Eurasia Program Portfolio Review

Platforms for Public Debate, Discussion, and Social Mobilization

2010-2014

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*“Public debates create autonomy within an authoritarian state.”*

– Tatiana Kosinova, Memorial St. Petersburg, 2011

# Our Ambitions

## Assumptions

The Russia Project has been supporting “platforms for debate and discussion” since its inception as a grantmaking program based in New York. While we have refined our approach over the years, several key assumptions and guiding principles have underpinned our continuing commitment to this field:

* Vibrant public discussion and debate, independent of political control, is a necessary (though certainly not sufficient) condition of a functioning open society;
* With the media predominantly under state-control, alternative spaces must serve as venues for independent discussion on critical issues of the day;
* 48% of Russians are now online, with access to information that has been heretofore largely free of state control—though new restrictive legislation passed this year presents a major threat;
* Online initiatives can attract new audiences, especially from younger generations, to play an active role in civil society;
* Opportunities for citizens to shift Russia’s course via the electoral process are almost nonexistent. Therefore, alternative methods of advocacy and public mobilization need to be fashioned for social change to advance.

## Strategic Approach

The Russia Project’s aim has been to sustain and foster spaces—both online and off—where people can congregate and freely discuss issues of the day. These venues, independent of state control, provide a place for activists, academics, journalists, artists, and the general public to exchange ideas and hear alternative points of view. Such platforms are also a means of enabling civic mobilization and grassroots activism, by serving as physical and virtual meeting spaces for individuals and groups, both formal and informal. By funding the spaces that activists need for effective communication and self-organization, the RP indirectly supports the work of a wider ecosystem of independent civic initiatives—groups that become all the more important as traditional NGOs face growing obstacles in their work.

# Our Place: Environmental Context & OSF’s Response

## “A Talkative Mood…”

“Russian society is in a talkative mood again” was the assessment in mid-2011 of Dessy Gavrilova, founder of the Red House Centre for Culture and Debate in Sofia, Bulgaria. Gavrilova had been engaged as a consultant to help the Russia Project think through how to best promote discussion and debate in Russia. During her trip, Gavrilova was surprised to see that after a decade of general apathy and civic inactivity, there was an exciting renewed interest in public conversation.

In venues ranging from museums to bookshops to universities, people were discussing culture, politics, science, and the changing media landscape. Many of these conversations were happening simultaneously both online and off: discussions in public spaces were live-streamed, recorded, and/or transcribed for online dissemination. Attendees, whether in person or virtually, could contribute to an ongoing conversation long after the event via website comments and social media.

Since Gavrilova’s trip, the “talkative mood” has even expanded in some sectors. The popular Moscow-based listings site *Theory & Practice* is populated with an enormous diversity of seminars and events open to the public. On a typical Tuesday in autumn (at the time of writing), a Moscow resident could choose from 26 different events just in the capital. These ranged from a lecture on “The Church on the Eve of the Revolution” at a bookstore, to a discussion of “Does Ebola Threaten Russia?” led by a Russian virologist just returned from Guinea. Even outside of Russia’s capitals, the practice has caught on to some extent—though certainly not uniformly. Cultural centers, film clubs, and universities all serve as venues for public discussions and events. For those not living in major cities, the internet fills a similar role.

Online, the field is even more crowded. Russian internet users are extremely active on blogging platforms, magazine websites, and social media. Facebook, VKontakte, and Twitter all attract slightly different types of users. LiveJournal, no longer widely used in the U.S., remains an enormously popular blogging site in Russia, hosting in-depth political discussions and even grassroots reporting of current events.

## …But Not on Every Subject

What one will not find amid the listing on the *Theory & Practice* site, however, is a discussion about election fraud, or a roundtable on harm reduction and needle exchange. Even as public spaces have proliferated, the number of venues willing to host a meeting for activists remains extremely limited—barely a handful, even in the capitals, and the numbers are decreasing. Universities are wary about the kind of content they host. Commercial meeting spaces refuse to sign contracts for event halls with groups that might turn out to be politically problematic. Even a pre-arranged event might be cancelled at the last minute by the venue due to “fire code inspections” or some other fabricated technicality. Those organizations and spaces that remain committed to diverse programming may become even fewer as the state continues closing the space for independent civil society. Authorities can even hinder their work via inaction: if aggressive protestors enter a closed event and attack participants, police sometimes simply do not react.

The online space has been under increasing state restriction since 2011, with progressively harsher laws limiting what can be published and who can access it. The situation has reached an unprecedented low in 2014. The Prosecutor General can now blacklist any site deemed to be promoting “extremism,” a term with plenty of room for interpretation. Major alternative news portals like ej.ru and kasparov.ru are now blocked by most Russian internet service providers, as is the blog of anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny. A so-called “Bloggers Law” compels websites with over 3,000 daily visitors to register as mass media outlets. Once they do so, they are subject to the same content restrictions as newspapers and television in Russia: authors will be held responsible for moderating any libel, defamation, and any other content deemed illegal under current legislation. Discussions that proceeded freely on blogs and in comments fields will now need to be patrolled by editors, because the site itself could be punished for the activities of its users. Most recently, in an expansion of an existing anti-terrorism law, sites must store metadata about their users for six months on Russian soil, making them accessible to Russian authorities. Complying with such a law would require international sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to either install domestic servers or to completely leave the Russian internet space.

## Internet-Enabled Volunteerism and Opposition

The summer of 2010 was the hottest in Russia’s recorded history. Forest fires broke out across the western regions of Russia, destroying homes and blanketing urban areas (including Moscow) in heavy smog. Frustrated by the government’s lack of response to this emergency, Russian citizens began using blogs to share information and coordinate assistance. Volunteers traveled to fight fires, assist with cleanup, and provide medical assistance.

Traditional blogs were inefficient for connecting the many people willing to help with those who were most in need of assistance. A Moscow-based blogger soon created the solution: a “Help Map” (<http://russian-fires.ru/>), based on the Ushahidi “activist mapping” platform. The site greatly streamlined volunteer coordination and allowed for a virtual community to actually fill the vacuum left by government inaction.

The forest fires of 2010 were followed by other inspiring examples of volunteerism, which was directly enabled by blogs, Twitter, and new websites like the Help Map. Journalists and analysts wrote about a new kind civic activism emerging in Russia, largely disconnected from traditional NGO structures. Activists protested against the destruction of forests, collected money online for orphanages, staged flashmobs, and petitioned for local officials to fix local leaky roofs.

The population involved in this informal civic activism overlapped to some extent with those who went out to the streets to protest beginning in late 2011. Some who became involved in local initiatives were spurred to more political activism as they became frustrated with the government’s actions (or lack thereof) on issues they cared about. Others who had initially joined political protests then looked for more tangible ways to effect change as the initial momentum and excitement of the mass protests died down. Both groups have made heavy use of social media for communication and coordination. Whether they will be able to continue to do so, given the closing internet space, remains to be seen.

## OSF’s Role in a Changing Political Climate

Most of OSF’s work in Russia happens at the level of society and not the state and has as its cardinal objective the promotion and invigoration of public life in the country. Primarily through organizational grants, the Russia Project (now integrated into the Eurasia Program) has supported the diverse elements that make up a coherent third sector and contribute to a vibrant civil society. Whether through advancing public debate, broadening access to information, protecting basic rights and dignity or de-marginalizing Russian voices abroad, the RP’s funding has been geared specifically to stimulating and enhancing the role and reach of civil society.

Vladimir Putin’s second term as president (2004-2008) was marked by a fierce and arbitrary assault on human rights and other civil society actors. Simply maintaining an independent civil society was deemed the most that OSF could legitimately achieve in a time of retrenchment for Russia’s third sector; “keeping the flame alive” was our primary ambition at that time.

Dmitri Medvedev’s subsequent presidency (2008-12) seemed to suggest new openings: there was a so-called reset between the U.S. and Russia, a domestic “modernization” agenda, and our previously marginalized partners began to engage directly with the state through the Presidential Council for Human Rights and Civil Society. NGOs operated largely without political harassment. A few of OSF’s key grantees partnered, where feasible, with local and federal authorities. During this time, we encouraged our grantees to work more strategically, reach out to diverse audiences, broaden their constituencies, and improve their communication strategies.

Hopes for this gradual “modernization” process were shattered in October 2011, when Putin announced his return to the presidency. Since Putin reassumed the Presidential post in 2012, Russian civil society has been experiencing a crackdown even more severe than during his last period as president. Progressively draconian laws have placed all foreign-funded organizations under threat of isolation and disrepute. While on the one hand the state has restricted the activities of independent and particularly foreign-funded NGOs, it has also assumed a greater role in setting the civil society agenda in Russia via state-run grant competitions. Russia’s military activity in Ukraine has been accompanied by a vociferous propaganda campaign that casts any opposition as a traitorous “fifth column.” Independent media outlets have been shut down, censored, or simply sold to pro-Kremlin management. Many expect only further clampdowns on civil society, and it is in this context that we consider our “Platforms for Public Debate, Discussion, and Social Mobilization” portfolio to chart a way forward.

# Our Work

## What We Fund

As part of this portfolio, we have provided organizational grants to six primary types of platforms between 2010 and 2014:

* Civil Society Hubs: multi-functional spaces for public discussions, debates, civil society meetings, and cultural events.
  + Memorial International, Moscow (2010-2014)
  + Sakharov Center, Moscow (2010-2014)
* Press Centers: independent spaces for NGOs and other civil society actors to hold press conferences, briefings, and seminars.
  + Independent Press Centre, Moscow (2010-2012)
  + Regional Press Institute, St. Petersburg (2010-2012)
* Arts & Culture for Social Change: regional film festivals and participatory art projects, accompanied by public discussion programs.
  + CEC ArtsLink, St. Petersburg (2013-2014)
  + Frontline Film Festival, Moscow (2011-2012)
  + Side by Side LGBT Film Festival, St. Petersburg (2010-2014)
  + Stalker Human Rights Film Festival, Moscow (2010-2014)
* Blogger/Activist Portals: online tools for communication and self-organization.
  + 7x7, Komi (2013-2014)
  + Objective Reality, Moscow (2011-2012)
  + ProVladimir, Vladimir (2012-2014)
* Resource Centers: organizations that work to empower independent civil society communities via research and convenings.
  + Creative Industries, Moscow (2010-2012)
  + GRANI, Perm (2012-2013)
* Social Marketing Campaigns: targeted projects that promote local grassroots civic engagement.
  + Information Agency Memo.ru, Moscow (2010-2014)

*A full list of grants to these organizations, 2010-2014, can be found in Annex 1.*

## What We Don’t Fund

There are many interesting organizations and projects that serve as spaces for independent discussion. Particularly in the capitals, as mentioned above, a range of venues hosts all kinds of diverse public programs. The majority, however, will not take on the risk of hosting convenings or conversations on sensitive topics that might draw the ire of the authorities. We have focused our support on those few independent venues that have demonstrated a long-standing commitment to showcasing a diversity of viewpoints, free of state of control.

“RuNet,” the Russian internet, offers an array of news portals, blogs, and social networking sites vying for users’ attention. The vast majority has no need for philanthropic funding. Those online projects that we do consider must in some way meet needs that are not already being fulfilled by existing online platforms.

Some public spaces, both online and off, could be good candidates for OSF funding but are uninterested in our support for various reasons. A common explanation these days, unfortunately, is an unwillingness to accept money from a foreign donor in general and from OSF in particular. Others charge for the use of their spaces or receive commercial sponsorship, allowing them to maintain financial viability without applying for grants.

Though we aim to support “social mobilization,” we are not directly funding social movements or public protests. Instead, we are looking to support the tools that allow the members of these movements to self-organize and communicate. The reasons for this decision are both logistical (no legal entity to receive a grant) and strategic (risks to the movement for being associated with OSF).

## Organizational Development

Our funding of this portfolio embodies the “Fealty to the Field” approach. We do not dictate the content of the discussions that take place on these platforms, nor do we determine the approach that our partners will take in their programming. Instead, we have invested over the years in the continued organizational development of our partners. We have also strongly encouraged mutually beneficial collaboration between these spaces and other OSF grantees.

Seeing new openings during Medvedev’s presidential term, for example, we pushed our grantees to broaden their audiences, especially to include young people not typically seen in the traditional human rights circles. Additional funds were allocated in grant budgets for building up an online presence and updating outdated websites. In the case of the Sakharov Center in Moscow, we invested in an intensive strategic planning process, which transformed a small museum that hosted human rights NGOs almost exclusively into a dynamic public space, with events so packed with eager young audiences that many are forced to stand. Events in the past month have included a roundtable on the Ukraine conflict, a lecture on queer theory, another on the history of global anti-war movements, and a memorial reading of the works of “dissident priest” Father Pavel Adelgeim. The Center holds regular film screenings and photography exhibits, and partners with contemporary theater company Teatr.doc to stage cutting edge political works. It has a dynamic internet presence, with videos of the Center’s programs complemented by online-only video debates and analytical blogs on its website.

Unfortunately not all of our partners were able to be equally responsive and maintain their relevance. We have ceased to fund the Regional Press Institute (RPI) in St. Petersburg, for example, as the organization’s leadership has refused to innovate its approach and therefore is at risk of losing its relevance in the public sphere. RPI is one of a few exceptions, though. Most of the groups in this portfolio have excelled at fully exploiting new media tools in their work, understanding that doing so is essential for fulfilling their mission.

With respect to financial sustainability, however, this group of organizations has been less successful. We take some responsibility for this failure: we have kept funding our partners at steady or even increasing amounts, despite the fact that they have made no progress in diversifying their funding base. Simply telling grantees to “diversify funds or else” is neither effective nor realistic, but we have not been proactive in helping these groups to find new sources of revenue.

The fundraising challenges that these organizations face are real. The funding pool for social marketing projects or NGO meeting spaces is relatively small and continues to decrease. The same few international donors (i.e., NED, Mott, MacArthur, and Oak Foundations) co-fund many of these projects with us. The Ford Foundation, which was a major donor for public spaces, ceased its funding to Russia at the end of 2009. Ever since Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s arrest, business owners have been hesitant to engage in philanthropy that could in any way be construed as political. Online platforms that feature potentially controversial content, even if it is user-generated, struggle to get commercial advertising revenue.

Despite these many challenges, these NGOs did have a window of opportunity during Medvedev’s presidency when their work proceeded without the interference of the state. The new audiences that they were able to bring in to their spaces could have been considered potential supporters. Crowdfunding tools were slower to take off in Russia than in other parts of the world, but they are now relatively well known and their use has been growing steadily. These donations, even if small, would not only have provided organizations some additional income, but would have also built a constituency of supporters with a stake in the organization.

Looking back, it would have been wise to hire a shared fundraising consultant for a number of similar organizations, who could have helped the groups to secure new sources of domestic funding. This person could have helped them think through innovative tools for income generation, such as crowdfunding campaigns and fundraisers aimed at the business community. Such tactics are far less viable in the current political climate, but they would have been well worth trying in the past four years.

It should be noted that by taking a “fealty to the field” approach and not driving these platforms’ programming, the RP has inadvertently reduced at least one kind of risk for our grantees. During the wave of NGO inspections that began after the law on “foreign agents” was passed, organizations were frequently asked about their agreements with Western donors. Inspectors looked for evidence that donors were shaping an NGO’s work and therefore turning it into a “foreign agent.” The grantees in this portfolio were able to comfortably say that they received funding only for operating costs from OSF and that all programming decisions were made by local staff.

## Geographic Scope

Given the size of the country and our own limited resources, we prioritized working with those organizations that can extend our geographic reach and build regional networks. Most of the grantees in this portfolio are based in Russia’s capitals, yet their work reaches far beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg. 7x7’s blogging platform, which began in 2010 in the Republic of Komi, now extends to ten different Russian regions. The film festivals in this portfolio travel to far-flung cities across the country: in 2014, Stalker is holding its film screenings and discussions in a total of ten cities, which range from Voronezh (in the south of Russia, a 5 hour drive to Kharkiv, Ukraine), to Krasnoyarsk (in Siberia), to Petrozavodsk (in the northwest, a mix of Russian and Finnish culture). Even the Sakharov Center, very much a Moscow institution, runs an online video debate site and is in the process of creating a web-based distance learning program, allowing it to reach Russian-speaking audiences both inside and outside of Russia.

Nevertheless, we see the concentration of funds going to the capitals as a limitation of this portfolio, caused historically by insufficient staff capacity. We had hoped in our last strategy period to identify at least one additional physical space for discussion in the regions. Discussions with a promising potential partner in Voronezh stalled in 2013 due to the tightening political situation. Today, according to our partners, the threats facing NGOs are often greater in the regions than in the capitals.

Taking into account the ongoing risks, as well as the considerable expenses required to support a new physical space that could at any moment be shut down, we shifted more attention to online tools that could serve similar purposes. In particular, we have prioritized those platforms that could help bridge the gap between online and offline engagement.

# Representative Grantees

## New Online Platforms

ProVladimir

In Vladimir, a small city outside of Moscow, local activists expressed to RP staff a need for people to meet and connect across sectoral lines. Rather than funding an actual community center, we invested in the ProVladimir portal. Along with providing local news and analysis, ProVladimir allows users to organize meetings and discussions, inviting others from the same building, block, or district. It also serves as a tool for dialogue between authorities and citizens. Users can submit messages and petitions directly to local officials; if responses are unsatisfactory, ProVladimir staff can help users further advocate for their demands, such as by connecting users with journalists to publicize the issue. Nearly half of Vladimir’s internet users are on ProVladimir and the site’s user base has doubled in the past year. Now we are considering a new proposal from the organization to develop open source resources that will help other cities to achieve similar results.

Objective Reality

A far less successful example was the Objective Reality project, which had been running online skill-building workshops in “visual storytelling” for documentary photographers from Russia and the former Soviet Union. The RP was impressed with the photography that the project was attracting—individuals capturing with their cameras complex issues of identity, nationalism, and inequality—and agreed to fund the development of a new kind of social media platform, which could be used to create collaborative multimedia content. NGOs, alternative media, and civil society groups would be able to use the platform to form new partnerships with visual storytellers in order to further their own missions. Every aspect of the site would be open source and could later be adapted for citizen journalism projects and other initiatives with a heavy multimedia component.

The proposed project was technically complex and relatively expensive. RP staff had some hesitations, but after a positive external assessment of the development plans by Tactical Tech, a close partner of the Information Program, we moved forward with funding. The grantee submitted final reports in 2012, which noted that the site was just about to launch. Two years later, the website still has a “coming soon” graphic, and the project has been abandoned by the organization’s director in favor of other professional pursuits. $150,000 in OSF funds and many hours in staff resources were spent, with no product but a final report and a few additional online workshops. We learned the hard way that funding software development—especially led by a single individual—carries with it unique risks.

## Arts & Culture for Social Change

Stalker Film Festival

As part of this portfolio, we have been supporting three different film festivals, which we see as an effective means of bringing public discussion to the regions on underserved themes. They are another way to expand the geographic reach of our work, as well as to diversify the audiences that are able to take part in public discussions. A representative example is the Stalker International Film Festival. We do not fund the Festival’s five-day main event in Moscow; instead, we have been covering costs for five to seven regional locations, which would not otherwise have this kind programming in their cities. Unlike the capitals, where film screenings and festivals of various kinds are plentiful, for cities like Penza and Petrozavodsk the Stalker Festival is a major event. Stalker books the largest cinemas in town for the festival to ensure maximum attendance; admission is completely free of charge. A special screening is held at a youth detention facility in each city. In 2013, the number of attendees for each city ranged from 7,500 to 11,000 people.

Our decision to fund the Festival is not driven by the film screenings themselves, no matter how popular. Instead, we are interested in the discussions that accompany each of the screenings. For each city, all of the international films selected pertain to a particular theme relevant to that region, ranging from migration to disability rights to freedom of speech. Government representatives and local NGOs also attend the discussions, allowing the general public to have in-depth conversations with these two sectors of society, on topics seldom mentioned in the media.

Arts Prospect Festival

In 2013, we piloted a new kind of project at the intersection of the arts and civic participation. The Arts Prospect Festival, run by CEC ArtsLink, fills a major boulevard in St. Petersburg with exhibits and installations in its courtyards, parks, and storefront windows. These site-specific and often interactive works, by both Russian and international artists, specifically address socially relevant issues. 2014’s festival, for example, focuses on the environment, specifically the ecology of urban space. By situating the festival in public spaces, the festival brings together the arts community with random passerby to engage on local topics.

The project is one of the least expensive in this portfolio, and may represent one of the most promising ways forward for our work. In just two year, the Arts Prospect Festival has successfully earned the trust of city authorities. Government officials and municipal workers have been brought into the project, participating in the workshops and roundtables that happen around the festival, engaging in conversation with artists, activists, and the general public. The arts remain one of the few relatively safe areas remaining for activism in the current political climate—as long as the activism is not overtly political. Performance art that directly challenges state power is still subject to repression, the extreme case being Pussy Riot’s 2012 performance.

## Social Marketing

Memo.ru

Together with a coalition of international donors (Mott, Oak, and Ford), OSF supported Memo.ru’s development of a “social marketing” strategy: a set of innovative tools that would allow NGOs and activists to effectively influence public opinion. This included basic commercial marketing techniques, such as segmenting the target audience and crafting targeted messaging for each subgroup, as well as international grassroots campaigning tactics adapted for the Russian context. Beginning in 2010, the RP supported a series of projects that put these strategies to work, addressing issues of local importance in various regions.

Memo.ru’s social marketing projects are, in one sense, major success stories. In 2011, the organization set up a “Sakharov Movement,” made up of young Moscow-based activists whose goal was to revitalize the legacy of Soviet physicist and human rights defender Andrei Sakharov. A series of posters ran on the Moscow metro to raise public awareness of Sakharov’s legacy; photographs of Russian public figures posing with the posters went viral. Debates held between members of the Sakharov Movement and pro-Kremlin youth group NASHI were heavily covered in blogs and social media. In partnership with the Sakharov Center, the Movement successfully crowdsourced funds to renovate Sakharov’s old apartment into a museum. The RP considered the project to be a huge success, far exceeding our expectations of what could be accomplished in Moscow.

None of these activities were concretely planned in advance, making them all the more impressive. Memo.ru’s approach is to allow local activists to themselves come up with the tactics best suited to their local environment; Memo.ru simply gives them the tools and know-how to design a campaign. In a subsequent project in Kirov, for example, Memo.ru first conducted sociological surveys to identify the issue of greatest resonance to young people, and then to form a grassroots movement around that issue. The result was a cadre of youth volunteers designing their own projects around the theme of cleaning their city and the local Vyatka River. These ranged from grassroots ecological initiatives to local graffiti artists painting over offensive or xenophobic messages on city walls.

Yet each one of these campaigns was a one-off effort—an expensive one. Each campaign required months of preparations, expensive sociological surveys, and an intensive effort to mobilize volunteers. Once the project period ended, though, Memo.ru left the city and follow up with campaign participants was minimal. In the case of the Sakharov campaign, for example, Memo.ru failed to connect the informal Sakharov Movement with the well-established staff of the Sakharov Center, though they shared a common goal of promoting Sakharov’s legacy. The crowdfunding campaign successfully raised an impressive 1.5 million rubles (nearly $40,000) for the renovation of Sakharov’s apartment, yet the Sakharov Center is still struggling to launch its own crowdfunding mechanism two years later. None of the techniques used during the project period were seen again in Moscow after Memo.ru had moved on to its next target city.

In short, each of the OSF-funded social marketing campaigns was successful in a particular time and place, but required hundreds of thousands of dollars to achieve that success. Our initial hope—that Memo.ru could eventually come up with a replicable and scalable approach that could be used by other NGOs and civic activists—remains unrealized. The enormous financial resources required for Memo.ru’s sophisticated marketing techniques are out of reach for the majority of the civil society sector. Our challenge is to figure out how to harness the momentum generated by the high-cost, high-success social marketing projects into a sustainable long-term initiative.

# Going Forward

## Key Adjustments

Now that this portfolio is part of the Eurasia Program, we are looking at ways of giving the “Platforms” portfolio a more regional quality. We plan to work more closely with the National Foundations in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, which have also been piloting projects like urban youth forums in order to foster informal civic engagement. There are undoubtedly valuable lessons to be shared in the post-Soviet space. We are also planning to pilot in 2015 a new project on housing rights in Central Asia, aiming to bring together civil society groups, informal activists, and local governments to collaboratively come up with solutions to this timely issue.

In Russia, the rapidly closing space calls for more immediate adjustments to our approach. We may need to shift more of our funding to organizations that are registered outside of the country, and to websites with servers located abroad. Educational institutions could be promising potential partners to mitigate risk. We need to seek out external expertise in developing effective online platforms that can actually garner a critical mass of users. Finally, we will continue investing in the legal resources and other protections that the NGO sector as a whole needs in order to keep working. In the worst case, however, we might have to consider reducing our funding to Russian groups within this portfolio. First, we will need to reassess what a successful project looks like in a rapidly closing society.

We are also examining the scalability and cost effectiveness of the various approaches that we have used in Russia. Ideally, partners like Memo.ru can come up with less costly and more sustainable methods for reaching their desired goals. More broadly, we are considering across our Russian portfolios how to assist our grantees with fundraising in a challenging political environment.

## Key Questions for Discussion

1. Is financial sustainability possible? How can we help our partners diversify their funding? Are there innovative revenue models available?
2. How do we approach this portfolio through a regional lens? Are there merits in keeping a separate focus on Russia?
3. Can the strategic approaches in this portfolio be used in other closing environments? What are the lessons learned that can be transferable, both to Eurasia and to other parts of the world?
4. Do we need to more concretely define the contours of this field and create a more cohesive strategic direction? How do we define or redefine success in a rapidly closing society? Are there goals and tactics that we previously had, which are no longer viable in the current political context?
5. This portfolio’s original ambition was to maintain space purely for public debate and discussion. Is that still our aim? Or do we also make “social mobilization” and movement building, whether in direct or indirect form, a prerequisite of our funding? Do we want to be more strategic about these platforms’ connection to informal civic activism and internet enabled social movements?
6. How do we maintain safe, independent spaces for face-to-face interaction? Buildings have high fixed costs, from rent to security, which require a dependable stream of core support; they can be shut down by bureaucratic regulations at any moment. Nevertheless, there is a clear benefit to in-person interactions, for both communication and planning purposes. Does that benefit outweigh the costs of funding physical spaces in the current high-risk environment?
7. How do we decide when to support the creation of a new online platform (which brings with it high start-up costs and high risks, but also high potential)? What are the key determining factors that we use in making these judgments?
8. How do we contend with the many new restrictions on the online space? How can we help existing partners continue to reach their audiences?
9. How can we mitigate the threat of co-optation? The Russian government is adept at creating parallel civil society structures that seem to fill the role of public spaces (such as the Seliger youth camps) but are carefully controlled by the state. How can we maintain an independent alternative that can actually attract a large enough audience?

# Annexes

## Annex 1: Portfolio Elements

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grant # | Amount | Date | Duration (months) |
| 7x7(Memorial Komi): online multiregional hub for civic activists and bloggers | | | |
| OR2014-15297 | $ 201,921 | 8/1/2014 | 16 |
| OR2013-07577 | $ 93,793 | 8/1/2013 | 12 |
| OR2012-37216 | $ 56,054 | 8/1/2012 | 12 |
| Arts Prospect (CEC ArtsLink): participatory public art events | | | |
| OR2014-14710 | $ 33,950 | 6/1/2014 | 6 |
| OR2013-10460 | $ 24,998 | 1/1/2014 | 12 |
| OR2013-08827 | $ 12,700 | 9/15/2013 | 10 |
| Civic Analysis and Research Center “GRANI”: empowering independent/grassroots initiatives in Perm | | | |
| OR2013-04705 | $ 67,138 | 5/1/2013 | 12 |
| OR2012-35841 | $ 50,000 | 5/1/2012 | 12 |
| Creative Industries: a professional community supporting creative/cultural entrepreneurs in Russia’s regions | | | |
| OR2012-00799 | $ 70,000 | 12/1/2012 | 9 |
| OR2011-33223 | $ 200,000 | 10/1/2011 | 12 |
| OR2010-29784 | $ 162, 725 | 8/1/2010 | 12 |
| OR2009-26686 | $ 134,350 | 9/1/2009 | 10 |
| Frontline Club: film screenings and discussion clubs in capitals & regions | | | |
| OR2011-19201 | $ 196,925 | 2/1/2011 | 12 |
| Objective Reality (Fotoweek DC): online platform for visual storytelling | | | |
| OR2011-34319 | $ 124,010 | 12/1/2011 | 6 |
| OR2011-34069 | $ 24,990 | 9/1/2011 | 2 |
| OR2011-33112 | $ 70,237 | 7/12/2011 | 6 |
| Independent Press Centre: an independent space for NGOs to hold press conferences and roundtable discussions in Moscow | | | |
| N/A | $ 25,000 | 12/1/2012 | 7 |
| N/A | $ 50,000 | 8/1/2011 | 11 |
| OR2010-29787 | $ 50,000 | 8/1/2010 | 12 |
| Memo.ru: social marketing projects and campaigns to promote civic engagement | | | |
| OR2013-04713 | $ 110,000 | 10/1/2013 | 12 |
| OR2011-33226 | $ 200,000 | 8/1/2011 | 12 |
| OR2010-29790 | $ 200,000 | 8/1/2010 | 12 |
| OR2010-28210 | $ 24,499 | 2/1/2010 | 4 |
| Memorial International: a multi-functional resource center for civil society based in Moscow | | | |
| OR2011-34321 | $ 1,662,000 | 1/1/2012 | 45 |
| OR2006-19069 | $ 714,186 | 1/1/2010 | 24 |
| ProVladimir (Lebed): online portal for the city of Vladimir, a tool for community discussion and self-organization | | | |
| OR2013-08277 | $ 112,500 | 10/1/2013 | 12 |
| OR2012-00808 | $ 54,200 | 12/7/2012 | 12 |
| Regional Press Institute: an independent space for NGOs to hold briefings, press conferences, and seminars in St. Petersburg | | | |
| OR2012-37232 | $ 40,000 | 9/1/2012 | 12 |
| OR2011-34324 | $ 68,216 | 12/1/2011 | 9 |
| OR2010-28757 | $ 71,960 | 5/15/2010 | 12 |
| The Sakharov Center: a multifunctional civil society hub in Moscow for public debates and discussions | | | |
| OR2014-15294 | $ 315,000 | 8/1/2014 | 24 |
| OR2013-04720 | $ 180,000 | 8/1/2013 | 12 |
| OR2012-37218 | $ 175,000 | 8/1/2012 | 12 |
| OR2012-35941 | $ 36,519 | 4/1/2012 | 4 |
| OR2011-33227 | $ 209,921 | 8/1/2011 | 12 |
| OR2011-32468 | $ 80,000 | 3/1/2011 | 5 |
| Side by Side LGBT Film Festival: multi-city film festival with screenings, discussions, and workshops on LGBT issues | | | |
| OR2014-16742 | $ 132,452 | 10/1/2014 | 12 |
| OR2013-07722 | $ 171,418 | 10/1/2013 | 12 |
| OR2012-37730 | $ 159,832 | 10/1/2012 | 12 |
| OR2011-33230 | $ 199,992 | 10/1/2011 | 12 |
| OR2010-29797 | $ 154,845 | 10/1/2010 | 12 |
| Stalker Film Festival (Moscow Guild of Stage and Screen Actors): human rights film screenings and roundtables in Russia’s regional cities | | | |
| OR2014-15002 | $ 151,000 | 9/1/2014 | 10 |
| OR2013-03897 | $ 140,359 | 4/1/2013 | 14 |
| OR2012-35917 | $ 176,205 | 5/1/2012 | 9 |
| OR2010-30729 | $ 175,550 | 1/1/2011 | 12 |

**TOTAL SPENDING: $7,201,720**

## Annex 2: Annual % Spending

Percent of total annual budget ($6M) spent on Platforms for Public Debate, Discussion, and Social Mobilization, 2010-2013: