism; major media, investigators, and researchers; and human rights movements, including those for women's and LGBTQ+ rights. It also includes aid for Ukrainian citizens.
2. Eco- and urban defense, the decolonial movement, the defense of social and collective rights, left-wing movements, trade unions, professional associations, local initiatives, and local media.
3. Helping people in vulnerable situations, support of vulnerable and marginalized groups, the field of philanthropy.
4. Animal welfare.
5. Third places—centres that build and maintain horizontal ties, such as evenings of writing letters to political prisoners, independent bookstores, or cultural spaces.

6. "Uncivil society": support groups for the Russian army, wives of mobilized people, camouflage netting (*setkopyoty*), right-wing activists, and pro-state initiatives on various topics, such as environmental GONGOs³ or anti-abortion women's initiatives).

Which risks and challenges most affect the performance of initiatives?

We identified three groups of challenges: political pressure, lack of resources and communication problems.

What successes does Russian civil society have in 2024?

1. Many initiatives claim victory because they have survived and remained active in the current environment. To accomplish this, they had to rebuild teams, change organizational forms, restructure strategies and practices, and overcome atomization.
2. They developed digital and other technologies to continue competing with the state even in situations of pronounced power inequality. This includes anonymous chatbots, emergency evacuation practices, online counseling, memos and other methods of sharing knowledge, the use of cryptocurrency, VPNs and other means of circumventing blockades, anonymous activist cells, protocols for storing and destroying sensitive data, and guerrilla methods of recruitment and communication. It is also important that, thanks to technology, initiatives communicate intensively and are able to share solutions, train each other, and provide mutual services.
3. There has been rapid growth in military law advocacy, conscientious objector rights, and evacuation support for people at risk, as well as mobilization of efforts to assist Ukrainians.
4. The human rights community engages in both "day-to-day" advocacy as well as education and planning for transitional justice, including better representation of women, LGBTQ+ persons and indigenous peoples.
5. Activists in the field of collective rights and interests are achieving direct victories in confrontations with the state and other aggressive actors, especially at the local level (e.g. stopping construction projects or securing wage increases). They are also succeeding in engaging new participants in civic activism, especially in non-metropolitan regions.
6. Animal protection initiatives have achieved the abolition of a regional law on the euthanasia of homeless animals. The movement is expanding rapidly and is active in both the regions and the capitals. It is accumulating potential for collective and solidarity action. For many new animal advocates, this is their first experience with solidarity-based activities.

³ A government-organized non-governmental organization is a non-governmental organization that was set up or sponsored by a government in order to further its political interests and mimic the civic groups and civil society at home, or promote its international or geopolitical interests abroad.

7. There have been successes in rebuilding political culture and attracting new participants to civil society, as well as actions aimed at overcoming division and atomization—particularly the politicization of members of the “uncivil society” who have faced repression.

What developments can we expect in civil society in Russia in the near future, and what recommendations can be made regarding its progress?

The experts involved in our forecasts agree that the risks associated with repression will continue to rise. However, it is also impossible to say that “everything will be banned”. The transition to totalitarian control requires significant state resources and fewer resistance resources. The outcome of this confrontation cannot be determined in advance. In addition, neither the state nor civil society is homogeneous. Increased control in some areas may result in weakened control and the emergence of local opportunities in others. In any case, organizations and grassroots initiatives in Russia will need to invest considerable effort to comply with the ever-changing legislation, avoid attracting the attention of security agencies, and continue developing innovative solutions.

Regarding the other two challenges, resource and communication issues, it is important to consider the diversity of existing initiatives in terms of field, size, geography, and practices. While it is not possible to make the same recommendations for so many different initiatives, there are some general observations that can be useful when designing civil society development strategies.

- The relationship between initiatives and the state is much more complex than a simple pro- or con dichotomy. Often, organizations must partner with state actors, take presidential grants to continue their activities, and communicate with state channels to reach new audiences.
- Funding for the charitable sector in Russia is becoming more state-centered. Presidential grants and those from the Vladimir Potanin Foundation and the Skolkovo Foundation are the most promising due to the volume of support they provide. However, there is no guarantee that the same level of support will be provided next year, and these grants focus on project-based rather than strategic organizational development. Due to the increased risks involved in obtaining foreign funding, fewer initiatives are turning to this option. Private donors, crowdfunding, and the commercialization of services remain viable alternatives.
- The boom of grassroots initiatives in Russia continues. Many people who were not previously involved in political or civic activism are now joining or creating their own initiatives. Often, these initiatives lack a legal entity, an official website, sustainable funding, and representation at major conferences. This makes them difficult for donors or the repressive system to detect.

- The “boom” of grassroots initiatives in Russia continues. Many people who were not previously involved in political or civic activism are now joining or creating initiatives. Often, these initiatives lack a legal entity, an official website, and sustainable funding. They are also not represented at large conferences, which makes it difficult both for donors and the repressive machine to detect them.
- The social sphere is experiencing a staff shortage due to the forced emigration of many activists and specialists from the non-profit world. The demand for philanthropy education, in turn, has led to the creation of relevant courses. However, many of these courses still focus on Moscow and project grants rather than regions and sustainable funding.
- Another consequence of mass emigration is the separation of teams and the transition to a distributed format of joint work between those who left and those who stayed. Communication between these two groups has also become more complicated. Nevertheless, initiatives are finding ways to restore dialogue and address the challenges they face by using all the resources available to emigrants (foreign donors, the media, officials, and technical solutions).
- New initiatives are often created by young people and based on horizontal principles, meaning there is no clear division of responsibilities and decisions are made collectively. Horizontal assistance at the institutional level is also developing, and there is a growing demand for peer counseling and platforms for sharing experiences.

Background and Objectives

Study Rationale

A strong civil society is considered key to modern democracies. Since the early 1990s, civil society institutions and practices have emerged in Russia through the efforts of experts and donors ([Evans et al. 2006](#)). Despite increasing pressure from the state and low levels of politicization among Russians, many civil institutions have operated for decades, supporting democratic practices “from below” ([Chebankova 2013](#); [Morris et al. 2023](#)) and using new formats, tools, and technologies despite pressure “from above” ([Shvedov et al. 2022](#)). However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly and dramatically changed the work of Russian civil society, creating and exacerbating a range of threats and vulnerabilities ([Gretskiy 2023](#)).

- In Russia, legislation is changing and repression is increasing. This directly affects the work of initiatives and organizations. For example, bans are imposed on various activities and funding, publicity is restricted, and harassment of both individuals and associations is implemented;
- The decline in prosecutions for anti-war views indirectly suggests a decline in the effectiveness of public protest as a tool;
- War divides and polarizes societies. It also creates new vulnerable groups and increases social, regional, and ethnic inequalities;
- Society's tolerance of violence, corruption, repression, and low living standards is growing.
- In environments of censorship, the “patriotic” identity constructed by the state receives the broadest and most unrestricted representation.
- A growing gap is emerging between those who left and those who stayed. This gap is informational, visa-related, financial, and, gradually, cultural. It complicates understanding and dialogue. Emigrants trust other emigrants above all, while trust in remaining Russians is gradually decreasing.

Can civil society in Russia today resist and achieve social change? What has Russian civil society learned over the past 30 years, and how does this knowledge help today? What will Russian civil society look like in 2024? What potential does it have, and what support does it need?

To answer these questions and draw the most complete and up-to-date map of active and potential civil society communities and initiatives in Russia, understand their most pressing problems and risks, identify their strengths, and determine the range of demands they have of each other, allies, and donors inside and outside Russia, we conducted a research based on field data.

Theoretical Background

The Concept of Civil Society

In defining civil society for this study, we chose not to equate it with democratization—specifically, the ability to participate in politics, form trade unions, or create political parties. Although these features are often linked with civil society in both research and practice, several contemporary studies argue that such definitions are overly normative and do not apply well across different contexts. Agreeing with these critiques, we have adopted a different starting point for studying civil society: **solidarity**, along with support for human rights, other living beings, and the environment ([Alexander 1999](#)).

Unlike other phenomena, solidarity can also take place in extremely hostile environments, such as Russia's, where people lack access to rights, freedoms and resources. It is solidarity practices that allow people to come together for collective action and civic engagement ([Ekman et al. 2016](#)). The initial set of tools for researching grassroots forms of solidarity in the Russian context is presented in the works of Karine Clément ([Clément 2015](#)). She analyzes how ordinary, non-activist people can change their habits and start participating in collective action through appropriating a part of the common space outside of home or work, as well as through talking about the experience of self-organization.

As a result, we used the following working definition of civil society, according to which we draw the boundaries of the field we studied.

Civil society comprises a set of initiatives whose participants:

- show solidarity;
- seek to improve living conditions, protect rights and freedoms, restore justice and political expression, bring about social and political change, realize the will of citizens, voice social problems at the public level and attract maximum attention to them, and create counter-discourses that do not coincide with the state's official agenda;
- can use the resources of the state, businesses, and other agents if they set their own objectives, not "top-down" ones, and do not pursue the goal of gaining direct political power;
- are involved in both grassroots and professional forms of organization—ranging from local chat rooms and one-person expert initiatives to large non-government organizations (NGOs) and foundations—and are most often associated with horizontal governance practices.

Solidarity can be interpreted and used in different ways. Our respondents overwhelmingly share a similar understanding of solidarity: they speak of creative, rather than destructive, collective action.

The energy of civil society is not at all... It is very creative <...> Of course, there are some groups where hatred is prevalent, but these people usually don't unite, so they don't become a political force. People most likely unite on positive ideas, even if they have suffered themselves.

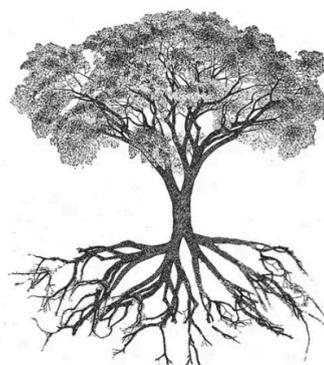
— quote from an anonymized informant

Solidarity is important not as an abstract value or philosophical concept, but as a practice involving collaboration, mutual support, and assistance. In modern humanistic society, we can certainly observe many examples of people coming together to help. One example is when people help those with whom they have a positive emotional relationship, such as extended family or friends. This is called affective solidarity. Another example is conventional solidarity, which is based on the awareness of shared interests and common tasks, values, and traditions (e.g., neighbors uniting for home improvement or wives of mobilized men organizing to protect their rights).

In regard to the relationship between a developed civil society and democratization, as well as the conceptualization of the so-called “uncivil society”—anti-democratic initiatives that some studies include in the definition of civil society and others exclude—a closer look at the third type of solidarity may help clarify these issues. **Reflexive solidarity** (Dean 1995) toward the Other—social groups that practice different approaches and share different values—should be emphasized. This type of solidarity involves helping those who do not belong to one’s own community and with whom they do not have emotional and familial ties or shared obligations. Moreover, differences and disagreements become the basis and fuel of such solidarity. When one consciously transcends the friend-or-foe boundary, disagreements lose their disintegrating character and instead become a characteristic of the connections between people.

Russian Civil Society as a Rhizome

We believe it is productive to examine Russian civil society through the lens of Gilles Deleuze's metaphor of a “rhizome.” Unlike tree-like structures, a rhizome has no single center, size, shape, or direction of growth. Its individual parts can emerge and disappear, and the connections between them are not subject to a single order.



Tree



Rhizome

All actors of civil society—from individuals to large projects—have autonomy and their own

goals, yet they are connected by a shared environment. This is particularly true in Russia, where civil society largely operates “underground” today.

To effectively support the “rhizome,” it is necessary to abandon the concepts of centralization, consolidation, and unification, as well as the search for single solutions. Instead, we must work to find distributed and sustainable strategies that support diversity, autonomy, and opportunities for initiatives to accept assistance while retaining their subjectivity and ability to make independent decisions and respond quickly to changes in the environment.

Data and Methods

The study consists of four blocks:

- **In-depth** interviews: interviews with representatives of communities and initiatives (115);
- **Ethnographic observation** of digital communities (12) and of online and offline conferences involving civil society initiatives (8);
- **The quantitative** block involves analyzing the connectivity and characteristics of digital civil society communities on VK (5,434) and Telegram (1,062);
- **The prognostic** block includes foresight groups with Russian and international experts to validate the research conclusions, forecast the development of the situation and formulate recommendations.

On the one hand, we aimed to map the entire sphere of civil society in Russia, rather than limiting ourselves to our own “bubble.” On the other hand, it was important for us to hear and convey the voices of individuals and initiatives, keep the focus on specific cases and practices, and study the situation at the micro level. Combining these two approaches—the general and the particular—required mixed methods. Quantitative data and analytical methods allowed us to examine the communities and initiatives of interest in terms of general patterns and connections. Qualitative materials from interviews and ethnography enabled us to interpret the statistics, flesh out the specifics, and avoid overlooking diversity and internal contradictions.

For us, it is essential that the three research blocks—the in-depth interview, quantitative, and ethnographic—exist in dialogue with each other. The research design implies constant exchange of materials, ideas, observations, concepts, data, and tools between the researchers to synchronize and enrich the three methodologies. This allows us to constantly sharpen the research focus and adapt methods during the data collection process. For example, the research team obtained access to digital communities for a consequential ethnographic study through initial interviews with experts about the field as a whole. Conducting digital ethnography enabled the generation of more specific and precise interview questions for community participants. Keywords and filtering criteria were then selected from the interview and ethnography data, as well as analysis categories for the quantitative study.

The foresight bloc is unique in that, at this stage, we did not collect field data; rather, we only discussed our findings with experts. Nevertheless, in addition to its main goal of trying to predict the future and understand how to work with it, this stage allowed us to enrich our understanding of the field and better position our conclusions.

Qualitative Data

Data Collection Method

In our case, the qualitative part involved conducting a large number of in-depth interviews (N = 115). We organized the collection into two stages so that we could analyze the material from each stage and more precisely define the criteria for the next stage.

The preliminary qualitative stage included fifteen interviews with Russian experts deeply immersed in the work of civil society (e.g., media, education, philanthropy, and activism, often in several fields simultaneously), who were willing to discuss their work and civil society in general. We asked them about their observations of the field, the dynamics of recent years, and the challenges and resources they had encountered. We also asked them about the areas of work and specific initiatives and their communities, including its activities and existing partnerships and interactions within the field. During the interviews, we followed the respondents' understanding of which issues were important to them. In this sense, the interviews were closer to unstructured interviews than structured ones.

Based on these initial interviews, we developed working definitions of “civil society” and other relevant concepts. We also formulated hypotheses, adjusted research questions, outlined further sampling, and created a guide for semi-structured interviews. Phase 2 interviews (N = 100) lasted between one and three hours. They included questions about the initiatives' objectives, goals, teams, practices, resources, challenges, victories, inquiries, and interactions, as well as the respondents' professional journeys. Most interviews were conducted online, though some took place offline.

Of the 115 interviews, 114 were audio-recorded and transcribed, and one was received in writing. The transcripts were then coded and analyzed. Code development and interpretation were conducted collaboratively and iteratively.

To uphold the principle of confidentiality, we anonymized all quoted material in the final text. Before each interview, participants were informed that they could choose not to answer any uncomfortable questions and that they could pause or end the interview at any time.

We conducted digital ethnography in both public and closed communities. In public communities, we downloaded messages from the past year and coded the data manually. In closed communities, we informed participants about our research goals and requested access to conduct observations. To prioritize the safety and comfort of activists, we refrained from taking photographs or making video recordings during our participation in communities, conferences, and online events. Instead, we kept ethnographic diaries in the form of written and audio notes, which we later reviewed and discussed within the research team.

Sampling

When selecting initiatives for interviews, we were guided by three principles: first, **diversity of fields of activity**; second, **regional diversity**, including non-metropolitan areas (only about 20% of the initiatives we reviewed were from Moscow and St. Petersburg); and third, **diversity in the form, scale, and age of organizations**. These principles, along with the commissioning parties' and the research team's applied objectives and shared values, helped us identify, select, and prioritize interviewees and communities for digital ethnography.

Similarly, when selecting experts for the foresight analysis, we prioritized diversity. On the one hand, we sought individuals deeply immersed in Russian civil society with many years of experience in practice or research. On the other hand, we looked for experts who had not worked specifically in the Russian context, but who could share their experiences working in authoritarian regimes, polarized societies, or contexts of military conflict.

Among our 115 respondents, a notable number are labeled by the Russian government as “foreign agents” (14) or are affiliated with “undesirable organizations” (3), including two respondents who are both foreign agents and members of such organizations. In contrast, there are virtually no participants who actively cooperate with the Russian state or support its official political agenda. This composition reflects the nature of our applied research and the limitations of our available resources.⁴

All the organizations we spoke with operate within Russia and primarily focus their efforts inside the country, even when some team members are based abroad. Initiatives targeting exclusively Russian emigrant communities were not examined in the study. However, we conducted participant observations of both domestic and international events, including those addressing Russian issues and Russian–Ukrainian dialogue.

Areas of Work. What spheres does the civil society that we researched through interviews and observation operate in?⁵

- **Political Activism and Human Rights Advocacy:** Supporting political prisoners and the politically persecuted; working with information and memory of political repression; and electoral rights.
- **Anti-War Activism and Addressing the Consequences of War:** Aiding conscripts and conscientious objectors; assisting refugees and individuals with PTSD; countering propaganda and war rhetoric; and grassroots humanitarian aid efforts for the military.⁶

⁴ In addition to the people and initiatives included in our final sample, we approached 43 other civil society representatives. During the period allocated for fieldwork in the study, we either received a rejection from them or no response at all.

⁵ This tentative categorization aims to thematically delineate the coordinates of civil society in Russia as presented in our research. Naturally, specific beneficiary groups, communities, and projects may fall into multiple categories, and the categories themselves could have been identified differently.

⁶ In this study, we did not focus on pro-war, right-wing, or pro-state activism. However, we included pro-war grassroots initiatives and organizations that cooperate closely with the state in the sample, even if they are not necessarily sympathetic to official policies. We believe this approach was necessary to avoid bias, gain

- **Feminism and Reproductive and Sexual Rights:** Supporting LGBTQ+ community and fighting for their rights; women's reproductive rights and safety; assisting survivors of sexualized and other violence; and shelters, emergency evacuation.
- **Health and the Healthcare Environment; Rights to Health:** Volunteering in hospitals; psychological care projects; physical and psychological rehabilitation; prevention, education, and medication for HIV/AIDS; and harm reduction programs.
- **Vulnerable Groups:** Protecting the rights of migrant workers and other migrants; helping children with a migration background; providing aid to homeless people; coordination of care for elders, supporting adults and children with disabilities, providing security for marginalized groups (e.g. survivors of sex trafficking and prostitution).
- **Childhood, Family, Care and Growing Up:** Support for families in crisis, orphans, parents in vulnerable situations; advocating for changes in family and care legislation; volunteering in orphanages and boarding schools; psychological support for adolescents.
- **Education and Outreach:** Educational projects; cultural and contemporary art centers; independent bookstores and other “third places”—venues for lectures, dialogue and debate.
- **Independent Media:** Media outlets with varying target audience and scales of operation.
- **Cultural, Local and Linguistic Activism:** Preservation of cultural and historical heritage; support for local activists and artists; small-area development and local identity; cultural entrepreneurship; language courses and minority language development.
- **Self-Governance and Support for Professional Rights:** Trade unions; elements of local self-governance.
- **Environmentalism:** Environmental defense; environmental justice; environmental education, local identity development through environmental work; animal welfare.
- **Support for Civil Society:** Infrastructural support; psychological assistance for activists; organization of schools and courses; educational events and retreats for activists; resource centers for NGOs; educational support for those involved in civil society initiatives.

Geography. Russia has a high level of social and regional inequality: financial, educational and other resources are concentrated primarily in the capital and other large cities. Had we aimed for quantitative representativeness, our sample would have consisted primarily of projects based in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Novosibirsk, and a few other resource centers. However, we designed the project around the principles of diversity and applied relevance,

insight into the work of the less familiar values circulating in that part of civil society, and not overlook the diverse, speculative, complex, and contradictory relationships with the state that characterize the Russian third sector.

prioritizing initiatives that are more vulnerable and whose voices are less prominent in the broader civic landscape.

Organization. Our goal was to reflect a broad range of organizational characteristics, including scale, longevity, coordination styles, and levels of institutionalization. Our sample includes large, long-established organizations with numerous permanent staff and volunteers with their “classic” hierarchical governance structures. It also includes initiatives that emphasize horizontal structures and practice collective decision-making. Many of these initiatives are relatively new, having emerged in the past few years. Some are small, grassroots activist communities. We interviewed several solo initiatives—projects led by one or two individuals who primarily work alone but occasionally receive support from professional and volunteer networks. Many respondents balance multiple professional identities and types of employment.

Shift in Focus. Given the goals of our research, which were to highlight the most urgent problems, risks, and needs facing civil society, we intentionally shifted our focus away from large, stable, highly institutionalized NGOs. Instead, we aimed to capture the voices of the more vulnerable and younger segments of Russian civil society. At the same time, we see our research mission as illuminating the relationship between the various generations of initiatives. Promoting interaction between these groups is one of our key priorities for developing civil society.

Quantitative Data

We analyzed a continuous dataset of VK groups and public communities, as well as Telegram chats, that we found through APIs and that met the criteria formulated in several iterations.

Search Stage. In order to search for relevant communities, we generated a closed list of keywords based on the results of digital ethnography of startup communities, as well as internal recommendations of social networks. For each keyword, we collected the first N=100 communities (most likely the most active and/or popular) and assessed whether these were indeed communities related to civil society initiatives; if not, we refined and reformulated the queries. As a result, we settled on the following 56 keywords for which a significant proportion of the first N=100 communities appeared to be appropriate:

aid to the front (pomoshch frontu)

aid to the mobilized (pomoshch mobilizovannym)

animal volunteers (zoovolontyory)

animal welfare (pomoshch zivotnym)

assistance to the elderly (pomoshch pozhilym)

camouflage nets (maskirovochnye seti)

charitable foundation (blagotvoritel'nyj fond)

child support (pomoshch detyam)

civic activists (grazhdanskije aktivisty)

civil society (grazhdanskoe obshchestvo)

combat assistance (pomoshch bojtsam)

concerned people (neravnodushnyye lyudi)

creative space (tvorcheskoe prostranstvo)

creative workshop (tvorcheskaya masterskaya)
crisis assistance (krizisnaya pomoshch)
crisis center (krizisnyj tsentr)
difficult life situation (trudnaya zhiznennaya situatsiya)
disability assistance (pomoshch invalidam)
domestic violence (domashnee nasilie)
drug addicts (narkozavisimye)
emergency accommodation (ekstrennoe razmeshchenie)
environmental problems (ekologicheskie problemy)
environmental protection (zashchita okruzhayushchej sredy)
family development center (tsentr razvitiya semyi)
farmer (fermer)
feminism (feminizm)
feminist (feministskaya)
fight against corruption (bor'ba s korruptsiej)
helpline (telefon doveriya)
historic preservation (zashchita istoricheskogo naslediya)
hiv/aids (vich/spid)
homeless assistance (pomoshch bezdomnym)
homeless assistance (pomoshch bezdomnym lyudyam)
human rights defense (pravozashchita)
human rights project (pravozashchitnyj proekt)
humanitarian aid (gumanitarnaya pomoshch')
humanitarian mission (gumanitarnaya missiya)
initiative group (iniciativnaya gruppa)
large families (mnogodetnye semyi)
lonely old people (odinokie stariki)
low-income families (maloimushchie semyi)
maternity support (podderzhka materinstva)
migrant children (deti migrantov)
nature protection (zashchita prirody)
NPO (NKO)
non-profit organization (nekommercheskaya organizatsiya)
orphans (deti-siroty)
palliative care (palliativnaya pomoshch)
participants of war (uchastniki svo)
political education (politicheskoe prosveshchenie)
public association (obshchestvennoe obyedinenie)
racism (rasizm)
rehabilitation (reabilitatsiya)
refugees (bezhentsy)
resource center (resursnyj tsentr)
sexual violence (seksual'noe nasilie)
sexualized violence (seksualizirovannoe nasilie)
social and political movement (obshchestvenno-politicheskoe dvizhenie)
social assistance service (sotsial'naya sluzhba pomoshchi)
social justice (sotsial'naya spravedlivost')
social service (sotsial'noe sluzhenie)
soldier assistance (pomoshch soldatam)
strong rear (sil'nyj tyl)
support group (gruppa podderzhki)
trade union (profsoyuz)
trucker (dal'nobojschik)
victim assistance (pomoshch zhertvam nasiliya)
volunteer (volontyor)
vulnerable populations (nezashchishchennye sloi naseleniya)
vulnerable position (uyazvimoe polozhenie)
veterans' assistance (pomoshch veteranam)
women's aid (pomoshch zhenshinam)
youth movement (molodezhnoe dvizhenie)

The process of using the API to search for communities by keyword differed between VK and Telegram.

VK's API standard allows one to download up to 1000 communities by keyword. In the vast majority of cases, this limit was not reached for our keywords. The API also implements full-fledged search algorithms and allows selecting communities. In contrast, the Telegram API limits search results to a few dozen and mostly returns Telegram channels rather than chats. In our research, however, it was the group interactions within chats that were important, including those that function as comment sections under channel posts. We supplemented the standard API output with data from the TG Stat catalog. As a result, we collected N=48,826 communities (groups and public communities) for VK and N=3,877 communities (individual chats or chats linked to channels) from Telegram.

The following limitations are present in the data based on the results of the community search:

- The data represent the results of search algorithms (either by the social network itself or by the moderators of the TG Stat database); these algorithms are not transparent, and we cannot assess their completeness. At the same time, it is important to note that a “standard user” of a social network, wishing to find a community of interest, is under the same or greater restrictions; that is, these restrictions are coherent to all other cases of social network use.
- The social network APIs we used also impose a limit on the number of results that can be returned. According to our observations, the most active and/or popular communities tend to appear at the top of VK's search results, while the inactive or irrelevant ones appear toward the end. In most cases, the total number of communities was below the maximum limit. When it was not, we applied additional filtering to exclude the last dozen results. There were fewer communities accessible via the Telegram API, but supplementing the dataset with TG Stat data mitigated this limitation.

Filtering stage. After collecting the identifiers of the communities of interest on Telegram and VK, we moved on to the filtering process. This included two stages: technical and thematic.

It's important to note that Telegram and VK have significant differences in usage scenarios, audience characteristics, and how bots, advertising, and marketing functions are integrated. Telegram tends to have less advertising “noise” and more “organic content.” However, communication often occurs in closed groups. Consequently, communities collected using the same keywords on different platforms require different filtering approaches. To develop technical filtering algorithms, we relied on a team member's expertise in digital marketing research.

In the technical stage, we excluded communities that met the following criteria:

- No activity within the last month (as of the most recent data download for the study);
- In the case of VK: no growth of at least 5 participants over the past six months, or fewer than 1% reactions to posts during that same period. Such VK communities are considered “inanimate”: their activity is either the result of random bot actions or is artificially maintained by administrators for reporting purposes or appearances.

For the remaining communities, we collected the following data:

- Community description;
- Pinned messages (for Telegram);
- Description of the linked channel, if applicable (for Telegram).

We conducted thematic screening of the communities using this data. To accomplish this, we developed a rule-based system that defined the criteria for including a community in the research field. These rules considered variables such as community goals, organizational practices, communication topics, the presence of calls to action, fundraising, rhetorical.

Examples of such rules include:

- “The primary purpose of the community should not be commercial. If the community is commercialized, there should also be evidence of the free provision of help and support and solidarity.”
- “If the community is horizontally organized and coordinates work on vulnerable groups, then it fits.”
- “If the community's main focus is entertainment and resembles a personal blog, then it's not a good fit.”

To operationalize these variables, we submitted targeted queries to [GPT-4o](#) and asked the model to estimate the probability that each variable would be present in a given message. For instance, the probability of the variable “funding: government funding” would be 1 for a state-run social services center and 0 for an anarchist chat. When the information was insufficient, the model returned a value of -1. We accessed GPT-4o via the [OpenAI API](#) and built a custom library for integration. Alongside specific variable queries, we provided a system prompt that included a brief overview of the research objectives. We ensured quality control of the neural network’s output using metrics of completeness and accuracy on test samples (N=20 for each keyword, totaling N=1,080). In these samples, all borderline cases were marked with -1 to allow for later manual review.

We applied deterministic filtering rules to the model's output based on the above-described rule set to determine if a community met the inclusion criteria. Communities that did not meet any criteria were flagged for manual validation.

Through this process, supplemented by a manual review of ambiguous cases, we identified 5,434 communities on VK and 1,062 communities on Telegram.

Classification stage. To identify interesting trends in community data, we used neural networks to categorize the remaining communities further. We downloaded 500 recent chat messages for Telegram and up to 20 posts and 200 comments from the last 2 months for VK. Then, we composed additional queries to GPT-4o using the same methodology. We were interested in:

- Areas of civic engagement represented in the community;
- Organizational practices;
- Geographic reference;
- Clarification of the narratives from the previous step.

Analysis Phase. One of the key components of our quantitative data analysis was constructing a community connectivity graph based on shared participants. We collected lists of VK community members who had published posts or comments within the last 500 posts in each community. We also collected the authors of the last 10,000 messages in the selected Telegram chats.

Next, we tested different algorithms for creating connectivity graphs. Among other things, we experimented with different thresholds for determining connections between communities: These included 1%, 3%, and 5% of total members, as well as minimum shared user thresholds of 2, 5, 10, or more. These thresholds were necessary because despite all previous filtering, bots were still present in some communities.

After creating the graphs and color coding the vertices according to thematic categories, such as activity topic, geography, narratives, sources of funding, and organizing practices, we developed hypotheses about the relationships between different community characteristics. We then tested these hypotheses using simple correlation analysis.

Foresight Analysis

Composition and Characteristics of Expert Groups

The foresight sessions were the final phase of the project, linking our findings and conclusions directly to the main practical objective of the study as a whole.

It was important to us to make sure that the trends and recommendations we identified for donors would be correct and relevant in the months following the completion of the study. To do this, we invited experts to “predict the future” based on our data.

In the foresight analysis, we brought together several types of experts:

- Russian specialists with academic background, practical experience in media or civil society initiatives in emigration or within Russia;

- Foreign (English- and Russian-speaking) specialists on the history of Russian civil society;
- English-speaking practitioners from the world of peacebuilding;
- Foreign (English- and Russian-speaking) specialists with academic background, practical experience in media or civil society initiatives in authoritarian countries with similar contexts (e.g. Belarus and Azerbaijan).

A total of 23 experts took part in the foresight sessions. Sixteen joined the Russian-language sessions and seven took part in English-language sessions.

Our criteria for selecting participants were as follows:

- Relevant experience in studying or developing civil society initiatives in Russia and others contexts marked by repression, military conflict and divided societies, or specialists in Russian studies;
- A solid reputation and commitment to ethical research and activist principles, such as reflexivity, non-harm, non-violence, and intersectionality;
- If the first two conditions were met, we would also ensure that an expert had a meta-perspective and was able not to focus on one specific initiative. Additionally, the respondent must not be on our list during the fieldwork phase.

The groups were divided by language based on the participants' preferences. To encourage diverse perspectives, we brought together people with different backgrounds and approaches to civil society, combining practitioners and theorists in each group. This ensured that discussions reflected a wide range of perspectives and that participants' ideas were immediately tested against the group's collective experience.

Methodologically, our work with Russian and Russian-speaking experts was similar to our work with English-speaking experts. However, when necessary, we provided foreign participants with additional context to help them understand Russian civil society. During discussions and forecasting, the participants often drew on analogies from their own experiences or from the communities they had studied—those whose Russian counterparts they were analyzing. This approach provided us with a broader and more nuanced understanding of the current dynamics and potential trajectories of the observed trends.

We discussed the issue of anonymizing the experts in advance, both during their participation in the sessions and in subsequent mentions in the project materials.

Methodology

To conduct foresight sessions, we analyzed more than ten most commonly used approaches and methods and decided to apply a dynamic SWOT analysis.

Based on our research, we have formed a definition of civil society and identified desirable directions for its development. We have also determined the current state of SWOT variables. We obtained the following matrix:

S[trengths]: internal resources of civil society organizations

W[eaknesses]: internal problems of civil society

O[pportunities]: external opportunities for civil society (according to our respondents)

T[hreats]: external risks to civil society (also according to our respondents)

After obtaining consent from each invited participant, we sent them a short brochure outlining these factors and providing recommendations for donors interested in supporting Russian civil society.

It is important to note that we did not study external factors directly, but rather examined their impact on civil society. Therefore, it was crucial to include experts specializing in macro-level factors within authoritarian contexts (from fields such as political science, economics, and human rights) in the sessions. We believe their expertise helped the group contextualize and deepen its understanding and analysis.

Each foresight session lasted between **1.5 and 2.5 hours**, and each group included **2 to 4 participants**.

We invited experts to engage in **dynamic SWOT forecasting**, structured as follows:

First, OT in Dynamics: Participants were asked to generate possible external scenarios (opportunities and threats) for 2025 and estimate their likelihood. To guide this process, we proposed some recommendations from the study as examples of potential opportunities. For example: "Activists will be able to receive personal stipends from donors equivalent to the minimum wage."

Then, SW in Dynamics: Participants were asked to evaluate potential internal scenarios (strengths and weaknesses) and propose strategic responses from civil society based on the likelihood of various OT scenarios occurring. For example: "Donors stop funding free meetings/retreats for initiatives," or "VPN use becomes criminalized," followed by guiding questions such as "What are the risks to civil society development in this situation?" and "How can we adapt to this situation?"

After the sessions were completed, we summarized the forecasts and conclusions provided by the various expert groups. Based on these insights, we revised and refined our recommendations for donors, which are included in this report.

Detailed Findings

Map of Russian Civil Society at the End of 2024

Through a visual analysis of community graphs in social networks and data from expert interviews, we identified six main clusters of civic activity. We then described these clusters in detail based on interview and observation data.

Explicitly Anti-war and pro-democracy activism; major media, investigators, and researchers; human rights movements (including women's and LGBTQ+ rights); and assistance to Ukrainian citizens

These initiatives often relocate, hybridize, and/or operate clandestinely or anonymously. While they generally have sufficient resources, they may lack dialogue with a broader range of grassroots initiatives. They may not demonstrate “victories” in the traditional sense, such as influencing government decisions, because the state is committed to their suppression. Many of these initiatives avoid interaction with the state, although there are exceptions, such as ongoing dialogue about issues like torture and detention conditions in colonies.

Environmental and urban defense, decolonial movements, defense of social and collective rights, leftist movements, trade unions and professional associations, local initiatives, and local media

These actors historically have limited ties to the first group. The two clusters often struggle to find common ground, due in part to the centralization and stark inequalities within Russia. The first group tends to be associated with capital cities, while the second is more prevalent in non-capital regions and smaller towns. These initiatives typically lack resources, visibility, and broad social connections. Although often perceived as “non-political,” they are in fact politically active, and sometimes adopt apolitical positioning strategically to improve their survival prospects. They operate under constant threat of repression, observe various secrecy practices, and face acute issues of burnout.

Assistance to people in vulnerable situations, marginalized groups, and the broader charity sphere

The state actively encroaches upon this space, seeking to seize its agenda. In response, initiatives employ various strategies. Some engage in confrontation with the state regarding issues such as reproductive rights and motherhood, while others adopt mimicry in areas such as healthcare. The first group and other independent actors often quietly and discreetly seek support and alternative funding models, especially under the constraints of sanctions and repression. Many also face significant shortages of resources and technological capacity.

Animal welfare

Of all the visible and interconnected sectors, this is the largest and fastest-growing area of independent, horizontal activity. Currently, participation here represents a relatively safe space for practicing values such as solidarity, empathy, and justice, specifically in relation to animals. Participants tend not to form NGOs or formal organizations, but they often go beyond atomization in search of allies and collaborate with people with whom they may disagree in order to achieve a shared goal.

Third places, centers for building and maintaining horizontal ties

These spaces function as semi-public places that resemble the “dissident kitchens” of the USSR era. Unlike in the past, however, these spaces are more accessible to new participants. As of 2024,, they were successfully fending off pressure from pro-state actors by translating conflicts into bureaucratic or administrative terms. These venues serve as entry points for new participants and as support spaces for activists who have lost previous opportunities for civic engagement due to repression or exhaustion.

“Uncivil society”: wives of mobilized men, support groups for Russian military personnel, those who produce camouflage nets (setkopyoty), right-wing activists, and pro-state initiatives across various topics

The state uses grassroots and professional activism in these initiatives to normalize war and repression. However, these groups are not immune to repression themselves. In some cases, initially pro-state or neutral actors become politicized. They differ structurally and ideologically from other civil society groups, warranting further study. These initiatives compete with civil society for volunteers and humanitarian agendas and possess latent protest potential.

You can learn more about the contours of civic activism clusters in Russia, as well as the connections between them, using the interactive graph of online civil society communities on the HARC website:

tharesearch.center/en/online-community-connectivity-graph

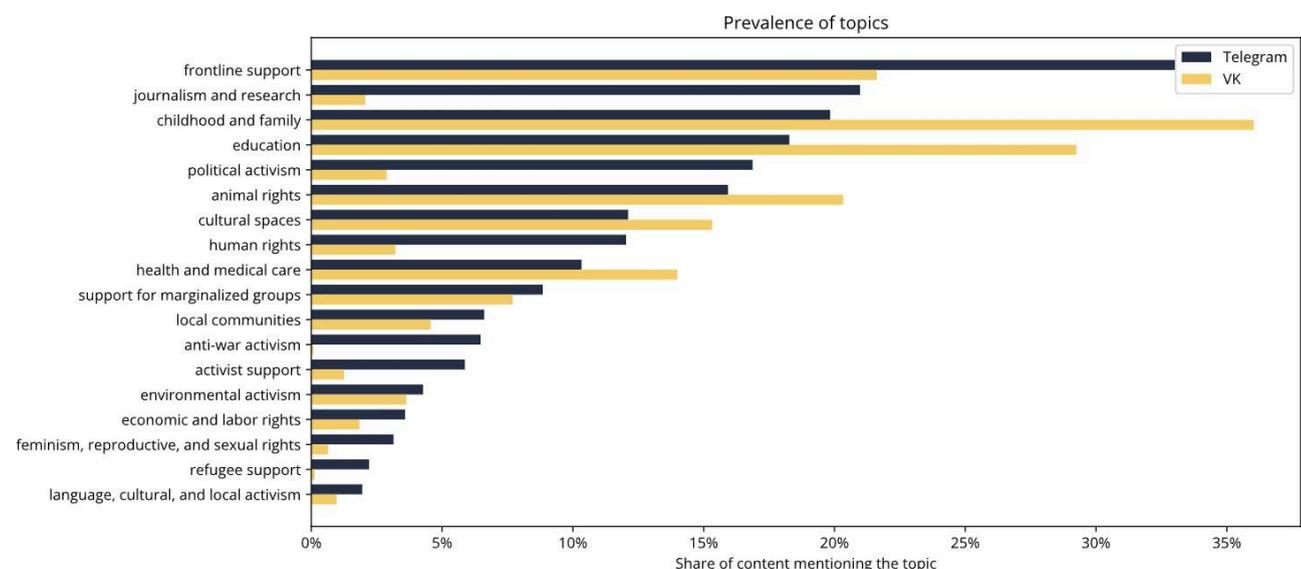


Analyzing the Digital Footprints of Civil Society Work

Themes of Work in Communities

In contexts where there is low trust in survey data, such as in authoritarian regimes, social media data can serve as a partial substitute for the quantitative monitoring of civil society dynamics. One key question is what topics civil society is engaging with and how these topics are distributed. The graph below attempts to answer these questions, albeit only partially.

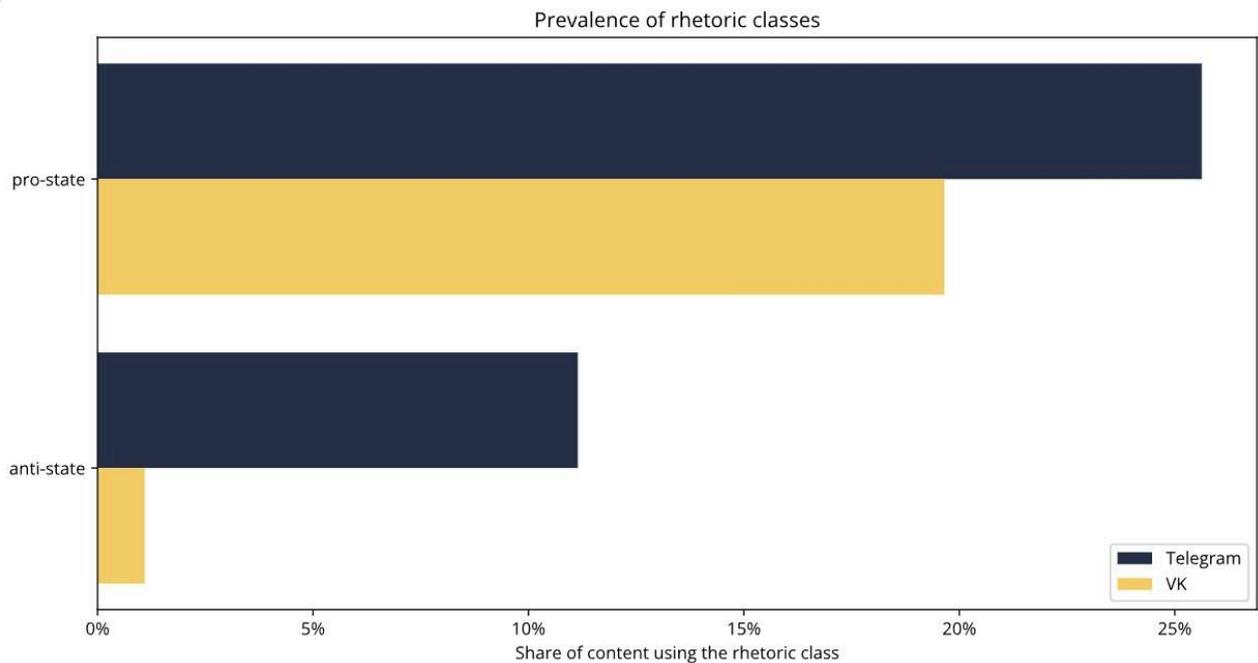
At first glance, the graph suggests that the largest part of Russian civil society consists of “uncivil society” actors, or those who provide grassroots support for the Russian military. In contrast, far fewer people appear to be involved in anti-war, social, cultural, or environmental activism. However, this interpretation should be approached with caution. The dataset only includes open communities. This means that the visibility of a topic depends not only on its actual prevalence, but also on how safe activists feel discussing it publicly. For this reason, the current data only provides a snapshot. More nuanced and reliable insights will likely emerge as this type of data accumulates over time.



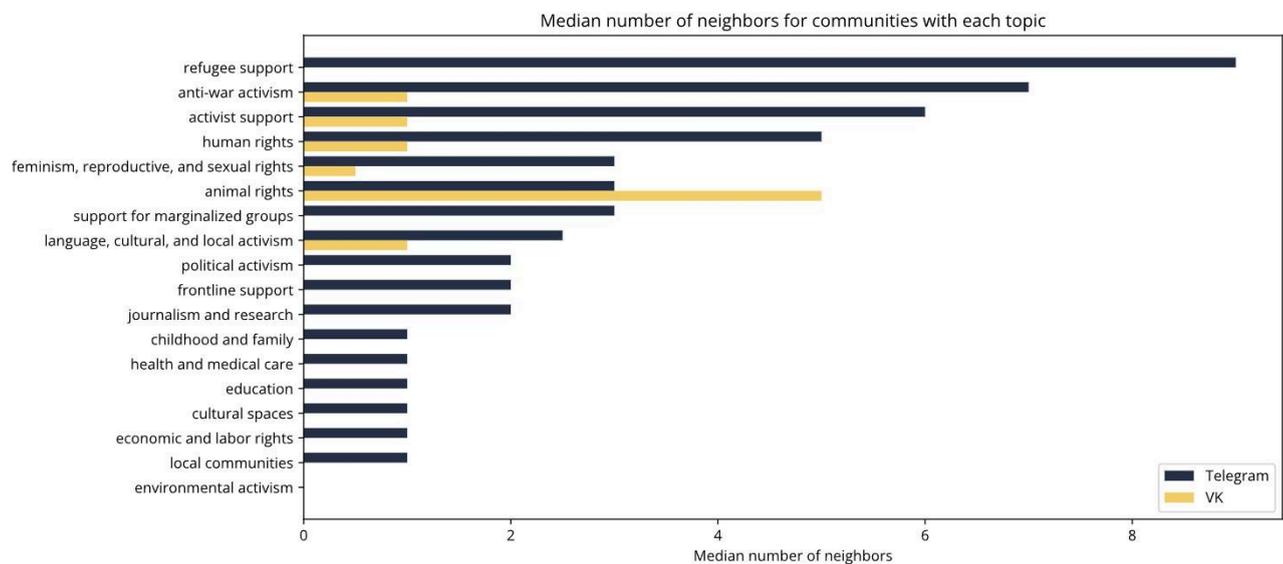
In this context, it is notable that Telegram is perceived as a more suitable platform for discussing politically charged topics than VK, even though both networks have open, public groups. This contrast is most evident in topics that typically involve opposition or protest: political activism, journalism, research, human rights, and support for activists. It also extends to topics that are considered “toxic” by the state, such as feminism and language activism. Anti-war activism, which is visible on Telegram, is completely absent from VK.

At the same time, this trend extends to Z-activism, which involves pro-government and militarist discourse. On VK, this topic is discussed almost a third less frequently. This finding aligns with our interview data, which suggests that Z-activists fear potential state repression as well.

This finding supports the broader hypothesis that users are reluctant to express anti-state views, or any political opinions, on VK due to perceived or real risks. This is further confirmed by comparing the representation of different rhetorical patterns on the two platforms.



When evaluating the significance of a topic within a sector, it is helpful to consider not only its quantitative representation, but also its capacity to bring people together and engage them in broader civil society activities. To measure this, we calculated—for each topic—the average number of neighboring communities. The resulting distribution graph is presented below.



What we observe is that topics more closely tied to reflexive solidarity—such as supporting vulnerable groups, anti-war activism, human rights, and animal protection—are more effective at uniting people than more widely represented and safer themes like childhood, healthcare, and education, or even support for the front. This ability to form connections can serve as an indicator of how grassroots a movement is. When a community has many

connections, it suggests that various initiatives emerged independently and formed links later on. In contrast, top-down or centrally coordinated communities tend to have fewer connections.

Taken together, the data from the distribution and connectivity graphs indicates that animal protection is one of the most promising areas for further observation. It is one of the top five most popular topics on both social networks and is highly connected, particularly on VK, where it holds the record for the most internal links among communities.

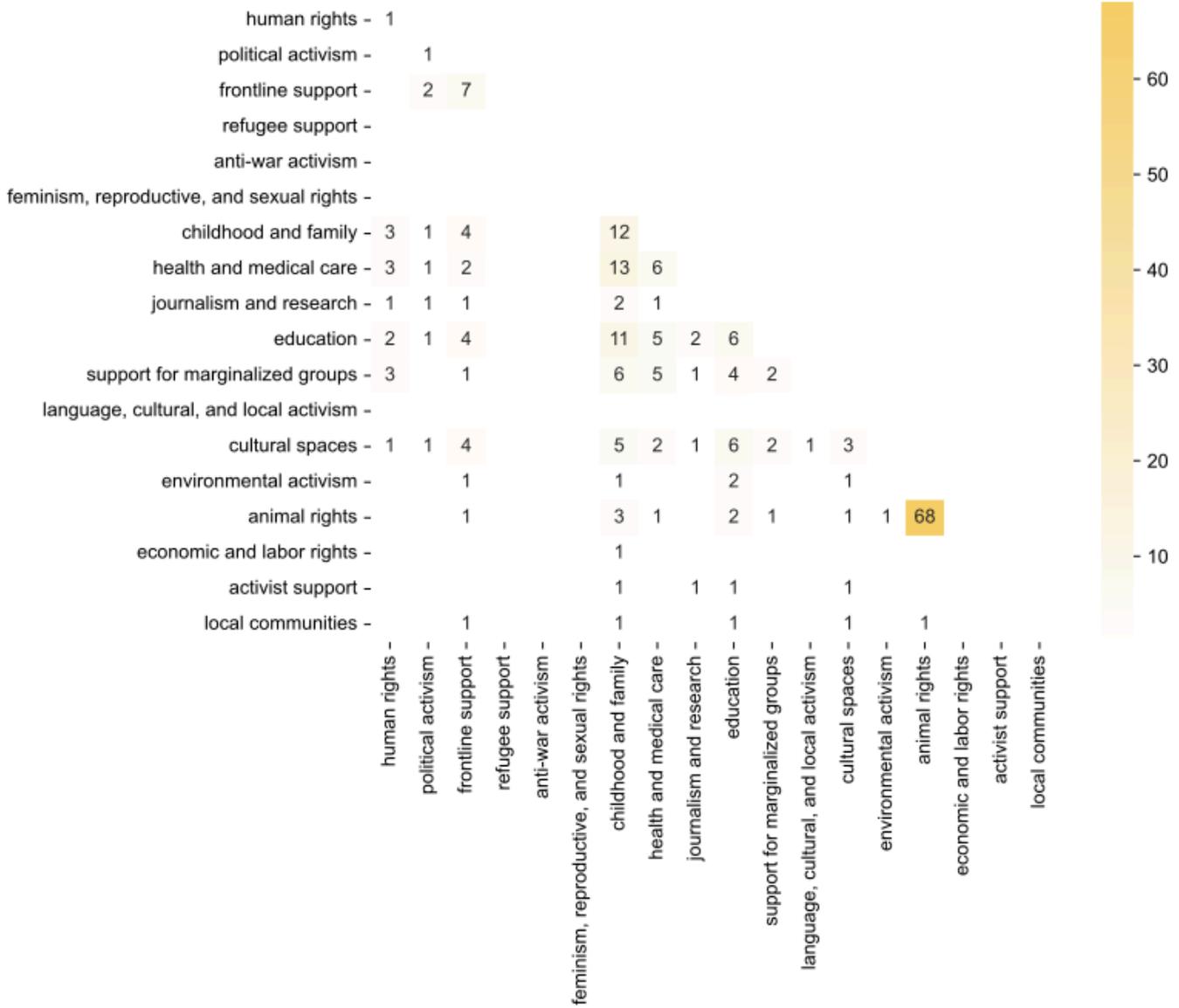
Another topic of interest is ecology. Although ecology is underrepresented on both VK and Telegram, our qualitative data shows that initiatives related to ecology tend to follow strict digital security practices and primarily communicate through secure messengers. This likely explains why they are not more visible in the public digital space.

The charts below show the distribution of connections between communities organized by topic, providing a quantitative view of what is also visually observable in the connectivity graph.

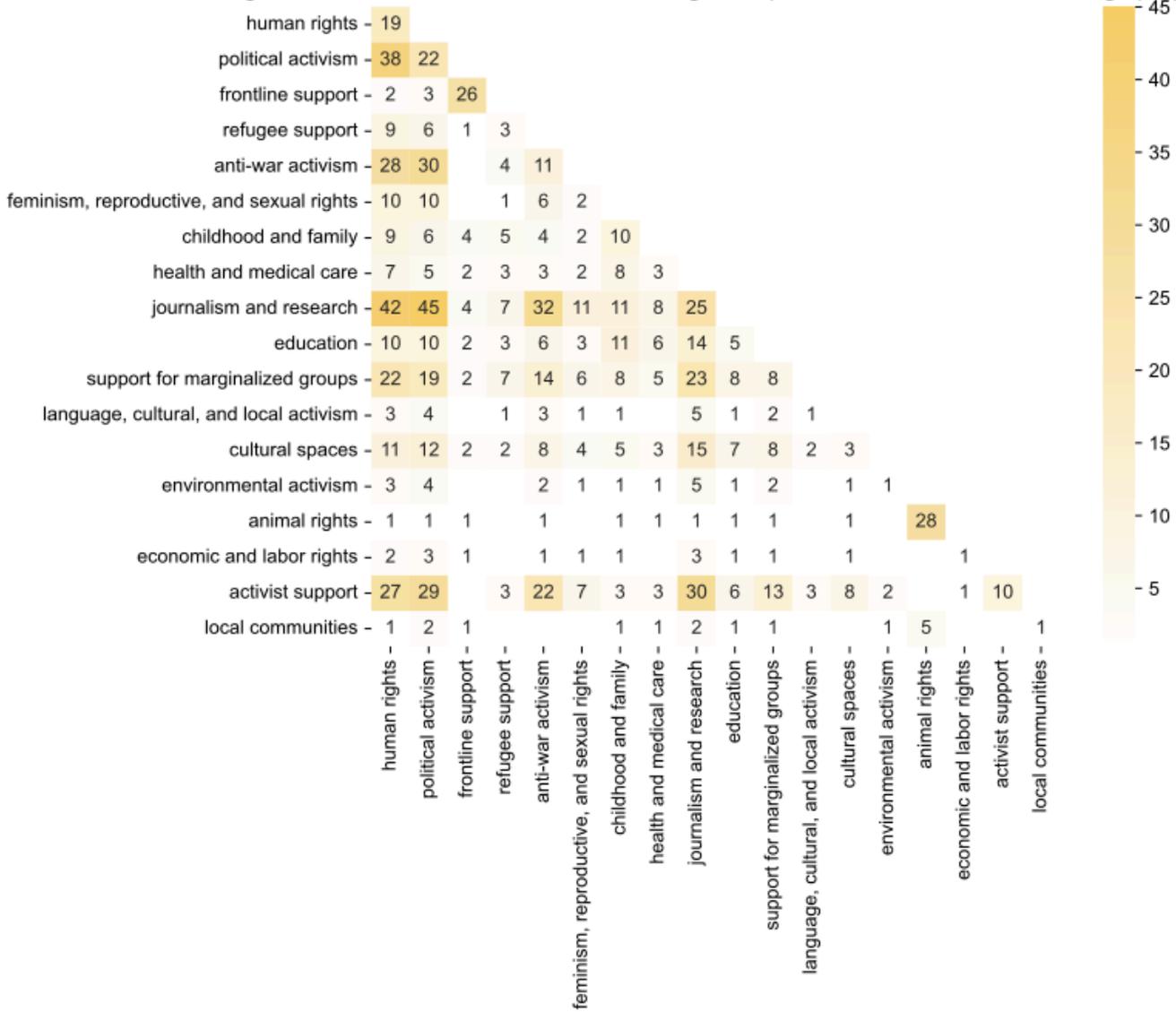
We see that initiatives in the social sphere, such as those related to family and childhood, healthcare, and education, are generally well-connected internally. However, they remain distant from more politically sensitive areas, such as anti-war activism, political mobilization, support for vulnerable populations, and animal protection.

The human rights and independent journalism sectors play a key role in connecting otherwise separate areas, especially on Telegram. However, these sectors are less connected to ecology and collective rights. This can be explained by their differing ideological orientations: Many human rights and media projects lean more neoliberal, while ecological and social justice movements, particularly those outside capital cities, tend to lean more leftist

Percentage of connections between communities of given topics out of all connections in the graph (VK)



Percentage of connections between communities of given topics out of all connections in the graph (Telegram)

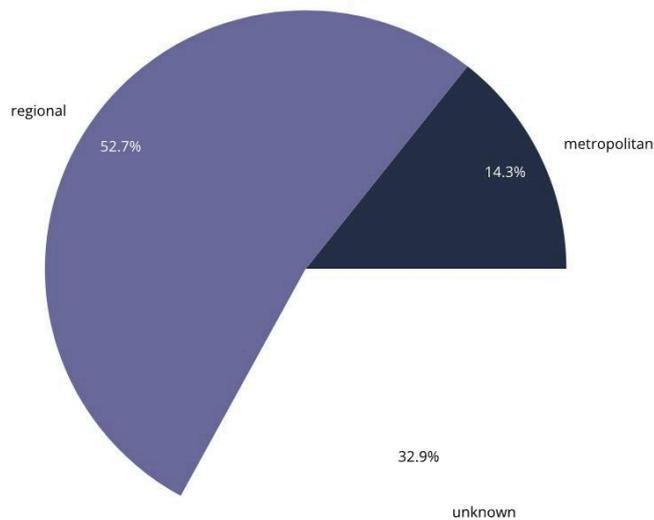


Finally, both frontline aid and animal protection demonstrate what we might call “self-contained” connectivity. They are strongly networked within their respective thematic clusters but have limited connections to other spheres. This suggests that these topics serve as entry points into civil society for many participants.

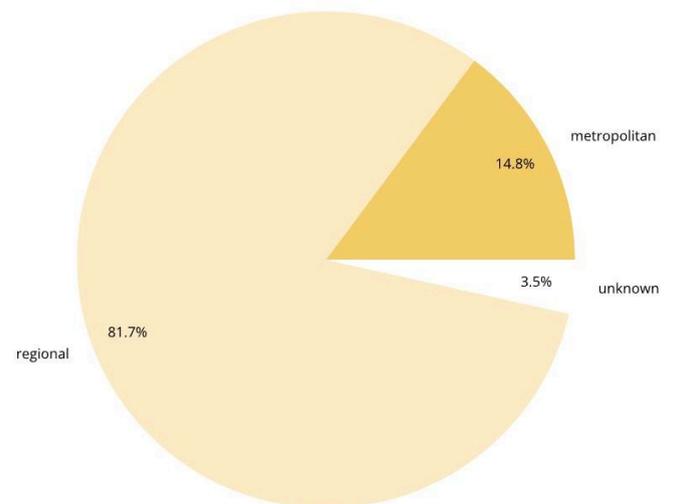
Geographical Distribution of Communities

Another important aspect to consider is the geographical distribution of civil society activity. In this study, we used Russian-language keywords, which likely caused us to overlook communities operating in other languages. The pie charts below illustrate the distribution of communities in metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions, as well as a more detailed regional breakdown for Telegram and VK.

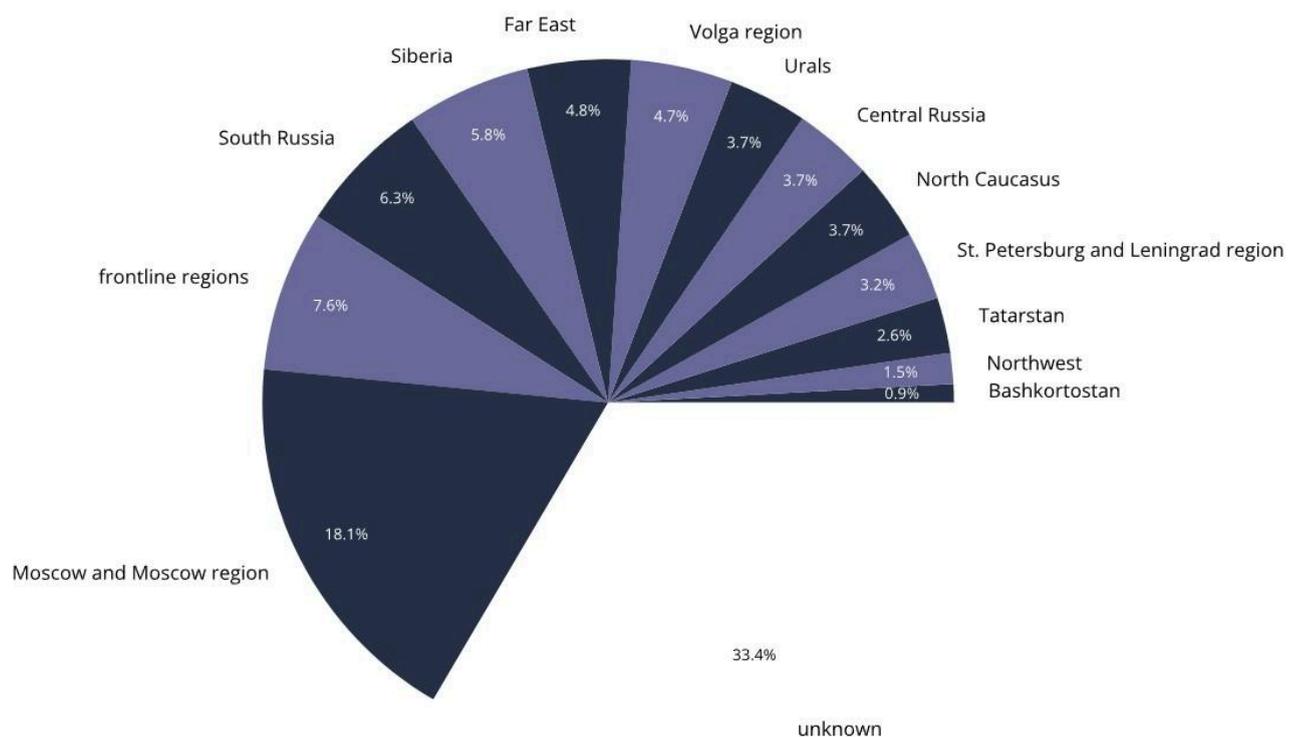
Share of metropolitan and regional communities (Telegram)



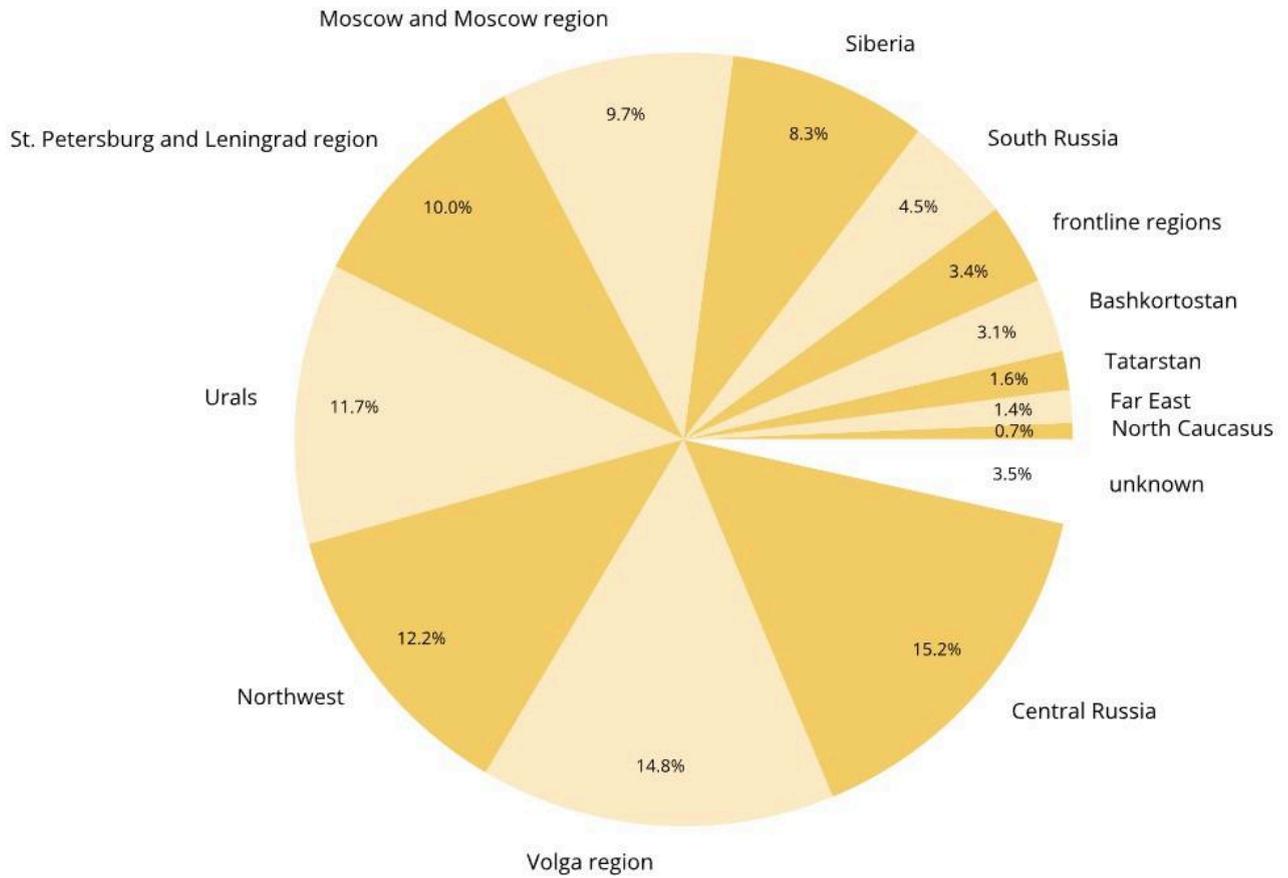
Share of metropolitan and regional communities (VK)



Community geography (Telegram)

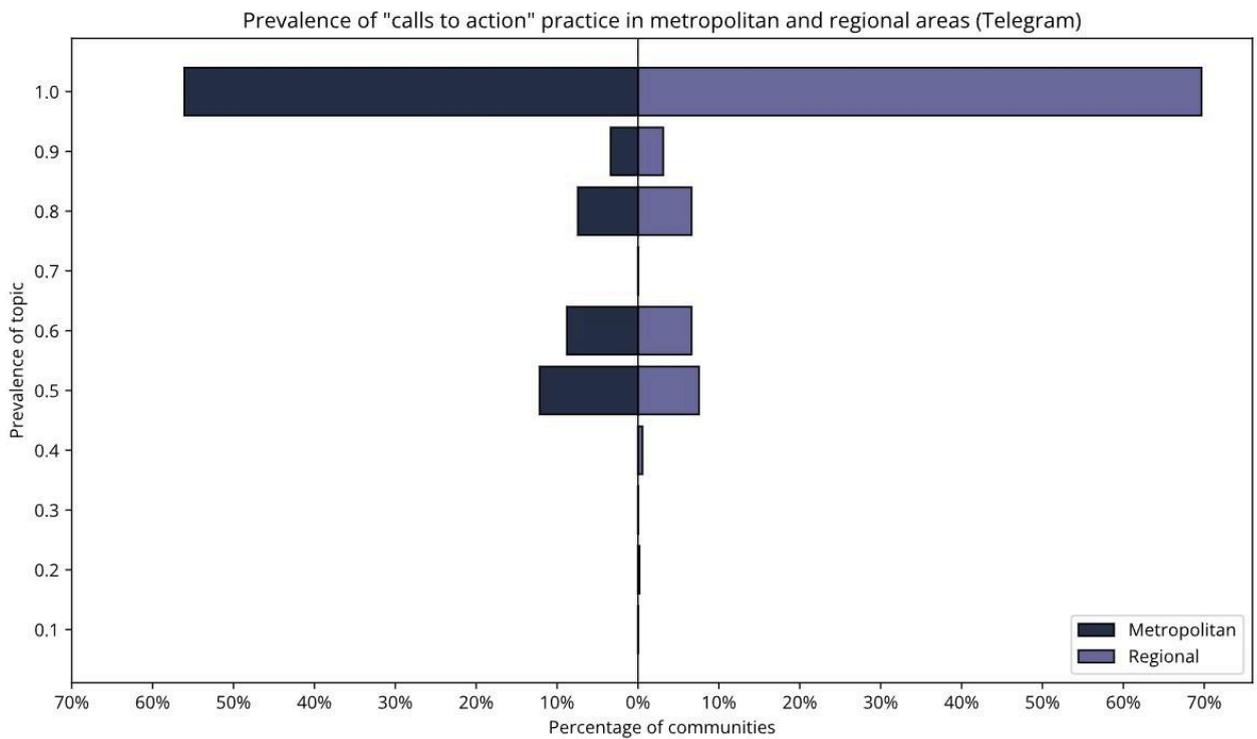
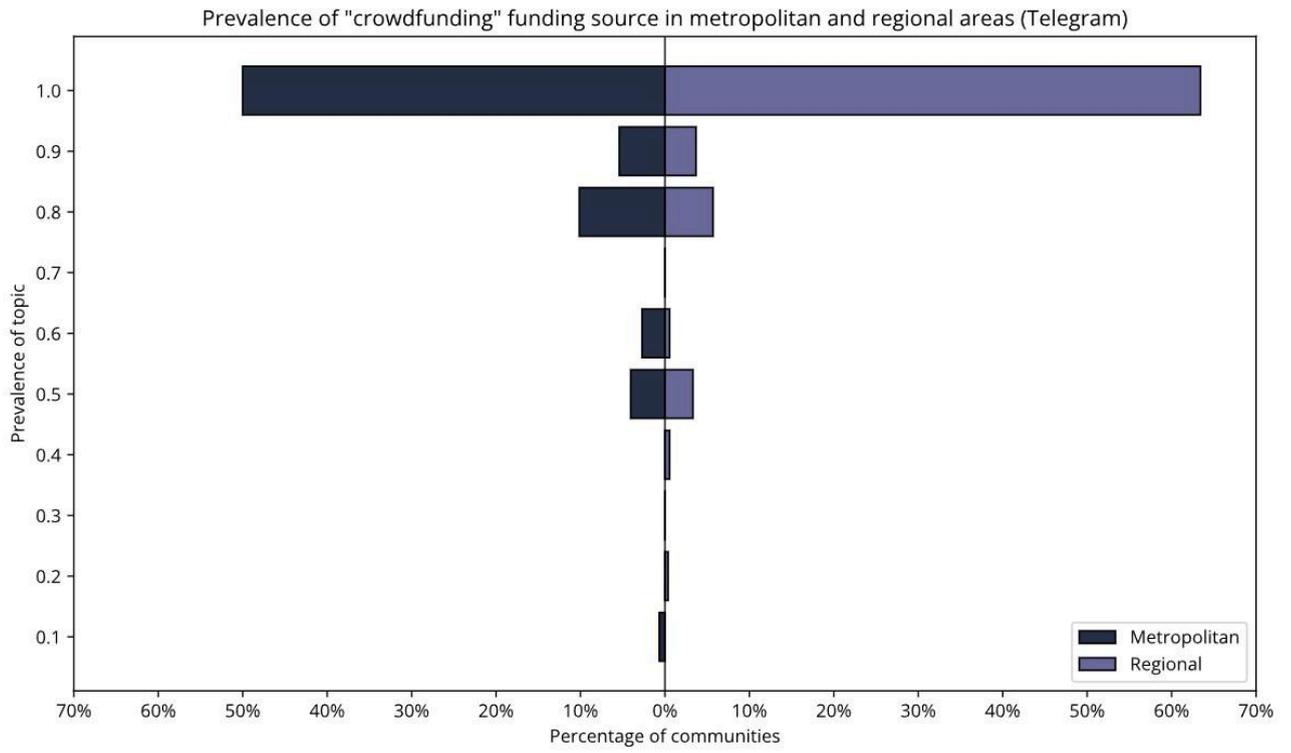


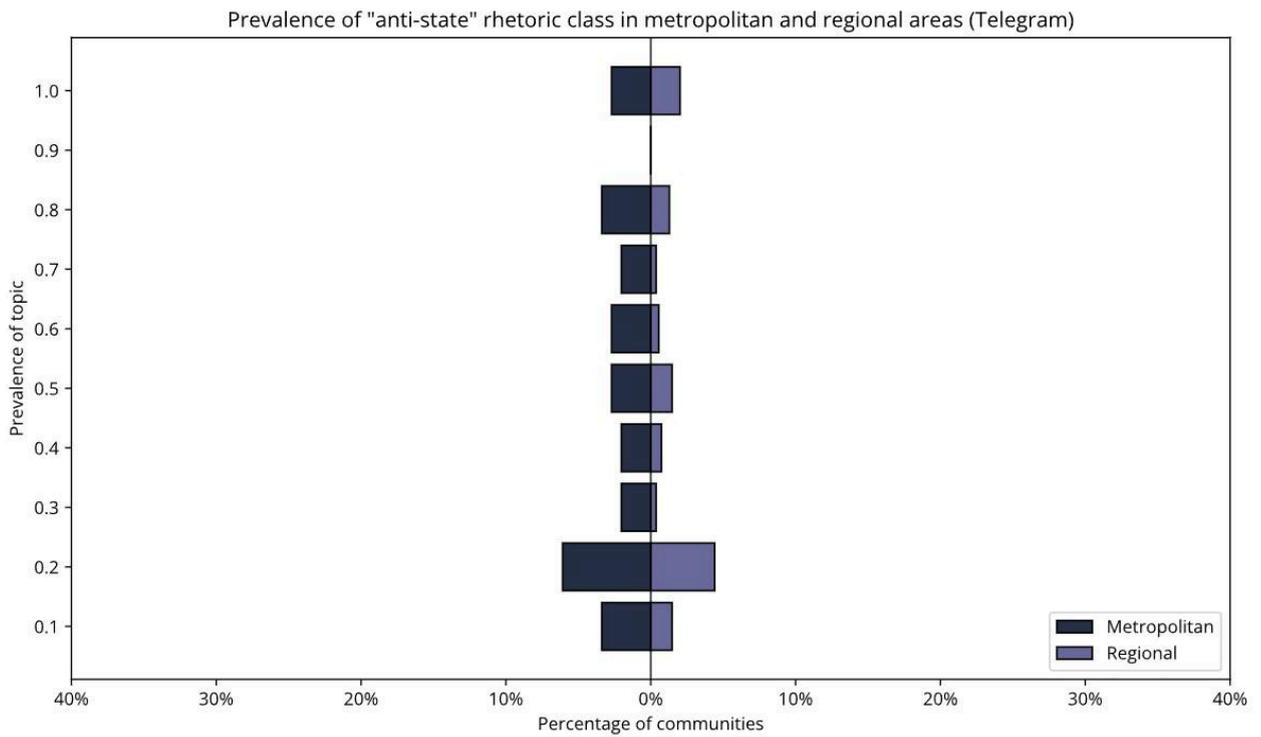
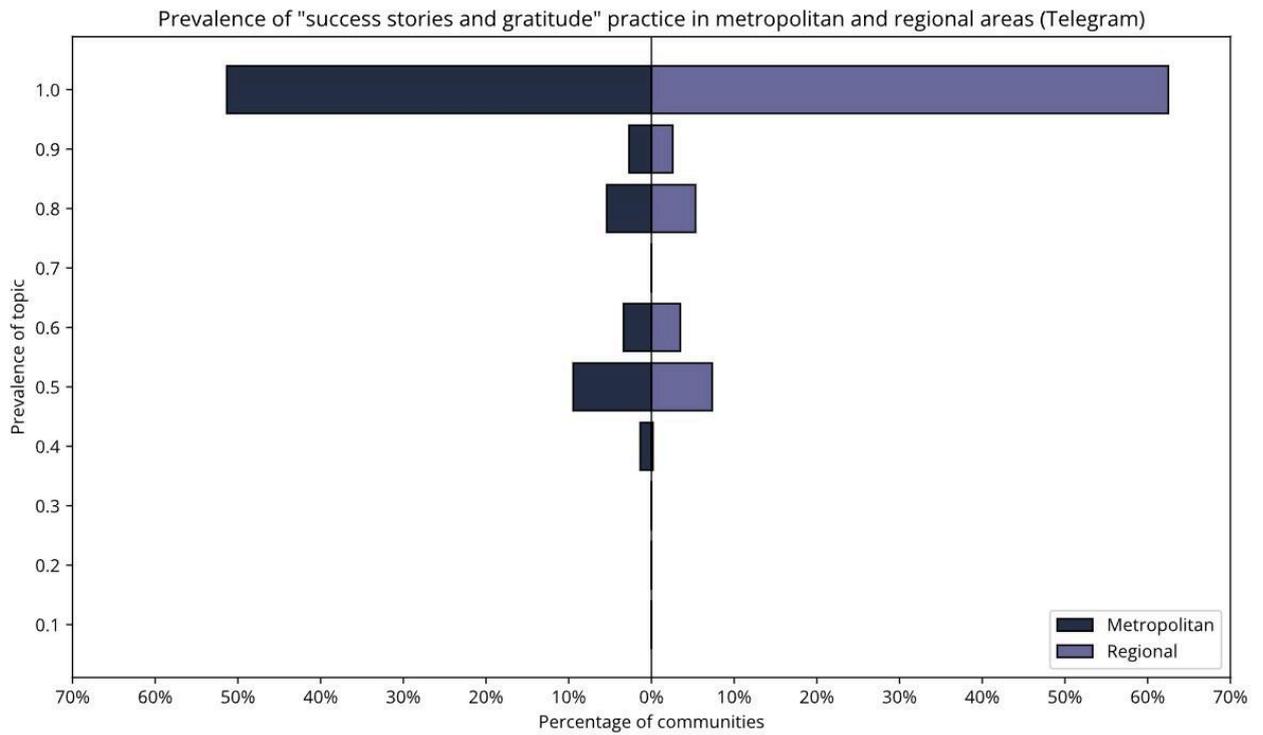
Community geography (VK)



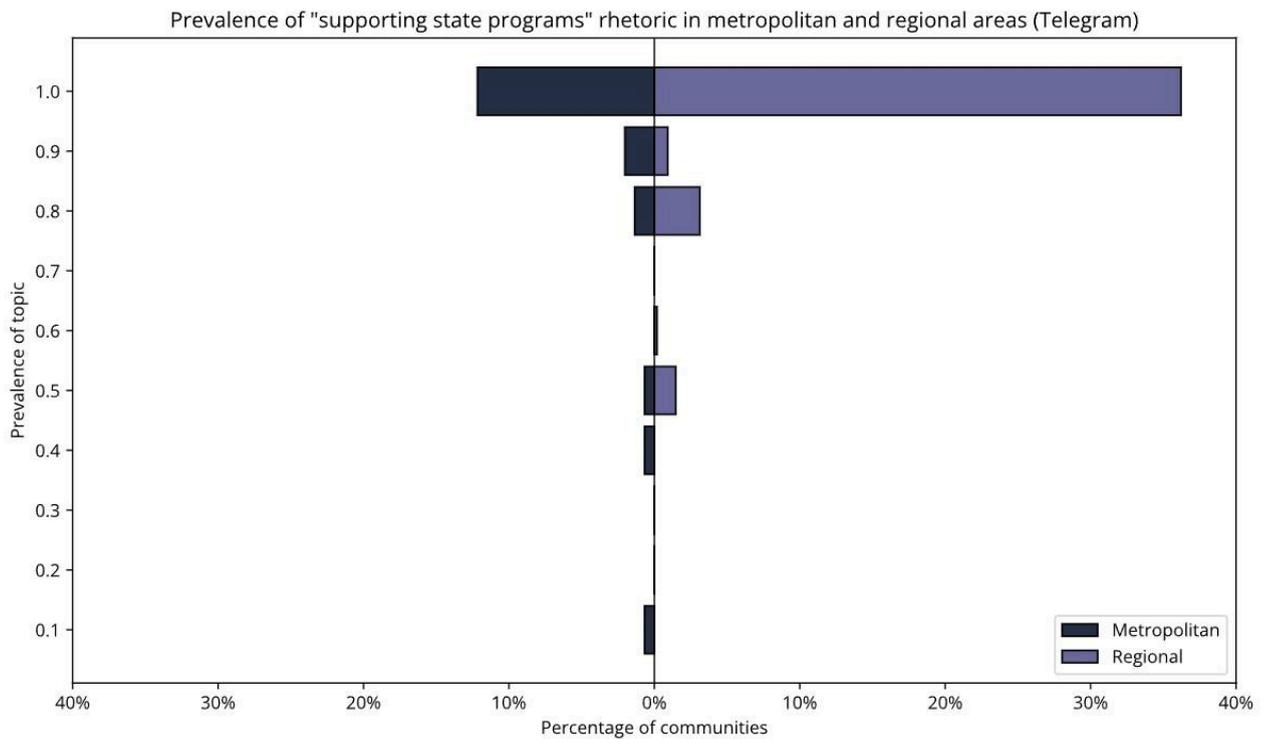
The data show that, at least when it comes to civil society-related topics, Telegram skews more metropolitan. In contrast, VK has a stronger presence in the Northwestern Federal District, the Volga region, and the Urals.

Despite their geographical differences, metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions share many characteristics. In both areas, communities engage in joint action, practice crowdfunding, foster positive emotions and gratitude toward one another, and criticize the state.

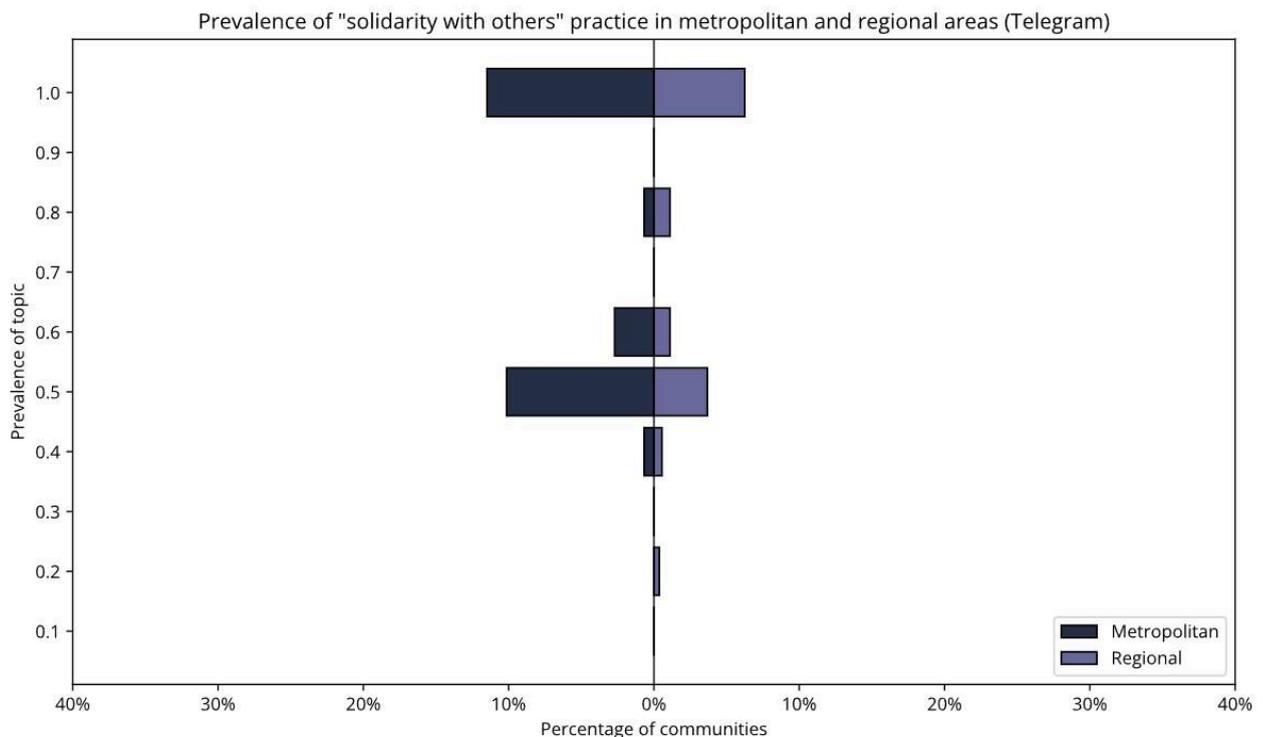




There are also notable distinctions. In non-metropolitan regions, the state is often the sole donor to civil society organizations working in the social sphere. This influences their alignment with state programs. In contrast, reflexive solidarity—solidarity rooted in ethical reflection and shared values—is more prevalent in metropolitan areas.

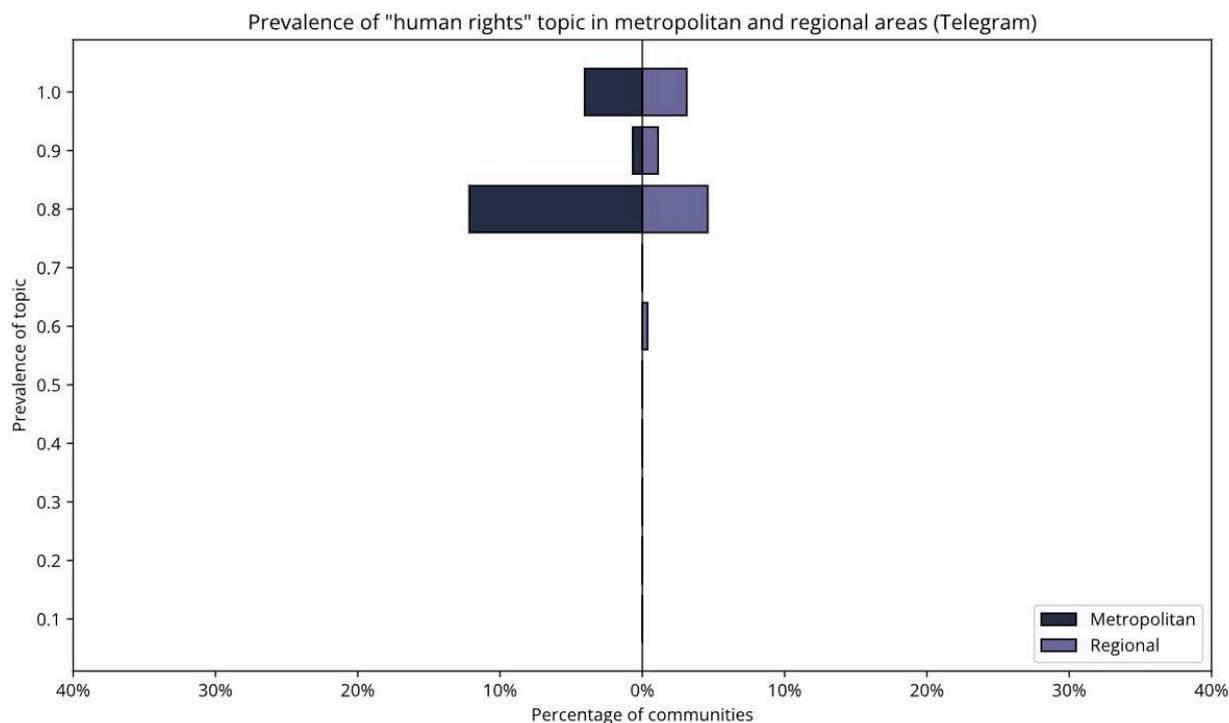


This disparity can be explained, in part, by socioeconomic inequality. Residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg tend to have more resources to share with others and an easier access to knowledge on philanthropy.

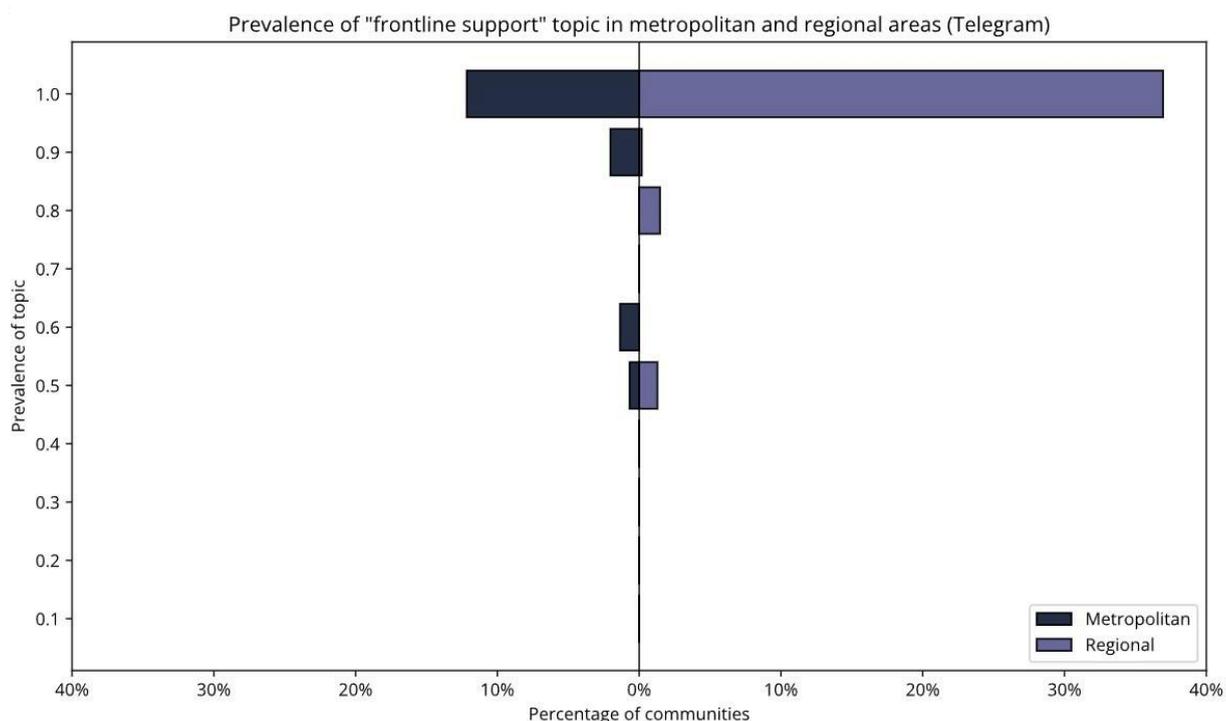


The high prevalence of a culture of solidarity in Moscow and St. Petersburg is also evident in the normalization of human rights discourse within these communities. As the graph below shows, human rights rhetoric appears not only in communities dedicated to human rights,

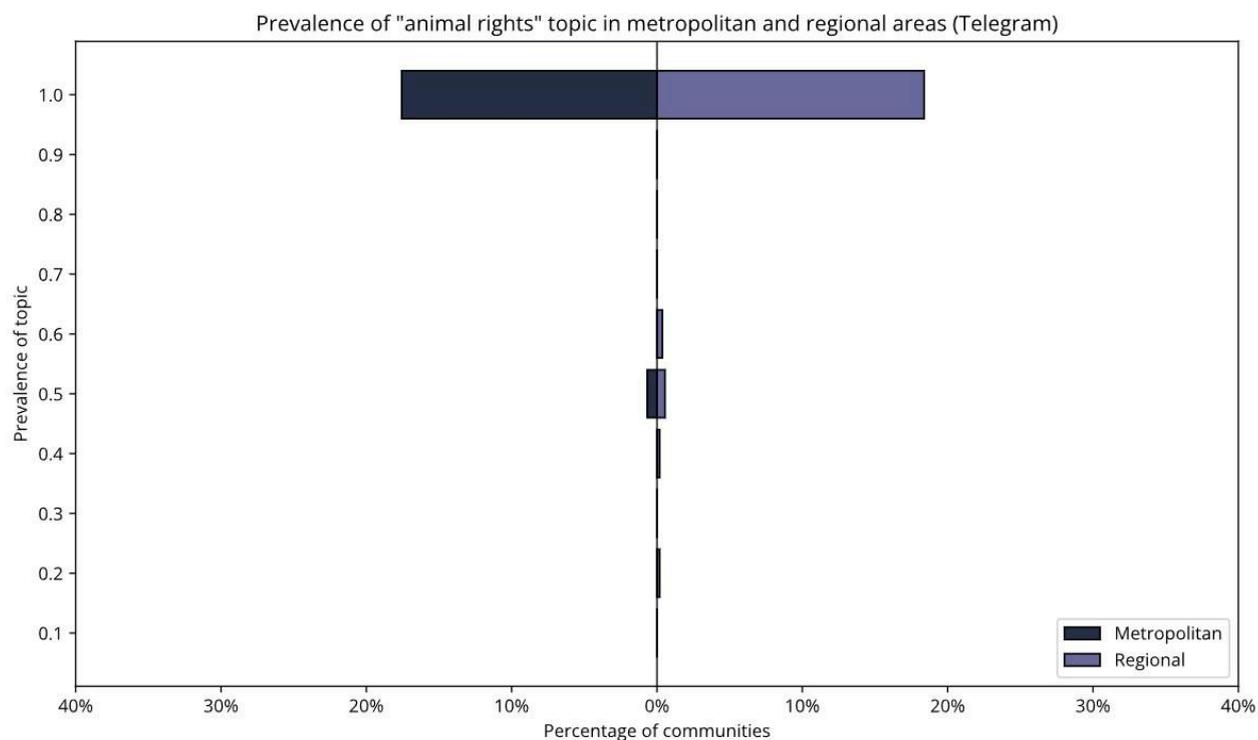
but also in communities with a more general interest. In these communities, human rights content comprises around 80% rather than 100% of the discussion.



Conversely, Z-activism, or pro-military or pro-state grassroots activism, is less prevalent in capital cities, likely due to differences in mobilization policies. Metropolitan areas tend to have fewer conscripts and greater access to legal support and human rights defenders. This also means that grassroots communities in non-metropolitan areas, which are often composed of relatives of mobilized individuals, are more actively involved in supporting the front.



Once again, the animal protection community stands out as being equally well represented in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. This finding reinforces previous observations about the community's exceptional unifying potential across different regions and social environments.



Connections Between Topics, Rhetoric and Practices

Based on our visual analysis of connectivity graphs—colored according to different variables—we formulated the following hypotheses about communities that practice reflexive solidarity:

- They are less prone to hierarchical structures, which means there is less of a division between “major” and “minor” participants.
- They are more likely to unite through shared anger, outrage, and criticism of the status quo and not only positive emotions.
- They are more closely associated with anti-state themes and critical rhetoric.

Correlation analysis confirms these hypotheses. Specifically, reflexive solidarity tends to emerge in communities that openly condemn war and repression. The analysis also shows a negative correlation with expressed hierarchical roles and a positive correlation with expressions of criticism. At the same time, certain practices, such as calls for joint action, requests for help, and expressions of gratitude, are characteristic of all the communities included in our dataset. This is partly because the presence of collaborative practices was one of the inclusion criteria for a community in the study. The full correlation matrix of various community characteristics is presented below.

The Challenge to Civil Society: Political Pressure

The Price of Civic Activism

When discussing civil society in contemporary Russia, it is important to recognize the risks associated with nearly any initiative. Traditional forms of political resistance, such as protests, public demonstrations, and openly criticizing the government, have become nearly impossible due to the threat of repression. According to [OVD-Info](#), Russia has enacted 45 repressive laws since the start of the full-scale invasion, and the [International Federation for Human Rights](#) has counted 50 such laws between 2018 and 2022.

The repressive machinery now considers virtually any action aimed at developing political agency and horizontal networks to be a potential crime, especially if it could provide an opportunity to criticize the state, highlight social injustices, or defend civil rights. This explains the aggressive stance toward charitable foundations and independent journalism; the state increasingly views these entities as direct competitors or enemies.

Authoritarian regimes use various tools to suppress dissent and political activism. Examples of legal repression include designating organizations or individuals as “undesirable,” “extremist,” or “foreign agents”; initiating criminal proceedings against opposition figures; and prosecuting people for “slander,” “fake news,” or “discrediting the army.”

Receiving one of these hostile designations greatly increases the risk of losing an initiative's audience, funding, partners, and assets.

Many friends and partners have been labeled “undesirable” and “foreign agents” for a long time. It seems to me that it has become clear that all of this is just theater that can be quickly shut down.

— quote from an anonymized informant

A defining feature of authoritarian contexts is the combination of direct repression, persistent uncertainty, and absence of clear “rules of the game.” People do not know what is permitted, what might be punished, or when arbitrary enforcement might occur ([Glasius et al., 2018](#)).

For example, the last call was about foreign agent books [books written by authors who now have a foreign agent status]. No one could understand what we were supposed to do with them, which plaques to use, who was responsible for what, or what the restrictions were.

– quote from an anonymized informant

The threat of sanctions forces initiatives to forgo potential resources and resort to self-censorship.

My colleagues, poor people, and I are constantly afraid that we will be declared foreign agents because everyone around us already has been—our whole environment and those from whom we studied <...> Our sphere is not well known in Russia, so private funding is scarce. That's why foreign funding was important to us. We can't use it anymore because there is a huge risk—we have a lot of specialists living in Russia.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Participants in opposition-aligned projects or initiatives that address taboo issues fear infiltration by state agents, including informants and Center for Combating Extremism operatives. The mere presence of such individuals in chat rooms or meetings can have devastating consequences for the organization, including surveillance, administrative and criminal prosecution of participants, especially if they speak freely.

A lot of people started to recognize us. Recently, many new people started showing up, and we realized that we're done—unsafe and uncool, to put it simply. That's why we decided to go underground again. We've given up public spaces.... We just want to gather in different places all the time so that the enforcers won't come to us anymore. We are also gradually abandoning social networks. We don't announce events anymore. For example, we only invite people through personal invitations or activist group chats, but that happens less frequently because it's not so safe anymore.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Most of our team is in Russia. We don't want to take any risks. That's why we're taking action—for example, we removed [mentioning] non-binary people. Again, nothing will be done for mentioning them. However, they may pay more attention to us. Some communities and publishers are reposting us, which is drawing attention to us. It is very likely that someone will come in, see the non-binary people, and draw attention to us. This would not be desirable from the perspective of people's safety in Russia who are devoting their time and effort to helping.

— quote from an anonymized informant

As independent structures are being repressed, the state is actively co-opting the nonprofit sector by creating GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) and launching youth engagement programs. As part of its strategy to promote volunteerism, the government aims to engage 45% of Russian youth in state-sponsored civic and volunteer activities by 2030. This initiative is framed as cultivating “patriotic and socially responsible citizens.”

The thing is, there's now a general trend toward some kind of state control. One way or another, this topic has been taken over to some extent. I mean nonprofit organizations. This is a new reality that everyone is facing now.

— quote from an anonymized informant

In authoritarian conditions, initiatives must be constantly vigilant, closely monitoring the actions of the state and its enablers. They must also make difficult strategic and ethical choices regarding their values, access to resources, and the security of their team and recipients. The collective and familial experience of repression during the USSR also fosters pessimism. As one expert put it, "If this country needs to build a Gulag, it will build a Gulag."

Nevertheless, it's important to resist one-sided narratives. State repression, control, and associated risks are not the only context shaping Russian civil society, nor is it a primary one. While civil society actors, donors, journalists, and researchers must acknowledge it, focusing exclusively on total repression can be paralyzing. The emphasis exclusively on danger and decay can overshadow the everyday resilience, successes, and local relevance of civil society work.

According to our data, the most successful and active initiatives are primarily focused on specific local social tasks, despite having to adapt to the ever-changing repressive landscape. These tasks become an expression of their civic mission, responsibility, and political stance, and the initiatives often succeed in addressing them. The narrative of repression, anxiety, and alarmism surrounding the idea of "tightening the screws" can be productive when it motivates mutual aid, solidarity, and the exchange of experiences (e.g., security techniques). However, in other contexts, this narrative can contribute to the counterproductive exoticization of Russia as solely a "scorched field" of FSB agents, torture, and dead hopes.

Strategies for Initiatives

Many initiatives **focus on physical, legal, and digital security practices**. They develop their own technologies and frameworks to make surveillance, hacking, and blocking more difficult. However, not all initiatives utilize such developments.

The demand for such technologies stems from two factors: a lack of digital literacy and the constantly shifting landscape of digital services. Maintaining digital operations has become much more difficult due to sanctions and the withdrawal of international companies from the Russian market.

Apparently, the server we were using has been blocked again. We're moving to another one now. It's always a hassle to make everything work in the office. Plus, some services are stopping working in Russia. We received another letter from Microsoft saying that our organization has been reclassified as undesirable for cooperation. Google sent us a similar letter during the holidays saying they're going to cut us off too <...> Most organizations like ours [that operate in Russia], of course, have the necessary qualifications. However, there just are not enough services willing to work with NGOs operating in Russia. This includes cloud technologies and AI-related services. Because everything is used via VPN. For example, you have to register with a Serbian phone number. These are the main difficulties.

– quote from an anonymized informant

A high level of digital literacy is essential to improving the security of both employees and beneficiaries. Today, organizations in Russia are advised to verify the servers of the platforms they use, encrypt messengers and devices, set up two-factor authentication and auto-delete messages, and avoid using the same device for work and personal activities. Due to the country's relatively low level of digital literacy, urgent digital education and transforming communication practices have become another challenge for activists. Many projects still do not integrate these practices into their daily operations. As with the uncertain “rules of the game” in an authoritarian regime, digital security practices are similarly fraught with ambiguity. People are rarely certain that the tools they use are completely reliable, and digital infrastructure often proves fragile.

These are all technical tools that you can never fully trust, especially when working on sensitive topics <...> All these tools are widely used in nonprofit projects in Russia and carry significant risks. There is no universal risk template that fits most organizations because risk assessment and risk management vary greatly from group to group.

— quote from an anonymized informant

The Russian government blocks online access to many resources used by initiatives and individual activists. VPNs are required to access these sites, creating an additional financial burden. Furthermore, purchasing a VPN is not a solution once and for all. They are often blocked as well, and sharing information about functional services is legally restricted, creating further risks. In general, many digital security systems require constant updates and can incur additional costs.

We're undergoing another audit and making adjustments to our security system so that we can work productively. Our goal is to bring everyone up to roughly the same level of protection <...> Our goal is to keep the system affordable and prevent it from draining our resources.

— quote from an anonymized informant

With the withdrawal of international companies from the Russian market, NGOs also lost access to key tools for coordination, data storage, and security. Popular platforms like Miro and Notion, often used by distributed teams, have become unavailable—necessitating significant effort to find alternative digital infrastructure.

Cybersecurity problems are especially pronounced in regions where collaborators are often under-resourced and thus at greater risk. Below are observable trends in digital communication practices among the communities we studied, including both large-scale and small, grassroots efforts.

To support initiatives, it might be helpful to do the following:

- Encourage **the exchange of experience, technologies, and practices** between the “technological vanguard” and more conventional initiatives. Where in-house development is not feasible, infrastructure for IT, accounting, legal, administrative, marketing, and social media work can be **outsourced** to more advanced peers.
- Provide indirect support by **covering the cost** of task managers, communication tools (like Slack, and AI services, depending on the needs of each initiative).
- Ensure that international partners **adhere to strong security practices**, such as protecting sensitive data with robust passwords. At the same time, consult directly with initiatives and their tech-savvy peers to determine which security practices are helpful and which are harmful. Allow Russian organizations to **assess the risks** of participating in international programs **independently** and support them through public discussions and legal advice.

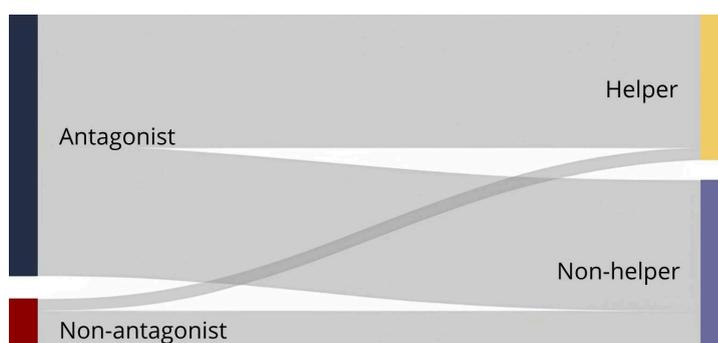
Many initiatives critical of the Russian state **do not publicly position themselves as political**, instead focusing on social, cultural, or charitable work. This strategy often reduces the risk of repression for those seeking to continue their activism. It can be valuable to **consider the implicit political content of an initiative**, which may align with its core mission even if not outwardly expressed.

Some initiatives employ a **“division of labor and risks”** strategy. Some team members relocate to another country (or region, if the threat comes from local regional authorities) and engage in public activities there. They have an opportunity to apply for foreign grants. Those remaining in Russia **continue on-the-ground work while maintaining anonymity** or semi-anonymity. They receive resources from colleagues abroad rather than directly from international donors. This strategy offers some protection from legal threats and law enforcement attention. It could be further supported by enabling Russian initiatives to **publicly report** via external representatives so that they are not forced to publish sensitive data that could heighten political risks.

Blurring the Lines Between the State and Civil Society

Upon closer examination, many initiatives and organizations—especially those engaged in social or cultural work that is not explicitly oppositional—do not fit neatly into the pro- or anti-state binary. The state itself is not monolithic; law enforcement, regional officials, and pro-war activists can act in contradictory ways at different levels of governance. Consequently, the same initiative may receive state funding while justifying its international contacts to law enforcement or opposing local authorities through legal complaints. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of a diversity of relationships with the state at both the federal and local levels.

Our data supports this heterogeneity, showing that an organization's decision to interact with the state, and how it does so, depends on the scope and nature of its activities, as well as the political climate in its region. Although most respondents identified the state as an antagonist, approximately half currently use or are considering using its resources as international funding continues to decline.



Plus we have a hotel. It's a security issue. Generally, we have a private company guarding the first floor, and the Rosgvardiya [National Guard of Russia, a federal executive body which is responsible for law enforcement, internal security, counter-terrorism and riot control of the Russian Federation] guarding the second floor. This can be scary for people, especially for activists. Unfortunately, due to corruption and monopolistic schemes, hotels cannot be guarded by anyone other than the Rosgvardiya. We are fine, though. In general, we have not experienced any problems with them.

— quote from an anonymized informant

By 2024, avoiding dependence on the Russian state will be a privilege. Even projects that are not reliant on state funding spend considerable energy following regulations, maintaining relationships with local officials, and avoiding attention. Many of the representatives we interviewed said they “try to do everything right.”

This year, we received grants from both FPG and the [name of department and city] Department. These are the two largest grants we received at the end of last year. But it's such a crapshoot... I would also be happy to be among those who say, “Oh no, we don't take government money. We don't work with those.” But I'm afraid we have no other option because we can't accept foreign money.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Part of this complicated relationship between initiatives and the state has historical roots. For example, the large, state-run platform Dobro.RF used to be Dobro.Mail.ru, a well-respected organization similar to “Need Help.” With the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, Dobro.RF underwent a de facto takeover. Some staff members left, while others stayed because the workflows did not change overnight. The same applies to volunteers and beneficiaries: some continue their involvement and partnership with Dobro. RF due to their own relationships with specific employees or projects.

This does not apply to openly pro-government initiatives: the overwhelming majority of our respondents reject cooperation with them. The names of the organizers behind such projects are usually unknown to long-time nonprofit professionals, and the volunteers from pro-war

chats (“to help the front”) rarely overlap with other civil society audiences. We assume that for many pro-war organizers and participants, this is their first experience with any kind of collective or solidarity-based action—suggesting that until recently, they were entirely disconnected from civil society.

A new generation has grown up, and I try to follow them as best as I can. The people volunteering to support the front—they are also our colleagues, even if we have certain political differences. I see them go through the same stages we did: first, forming volunteer groups to solve specific problems, then organizing efforts more formally, then tackling infrastructure. But everything is more extreme there—because their problems are more extreme. Their methods are more extreme, too, because many of them are used to organized violence.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Participants in such initiatives are often reluctant to engage in dialogue. Most of the participants in our study who agreed to take part preferred impersonal forms of communication, such as written correspondence or voice messages, and tended to give dry, abstract responses.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, pro-war initiatives also complained about the lack of state support, the hostile atmosphere surrounding their work, and the absence of societal solidarity. This may reflect the state’s general distrust of grassroots initiatives and self-organized efforts, as well as the system’s internal chaos and fragmented nature at various levels.

Some pro-war and pro-government initiatives express frustration that they receive little or no institutional support in return for “taking on the work of the state.” Their dissatisfaction is heightened when they face opposition from local officials seeking to monopolize certain types of volunteer work for corrupt purposes or to boost their public image, effectively blocking outsiders from entering those spaces. Some pro-war activists view the “abstract” upper levels of the state (federal government) as more aligned with their values. They see local authorities as self-serving and disconnected from the common good.

Additionally, activists who support the front are better than others at identifying flaws in the system (e.g., noticing that humanitarian aid does not reach its intended recipients or hearing soldiers complain about substandard uniforms). They convert these observations into criticism of certain aspects and practices of the current system, not of the overall state course. Although these observations are made on a small scale, they overlap with PS Lab’s [study](#) of how Russians perceive war. This study shows at what levels non-opponents of war can criticize certain aspects of the war itself and the government.

Pro-war and pro-state activists and organizations that are “apolitical” also fear reprisals because they feel the cost of criticizing the state is too high and the rules are too uncertain.

Even those generally loyal to the state can easily come under pressure if their activities or rhetoric highlight official policy weaknesses or hinder its representatives.

Strategies of Civil Initiatives

The tactics that initiatives use to build relations with the state depend on a number of factors. In some cases, an initiative may demonstrate loyalty and appear to comply with the rules while maintaining its values—in fact, this may help preserve them. Environmental initiatives, for example, are often forced to adopt an apolitical stance to involve a wider range of people in protests and maintain their advocacy abilities. In other cases, however, we observe co-optation rather than mimicry. For instance, many women's initiatives now conduct anti-abortion campaigns despite previously supporting gender and reproductive rights, due to pressure from the state. Finally, in certain areas, such as education and healthcare, formal compliance with state standards is necessary for an initiative to reach its intended audience.

We recommend assessing the public positioning of an initiative flexibly, in light of its operating context, and **distinguishing between reflexive mimicry and coaptation**. If it does not contradict international law, it may be reasonable to consider **co-financing with the Russian state** or other donors who do not share the initiative's values, if co-financing is the only way for the initiative to survive.

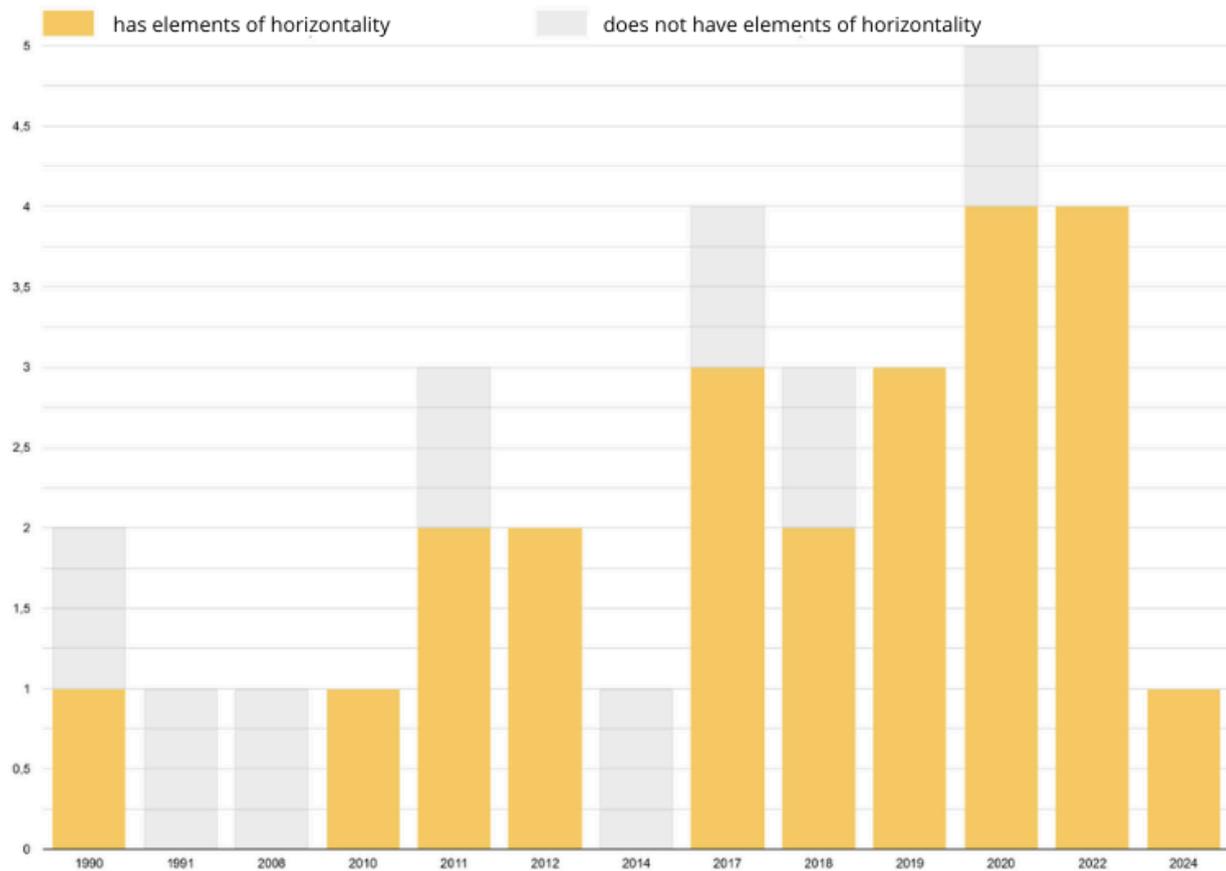
Horizontality and Chaos as New Tools for Sustainability

A hierarchy with prominent leaders who have the authority to make final decisions is more characteristic of pre-war or fully relocalized initiatives. These initiatives were able to safely use media resources and build the personal brand of the top manager to attract funding and audiences. Respondents from such organizations may mention the word “horizontality” in interviews without prompting but usually do so with a tone of skepticism or negativity.

We are not trying to create a horizontal organization or project. Firstly, I think many people don't need it. Secondly, it seems to me that, often, there is still a vertical behind the horizontal; someone still makes the final decision.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Most young organizations practice horizontality to varying degrees, ranging from incorporating elements of collective decision-making to adopting fully networked structures where not all participants know each other. It is important to note that even established organizations undergo transformations in times of crisis. Many begin to introduce elements of horizontality and move away from rigid vertical structures. These changes are often introduced rapidly as a defensive response to state aggression and are also linked to an influx of new, more liberal activists.



The Number of Initiatives with Elements of Horizontality by Year of Commencement of Work

At the same time, activists may avoid the term “horizontality” and instead use terms such as “collegiality,” “debates,” “colloquiums,” “meetings,” and “organizational meetings.”

But we also have these pep sessions. Well, “pep sessions” sounds a little weird. It’s more like a tea party. We talk about basic things at the communal tea table.

— quote from an anonymized informant

The desire for horizontal structures and networks has a value-based and pragmatic foundation. Though this organizational principle is often criticized for slowing down decision-making, it allows for rapid disbanding and reassembling, role swapping, and avoids rigidity, inertia, and dependency on specific formats, locations, and structures. These qualities make the organization more flexible and “multifaceted,” including legally, and enable a quicker response to emerging challenges. As one interviewee from an environmental initiative that values horizontality said: “I am proud of the fact that we are keeping things chaotic.”

In the current repressive environment, this chaotic nature is especially useful from a security standpoint. Many respondents noted that law enforcement was unable to understand the organizational structure, resulting in the targeting of only public figures or individuals who were more easily identifiable, such as through financial transactions linked to specific organizations.

These initiatives' chaotic nature mirrors the state's own behavior. Despite a sharp increase in repression over the past three years, much of it has been uncoordinated and inconsistent. Outside observers often struggle to understand why certain individuals are targeted, and occasionally, seemingly random people far removed from activism or human rights work end up imprisoned. These outcomes usually depend heavily on the actions of regional law enforcement. In some areas, authorities fabricate cases, while in others, they monitor social media to justify future arrests. This selectivity and lack of logic generates fear even among loyalists, significantly reducing their willingness to engage with anyone outside their immediate circle.

During these past two years, we have seen that the repressions are absolutely random and do not target a specific group. Accordingly, we cannot inform everyone in Russia about how to behave in a given situation.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Thus, chaos and “disorder” become a new kind of “order” for some horizontal initiatives—a response to the state's unpredictability. These qualities make an organization resilient in the face of uncertainty and compel us to rethink familiar assumptions. Whereas resilience used to be associated with clear structure, it is now associated with its absence.

In order to support such strategies, it makes sense to:

- Inform and train activist projects in **organizational development and capacity-building practices** suitable for horizontal and networked structures, as well as those transitioning toward them. These practices include developing a communications strategy, planning leadership succession or role rotation, improving performance assessment, and strengthening volunteer recruitment.
- Taking into account the fluid, multi-component structure of certain projects, collaborate with their teams to co-develop relevant **support algorithms and third-party evaluation criteria**.

The Challenge for Civil Society: Lack of Resources

Financial Flows

Civil society begins with strong, yet individual, ties formed at the grassroots level. People become involved in communities through shared experiences, such as shared burdens, pain, or anger; common causes or practices; and opportunities to discuss, support, and help one another. In Russia, it is often easier and more effective to become involved in collective action through bonds of friendship, family, or neighborhood.

Of course, it is easier to reach an agreement in rural schools when the relationship between a colleague and a principal is also that of neighbors in the same village. After all, they have vegetable gardens next to each other and their children play together.

-- quote from an anonymized informant

Engaging in joint activities can lead to the emergence of new meanings and goals that are shared by the participants. Building neighborly or friendly relations fosters trust more quickly, which is much harder to achieve in large organizations or NGOs where people may come from very different social backgrounds. Despite their crucial role, grassroots, young, and small initiatives are usually far more resource-constrained than their more established counterparts. In a competitive environment where funding, international advocacy, human resources, and access to offline events are limited, projects with recognizable brands and dedicated fundraising staff are much more likely to succeed.

Securing funding was one of the most frequently cited problems by our respondents. The economic situation of Russian initiatives is shaped by both internal state processes and international sanctions imposed on Russia after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Many international partners have withdrawn, equipment and supplies have increased in price by 25–100%, and deliveries have become more difficult due to restrictions on air transportation. Meanwhile, amid the crisis, the number of people in need is only growing.

Receiving grants or donor funds from abroad has become dangerous. Organizations labeled as “foreign agents” have lost the ability to generate income through advertising. Businesses are less interested in supporting nonprofits, and Russians are more reluctant to contribute to crowdfunding campaigns, especially when organizations are labeled as “foreign agents” or “undesirable.” Many opposition-minded Russians who once gave regularly have stopped their recurring donations.

Existing crowdfunding practices via aggregator platforms, such as Planeta.ru, Boosty, and Patreon, persist but have proven to be unreliable. The forced shutdown of a platform, as happened with Need Help, puts organizations that rely on it at serious risk. Furthermore, because the regulatory environment is constantly changing, any platform could suddenly fall under a new repressive law.

The legislation does not define those platforms that collect money. In our opinion, what they are doing is not quite legal. The documents they provide as justification have no legal basis, in our opinion. Nevertheless, this practice exists. No one has been jailed or punished yet. Therefore, we cannot say that it is illegal because there have been no cases of punishment. However, we cannot say that it is legal either because there are no norms on which it is based.

— quote from an anonymized informant

These developments have made financial flows even more state-centered. Consequently, it is often necessary to seek funding within the state framework to survive. On the other hand, state-funded organizations face greater scrutiny and risk punishment for documentation errors or perceived misuse of funds. Moreover, reliance on public funding imposes further constraints, including limitations on collaboration with certain experts or media and on how the organization presents itself publicly. Finally, there is no consensus within the sector on the ethics of receiving state funding.

This money is toxic in another sense. Since it is budget money, the controlling authorities treat it very seriously. It requires thorough reporting. There is always a risk that you will be punished for misusing these funds. This could result in jail time or huge fines. In this sense, dealing with budget money is generally dangerous for organizations that want to act independently.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Strategies of Civil Initiatives

One of the most accessible survival tactics for Russian initiatives today is to reduce their own expenses. This includes lowering salaries, relying more heavily on volunteers, and using personal resources, such as savings, housing, and transportation, for professional needs. Both staff and leaders often juggle multiple jobs, either to make ends meet or as part of their activist work. While this has helped initiatives withstand initial setbacks, it is not a long-term solution and often leads to burnout.

To address this issue, we recommend promoting more **sustainable salary policies** within initiatives. Additionally, enabling activists to apply for **personal grants and scholarships** would allow them to focus on their community work without experiencing constant financial anxiety. **Mentorship from professional peers** through counseling, seminars, and workshops can also help. This support not only helps activists maintain their professional identity, which is often lost in times of crisis, but also provides oversight for the use of personal grants.

Some larger resource centers and well-known initiatives support smaller ones through donations, joint events, and collaborative grant applications. These acts of solidarity serve operational and emotional purposes. In some cases, donations aim to acknowledge a project's legacy and express gratitude to its team rather than save the project.

They should know that we are extremely grateful they were there for those ten years, that we could attend these events, and that we had a place like this in our town.

— quote from an anonymized informant

When initiatives face pressure from authorities, they may need to publicly sever ties with their allies. However, informal or “underground” support networks often remain intact. The ability to form partnerships flexibly helps initiatives maintain a presence inside Russia while minimizing the risk to new participants. Positive examples include human rights organizations offering emerging groups digital infrastructure, such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems and Telegram bots, as well as volunteer coordination, fundraising support, and consultations. Other positive examples include accelerators created within more established charities.

Support for such practices, especially those connecting Moscow and St. Petersburg with other regions, should be based on their potential to engage citizens. We suggest the following:

- **Support large-scale initiatives** that provide training, mentorship, consulting services, and infrastructure to small and grassroots groups and facilitate the rapid exchange of information.
- **Lower the entry barriers:** When there is insufficient data to verify a new initiative, use assessors or peer validation. If the organization does not have the resources to prepare documentation, report on the grant, or provide technical means or specialists, it can be offered technical support.
- **Actively seek out underrepresented groups** with low social capital, including those not on the “grant mailing list.” When resources are funneled through well-connected intermediaries, such as relocated organizations, monitor the geographic and generational distribution of the final recipients.
- **Create special grant programs** that allow trusted initiatives to redistribute resources in the form of micro-grants. Oversee how intermediaries use these funds to prevent centralization among metropolitan or relocated actors.

Amid this instability, some initiatives have started to consider previously rejected funding sources. Views on funding vary widely. Some groups believe that redirecting state funds to socially valuable work is legitimate.

One of our funders <...> sits on the [Presidential Grants Fund] commission. She sees what is happening there and says, “We should take money away from them <...> and spend it on good things.”

— quote from an anonymized informant

By contrast, others see any form of state funding as unacceptable, either ethically or reputationally. Many groups, however, operate in a gray area, balancing their funding needs against their values. Crucially, not all state-linked funds are viewed equally. Depending on the

source, requirements, and political messaging involved, some funds are considered acceptable while others are considered completely “toxic.”

In Russia, we try to avoid toxic sources of money. For example, we will not cooperate with foundations that ask us to put a Russian flag on our website or tell us that “victory will be ours” or to “serve [in the Russian army] under contract.”

— quote from an anonymized informant

To make supporting Russian initiatives less risky, we recommend **searching for alternative, safe funding technologies** for initiatives and donors, such as cryptocurrency and proxy organizations, including religious ones, and constantly updating this knowledge. Providing not only direct financial assistance but also **indirect resource** support would also help. This support could be used to pay for renting premises, purchasing equipment and software, paying contractors, covering vacation and conference expenses, and providing organizational and networking assistance.

It can also be productive to offer **alternative platforms as connecting hubs instead of state-controlled ones**. In this context, it is important to maintain contact with people from the regions—getting to know them, speaking their professional and socially engaged language. It’s worth supporting forms of partnership and communication in which a well-established civil society brand, possibly in the format of a sub-brand or proxy organization, also needs help from a less well-known initiative—not only giving it resources, materials, or tasks, but receiving value in return.

Some initiatives earn money for their work by commercializing part of their services: from renting out premises (“from weddings to funerals”) to selling tickets for certain events. This approach can also be supported by helping initiatives **develop commercialization strategies**, so they can at least partially sustain themselves.

Human Resources

Following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, new initiatives began emerging in Russia. These initiatives were created by individuals who had no prior experience with activism or professional background in NGOs. Many of these individuals came from creative industries, marketing, or research. While these trends were visible earlier, they now have a different significance: new participants are replacing more experienced ones. This shift is largely due to the mass resignation or emigration of many team members from leadership positions for reasons of personal or organizational safety or burnout.

Emotional burnout among teams is one of the most frequently mentioned issues in our research. Causes include the political context, such as war, repressive laws, and state pressure, as well as the direct and indirect consequences of political changes, including

security threats, loss of contact with international partners and donors, emigration and isolation, constantly shifting rules, and the inability to achieve visible results.

Russia has currently developed a wide range of educational programs for NGOs and activist communities. These programs aim to professionalize project teams in areas such as project management, fundraising, marketing, and volunteer coordination. Some of these programs are the positive outcome of collaboration among different actors who built professional communities, identified needs, and created products to meet them. However, many programs focus on how to write grants or fulfill grant requirements, which tends to reinforce a “grant mentality” that hinders the sustainable development of organizations.

There are a dime a dozen of different trainings. And this is also thanks to PGF [Presidential Grants Foundation] and other grant-giving organizations <...> If the authors of the course had involved a methodologist and considered the potential outcomes, it would be worthwhile. But if the goal is just to get another grant, no one cares whether it will be applied or taken into work <...> However, if the training relates to a new skill outside your field, the same fundraising, PR, and promotion efforts are usually lost in vain, except for organizations that already have a PR or fundraiser.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Demand for skilled workers is particularly high in non-metropolitan areas. Access to professionals with relevant experience and quality educational programs is often caused by the broader inequalities in resources and decision-making between Moscow and other regions.

The biggest misunderstanding seems to be that people from Moscow solve the problems of people in the regions. It's impossible to sit in a beautiful office in the center of Moscow, tap a table, and order something to be done somewhere else. Social inequality problems must be solved by experiencing social inequality, understanding its nuances, doing research, and talking to people.

— quote from an anonymized informant

At the same time, regional initiatives report lacking the financial resources necessary to attract experienced professionals from the nonprofit or commercial sectors. This affects the overall level of project management as well as the availability of specific hard and soft skills. In interviews, we often hear requests for training in general project management and specialized areas.

In Moscow, organizations are discussing which CRM is best for managing their wards and donations. In the provinces, however, they simply will not understand what they are talking about. In the provinces, a simple Excel spreadsheet is considered a huge step forward in terms of getting organized.

— quote from an anonymized informant

The Moscow School of Professional Philanthropy (MSPP) has become a prominent player in the professionalization of the sector. It is often mentioned in interviews, either as a place where respondents studied (regardless of their location) or as a reference point in discussions about preferred types of education. MSPP is both praised and criticized. According to respondents, MSPP training does not solve regional inequalities on a conceptual level because it adheres to Moscow-based standards of organizational work. Nevertheless, it helps participants expand their professional networks, including connections with donors. In most cases only people already involved in a particular project can get into the MSPP and apply for scholarships for education; otherwise, the cost of training is too high for many actors. It is nearly impossible to receive a personal grant for systemic training without being employed by an initiative.

Strategies of Civil Initiatives

In recent years, burnout has become a more widely recognized problem in the charity sector. Many initiatives try to **prevent burnout** by providing additional opportunities for recreation and sources of motivation for their teams. Unfortunately, the charity sector's culture does not encourage allocating significant resources to such practices. Therefore, it is important to **fund recreation and burnout prevention** for the employees and volunteers of these initiatives, such as counseling, psychological support, and recreational activities inside and outside of Russia, including retreats and conferences. Organizations that care about the health and mental well-being of their employees and provide these opportunities should be encouraged. This is especially critical in areas where external “wins” are scarce.

One source of staff are individuals who have previously received assistance from the initiative. While some initiatives and their leaders may retain a patron–client model of relationships—this is more often seen in relation to marginalized groups, such as the homeless, people who use alcohol or drugs, and vulnerable women with children—there is also **a trend toward democratizing participation in collective action**. This is expressed through the desire for interaction between the helper and the helped “on equal terms,” which not only lowers the threshold for entering civil society, but also results in “more hands.”

This is most clearly seen in peer counseling, where former beneficiaries help new members of the community. This practice is often used in LGBTQ+ and HIV-positive initiatives and communities of sex workers. In recent years, it has also been adopted by the conscientious objectors movement and groups supporting political prisoners. Grassroots experience-sharing and mutual support are emerging from resource centers and independent community spaces as well.

It is important to continue supporting professional interactions at the organizational level and the democratization of practices. Therefore, it makes sense to encourage the following:

- **Training and consulting between initiatives**, including the creation of libraries of practices, guides, FAQs, etc.
- **Establishing and supporting direct communication between Russian initiatives and similar projects in other countries.** Possible support measures include: identifying reliable and relevant contacts for partnerships, providing interpreters or translators, and ensuring digital security.

The Challenge to Civil Society: Communication Difficulties

Fragmentation of Communities

According to a recent [report](#) by The Bell, approximately 650,000 Russians have left the country since the beginning of the full-scale invasion and not returned. Among them are many civil society representatives, including activists, NGO workers, aid initiative organizers, and journalists from independent media outlets. Some left not only as a result of personal choice, but also because of persecution by the Russian authorities. Additionally, some people with no prior activist experience became politicized and joined volunteer and activist initiatives largely due to the war and emigration ([ZOiS 2023](#)).

A joke about “outsourced civil society” has emerged in connection with the number of activists who have left Russia. However, this joke hides new challenges for those who have left and those who have stayed.

As we noted in the section on repressions, greater safety enables exiled individuals to participate more freely in activism and gain access to resources—funding from European and American donors, access to international venues and events, educational opportunities, and networks. However, members of Russian civil society in exile often have to dedicate a significant amount of energy to integration and adaptation. This process is psychologically taxing and leaves little room for activism.

Many activists continue to work with Russian initiatives while surviving on low-paying salaries in ruble or the occasional grant or scholarship. Having lost access to direct contact with their teams and beneficiaries, they also face the challenge of adapting to new and unfamiliar modes of remote or hybrid work.

For those who remain, higher risks and the need for team rebuilding are compounded by a sharp decrease in access to funding, international connections, and platforms. This exacerbates feelings of exclusion, isolation, and lack of support. Sanctions, high flight prices, and visa difficulties are deepening the spatial and value gaps between Russia and the rest of the world.

In fact, we are talking about people who do not receive visa support and who, I would say, do not have access to the opportunity to enjoy European values. These are people who adhere to European values, and they are now blocked from entering the EU <...> Most of these people remain in Russia for various reasons. They stay for various reasons <...> For me, for example, and for some of us, a humanitarian visa is more of an evacuation method, just in case. But there are no such options “just in case.” You either go there or you don't. It's very sad.

— quote from an anonymized informant

The gap between those who stayed and those who left is widening due to a lack of shared practices and experiences. Peer research points to growing alienation and misunderstandings between the two groups, making cooperation and mutual understanding difficult ([PS Lab 2024](#); [SCEEUS 2024](#)). These tendencies are reflected in the words of some of our interviewees, particularly those who, unlike most Russians, still have the opportunity to participate in international events.

Most people now read Meduza and other media outlets and form their own impression that “orcs” are really running around here and we can't move or breathe. In this whole story, people have a very different understanding of security. This is the deprivation of people's subjectivity in Russia. We have a conference or tour, and the organizers decide at the entrance that they won't invite anyone from Russia because it's unsafe. At that point, we ask, “Why are you deciding for us?”
— quote from an anonymized informant

Strategies of Civil Initiatives

Our materials show that many initiatives—especially those led by young people—are successfully bridging these gaps, both professionally and personally. For example, shared work tasks often help close the distance:

There is an ideological gap of sorts when those who have left and those who have stayed talk <...> But when you move from discussing these political approaches in general to discussing what we are doing, many things often resolve themselves.
— quote from an anonymized informant

In many distributed teams, personal connections, empathy, and support, as well as **face-to-face meetings** when possible, help team members listen to each other and overcome feelings of resentment and alienation. **Events that bring together participants from Russia and other countries** can also help reduce the gap. Further event organization and broader outreach to include more participants can support this practice. It is crucial that all participants have the opportunity to influence the format and agenda of such gatherings.

Some interviewees shared specific ideas and requests that we believe are important to quote:

We don't need evacuation visas; we need long-term insurance visas with multiple entries <...> We need three- to five-year visas so that we can use them to go there and come back or come and apply for a residence permit <...> We need unconditional support from the people who are helping now. Globally, we need to create more opportunities for young people, such as admitting them to European universities based on their Russian documents. They don't need to be there in person; they just need to be able to study online. All university courses must be unambiguously resumed. This will not be regime support; it will be opportunities. Those windows need to be bigger and wider because... First of all, it is impossible to build walls around Russia. Second, it will not lead to anything good, so the

wall must be destroyed. The wall is important to Putin. If the wall is important to Putin, then those who oppose him do not need it. Our task is to maximize civil communication.
— quote from an anonymized informant

In other words, there is a clear need for bureaucratic mechanisms that allow activists to obtain visas for international events as well as **humanitarian visas** for emergency evacuation.

Safe communication between civic activists can be facilitated to build dialogue and bridge the gap between different groups of people (e.g., those remaining in Russia and those who have emigrated, as well as regional and Moscow or St. Petersburg groups). Foresight experts with experience working with divided communities recommend support packages for Russian initiatives. These include facilitated dialogues among themselves, with peers in the sector, with civil society actors from other post-Soviet countries (including Ukrainian activists willing to engage), and globally. At the same time, it is crucial to ensure strong security measures for these events, ensure strict data storage practices and participant safety because any cooperative events are criminalized both in Russia and Ukraine.

Publicity

The need to shield oneself from unwanted attention also affects media engagement. In the past, widespread publicity helped recruit new participants and sponsors. Now, however, a publicly shared success story without sufficient precautions can draw increased attention from the authorities and result in an organization's closure. This is particularly problematic for groups working on evacuations—a single media misstep can shut down entire escape routes.

At the same time, the ability to represent oneself and speak remains valuable. However, international and national platforms often only invite well-known organizations. It is extremely difficult for smaller, grassroots, or newer groups—especially those lacking personal connections with “recognized” activists—to break into public discourse. This inequality exacerbates existing disparities in resources between metropolitan and non-metropolitan organizations.

Security issues affect all aspects of communication: who speaks to whom, what topics are being discussed, and what channels are used for that. In Russia, many independent media outlets have been blocked, which makes it difficult or impossible for some audiences to access them. Major opposition media outlets have been declared “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations,” so engaging with them increases the risk of political persecution. Meanwhile, cooperating with state-run or not-yet-banned media provides access to a broader audience, but this option is often rejected due to ideological or ethical concerns.

Publishing materials with the names or photographs of individuals instantly makes them targets for law enforcement. Interviewees often want to stand behind their words with their real names and reputations, but de-anonymization sharply increases their risks.

Without regular public evidence of the organization's activities, the social changes it brings about may not be visible. But it does not mean that they do not exist. In addition, an initiative's results and social effects may not be accurately measured or captured in reports and "success stories," but this does not diminish their significance. Examples of these less visible effects include nurturing a sense of agency, providing a platform for building new connections, building community, or sharing experiences.

*It doesn't matter what topic people learn to be solidary, organized, and strategic about <...> It then spreads from group to group very easily.
— quote from an anonymized informant*

Strategies of Civil Initiatives

For security reasons, initiatives often resort to **"guerrilla" approaches** instead of broad public communication. These approaches include targeted communication, such as engaging people through personal connections or professional Telegram chats; using Aesopian language; and verifying new participants.

*You get publicity within this glass cap or your own bubble <...> The main thing is that it doesn't burst and that it doesn't go out to external twitter <...> That's a very fine line I would like to keep.
— quote from an anonymized informant*

When initiatives try to operate "below the radar," it is important **not to require them to "surface."** From this perspective, public reporting promotes transparency of processes and costs but may entail additional risks. Therefore, new, safe regimes of transparency and accountability must be developed to address the specific risks associated with public reporting. Some types of assistance, such as evacuating people facing political charges or domestic violence, are not accountable even though they are extremely resource-intensive.

In order to support these initiatives, it would be helpful to **shift the focus away from public impact**, broad citations, and other public indicators of organizations. Instead, we should assess them based on their **ability to build solidarity**, engage new people in civil society, connect with other communities, and foster a culture of responsibility and active participation.

Partnership and Solidarity

One important finding of the study is the growing solidarity among activists, even during wartime and despite fear. The drivers of fast and connected networks are infrastructural and value-based. Among them are:

- Digital-based activism, which increases cross-regional visibility and trust;
- Shared values not necessarily related to the core mission of the initiative, such as non-violence, feminism, anti-war action;
- Shared emotions experienced during events and in everyday practices;
- Expertise—for example, a clear vision of needed improvements in public policy;
- Joint definition of key concepts and operating principles.

The most tangible form of partnership is **collaborating on a specific task or case**. This helps achieve goals and allows participants to grow professionally. The vast majority of informants noted that they learned by doing and increased their visibility. It is important not just to work together, but to do so on a regular basis. At the same time, many noted that long-term relationships often lack publicity, making it difficult to assess the broader situation.

Even if an initiative disagrees with government policy, it may choose to maintain a partnership with another organization in its field, even if they disagree on values. This is less common among human rights, feminist projects, and independent media, but more common in fields such as ecology, medical charity, and homelessness advocacy.

For example, we have a partner with whom we started interacting before the war. They are normal people. But now, they're weaving [camouflage] nets and participating in activities like that. We can't influence that. It's the organization's internal affairs. We probably won't give up on NGOs who are doing good work just because of stories like this.

— quote from an anonymized informant

At the same time, there are limits to what is considered acceptable behavior. For instance, using state methods and ideology, such as propaganda, violence, or coercion (e.g., forcing someone to not have an abortion), may be considered unacceptable.

They train people in counter-propaganda. I decided not to collaborate with them. These people have different values than I do. That's it. Instead of teaching people to analyze propaganda or think critically, they teach counter-propaganda. They teach counter-propaganda. So, guys, come on—it means you want to do the same thing, tomato tomato.

— quote from an anonymized informant

Professional conflicts and disagreements are usually kept out of the media so as not to discredit the field in the eyes of the public. However, these disagreements can be significant.

Consequently, their hidden presence complicates relationships, though it does not necessarily prevent mutual support.

We have worked together in the same field for many years, but I understand that... Although I understand and agree with her public position in many respects, I see that we do not coincide in our methods of work. There is a problem here because methods like "I have contacts with military commissars and units. I will call you and solve your issue" do not allow people to get involved themselves. People should have the conditions and space to express themselves.

— quote from an anonymized informant

A quantitative analysis of communication patterns and topics in online communities shows that groups formed to support the front do not participate in relationships of reflexive solidarity, where help is given to those with different goals or parameters. For these groups, shared affect and interests are central. Messages often refer to a common identity ("our boys"), objectives (e.g., victory as a universal value), and family connections. In contrast, reflexive solidarity is exhibited by groups engaged in refugee aid, animal protection, anti-war work, human rights, and gender-related causes. Their linking structures and message content often include groups that are unrelated but share common goals or interests. This kind of reflexive solidarity, where the boundary of "otherness" itself becomes a subject of engagement, is vital for the development of civil society. It fosters greater cohesion among diverse groups and encourages a deliberate approach to the boundaries between communities, enabling them to be modified or reinforced as necessary.

Strategies of Civil Initiatives

Building and maintaining partnerships and friendships requires conscious effort and is a distinct type of work. In a translocal environment, where team members may work on projects without ever meeting in person, there is a need for spaces and activities that facilitate in-person meetings and opportunities to get to know each other outside of a professional context.

At big conferences, we're all chasing donors or international organizations. There, it's more of a priority than taking breaks or sitting around talking to people you care about. But on personal trips like this one, it's very valuable. We go together to the Pushkin Museum, <...> to some exhibitions in Moscow. This has become our new form of communication and support, which we didn't have before.

– quote from an anonymized informant

One way to support initiatives is to **promote reflexive solidarity**, which involves forming partnerships and working together, as well as providing mutual support, even if people are not united by a common goal or feeling. Support can take various forms.

- Organize permanent and one-time **offline spaces for sharing experiences and accessing resources**, both inside and outside the Russian Federation, and ensure they are properly positioned (not only for the “opposition” or top-down learning).
- Maintain communication not only in a work setting or at events attended by donors, but also through visits to third places. This allows efforts to focus on sustaining community spirit.
- Support resource centers and “hubs” that link various communities into a shared network. This enables the direct exchange of experiences across regions and topics and facilitates the search for resources, experts, and more.
- Consider expanding your cooperation with religious organizations, as they tend to be more sustainable. For example, they are less likely to face issues with foreign funding and repression.

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