

Reforum

“THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEER GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES WILL ONLY GROW”

**9 interviews with representatives
of 9 anti-war projects**



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Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine hundreds of thousands of activists, NGO workers, human rights activists, journalists and simply people with an anti-war stance have left Russia: in their home country, they faced persecution, actual prison sentences, and a ban on free expression. But many stayed to continue helping out on the ground. They've established security protocols, often working anonymously and staying in touch contact with those who have left.

Almost immediately, as early as at the end of February 2022, in both Russia and the countries of relocation, dozens, then hundreds helping initiatives appeared. Most of them are aimed at helping and supporting Ukrainian refugees, there are also many who help Russians inside and outside of Russia, working on counter-propaganda, helping conscripts, community building, etc.

Many such initiatives are not very visible in the West. Politicians and ordinary citizens of the European Union sometimes get the impression that the Russians are passive. But this is a false impression.

We talked to representatives of nine initiatives and found out that all of them believe in the power and prospects of horizontal ties. They build relationships with Ukrainians and European civil society. They see themselves in Russia's post-war future, and they are already thinking about it and preparing for it.

“I see a direct correlation between informing people and their ability to resist, just as I see a direct correlation between misinformation and horrific events with loss of life”



Lev Gershenzon, IT-entrepreneur, creator of the uncensored news aggregator The True Story, former head of the Yandex.News project

Present your project, tell us how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

We started making The True Story aggregator in April 2022, a month after the war began. Before that, as the former head of Yandex.News, I had spent a month publicly addressing Yandex employees through Facebook and interviews, drawing their attention to the role that Yandex.News and the Yandex home page on which they are located play in spreading misin-

formation and hiding important information. I had been in charge of this service for several years and was no longer working at Yandex by the time the war started, but I could see the enormous impact on Russians of both Yandex.Novosti itself and a few headlines on the Yandex home page.

In the first days of the war, daily Yandex's audience reached 100 million people, 2/3 of the country's population. Repressive laws had not yet been passed, censorship had not been introduced, many independent publications had not been blocked, and Yandex had a chance to customize its aggregator so that it could truthfully cover the events, getting information from official open sources—Ekho, Novaya Gazeta, and so on. Or you could have removed the news block from the main page—there were plenty of plausible excuses, for example, you could have cited the impossibility of checking the information promptly. But my appeal was not heeded, and a hundred million Russians from the first days saw propaganda instead of news and read about the denazification of Ukraine.

This story provoked foreign press attention and discussions at Yandex (although they did not lead to a result).

For a long time, it was believed that the generational boundary, the boundary of propaganda and truthful information lies between television and the Internet. Those who read the news on the Internet are the ones who have objective data. But propaganda feels quite confident on the territory of the Internet, at least in its Russian segment. Internet penetration in Russia is very high—there are fewer TV sets in the country, I think, than smartphones. There are major IT portals in Russia that have a news aggregator on their homepage, Yandex is one of the biggest. The Google Chrome application is also organized in such a way that tens of millions of Russians consume news content when they try to access the browser. They follow links from the home page uncritically, without paying attention to the source (people often say: «I read this on Yandex»).

One of the secrets of the effectiveness of propaganda is that it always offers information from a single source, without focusing on what that source is. The more vague the better, the main thing is to keep the false fact in people's minds. And when my efforts to convince my former colleagues did not work, I thought that it would be good to make an alternative aggregator, from where a person could find out the news and by default on the first page see the story from different sources.

I wrote a private post on Facebook about the idea of the aggregator and added that people could donate me money or personally participate in its creation. No one offered money, but 40 people, half of them I didn't know, responded. Some highly qualified specialists who worked Facebook, Microsoft, and Yandex also responded. The team consisted of 75% volunteers. We worked very quickly and launched The True Story in August. I don't know any stories of launching similar products in 4 months; people worked in a very powerful impulse.

It is very important that the coverage of important events also includes uncensored publications (Interfax, RBC, VC.ru, and many regional media): when someone from Russia visits us, they do not get the feeling that this is a collection of State Department propaganda. And it is difficult for the propagandists to slime us.

On the first day we had 50,000 hits, and three days later we were blocked by Roskomnadzor. The authorities saw our speed and efficiency, and were afraid of an aggregator that would give an adequate picture. Now we have a fairly modest audience—about 150,000 visitors a month. The situation is somewhat reconciled by the fact that our aggregator is used by journalistic teams with a much larger audience.

I see a direct link between informing people and their ability to resist or at least not participate in the war. For example, telling people about the problems of the mobilized is very important so that people do not voluntarily go for the long ruble. The more people know what awaits them there, the more likely they are not to sign a contract. And relatives will collect money not for equipment, but to prevent the mobilized from going to war.

And I also see a direct link between disinformation and horrible events with human casualties offline. Propaganda operates in the occupied territories and has a devastating effect on the people there and their actions.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

It would be great if the project became international, multilingual, and made money. I don't want to wait until the end of the war—for me, as for any European, especially a Jew with a Russian passport, there are many wars going on.

As for the future: I do not agree with that part of opposition, who is convinced that if they seize Ostankino and start broadcasting the truth on TV, the country will change in two weeks. It's the same dead-end principle as propaganda: «we dictate to you what is right and what is wrong, and you write it down». This works only until the next coup, the next change of power. It changes—and people obediently write down such a villain ruled the country before. The long-term solution is a multi-year, multi-decade project to teach critical thinking, to analyze information on different platforms. Technology platforms, industries, media should follow certain standards for a very long time, like that English lawn that needs to be mowed for 300 years to look good. Only then will society become more stable, because no one will be able to tell it: that's it, we don't need elections anymore, I am your leader.

If the media market in Russia liberalizes, we will definitely have a place in this market: our product is of good quality, and the attention of the press and experts confirms this. With resources, it has a chance of taking a good share of the free market. There is an idea to make a map of Russian media, including YouTube and Telegram channels and popular bloggers, in order to evaluate them in relation to each other and what narratives they promote. Services for countering Kremlin propaganda and delivering information to other information bubbles are very relevant.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

Up to 80% of news content is distributed in Russia by platforms such as VKontakte, Yandex, and Google. This is where people get their news information, on the basis of which they

make decisions—exactly what the state has authorized, without thinking about where it came from. This situation makes a country of 140 million people with large resources and nuclear weapons quite unstable. Something has to be done about it. If the situation changes, if such people are not 80-90%, but 60-70%, it will be possible to deal with such a state.

You recently participated in a trip to Brussels organized by the Free Russia Foundation for representatives of civic initiatives. How can you assess the outcome of communication with European institutions, and how did this trip help your project?

It became a little clearer how they (in particular, NATO) are arranged and work. I got to know new people who may help in the implementation of projects.

“The role of volunteer grassroots initiatives will only continue to grow”



Katerina Kiltau, civil activist, co-founder of Emigration for Action, a project of Russian emigrants in Georgia, ex-coordinator of the Golos movement in Altai Krai

Present your project, tell how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

Emigration for Action is a Russian emigration project that helps Ukrainian refugees in Georgia in medical, social, psychological spheres and unites Russian-speaking community with anti-war views. We launched in April 2022.

In the spring of 2022, hundreds of people engaged in civic activism in Russia found themselves in Georgia. We quickly realized that we wanted to transform a destructive sense of guilt into a constructive sense of responsibility—which meant helping Ukrainians in some way. There were a lot of them in Georgia, especially from the southeastern part of Ukraine: not all refugees had the opportunity to go to the West, many did not want to stay in Russia and get Russian passports. So tens of thousands of people came to Georgia with one suitcase. They needed all sorts of help—housing, food, clothes.

At first, aid was chaotic and fueled by personal enthusiasm: I remember a huge number of points where people brought humanitarian aid. Quite quickly this enthusiasm began to fade away, and only projects that were able to make aid systematic remained.

We decided to focus on medicines. Many Ukrainians had lost their health due to the fight-

ing (sitting in cellars, cold, hunger), had severe chronic diseases. Many of them were forced to leave Ukraine precisely because of the lack of medicines they needed for a normal life. There was also a request for help from a psychologist: most of refugees were stressed, many have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Georgia is not the richest country, and many medicines (e.g. for cancer therapy, cirrhosis therapy, etc.) are very expensive. There is budget support for Ukrainians, but it is minimal. So we started to collect private donations to buy medicines. Ukrainian refugees learn about us through social networks and word of mouth. We see how urgent the request is, whether we can buy them, make arrangements with pharmacies, buy medicines in packages and give them to those who need them. In order to communicate competently and gently with Ukrainians, all our volunteers undergo courses of first psychological aid. They also have consultations with provisors and pharmacists. More than 8,300 Ukrainians have already received medical support thanks to us, including more than 100 complex medical cases.

There are six co-founders of the project and dozens of volunteers. Each co-founder has his own area of responsibility. Someone deals with financial issues, someone else coordinates the work of the site and the distribution of medicines, and I personally head the media department. There is an event department: we have organized over 200 educational, awareness-raising, anti-war events in a year and a half, where we collect donations for the purchase of medicines.

Involvement of the Russian-speaking community in anti-war activities is a very important area of our work.

Hundreds of volunteers have passed through our organization over the years. We have heard from many of them that they «want to be useful in some way», «the world around us will not get better if we do nothing», etc. Volunteering is one way to regain control: you can't stop a war, but you can influence its consequences. Such activities, as well as a good and stable anti-war community with clear shared values, help to «stay alive».

We publicly declare our position. We tell the stories of Ukrainians who have lived through hell, the stories of our team members and our struggle against the regime in Russia and here. We tell how exactly we help, how we experience what is happening, remind about the injustice and the ongoing violence. This is how we reached many people who share our position.

The fog of war, the fog of an uncertain future make many people lose their bearings. But I am sure: we—I am talking about all the helping initiatives, there are dozens and hundreds of them—represent the alternative face of Russia. The role of volunteer grassroots initiatives will only grow. Already now organizations like ours directly influence the attitude of Ukrainians towards Russians. We don't just help people—we talk to them. I see how Ukrainian refugees in Georgia see that projects created by Russians are helping them as much as possible, and through bewilderment, rejection, and then acceptance, they come to realize that not all Russians are orcs, that there are a lot of adequate and simply good people among them.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

We will, of course, continue to help Ukrainians as best we can, but the funds for this assistance are becoming increasingly scarce, and the routinization of war is undermining the

initial enthusiasm. The transformation of the project is necessary and inevitable: we need to be able to continue to exist and develop even when Ukrainians no longer need our help. Now we continue to conduct crowdfunding campaigns, make collaborations with different partners, and try to work together with Russian-speaking anti-war communities in other countries. We have a strong and great team, and we have to understand what we can afford and what we have the strength to do. I don't have concrete answers to the question of what we will do after the war yet, because the planning horizon seems to be minimal for everyone. But we are thinking about the future.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

There is a feeling that now in Europe both ordinary people and representatives of European authorities do not know much about the Russian opposition anti-war movement, that there are hundreds of initiatives that help refugees, fight propaganda, organize rallies, etc. Many do not see that hundreds of thousands have left Russia simply because they don't agree with what is happening, they don't want to pay taxes to the Russian state. And for the Ukrainians I talk to, this is often a huge revelation—how we fought in Russia against Putin's regime, how we are dealing with the aftermath of the invasion and trying to bring the end of the war closer to us (albeit not as quickly as they would like). This is a vacuum, and it needs to be filled. Perhaps then attitudes will begin to change, not dramatically, but change.

It is sad that during the post-Soviet years no stable bridges for dialog between Russian and European civil society have been built. This was actively pursued after the outbreak of war. This is a problem, and now we need to start solving it, because infrastructure is needed both in times of peace and non-peace. As someone wrote, «dialog is the only form of decent relations in our unworthy times». Transit is definitely waiting for us, we will see it with our own eyes. And strong ties will help us through it.

I don't have a universal prescription other than “do what you have to do and be what you will”. Each of us needs to continue to do everything we can at our own level to stop feeling Spanish shame for our state. We cannot give up, because that is what Putin wants: for the seeds of learned helplessness to grow into a big tree, and for all his crimes and repression to become information noise. We cannot let him get his way.

You recently participated in a trip to Brussels organized by the Free Russia Foundation for representatives of civic initiatives. How can you assess the outcome of communication with European institutions, and how did this trip help your project?

It is quite difficult for an unprepared person to understand the bureaucratic and institutional system of the EU. This trip helped to form at least partially an idea of how decisions are made, what factors exist. The trip provided new ideological acquaintances and useful contacts with whom we can make joint projects aimed at helping Ukrainians and, in general, the development of Russian civil society.

“We are not in the business of drawing fantastic maps of Russia’s fragmentation. We are working so that the peoples themselves can determine their own future”



Kirill Nemakin, co-founder and director of the investigative project “Metla”, head of the project “Non-Russian World”

Present your project, tell how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

Both “Metla” and “Non-Russian World” are definitely anti-war projects. “Metla,” for example, finds criminals who profit from war and talks about them. Talking about collective guilt is not only depressing but also dangerous: every crime has an actor, every criminal has a name. Through investigations, we can recognize those names, and hopefully in the not-too-distant future, these people will be convicted and answer for their crimes.

“Non-Russian World” is an educational project, its goal is to increase the subjectivity of indigenous peoples. This subjectivity affects the whole of Russian society and all the big events that happen to it. I am sure that if Russia were a federation not only on paper, many mistakes could have been avoided. Indigenous peoples should become a kind of fuse: if the center (the Kremlin, Moscow) launches another bloody initiative, it is the indigenous peoples who can interrupt this chain.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

It will continue: our main task is to help and educate, and it is always relevant, especially in such a multinational country as Russia. We are not in the business of drawing fantastic maps of Russia’s fragmentation. We are working so that the peoples themselves can determine their own future.

For this purpose, we are launching various initiatives: for example, training in working with Wikipedia (it is the largest information resource available, and the history of indigenous peoples is presented there in a disgusting manner), and we are planning to launch the School of National Leadership. Today, all national elites are absolutely servile: for the last 20 years they have been either intimidated or bribed, and as a result, not the best people are in charge, but the most loyal ones who come to rallies or vote at the click of a button. Our leadership project

aims to cultivate new elites.

The Non-Russian World has a very strong expertise: there are candidates and doctors of sciences (including PhDs from foreign universities) with knowledge of national languages, including numerous representatives of indigenous peoples. We are currently working on a large historical research project.

In the spring, we will be holding an incubator for national media that write either in national languages or in Russian, but with a focus on indigenous peoples and places where they live. This is a full spectrum of training—from creative workshops to dealing with global topics like gender diversity, financial management and community building. Work with history, language, political subjectivity, and representation in government is ongoing, with no end point.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

In the situation where we are now, there is only one possible answer to this question: the mafia group that has seized power in the country must go. Law and democracy must prevail. Once the laws work, the country will be transformed. And although the problem of xenophobia will not disappear—it exists all over the world—in the legal field it will decrease and become more controlled.

It is profitable for the Russian leadership to sow discord and foment conflict, including on ethnic grounds. The hatred that pours from the screens cannot simply evaporate. It settles down, the negativity spills out—today on the migrant who didn't deliver your order on time or accidentally stepped on your foot on the bus, tomorrow on the guys with the rainbow flag. We need to stop breeding hatred and start treating our own people with respect.

You recently participated in a trip to Brussels organized by the Free Russia Foundation for representatives of civic initiatives. How can you assess the outcome of communication with European institutions, and how did this trip help your project?

It has become more clear that the EU is a complex mechanism where many committees, think tanks, parties, foundations and individual politicians participate in decision-making. This means that it is very important to expand cooperation with all actors of European politics, to convey to them the point of view of Russian civil society. It was important to hear the opinion of European politicians, to learn new things about the projects of colleagues. There are also agreements on joint initiatives.

“The participation of young people in politics, in the fight against the regime, is very important”



Maria Novikova, lawyer, human rights activist and co-founder of the anti-war TikTok media NITKA, researcher of global freedom of speech at Columbia University (USA)

Present your project, tell us how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

NITKA is the first TikTok-media about politics. Through short videos, sometimes ironic, we talk about the situation in the country and the world, political terms, human rights, the nature of power and war. Our audience is schoolchildren and students who spend several hours a day on TikTok and draw their knowledge about what is happening in the country and the world mainly from there.

These young people are a very important part of Russian civil society, which is often forgotten. Most initiatives appeal to educated, intelligent adults who are information savvy and share their values. This is understandable: it is easy to talk to such audience and easy enough to support it. But it is students and schoolchildren who have to live in the Russia of the future. The war will be over, Putin will be gone, and today's teenagers will live and work in Russia and vote in the very first honest elections. It is very important to prepare them for an adult free life, to teach them to understand the importance of political processes, to be able to think critically. How to choose a candidate, how to perceive their programs? If we do not start this process of educating the young audience now, we will lose them. And it is very important to have young people as supporters.

There is, of course, a possibility that they will find answers to important questions about the war and the regime without us, but I think it is better and more promising to support their interest and desire to find out why things are happening, to help them become more involved. And young people definitely have an interest and a desire to understand—and they genuinely don't know where to get information that will be truthful, understandable and packaged in a format they are used to. Google and YouTube offer them long articles or hour-long videos of adults monotonously saying complicated things to the camera—just like teachers at school or university. A generation used to TikTok will not be attracted to such formats. To keep them interested, you have to tell them about what they are interested in, in their own language, the language of short videos (we ourselves spend several hours a day in TikTok to track trends and understand what is interesting and fashionable). We let them not think that someone is teaching them something, addressing them from the top down. We share what we have realized,

because we are like that ourselves, we have the same desires and dreams for the future.

Students ask me, «How do we talk to our classmates about the war, how do we convince them?» I answer: «Share a couple of anti-war videos with them, not necessarily ours. They won't get those videos by chance—TikTok's algorithms are not like Instagram's, so what your friends like doesn't end up in your feed. But if you personally send a video and they open it and watch it, then TikTok will feed them more and more of them».

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

Initially, NITKA media was an anti-war project: we wanted to tell stories about war for the TikTok audience. But the team started to grow, we began to feel our value, to receive positive feedback from the audience. Today we have big plans for the future: we realize that the project will be relevant even after the end of the war, and we want to expand and do educational projects. Now we are also helping grassroots initiatives to develop their TikTok. We all want Russia's freedom and Ukraine's victory and we are doing one thing. Thanks to the fact that anti-war TikTok media is becoming more numerous, it is easier for us to get access to the audience: together we surround young people with a cloud of political content.

The participation of young people in politics, in the fight against the regime, is very important. Do not think that because they have little experience, they do not understand life. Young people are smarter now than we were at their age. They learn more and faster, understand, analyze, see the connections between actions and consequences. It is important to give them a platform to speak out. I notice that opposition figures have started to listen to young people, grassroots activists, small organizations, including those involved in TikTok. There is a growing understanding that independent media have limited coverage, and that TikTok allows them to expand it greatly. Many people, including older people, are discovering TikTok thanks to us.

Our democratic community is moving forward, evolving, and that's a wonderful thing.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

One of our tasks is to interact with European youth movements and alliances. Within such alliances, we share our experience. We, representatives of Russian youth opposition movements, tell, for example, how our country became a democracy, but failed to remain one and slipped into authoritarianism. In Europe, including France, where I am now, I see a lot of right-wing sentiment. Russia's experience should show Europeans that even if you are already a democracy, you should never stop educating, democratizing society, working with young people: there is always a risk of becoming a dictatorship. We can share our experience of how we fight against this dictatorship, and they can share their experience with us—tools for interacting with audiences, tools for promoting democratic values. We are useful for each other.

I think it is very important to show Russian activists and the entire anti-war community

how Europeans are interested in politics. It is part of the culture here, everyone has political views, and it is quite normal to discuss them. Every European has sympathies or antipathies for certain parties, and «their» parties are followed, discussed, voted for, supported with donations, etc. I would love Russia to be able to do the same. I would love Russia to be like that too. Putin, unfortunately, has succeeded in discouraging interest and desire in this area. This is another of our tasks—to promote a culture of participation in civic processes and in politics, including global politics.

You recently participated in a trip to Brussels organized by the Free Russia Foundation for representatives of civic initiatives. How can you assess the outcome of communication with European institutions, and how did this trip help your project?

There is a deeper understanding of how we can communicate with EU authorities and what the European community is concerned about. Based on the results of the meetings, we will work on our strategy of influencing the audience both in Europe and within Russia. I have received contacts through which my organization specifically will be able to establish horizontal communication with European youth organizations to share experiences and tools for working with young people.

“Our main task inside the country is to let people know that they are not alone with their anti-war views”



Olga Petrova*, human rights defender, activist, participant of FAS (Feminist Anti-War Resistance)

* name changed for security reasons

Present your project, tell how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

Feminist Anti-War Resistance emerged on February 25, the second day of the war. Now FAR has cells in more than 30 countries. FAR works both inside Russia and abroad. These are two huge areas and two different audiences.

Activism in Russia is as non-public as possible for security reasons. At the same time, our main task inside the country is to let people know that they are not alone with their anti-war views, that there are many of them. Activists in Russia are constantly surrounded by propagan-

da, they are under tremendous social pressure. We help to organize anti-war actions and issue safety leaflets, we publish a newspaper called «Women's Truth», written in simple language and mimicking the district press. Everyone can propose an article to this newspaper and then, realizing the risks, distribute it in the way they choose. This seemingly small but important and constructive work means a lot to the activists.

When we do public actions outside Russia, we strive to keep the topic of war on the public agenda. Europe is tired of war, and this is understandable: it is difficult to empathize with it all the time, to read heartbreaking stories. There are those who say: «Let Ukraine give Russia its territories, just so long as it ends as soon as possible».

The actions attract their attention more than the texts, they remind that they have something to put up with rising heating bills and rising food prices. It is necessary for the war to continue to be evil and unacceptable for them, so that people not only know this, but also do not hesitate to express their attitude—by votes in elections, by donations, in conversations with friends, family, journalists, by supporting or not supporting parties depending on their attitude to what is happening. It is important for Europeans to realize that if refugees and asylum seekers appear in the country not only from Ukraine, but also from Russia, they did not come from a good life. After all, European citizens, unlike Russian citizens, feel that something depends on them.

And they also need to be told where they can donate to help those suffering from war. Europeans often don't know where to donate and give money to big organizations. But small organizations are also important, and 10 euros, which is a drop in the ocean for Amnesty International, can mean a lot to a small initiative. We tell you about such initiatives.

Of course, the community influences the resistance from outside and inside the country—but it is impossible to measure the efficiency of this influence. Nor is it possible to overthrow the regime through this influence. But it is possible to support people, not to let them despair and give up. It is possible to evacuate them in case of danger, finally.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

Nowadays, any meeting between anti-war Russians and people from Ukraine involves a terrible sense of guilt. People don't know what to say, but if they overpower themselves and the conversation takes place, both sides feel better. It is very important that Russians, especially those who supported and carried out the military actions, and Ukrainians who suffered from them, meet face to face in a safe environment, in the presence of a professional mediator who does not belong to either side. An ability to ask for forgiveness is sometimes more important for restoring justice than a fair verdict in a court of law. Perhaps our cells in many countries could organize such meetings.

When the war is over, Russia and Ukraine will have many unifying themes related to women's rights. Men—both aggressors and defenders—return from any war with a traumatized psyche, their trauma spilling over to their wives, children, sisters. We can support and help women who face this.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

Even when Putin is gone, all the structures will remain, and they are tied to the elites and corrupt. Russia needs very radical changes: a complete change in the institutions of power, judicial system, law enforcement agencies. Lustration, perhaps several. When the new government shows that it is serious, that it is working to make the situation in the country better, it will have the right and the opportunity to communicate to the world for help and expertise.

This does not mean that the country will need a European specialist who will come and fix everything. It will require consultations, joint discussions on how to build a new state based on Russian realities and international norms. Maybe we will need study visits to Western countries to see how things work there and what of this experience will be useful to us.

Dialogue and fulfillment of commitments can restore broken trust. Europe, as I said before, is tired of war—and would be happy to see Putin go and Russia have an adequate and negotiable government.

“When a person sees the anti-war community in their city, it gives them the strength to resist”



Ivan Rudnev, editor of the Perm 36.6 media project, ex-deputy coordinator of Alexei Navalny's headquarters in Perm

Present your project, tell us how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

In the summer of 2021, Alexei Navalny's headquarters were recognized as an extremist organization (recall that in 2017 Navalny launched his presidential campaign, 81 headquarters were opened across the country, including 11 opened on the initiative of local residents by their own efforts. But Navalny was illegally knocked out of the presidential race, and then poisoned and put behind bars). We, the staff of the headquarters in Perm, decided to continue working as media. When the war started, we were the only media outlet in the city that immediately made an anti-war statement, and then we became the only anti-war media outlet in the region—we wrote about Russian aggression and how the war and sanctions were affecting the region (and our region is industrial, so the sanctions hit it hard).

Regional media, like regional headquarters, are as close to the people as possible and are more immersed in the situation in the region than federal media. Since the time of the headquarters, we still have numerous ties with local communities and human rights groups (town defenders, human rights activists). It is very important to find common ground at the regional level: there are larger media outlets that openly speak out against Putin's policies and the war, but when a person sees an anti-war community in his own city, it gives him the strength to resist and shows that he is not alone, that there are like-minded people very close by (not in the distant capital). This is how we gathered all the anti-war, humanistically-minded residents of the city and the region around Perm 36.6.

However, we ourselves are not always clear about whether we are more media or more activists. It seems that professional media should be unbiased, cover events objectively, and give both sides a say. Of course, we are not, we have a strong anti-war and opposition orientation. We took part in several anti-war campaigns and actions, openly urged the citizens not to keep silent. And it works: people going out to anti-war pickets know that there is someone to stand up for them: in addition to information support, we have a lawyer who is now in the region and takes all cases related to «discrediting the armed forces» and «fakes». We also help to collect on fines for the detainees. Although there are other services, including federal ones, that help activists, it is very important that such support is provided by the local community.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

The field of activity is huge, there will be much more problems than before the war, and we, the civil society, will have to deal with them. I think we will continue to work as we did when we were the headquarters: we will continue to glue together various civil regional initiatives, including media initiatives, we will continue to work on and with the community.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

The first step is to revive a nurturing environment in the country in the form of an active civil society, to recreate this ecosystem. This is our mission and our contribution to restoring relations with democratic countries. It is important to continue international cooperation between different NGOs.

The world has always been open to Russia; borders have been built from within. To normalize relations, future Russia simply needs to resume this dialogue. I was pleasantly surprised that the representatives of the European Commission are as open and interested in this as possible. We are all neighbors, parts of the European community, we have to communicate.

You recently participated in a trip to Brussels organized by the Free Russia Foundation for representatives of civic initiatives. How can you assess the outcome of communication with European institutions, and how did this trip help your project?

Meetings with the leaders of the largest democratic parties and NATO staff who work in the Russian direction helped to understand how the decision-making mechanism in the EU works. I was pleasantly surprised by the openness of NATO as an institution. In particular, the opportunity to participate in joint projects, as well as lobby for initiatives to support civil society in Russia.

“Civil society in Russia is now a subculture. Our task is to make civic participation part of mass culture”



Ekaterina Sukhareva, creator and coordinator of the Anti-Corruption Academy, an educational project for activists and independent municipal deputies

Present your project, tell us how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

The Anti-Corruption Academy project was launched three years ago. We work with activists and independent municipal deputies from the North-West of Russia. Academy was born after a large independent campaign in St. Petersburg: there were several dozen municipal deputies who needed to learn the basics of civic control. Together with guest speakers, we teach people how to work with databases and data registers, teach them how to see and counteract corrupt practices, help them write appeals and do local investigations. Over three years, about 200 people have participated in the project, 50 of whom are active municipal deputies.

I think the important task now is not to lose each other. To continue to unite people with an anti-war stance into viable communities, to develop the skills of these people. I believe that Russia needs an insanely strong horizontal community, so I am building a horizontal community of people interested in the topic of anti-corruption.

When a person is able to conduct his own investigations, write appeals, formulate conclusions from his observations, and his associates see this, he gains basic political capital. People start to listen to him, a community forms around him, and he turns from an activist into a civic leader and an actor of change. Today you, as an anti-corruption activist, control the construction of a road near your house, tomorrow you run for a municipal seat because you realized

that you can change the situation for the better and bring public benefit.

The whole point is that in Russia now there are very few avenues of entry into civic activism. The authorities are deliberately cutting off the heads of independent organizations. The more entry points we manage to create and preserve, the better for the future.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

It is now very difficult for people to talk and dream about a future peaceful Russia. We do not understand well what it could be like, we do not realize what challenges we may face on the road to it. But in order for people to be motivated to take action, it is simply necessary to visualize at least its outlines. That is why we have recently launched a project to study the experience of democratic transformation in other countries. It turns out that many societies have passed this way. I hope it will work for us too.

Currently, several research groups are studying international experience in six different areas. The participants are working on areas in which they are already strong, taking expert interviews, and communicating with practitioners and representatives of the Russian and foreign academic community. For example, Vitaly Bovar, as a municipal deputy in St. Petersburg, was involved in monitoring the work of the police. Now Vitaly is accumulating the experience of police reform in different countries and will soon tell us all about his findings. In the spring of 2024, we want to launch a large educational project for civic leaders from Russia.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

I think that the international community should see that there is a demand for change in Russian society. That there are many people in Russia who want their country to be democratic and peaceful. And the task of civic leaders is to demand institutional changes, to become actors of these changes, to achieve representation, which Russian civil society does not have at the moment.

I think a lot about how we arrived at this point. How were we able to allow Russia's military aggression against Ukraine? There are many reasons: economic inequality, an avalanche of oil and gas revenues that were channeled into building an autocracy, an outrageous level of corruption, and a scale of political repression unprecedented in the modern world. As a result, we were unable to prevent this nightmare.

Civil society in Russia is very young. If you look at the history of any successful non-profit organization, you will most likely see that this community is no more than 10 years old. It is young, but in spite of everything it is actively developing. And the authorities understand this very well, so they are trying to drive us into a subculture. And our common task in the future is to make civic participation a part of mass culture.

You recently participated in a trip to Brussels organized by the Free Russia Foundation for representatives of civic initiatives. How can you assess the outcome of communication with European institutions, and how did this trip help your project?

It was very interesting to see how democratic institutions and mechanisms work. We plan to interact with some of them in the future; in a situation where representatives of civil society from Russia were forced to relocate to different countries, such events are extremely useful. The trip helped me to find like-minded people and partners, with some of the participants we are thinking about how to consolidate efforts in working on common areas.

“The fewer people in the Russian army, the more chances that the war will end sooner”



Alexei Tabalov, human rights activist, lawyer, founder and executive director of the autonomous non-profit human rights organization Conscript School

We created the Conscript School in 2009 in Chelyabinsk to help conscripts, servicemen and citizens choosing alternative civilian service to protect their rights. At the same time we were engaged in education, as we wanted not only to help, but also to increase people's subjectivity, their self-awareness, so that in difficult situations they could fight for their rights themselves. As long as we had access to military units, we monitored their work, and when access was closed, we monitored the work of military commissions and draft boards: whether the legislation was observed there, whether there were violations of citizens' rights.

When the war started, the number of requests multiplied, and we expanded our team. We persuaded servicemen to break their contracts and leave the war: it was not just us, but a whole coalition of human rights defenders, journalists, and activists. By the end of last summer, the number of such refuseniks had grown, and the army began to create so-called «pits» and camps for them. It was possible to fight against such things, but in the autumn the authorities took a hard way: they announced mobilization and immediately introduced a ban on contract termination until the end of mobilization (and as we remember, it is still going on). The contractors found themselves in slavery until the end of the war, which is not yet in sight.

Accordingly, our past tactics were no longer working. We focused on convincing and persuading people not to take a summons and not to go to the military enlistment offices. Our task is to help everyone who does not want to serve in the army, who does not want to go to the front. The fewer people in the Russian army, the better the chances that the war will end sooner.

We make training videos, issue instructions, methodological guidelines, and recommendations. We receive about 1,000 calls a month, and we consult via mail, our VKontakte page and website. The hotline was closed after the start of mobilization—they were unable to handle the multiplied volume of calls. Since it is almost impossible to leave the front, the bulk of applicants are conscripts, reservists and their relatives. We also retain a human rights component: we draft complaints, lawsuits, applications, offer lawyers and attorneys for defense in courts—as a rule, courts are related to refusals to provide alternative civilian service.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

The human rights component of the work is important and always will be—there will be an army in Russia under any regime.

We hope that in the future Russian legislation will be liberalized and society will be involved in the process of transforming the country. This includes discussion of what the Russian army should be like, by whom it should be managed and controlled, in what cases it can be used, and how to prevent the army from becoming an instrument for fulfilling the insane desires of a mad tyrant.

I am in favor of abolishing the conscript army and instead of it creating a compact professional army under the control of society and parliament. There should be state guarantees in relation to citizens who declare a conscious refusal of military service. The state has no right to force citizens to serve in the army: it is not a duty, not an honorable obligation, and especially not a universal conscription. The internal structure of the army must be changed: now a serviceman is raw material, cannon fodder, who has no rights, only duties.

If in that future Russia, where the coalition government will be appointed by the parliament (not the president), I were offered the position of defense minister, I would not refuse.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period? What changes should take place in Russian politics and society to achieve this?

Russia is unlikely to join NATO, but we can be good and non-belligerent partners.

Of course, Russia must stop this war, withdraw its troops to the internationally recognized borders of 1991, apologize to Ukraine, pay reparations, and perhaps take part in rebuilding the destruction it has caused. But it is much more important to rethink what happened inside Russian society: we ourselves, inside the country, need to figure out how we got to this point and how not to repeat it. We need to understand whether the actions of Putin and his team were war crimes, crimes against humanity and against our own country. This requires an internal tribunal, a public trial.

“The more citizens of different views gain experience in participating in politics, the higher the overall level of civic awareness will be”



Sergey Shukhov*, specialist in data visualization, infographics and data journalism, author of civic and anti-war projects

*name changed for security reasons

Present your project, tell how it contributes to ending war and building a peaceful future for Russia

Before the war, I worked on the Russia vote project—a service that clearly shows the situation with municipal elections in Russia, which deputies there are in which municipalities, when they were elected, what the turnout was, and so on.

The service is useful for those who can and want to become a municipal deputy or are at least thinking about a career in politics. We show you how to do it, and it's actually realistic and not too difficult, much easier than getting into the State Duma: for example, in 2/3 of the regions you only need to collect signatures from 100-150 people. We tell you what documents you need to collect and where to take them. And during the election campaign, we show voters who is running in their district (in 99% of cases, finding this information is a non-trivial task), and explain what municipal deputies can and cannot do.

In this way, we draw attention to municipal elections as a key element of grassroots democracy, telling people what they can influence both as voters and by being elected. We did not focus the project only on the liberal opposition: it is important that anyone, regardless of their views, has the opportunity to participate in the political process in Russia, so that anyone can try to get elected. The more citizens of different views gain experience in politics, the higher the overall level of civic consciousness will be.

In essence, we are engaged in digital guerrilla warfare—we take something that was initially done incorrectly and, through the interface, make it work. All the data we work with is available in open sources—on the CEC website, for example. But access itself does not make working with them either simple or convenient. We take this data, visualize it, help you read and understand it, and the dry data turns into a publicly useful service that solves many problems.

In addition, I do media literacy, digital literacy, data literacy: we talk about what sources can be trusted, how to recognize a source that is not trustworthy. The basic skill of critical

thinking and getting information about the world is to read and compare different sources. This is a critical skill for any civil society participant, as it allows them to make normal decisions and, consequently, influence the situation.

As a data journalist, I am involved in projects related to the war, training journalists to work with data, visualize information, and doing small projects (for example, based on obituaries, I made an infographic on how many Russian soldiers died in different periods of the war). With Kyrgyz journalists, we are now doing a project on re-exports—we are visualizing and comparing open data, from which it is obvious that Kyrgyzstan buys chips and other military equipment in China, Korea, and Europe and smuggles them to Russia.

Of course, all this will not stop the war, but it is work for the development of civil society.

How do you see your role in the post-war peace process? Will your work continue and/or what might it evolve into?

All our achievements of recent years will not be lost and will be useful even after the war and change of power. I am ready, as I am today, to create services based on open data, and if possible, to help the state create such services. I can contribute to areas that the state has not yet covered in the framework of healthy digitalization. This could be a consultative or advisory role, perhaps forming an advisory body to a government body.

How, in your opinion, can Russia strengthen the confidence of the international community in the post-war period?

The problems will not be solved immediately, but starting to talk about them openly is already an important step. We need to start communicating normally with the world, without constant deception, lies and gaslighting. We need to stop engaging in propaganda, lies and disinformation at the state level, in the state media.

The next step is to increase transparency at all levels: bring back freedom of speech, bring back independent media, make elections honest again as much as possible. Honest courts will start to improve the investment climate.

It is very easy to multiply people's interest in municipal governance: it is necessary to change the funding flows. When local taxes go to the local governing body, people begin to have a vested interest in having their representative become a deputy—this is a basic story that works perfectly well in many countries, and it works even by itself, even in the absence of parties and a passive parliament. There is already some interest from below, at least it started to appear about 5 years ago thanks to the efforts of such politicians as Maxim Kats, Dmitry Gudkov, and so on.

All this is impossible without a profound change in the political system. We need a full-fledged parliamentarism—then power will no longer be in the hands of one person and one party.