

'Foreign agents' and 'undesirables'

Russian civil society in danger of extinction?

SUMMARY

After a period of relative freedom in the 1990s allowed the emergence of civic activism in Russia, repression has now come full circle. Under Vladimir Putin's power vertical, space for independent voices has narrowed. Like the political opposition and the media, civil society is now increasingly subordinate to the state.

Repressive legislation has gradually circumscribed the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As part of a more general drive to exclude external influences after a wave of post-election protests in 2011, in 2012 Russia adopted a Foreign Agent Law, whose scope since then has been progressively expanded to include media and individual activists as well as NGOs. A second Undesirable Organisations Law from 2015 excludes numerous international NGOs from the country.

While the Foreign Agent Law does not actually ban Russian NGOs from receiving foreign support, it makes it much harder for them to operate and has forced many to close down. The number of organisations concerned is relatively small, but it includes many of the country's most prominent activists. Vaguely worded legislation puts large swathes of civil society at risk of falling foul of the law, a significant deterrent to activism.

Repressive legislation has created a divide between officially tolerated 'social' NGOs, whose activities and values are more closely aligned with the Kremlin's agenda, and 'political' NGOs. Conditions for the latter have become increasingly hostile, leaving little room for political activism.



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Repression comes full circle

The end of Communist rule opens the door to civic activism

After decades of state control and the Communist Party's near-monopoly of public life, the 1980s saw the emergence of an independent civil society. Formerly underground movements, such as the Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial, both linked to dissident [Andrey Sakharov](#), could finally operate without fear of prosecution, and were joined by other newer organisations.

Superficially at least, Russian civil society remains vibrant today, with nearly [210 000](#) registered non-commercial organisations as of February 2022. Despite the [absence](#) of any real tradition of civic activism, in some ways Russians are surprisingly willing to engage with civil society; data from 2019 suggests that around [one-sixth](#) volunteered during a 12-month period, a similar proportion to the [UK](#), while nearly half had given money.

Russia's [Civic Chamber](#) and equivalent bodies at regional level play a similar role to the EU's European Economic and Economic Social Committee, or national bodies such as France's [Conseil économique, social et environnemental](#). The chamber comprises 168 members, drawn from national public associations, regional civic chambers and citizens who have distinguished themselves through service to the state and society; it is currently headed by lawyer [Lidya Mikheeva](#). The chamber debates government policies and legislation, and issues recommendations to the authorities; in theory, therefore, it serves as a platform for civil society representatives to become involved in policymaking. Admittedly, its real influence is questionable; after its 2005 launch, several [observers](#) dismissed it as a mere 'smokescreen'.

The return of state control under Vladimir Putin

After the turbulent [1990s](#), which saw relative freedom but also poverty, soaring crime rates, a catastrophic drop in life expectancy and separatist conflicts, Vladimir Putin's first presidency saw the return of more centralised control. Two decades later, Putin's [power vertical](#) leaves little room for independent initiatives, whether from opposition parties, the media or civil society. The state is once again the dominant force in most areas of life: all national television channels, as well as six out of Russia's [10 largest companies](#), are government-controlled.

The Kremlin continues the long process of gradually tightening the screws on its opponents. In January 2021, leading dissident [Alexey Navalny](#) was arrested and imprisoned on spurious charges. In March 2022, [Dozhd TV](#) and [Moscow Echo](#) radio station, two of the few remaining independent media outlets, were forced off air due to their refusal to comply with official guidelines on coverage of the war in Ukraine. Such repression has a chilling effect on all kinds of activism, not only that which aims to achieve political change. At his trial for inciting extremism, [Yegor Zhukov](#), a student and former candidate in the 2019 elections to the Moscow regional assembly, denounced the 'atomisation' of Russian society: 'where common action does occur, the guardians of the state immediately see it as a threat. It doesn't matter what you do – whether you are helping prison inmates, speaking up for human rights, fighting for the environment – sooner or later you'll either be branded a 'foreign agent' or just locked up. The state's message is clear: "Go back to your burrow and don't take part in common action"'.

A legislative assault on independent civil society

2006: 'colour revolutions' inspire a first wave of restrictions

NGO legislation has become increasingly restrictive. The prominent role played by civil society in Georgia's Rose Revolution (2003) and Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004-2005) [prompted](#) Russia's [2006 law on non-governmental organisations](#), which, among other things, gives the authorities the right to deny registration to organisations whose objectives threaten 'the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national unity, unique character, cultural heritage, and national

interests of the Russian Federation', and restricts activities by foreign nationals and organisations. Vague concepts such as 'national interests' allow the law to be applied to a wide range of activities. However, some of these restrictions were [rolled back](#) in 2009 ahead of a visit by then US President Barack Obama, in the context of a ['reset'](#) between Washington and Moscow.

2012: Foreign Agent Law

Protests in Russia and a crackdown on foreign influences

Kremlin fears of a Western-instigated 'colour revolution' resurfaced after the December 2011 parliamentary elections, when allegations of vote rigging triggered the [biggest protests](#) since the 1990s. Vladimir Putin was quick to [accuse](#) then US State Secretary Hilary Clinton of fomenting unrest, and, in the months that followed, the Russian government took steps to curb Western influences over civil society. The first of these was the July 2012 Foreign Agent Law, targeted at foreign-financed NGOs. In September, Russia [ordered](#) the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – one of the main donors to civil society organisations in the country – to close its Moscow offices. Although best known for its ban on US citizens adopting Russian children, the ['Dima Yakovlev' Law](#) adopted in December of the same year also empowers the Russian authorities to close down US-funded organisations engaged in activities that threaten Russian interests.

Scope of the Foreign Agent Law

The original 2012 [legislation](#) requires 'public associations ... that receive funds and other property from foreign sources, and participate in political activities carried out on the territory of the Russian Federation' to declare themselves as foreign agents. Since June 2014, those that fail to do so can be forcibly registered as such by the Ministry of Justice. Subsequent legislation extends the concept of foreign agent from NGOs to other categories: media outlets ([November 2017](#)); [individual journalists and bloggers](#) ([December 2019](#)); individual activists and non-registered movements ([December 2020](#)).

The concepts of 'political activity' and 'foreign funding' are vaguely defined and inconsistently interpreted. The initial 2012 text does not specify the nature of political activity; a June 2016 amendment adds a [definition](#), but this is hardly an [improvement](#), as it includes a very broad range of activities such as meetings, publications, debates and requests aimed at influencing government policies and decisions – the kind of [advocacy](#) that is central to the work of many NGOs. Fields such as science, culture, art, healthcare, maternity and childcare, environmental protection, sport, charity and volunteering are defined as apolitical, but that did not save the [Dynasty Foundation](#), a former leading source of scientific research grants until its 2015 foreign agent listing forced it to close down. The law does not specify how much of an NGO's income has to come from foreign sources for designation; in the case of Alexey Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, a [US\\$50 donation](#) by a Florida resident was a sufficient pretext. Grants from other Russian organisations that have themselves received foreign funding, or even transfers from an organisation's own foreign bank accounts, also [qualify](#) for foreign agent listing.

How many organisations and individuals are foreign agents?

Registered NGOs: according to [Deutsche Welle](#), 200 organisations were registered as foreign agents between 2012 and February 2021. As of February 2022, there were still [73 organisations](#) on the list, the remainder having either having closed down or been delisted.

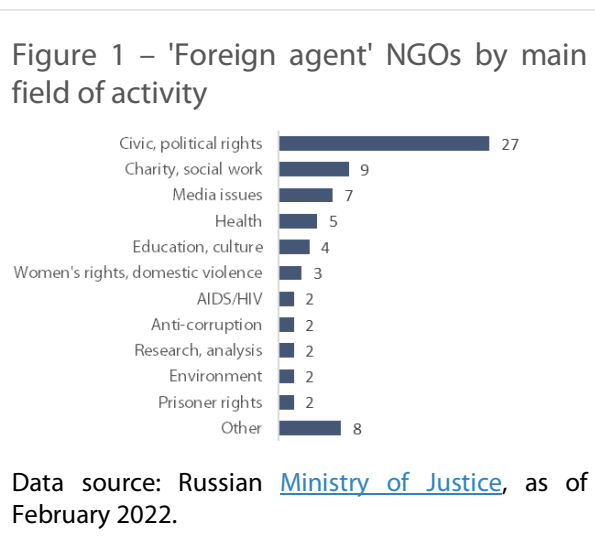
Table 1 – Examples of currently registered 'foreign agent' NGOs

NGO name	Nature of activity	Date of listing	Current status
Alliance of Doctors	Healthcare workers' trade union	March 2021	Active
Anti-Corruption Foundation	Fighting corruption	October 2019	Liquidated in 2021 by a court ruling as 'extremist organisation'
Defence of Prisoners' Rights Foundation	Prisoners' rights	February 2019	Active
For Human Rights NGO	Defending human rights (e.g. support for political prisoners)	December 2014	Liquidated in 2019 by a court ruling for refusal to register as foreign agent; re-established as unregistered movement; closed in March 2021
Levada Centre	Russia's leading independent pollster; market research	September 2016	Active
Memorial Human Rights Centre	Documenting human rights abuses, providing support to political prisoners, refugees, etc.	July 2014	January 2022 court order to liquidate for non-compliance with Foreign Agent Law; appeal ongoing
Nasilyu Nyet (No To Violence)	Supporting victims of domestic violence	December 2020	Active
Sova	Research and informational work on issues relating to racism, nationalism, religion, extremism	December 2016	Active

Data source: Russian [Ministry of Justice](#), as of February 2022.

After the Foreign Agent law came into effect, the authorities initially focused on organisations that had played a key role in the 2011-2012 post-election protests. In April 2013, election monitors Golos Association became the [first NGO](#) to be declared a foreign agent; Memorial Human Rights Centre followed in July 2014. However, the label was subsequently applied to a much broader range of NGOs, including those with no obvious political agenda. Other foreign agents include organisations dealing with [environmental issues](#), [domestic violence](#) and [HIV prevention](#) (Figure 1).

On the other hand, NGOs with ties to non-Western countries are rarely designated, even when they fit the law's definition of foreign agents. Many of the [over 90 NGOs](#)



whose goal is to promote closer relations with Beijing openly receive Chinese funding, yet none is on the register.

Non-registered movements: some organisations, such as Golos, initially evaded foreign agent status by re-forming as non-registered movements; these were outside the scope of the original legislation, which only applied to registered bodies. However, that loophole was closed off in December 2020, when a second [list](#) of non-registered foreign agent associations was created. It currently has seven entries, including Golos, [OVD-Info](#), which describes itself as an 'independent human rights media project' against politically motivated justice, and five LGBT groups.

Individual activists: according to a [list](#) compiled in 2021 by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 31 individual activists have been declared foreign agents. The majority of these are current or former Golos members; several others are lawyers from the former [Team 29](#), which used to provide legal assistance for activists facing politically motivated charges, such as Alexey Navalny, until it was itself forced to close down as an 'undesirable organisation' (see below), and its website was blocked. Veteran human rights defender [Lev Ponomaryov](#) is also on the list. Such individuals are barred from holding public office in Russia and must report regularly to the authorities on their income sources and expenditure.

Media: since 2017, [40 media outlets](#) have been declared foreign agents. The majority do indeed originate from outside Russia – for example, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Czech news agency Medium-Orient, iStories and Meduza from Latvia, and Dutch-based investigative journalism website Bellingcat. Germany's Deutsche Welle was [threatened](#) with foreign agent status before the authorities decided to ban it from Russia altogether. There are also several homegrown media outlets on the list, such as Dozhd TV. Some 76 journalists, mostly employees of foreign agent media outlets, are individually listed as foreign agents.

Impact of the Foreign Agent Law on NGOs

Given the very broad definitions of political activity and foreign influence in Russian legislation, foreign agent status is theoretically applicable to a very broad range of organisations. In practice, it is conferred in a very [arbitrary](#) way, the main targets being NGOs that have either criticised Russia's leaders or are active in areas that do not fit in with mainstream conservative values, such as domestic violence or gay rights.

Although Russia [claims](#) that the law aims to ensure transparency and is modelled on similar US legislation, in reality the restrictions it imposes are designed to make it difficult for NGOs to operate. Additional reporting requirements are a significant burden, especially for smaller organisations, which have only [scarce resources](#) available for such tasks. Designated organisations are subject to unannounced intrusive inspections. Furthermore, they are required to identify themselves in all public communications, including articles and social media posts, as foreign agents – a stigmatising term that carries negative Cold War [connotations](#) of treachery.

Being labelled as a foreign agent is highly [damaging](#) to an NGO's credibility and affects its relations with stakeholders. Cooperation with government departments becomes

Foreign agents: Russia versus the US

Adopted in 1938, the US [Foreign Agents Registration Act](#) requires NGOs engaged in political activity on behalf of foreign actors to register as foreign agents. As such, they are required to disclose foreign funding and to label their informational materials accordingly. Despite similarities in scope and terminology, US and Russian laws are applied in very different ways. US media outlet RFE/RL [claims](#) that its designation by Moscow as a foreign agent has a far more damaging impact on its capacity to engage with audiences than a similar label applied to Russian media in the US. It points out that, after registering as foreign agents, Kremlin propaganda channels [RT](#) and [Sputnik](#) were able to continue operating freely (at least until March 2022, when they were [taken off](#) air following Russia's invasion of Ukraine). Unlike their Russian counterparts, foreign agents in the US only [rarely](#) face criminal prosecution or are forced to close down.

difficult. In one of numerous examples, Federal Migration Service officials [stopped](#) attending seminars organised by the Civic Assistance Committee, an NGO that helps refugees and migrants; furthermore, Moscow city authorities declined to extend the lease on the committee's 'adaptation centre' for refugee children. The organisation also lost some private sector funding.

Levada Center, Russia's leading independent pollster, was designated a foreign agent in 2016; at the time, its director [Lev Gudkov](#) feared that negative public perceptions of the label would make it almost impossible to carry out surveys. In fact, Levada has remained active but has scaled back its pre-election polling in view of electoral legislation that bars foreign agents from participation in campaigns. For the [first time](#) in decades, Levada did not systematically publish polls for the 2018 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections – a blow to the transparency of the votes, given that the country's two other major pollsters are state-affiliated and therefore a less credible source of electoral ratings.

In August 2021, Levada carried out a [poll](#) to measure public perceptions of foreign agents. The poll found that 42 % of respondents were aware of the law, and that around one-quarter of them would change their views of an organisation or individual for the worse if they knew them to be on the list. Reflecting negative perceptions of subversive foreign influences, Memorial's Moscow headquarters were [vandalised](#) twice, while Lev Ponomarev's apartment building was defaced with graffiti describing him as a 'defender of terrorists'.

Organisations and activists failing to comply with foreign agent restrictions face heavy fines. By the time it was forced to close down in January 2022, Memorial had paid [5 million roubles](#) (€60 000). Criminal charges are another possible outcome; in 2017, human rights defender [Valentina Cherevatenko](#) became the first to face these, with the prospect of up to two years in jail, although the case was subsequently dropped.

Rather than accepting the stigma and inconvenience of operating as a foreign agent, nearly half the NGOs labelled as such close down their operations; several examples were mentioned in the preceding section. According to [Deutsche Welle](#), of the 200 organisations registered as foreign agents between 2012 and February 2021, 56 were voluntarily disbanded, 16 closed down by the courts, and 8 excluded from the state register of legal entities. 45 were delisted, leaving 75 on the list; several of the latter (such as Memorial) were in practice no longer active, due to court rulings against them (under foreign agent or other legislation).

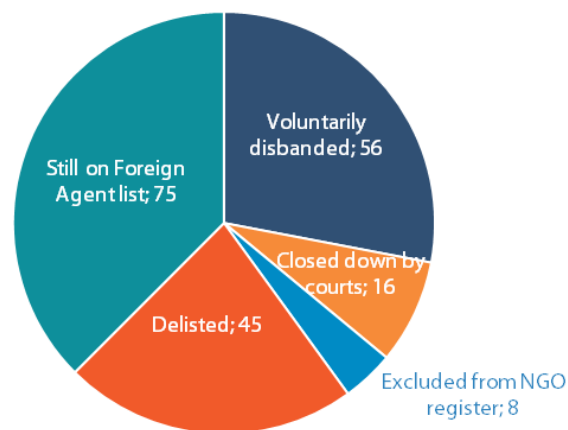
Although fewer than 0.1 % of Russian NGOs have been registered as foreign agents, the impact on Russian civil society as a whole is greater than these numbers would suggest, given that the organisations concerned are among Russia's largest, most prominent and professional associations. Furthermore, the very inclusive definition of foreign-funded political activity puts a much larger number of NGOs at risk of listing, a strong incentive for [self-censorship](#) and restraint.

Adapting to foreign agent status

NGOs labelled as foreign agents have adopted various survival strategies. Some have given up foreign funding, despite the difficulty of finding alternative domestic sources. In any case, even this is not always [enough](#) to guarantee removal from the list. Nor does the Justice Ministry always listen

Figure 2 – Status of NGOs listed as foreign agents in 2012-2021

(as of February 2021)



Source: [Deutsche Welle](#).

to the courts: several months after a judgment in its favour, Golos was [still on the list](#) of foreign agents.

To escape the foreign agent label, several NGOs followed Golos' example and re-formed as non-registered organisations; however, a lack of legal status can [get in the way](#) of cooperation with domestic and foreign partners. In any case, this legal loophole has now been closed, as already mentioned.

2015 Undesirable Organisations Law

In May 2015, Russia took a further step towards excluding foreign influences by adopting a new [law](#) allowing the prosecutor-general (without needing a court judgment) to declare foreign and international organisations that 'threaten the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, its defence capabilities or state security' as 'undesirable'. Undesirable organisations are banned from Russia, and participation in their activities becomes a criminal offence, punishable by prison sentences of up to six years. Like with the Foreign Agent Law, the [absence](#) of clear definitions in this new legislation makes it potentially applicable to a wide range of organisations. In June 2021, the law was [amended](#); since then, foreign or international NGOs that provide services or transfer money to undesirable organisations may by extension also become undesirable.

In July 2015, the National Endowment for Democracy became the first organisation to be designated as undesirable. It was followed by two branches of George Soros' network of Open Society Foundations. As of February 2022, there were 50 organisations on the [list](#). As well as US-based NGOs such as the Jamestown Foundation and the Atlantic Council, it includes several European ones such as the EU-supported European Endowment for Democracy and Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia. Projekt Media, which specialises in investigative journalism, and religious organisations linked to Falun Gong and the New Generation international Christian movement, are also undesirable. [Bard College's](#) designation in June 2021 ended over 25 years of joint degree programmes with St Petersburg State University. The most recent additions were the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, whose members include Golos (September 2021), and Poland's [WOT Foundation](#), one of the organisers of the 2019 Boris Nemtsov Forum in Warsaw (January 2022).

Before their ban, several of these organisations had played an important role in Russian civil society, not only through their own projects but also as donors to domestic NGOs. Despite being prohibited, the US-based National Endowment for Democracy continues some activity in Russia; in 2020, it awarded nearly US\$12 million in [grants](#) to 111 projects; these included publications of investigative journalism, training for local-level civic activists, and legal assistance for victims of human rights abuses.

Anti-extremism legislation

Russia has many other vaguely worded, arbitrarily interpreted and applied laws that are used for repressive purposes. Some [89 organisations](#) have been banned under an Anti-extremism [Law](#) originally dating from 2002. The law lists several examples of extremist activities, including advocating forcible change of the constitutional order, justifying terrorism, inciting social, racial, national or religious strife, claiming racial superiority, and using neo-Nazi symbols. Organisations engaged in such activities are banned from Russia and participation is punishable by jail sentences of up to 10 years. While the list contains several legitimate targets, it also includes [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) (designated in 2017) and the [Mejlis](#), an elected body that represents Crimean Tatars, as serious threats.

In Russia's footsteps: Foreign agent laws in other countries

Russia's Foreign Agent Law has served as a model in several other former Soviet Union [countries](#) and elsewhere. Although Kazakhstan's 2015 NGO law does not use the term 'foreign agent' and in practice is only [rarely](#) enforced, it potentially places severe restrictions on civil society funding. [Nicaragua](#) and [Venezuela](#) followed suit in 2020 and 2021. In 2016, [Kyrgyzstan's](#) relatively democratic parliament voted against similar legislation.

Recently, several [regime critics](#) have been convicted of extremism. [Masha Alekhina](#), who had already served a jail sentence in 2012 for performing an allegedly sacrilegious anti-Putin '[punk prayer](#)' in a Moscow cathedral, was sent to prison again in February 2022 for posting extremist propaganda, one month after two other members of the Pussy Riot collective were [designated](#) 'foreign agents'. In April 2021, Alexey Navalny's [Anti-Corruption Foundation](#) and other organisations linked to him were declared extremist, forcing them to close down. To exclude Navalny supporters from the September 2021 parliamentary elections, in June 2021 Russia adopted a [new law](#) banning members of extremist organisations from standing in elections for three years. In the case against Memorial, while the main pretext for liquidating the group was its failure to comply with foreign agent rules, prosecutors also [accused](#) it of justifying extremism by including Jehovah's Witnesses and Islamists on its list of political prisoners.

A bleak outlook

Harassment, violence against activists

Russian activists risk their freedom and even their lives. Historian and head of Memorial's Karelia branch Yuri Dmitriev was sentenced to [15 years](#) on dubious charges including sexual assault against his adopted daughter, while his Chechen counterpart [Oyub Titiyev](#) received four years for possession of drugs that he claims were planted on him by police. Titiyev's predecessor Natalya Estemirova was [killed](#) in 2009 by unknown assailants. The northern Caucasus is a particularly hazardous region for human rights defenders; one week after Titiyev's arrest, Memorial's Ingushetia office was [torched](#), in an incident that recalled a 2014 arson attack on the Committee Against Torture's Chechen branch. In 2016, masked men assaulted representatives of the committee and accompanying journalists before setting fire to their bus.

NGOs compete for scarce funding

Russian activists face a scarcity of funding. NGOs are eligible for state support; in 2022, 1 942 projects were awarded a total of [4 billion roubles](#) (€47 million) in presidential grants; a further 2 billion roubles (€24 million) was paid out as co-financing for regional programmes. However, this is not enough to meet demand – in 2022, fewer than one in five projects that applied for state support were successful – and funding lacks transparency; there are [reports](#) of officials demanding kickbacks in exchange for grants. Although applications by registered 'foreign agents' such as the [Moscow Helsinki Group](#) sometimes succeed, this is more the [exception](#) than the rule.

State funding is not enough to compensate for the loss of most foreign financing that has resulted from the above-mentioned crackdown on external influences. In 2009, Russian civil society received US\$67 million for democracy, human rights and government projects from [USAID](#) alone, but by 2020 this source of funding had dried up.

Private foundations, such as those founded by oligarchs [Mikhail Prokhorov](#) and Vladimir Potanin, support some NGO projects in areas that are less politically controversial, such as culture, healthcare and higher education. In 2020, the Potanin Foundation paid out [1.4 billion roubles](#) (€15 million) in grants and scholarships – again, less than the funding Russian civil society organisations used to get from US donors that have now left the country. One of these was the MacArthur Foundation, which awarded over US\$173 million in grants between 1992 and 2015, when it closed its Russia office [pre-emptively](#) to avoid being banned as an undesirable organisation.

Corporate NGO funding may sometimes be a front for corrupt practices. Alexey Navalny [claims](#) that the US\$300 million that pipeline company Transneft declared it had donated to charity in 2007 had vanished into thin air. In 2016, Transneft was among several state-owned companies awarding millions of dollars in grants to a foundation run by Putin's daughter, again according to Navalny.

For Navalny himself, crowdfunding was an important source of funding for his anti-corruption and political work; to avoid being traced and faced with criminal charges for supporting illegal

'extremist' organisations, supporters are now being [asked](#) to send money in cryptocurrencies. However, most NGOs – especially smaller ones from outside Moscow – do not have the same kind of prominence and are [unable](#) to attract enough public support to be able to rely on donations.

'Political' versus 'social' NGOs

Foreign agent and similar legislation has created a [divide](#) between 'political' organisations, especially in sensitive areas such as democracy, human rights and governance, and the rest of Russian civil society. Whereas the authorities view political NGOs with suspicion, they are more welcoming of [socially oriented](#) initiatives, which do not challenge official policies and help to fill the gaps left by government action in fields such as healthcare, education and the arts.

[Philanthropy](#) reflects socially conservative values, with a heavy emphasis on the family; six out of Russia's [top 10](#) charities focus mainly on children. Some, such as children's cancer charity [Podari Zhizn](#) (Give Life) were launched by celebrities, others are initiatives of government agencies, pro-Kremlin oligarchs (Konstantin Malofeyev's St Basil the Great Foundation, which supports mothers and children) and the Orthodox Church (the Miloserdiya charity).

Organisations linked to the Orthodox Church are among the [main recipients](#) of presidential grants for NGOs. Large amounts of public funding also go to pro-Kremlin [youth organisations](#) such as the former Nashi movement, the Young Guard of United Russia, or the Yunarmiya cadets. Although nominally independent of the government, some have been described as [GONGOs](#) (government-organised non-governmental organisations).

Despite protest potential, activists have diminished mobilisation capacity

According to Levada Centre [surveys](#), Russians' willingness to take part in protests has been much higher since June 2018, when the government announced an unpopular [pensions reform](#). In February 2022, around half of respondents said they would consider protesting on economic and political issues. Grassroots activists have harnessed this potential to organise protests on local-level issues (see boxed text, 'Grassroots activism brings local change'). At national level, the authorities have also shown some willingness to listen to economic demands. For example, after protests in 2018, the government revised its pensions reform proposal, and raised the retirement age for women by five years instead of eight as originally planned.

On the other hand, large-scale political protests, such as those in support of independent opposition candidates excluded from [2019 elections](#) to the Moscow regional assembly or jailed activist [Alexey Navalny](#) in 2021, met with a much less tolerant response, with thousands of arrests in each case. In February 2022, [anti-war rallies](#) were also harshly repressed.

For some [observers](#), the much smaller scale of the latter protests show the impact of dismantling Alexey Navalny's network under anti-extremism legislation; anti-war activists no longer have the organisational capacity or the social media outreach to mobilise large demonstrations, even though many Russians might still be willing to participate.

Grassroots activism brings local change

Operating in the space between government-approved conservative social NGOs and political dissidents such as Alexey Navalny, grassroots activists campaigning on local-level issues have achieved some [results](#). In 2020, plans to create a new landfill near Arkhangelsk were shelved pending public hearings after huge [protests](#). In the same year, residents of Bashkortostan demanded and obtained a ban on limestone mining on a [mountain](#) considered by them as a sacred site. In Yekaterinburg, protestors managed to [block](#) the construction of an Orthodox church on an urban park in 2019.

European reactions: following the closure of Memorial, in December 2021 the Venice Commission, which advises the Council of Europe on constitutional matters, [criticised](#) 'vague and overly broad terminology' in the Russian laws on foreign agents and undesirable organisations and their disproportionate nature in relation to the declared goal of transparency. For the Venice Commission, NGOs should only be liquidated 'as a last resort measure, for extreme cases of serious violations threatening democracy'.

In 2017, the European External Action Service [condemned](#) the Foreign Agent Law for imposing unjustified restrictions on NGOs and the media, in violation of Russia's international human rights commitments. The EEAS also criticised designations of media outlets [Meduza](#) and [Deutsche Welle](#).

The European Parliament has repeatedly condemned Russia's crackdown on civil society. In its December 2019 [resolution](#) on the Foreign Agent Law, Parliament regrets the extension of the label to individuals, in violation of their human rights. It calls on Russia to repeal the law and bring its legislation in line with its own constitution and international commitments such as the European Convention on Human Rights. Similar concerns are expressed in the September 2021 [recommendation](#) on the direction of EU-Russia relations. In its December 2021 [resolution](#) on the liquidation of Memorial, Parliament praises Memorial's work in highlighting injustices since the Soviet era, calls on the Russian authorities to drop charges against the organisation, and demands EU restrictive measures under the global human rights sanctions regime on 'Russian officials involved in the unlawful repression of Memorial' (however, to date no such sanctions have been adopted).

EU support for Russian civil society: EU financial support (for example, from the [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#)) is difficult given that beneficiaries risk designation as foreign agents. Moreover, in 2020 Russia [banned](#) the European Endowment for Democracy, which channels EU and Member State funding, as an undesirable organisation.

The EU supports an [EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#), which serves as a platform for cooperation between Russian NGOs and their EU counterparts. Forum participants dialogue with one another through various formats, including an annual general assembly. In the 2019-2020 period, joint [projects](#) concerned topics such as air pollution, problems faced by LGBTI people, civic education and election observation. Participating Russian NGOs include several registered 'foreign agents' such as Ecological Rights Center Bellona and Golos Movement.

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