

Russia Project Strategy, 2014-2017

1. Summary

Russia today faces a regrettable backsliding into authoritarian practice. Confronted with serious domestic challenges, the regime has become more insular and isolationist, seeking to solidify its base. The progressively draconian laws promulgated since Putin's return to the presidency have placed all foreign-funded organizations under threat of isolation and disrepute. Despite these decidedly challenging conditions, it is essential that we continue to engage Russia, both to preserve its extant democratic spaces, and to ensure that Russian voices do not go dark on the broader global stage.

Amid the grim landscape, there nonetheless remain apertures for the Russia Project's intervention. Exploiting all available opportunities, we will undertake the following three concepts, which we deem vital in the current climate:

- 1) We will mitigate the negative impact of new laws via domestic and international advocacy. Key allies in this regard are the growing numbers of diverse Russian citizens opposing the country's regression, along with the sizeable community of Russian legal experts with an in-depth knowledge of NGO law and a strong motivation to help the sector continue its activities.
- 2) We will integrate Russian voices into the global exchange of ideas. Given that Russian intellectuals, practitioners and activists are increasingly sidelined domestically, and academics are often isolated from the international community, we will support venues for inserting diverse, critical Russian thinking into the global discourse. Such opportunities allow Russian actors to enter into mutually beneficial collaborations on topics ranging from migration to digital activism, thus maintaining their relevance and reducing their provincialization.
- 3) We aim to mainstream the rights and dignity of one of Russia's most marginalized populations: LGBT individuals. The RP's diverse network of partners provides an opportunity to build a broader base of civil society allies at a time when the LGBT community is under profound threat. We hope to see a more balanced discourse on LGBT rights among the Russian public, as well as a strong cohort of mainstream independent organizations actively incorporating LGBT interests into their work.

Along with these initiatives, we remain committed to supporting three primary fields: (a) human rights and justice, (b) access to diverse, independent information, and (c) platforms and venues for critical debate and discussion. The RP plans to provide core support to our trusted partners in each of these fields, investing in their growth and development, and remaining flexible about the funding arrangements necessary to allow them to continue their essential work. We also seek to strengthen their legitimacy and financial sustainability, in order to build a more transparent, effective, and organizationally efficient third sector.

Russia is currently in a gradual, arbitrary, and haphazard process of becoming more closed. Amid this background, the RP's cardinal role is to create a dense and wide-ranging field of independent civil society actors, who can in the best case help set the agenda for a more open and democratic future in Russia, and in the worst case survive the effects of new draconian legislation.

2. Russia Project History and Context

Since 2006, the Russia Project (RP) has been based in New York, with a small supporting office in Moscow. Primarily through organizational grants, the RP supports the diverse elements that make up a coherent third sector and contributes to a vibrant civil society. Key strengths include the RP's funding across thematic subject areas; our deep and long-standing relationships with a wide range of civil society players, from policy experts to grassroots activists to innovative cultural entrepreneurs; a keen understanding of NGO best practices; a connection with multiple Russian regions via our networks of partners; and our close working relationships with other major funders.

From the late 1980s, the Open Society Foundations maintained a large operating foundation in Moscow, and for a time, branch offices in four regional cities. At one point the annual budget of the Foundation, not including thematic program contributions, was in excess of seventy million dollars. During its tenure, the Foundation was instrumental in funding initiatives beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, furnishing Internet provision to public institutions at the digital revolution's onset, setting numerous standards for public health work, and helping revitalize library and publishing activities. For years it was the largest private foundation in the country. Following the Khodorkovsky arrest and the hostile occupation of its building, George Soros decided to end his formal activities in Russia and to fund on a far more modest scale from outside. With the Foundation's closure, the Russia Project was born.

From 2006-2008, during Vladimir Putin's second term and the consequent fierce and arbitrary assault on human rights and other civil society actors, the RP's strategy was generally restricted to "keeping the flame alive." Simply maintaining an independent civil society – through networks of organizations in the regions and public platforms for engagement – was deemed the most that OSF could legitimately achieve in a time of retrenchment for Russia's third sector. A large plurality of RP funding during this period went to supporting human rights organizations.

Dmitri Medvedev's subsequent presidency (2008-12) gave some hope even to the most cynical Russia analysts, as the so-called reset between the U.S. and Russia along with Medvedev's "modernization" agenda seemed to suggest new openings. Opportunities appeared for our heretofore marginalized partners: some served on the President's Council for Human Rights and Civil Society, others were called upon by government officials to provide their input and expertise on questions ranging from police reform to hate crimes. Inspections and harassment of NGOs decreased notably.

The RP strategy naturally shifted in response to these changes. We prioritized those independent initiatives that were designed to reach beyond the insular community of human rights defenders, introducing new audiences to their work, and creating a more public role for human rights. And we demanded a higher level of professionalism from our grantees, pushing them to make use of innovative communication strategies or to produce policy-relevant work, if applicable. We increased our support of public venues to promote dialogue and civic engagement, both online and off, and expanded our support of projects in the field of culture and education. Finally, we sought to de-marginalize Russian intellectuals and practitioners by inserting them into global debates on issues germane to but not limited to Russia.

Since Putin's return to office last year, the operating environment for OSF's partners has deteriorated significantly. Almost immediately following his inauguration, Putin signed a series of draconian laws in rapid succession. One limited freedom of assembly, levying enormous fines on unsanctioned gatherings. Another required internet service providers to block certain sites, ostensibly to protect minors. The state widened its definition of "treason." The new Foreign Agents law requires all organizations receiving foreign funding and engaging in vaguely-defined political activities to register as foreign agents (a phrase that in Russia is equivalent to spy or traitor), leaving them susceptible to extra audits and arbitrary fines. Finally, the Dima Yakovlev law not only banned American adoption of Russian orphans but also granted the authorities the right to suspend the activities of any U.S.-funded NGO engaging in alleged political work. Full-scale inspections of NGOs began in March 2013 and now charges are beginning to be filed against organizations deemed to be in violation of the Foreign Agents law. Some of OSF's closest partners, even those without any human rights orientation like the independent polling outfit the Levada Center, are now being branded as "foreign agents."

While on the one hand the state is restricting the activities of independent and particularly foreign-funded NGOs, it is also assuming a greater role in setting the civil society agenda in Russia. The amount of federal and local funding available via grant competitions has increased dramatically. This money goes almost exclusively to those groups that are loyal to the state, most of which are "socially-oriented" and engaged in service provision. Much of this funding is also unsurprisingly lost to corruption, with GONGOs agreeing to kick back significant portions of their government grants in order to win grant "competitions." Independent NGOs without the backing of the state are at risk of losing the credibility and legitimacy that they have carefully built over the years. Organizations that receive state funding as

well as foreign funds are now subject to additional scrutiny. And, as noted, organizations that had previously served as sources of expertise for the authorities are now being deemed “foreign agents.” Uncertainty seems to be the only constant for the sector presently.

Despite these challenges, there are nonetheless several important opportunities for the RP’s work. First and foremost, there remains a diverse cohort of citizens that opposes Russia’s regression to authoritarian rule. Not only are our partners committed to continuing their activities, but many of those who took to the streets to protest in the past two years remain involved in a variety of self-organized grassroots initiatives. A younger generation of citizens (especially those of the urban middle class) has a strong desire to participate in shaping Russian society. Second, the explosive growth of Internet use means that a majority of Russians have access to information that is largely free of state control. “RuNet,” the Russian Internet, remains a space for alternative viewpoints, as well as a tool for civic mobilization. Third, Russia’s increasingly professional NGO sector – including its many legal and financial experts well-versed in the nuance of sector-specific regulations – is better positioned than ever before to withstand current pressures.

3. Fealty to Fields

The RP is committed to supporting three primary fields: (a) human rights and justice, (b) access to independent, alternative information, and (c) platforms for critical debate and discussion. As the legal situation for foreign-funded NGOs worsens, our support of the leading players in these fields must be flexible and responsive to rapidly changing circumstances. We are currently engaged in a risk-assessment of various alternative funding arrangements – including support of commercial entities and of affiliated NGOs outside of Russia – to ensure that essential work can be carried on. Please see Initiative #1 for the RP’s approach to mitigating the negative impact of NGO legislation on our partners.

Along with responding to the direct threats of new legislation, the RP will continue to strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of the organizations we support. Primary tools include: project grants to resource centers that support the third sector as a whole; targeted trainings for grantees, with an emphasis on peer learning; funding to strengthen NGO coalitions, regional networks, and cross-sectoral alliances; and capacity building grants to key partners who can then serve as models for their peers. Areas of high priority include organizational governance, managerial capacity, fiscal transparency, physical and digital security, and public communication. We believe that a more transparent, effective, and organizationally efficient third sector benefits not only OSF partners but all of Russian civil society.

The RP will also work with both domestic and international donors to encourage and enable independent fundraising for the sector, including raising crowdsourced funds online – a tactic that has already been used successfully by social service organizations but remains under-explored by the vast majority of the third sector. Individual donation fosters a sense of personal investment in the organization’s work, building a wider community of allies from other sectors of society. Key partners in this effort will be the Charities Aid Foundation, Donor’s Forum, and the NGO Development Center (CRNO).

a.) Human Rights and Justice: The RP has been continuously funding leading human rights organizations through rapidly fluctuating political circumstances. We have co-funded many of these groups with the Human Rights and Governance Grants Program (now part of Human Rights Initiative), whose support focused on litigation, prisons, access to justice, and the physical and digital security of human rights defenders. The RP’s priority has been to inspire these human rights actors to move beyond their traditional communities, reach out to new audiences, and insert their work into policy discussions where appropriate and feasible. For human rights organizations to maintain their viability and their credibility in these deeply problematic times, it is fundamental that they collaborate with their peers, engage in strategic public communications, and explore all possible avenues for domestic fundraising.

We will continue to provide institutional support to leading independent players in the fields of human rights monitoring and criminal justice – particularly those that work with a network of institutions in the regions. Key partners include Public Verdict, Man and Law, AGORA, Human Rights Center Memorial, and the Center for Social and Labor Rights. Funding will be earmarked to allow each group to continue

its core activities while improving our partners' ability to work effectively and efficiently: namely, to broaden their influence, innovate their approaches, and increase their financial sustainability. Our support of coalition projects allows regional groups to overcome their isolation and engage on a federal and international level, while exchanging experience and expertise with their peers. The RP will also encourage our partners to host internships for young activists, in order to nurture the next generation of leaders.

b.) Access to Alternative Information:

Russia remains bereft of a dense set of institutions that focus analytically on issues of policy relevance. Such organizations – including the Levada Center, the premier independent polling agency; the Carnegie Moscow Center, a leading independent think tank; Foundation for Fighting Corruption, a leading anti-corruption source; and SOVA, a source of expert research and analysis on hate speech and xenophobia – are instrumental in providing alternative and independent information to Russian society. Their work is utilized by policy experts, activists, journalists, academics, and the general public, both domestically and abroad. Without these leading institutions, the field for analysis on major issues of the day would be decidedly impoverished, and we therefore deem our support to be essential.

Russia also continues to be plagued by a politicization of the country's history, both in school textbooks and in the media. There is a growing demand on the part of the public, particularly younger activists, to dispassionately understand Russia's past – and its corresponding history of resistance – yet a dearth of funding exists for those individuals and institutions struggling to address issues of historical memory. The leader in the field continues to be International Memorial and its vast network of branches throughout the country. The RP will also continue its support of partners working on public access to archives: both those digitizing archive collections, like Memorial Ryazan, as well as those like the Freedom of Information Foundation who secure and protect the rights of researchers to access state documents under Russia's FOIA law.

c.) Platforms for Critical Debate & Discussion

The RP aims to sustain and foster spaces – both online and off – where people can congregate and freely discuss the issues of the day. These venues, independent of state control, provide a place for academics, journalists, and the general public to contend with open society themes and hear alternative points of view. They also serve as sites for valuable cross-sectoral collaborations: for instance, Andrei Soldatov's series of events at the Sakharov Center on state surveillance technology allowed him to form new partnerships with journalists and NGOs that had not previously worked on the issue.

Such platforms are also a means of enabling civic mobilization and grassroots activism, especially at the local level. Lebed's ProVladimir website, for example, allows individuals in the city of Vladimir not only to discuss local problems and events, but also to organize petitions and hold public officials accountable to citizens. By funding the online platforms that activists need for effective communication and self-organization, the RP indirectly supports the work of a wider ecosystem of independent civic initiatives in the regions.

Representative Trusted Partner: GRANI

A representative organization in our fealty to the fields of both Access to Information and Platforms for Critical Debate and Discussion is GRANI, based in the city of Perm near the Ural Mountains. A hybrid between a think-tank and a pressure group, the organization was founded in 2007 to improve the efforts of local citizens' associations in Perm to interact effectively with authorities. GRANI's influence now reaches far beyond the region. Its work enables public participation in political life and increases government transparency, while its well-researched analytical publications serve as a resource for the sector as a whole – and for OSF. A recent study of civic activism, for example, has informed the RP's work with grassroots initiatives. GRANI's successful track record, the reputation of its accomplished director, the breadth and depth of its networks, and its engaged young team all inspire confidence.

Nearly sixty-percent of GRANI's organizational funding comes from analytical and research contracts for clients such as the Higher School of Economics. This contract work provides institutional support and

financial sustainability, while project funding comes from international and domestic foundations (Ford, Mott, and OSF, along with the Evolution and Philanthropy Company and the Agency for Social Information) and government agencies (the Perm regional and city administrations and the Russian Ministry of Economic Development). The RP has been supporting GRANI since 2008, allowing the organization to work specifically on empowering non-institutionalized actors and movements, and integrating their activities into municipal policy-making in the Perm Region.

The RP is critically examining ways to engage with these self-organized, non-registered civic groups as alternative means of advocacy and public mobilization, particularly with traditional NGOs under threat. Moreover, we hope to foster stronger connections between non-institutionalized actors and the NGO community. As a supportive interlocutor between civic initiatives, NGOs, and local authorities, GRANI can serve as a model in this regard. In 2014, as GRANI continues its work with Perm's local groups, the RP hopes to learn new approaches and best practices that could be applied to other regional cities.

4. Russia Project Initiatives

Initiative 1: Mitigating the negative impact of the NGO legislation via domestic advocacy

One programmatic response to the “foreign agent” and Dima Yakovlev laws could be a direct struggle for their complete retraction via domestic and international advocacy. However, the current regime has proven to be largely unresponsive to Western pressure on domestic policy issues. There is at times even an inverse relationship between direct international advocacy and effective outcomes, as was seen in the highly publicized Pussy Riot trial. This does not mean that advocacy is fruitless or unwarranted; in point of fact, it demands reimagining. In the current context, the RP sees a multi-faceted domestic advocacy approach as fundamental for these laws to be diminished, if not jettisoned.

The Presidential Council on Human Rights and Civil Society has already proposed specific amendments to the existing legislation, hoping to change the “foreign agent” label to the more innocuous “organization receiving foreign funding.” We want to see these amendments passed and the legislation brought in line with international standards. In an ideal scenario, we would clearly hope for a full reversal of the laws. More realistically, however, we aim with this initiative to protect NGOs' ability to work and maintain their relevance in the short term. In the longer term, we hope to lay the groundwork for these organizations to emerge even stronger and more sustainable – with a solid legal basis for the legitimacy of their work, the ability to advocate on their own behalf, and a vocal community of public allies.

Given that the situation is changing rapidly, with many additional legal charges expected in autumn of 2013, we cannot predict how feasible the following outcomes will be over the next four years. In the worst case scenario – if organizations are forced to shut down, drastically modify their activities, or work in exile – our approach will necessarily need to be modified. We would likely need to restrict our activities to monitoring of court cases and violations, supporting organizations in transitioning their work abroad, and engaging in various forms of international advocacy in close consultation with Russian partners. We would also continue funding legal assistance wherever possible and would consider payment of fines in the most difficult cases. We are in ongoing communication with OSF colleagues and other donors as events unfold, in order to coordinate our support and to course-correct as needed.

Outcome A: Independent NGOs under pressure have the legal support they need

The number of organizations facing charges as “foreign agents” continues to grow, and many more groups are eager for legal advice and assistance to minimize risks. While each organization has its own preferences regarding the lawyers they trust, there is a sizeable community of Russian legal experts, with an in-depth knowledge of NGO law and a strong motivation to help the sector continue its work. Leading players include OSF grantees AGORA, the Human Rights Resource Center, Public Verdict, and the International Protection Centre.

In close collaboration with the Human Rights Initiative and other donors (particularly the Oak Foundation and NED), the RP will fund lawyers to provide direct counsel to at-risk NGOs, including court representation for organizations facing legal charges. Though court decisions are not likely to be in

NGOs' favor in lower-level courts, local experts see some possibilities for success in appealing these decisions, producing if not acquittals then at least reduced punishments. In the coming months, there will be multiple appeals to Russia's Constitutional Court from NGOs that were deemed "foreign agents." Once domestic remedies are exhausted, cases will be taken to the European Court where appropriate. We will deem our efforts successful if there is a critical mass of cases in the courts, as well as a number of strategic cases taken to the ECHR in the next two to four years.

We will also fund careful monitoring of the inspections process and of ongoing court cases. This information will be used by RP partners such as the Human Rights Resource Center to advise the wider NGO community on how to minimize risks, cope with inspections, and respond to legal actions. Information will be disseminated via online publications and webinars along with focused trainings in the regions. Success will be measured, first, by feedback from our partners: do they feel better informed and better equipped to handle legal threats to their organization's work? Are the materials and methodologies produced useful for their work? Do legal experts recognize these materials as offering relevant and accurate advice for the sector? Indicators such as the number of webinar viewers and the number of downloads will help us quantify the dissemination of the materials, but in the longer term, we will want to see a substantial improvement in organizations' ability to cope with inspections and legal threats.

Outcome B: A broad and diverse base of public allies opposes the NGO legislation

Poll data from the Levada Center (a RP grantee) shows that immediately after the "foreign agents" law was adopted, approximately one-third of Russians supported the law, while one-third was opposed and the remaining third undecided. Up until now, there has been no attempt by the NGO community to shift public opinion or to sway the undecided group in its favor. The state, on the other hand, has been using the "foreign agents" label to damage and de-legitimize the sector. Television news crews accompanied officials for higher-profile inspections and the tone of mainstream reporting casts foreign-funded organizations in a negative light. The new NGO laws were meant to be a state instrument for controlling and discrediting foreign-funded groups: after humiliating and disruptive inspections, organizations would register and be subject to additional scrutiny and oversight.

However, the laws' implementation has brought unintended consequences. Organizations have refused to register as "foreign agents" and are now facing legal charges. As the number of court cases grows against organizations and individuals that engage in public work, so too does public opposition against the effective criminalization of NGO activity. Russian citizens are realizing that the laws do not only affect traditionally marginalized human rights organizations; charges against the Levada Center in May 2013, for example, made clear that even the work of academics and social scientists is at risk.

The RP hopes to seize the opportunity to further grow and diversify the base of support for NGOs under threat. We will do so, first, by broadening the public discourse on these laws, ensuring that it is based upon objective information. Our aim is to make the public more aware of NGOs' contribution to Russian society and help them to understand the negative impact of the new legislation. And, second, we will enable collaboration between the diverse sectors of society that can serve as a strong community of allies for NGOs. We hope to build up a critical mass of vocal supporters, who can become influential domestic advocates for the groups deemed "foreign agents."

We will work with legal and communications experts to achieve our goals. The RP will first support legal analysis of the laws and their implementation, putting them into the comparative context of international NGO standards. We will then fund collaborations between Russian specialists in strategic communications and social marketing to ensure broad dissemination and public discussion of this analysis. These efforts, aimed both inside and outside of Russia, will help to counter inaccurate reporting on the law and the dismal portrayal of NGOs in the media.

The RP will also enable sustained collaboration between the diverse stakeholders that oppose the NGO legislation. We plan to fund a series of in-person convenings and round-tables, as well as a corresponding online platform for brainstorming approaches and joint projects. We aim to bring together members of the academic, business, cultural, and media communities, along with representatives from both human rights and "socially oriented" NGOs. Underpinning this activity is our conviction that local players are best

suited at coming up with the most appropriate domestic advocacy approaches; our role is to enable the process. We will consider targeted project grants for promising joint initiatives that emerge from these discussions; however, given that many of the aforementioned groups may be hesitant to accept OSF funds, we will encourage from the start that participants explore all possible avenues for domestic financing.

Success will be measured by the public visibility and resonance of informational campaigns, especially in Internet media; independent poll data on public attitudes toward the sector; the successful development of joint projects and cross-sectoral collaborations to oppose the legislation; and the growth of individuals from the general public speaking out in support of our partners. Ideally, we would hope to see the leaders of professional associations, cultural entrepreneurs, local business people, journalists, and regional art activists all standing up as allies to the NGO community.

Initiative 2: Integrating Russian actors into the global exchange of ideas

Unlike other countries in the region, such as Uzbekistan or Belarus, Russians still maintain spaces for intellectual exchange – though even these have been significantly narrowed. That said there remain few opportunities for Russian voices to participate meaningfully in debates of global significance. Now, with the space for domestic policy engagement dramatically constrained, the RP seeks to build upon its past work to create both mutually beneficial collaborations between Russians and their international counterparts, and targeted interventions by Russians into global debates.

By providing substantive contexts for Russian intellectuals, activists, and practitioners to overcome their international isolation, the RP can achieve several important outcomes. First, independent Russian actors will be able to remain relevant at a time when their voices are increasingly sidelined domestically, and to provide alternative analyses to state-sponsored information. Second, these efforts will not only integrate global perspectives into Russian discourses, but also allow the international community to benefit from the methods and approaches of Russian thinkers. Demand for such exchanges has been demonstrated by European and Eurasian partners, with Russians serving as a resource on a range of timely issues. Our efforts in this regard can further Russian involvement in future OSF Shared Frameworks. Finally, at the level of grassroots activism, Russians hardly operate in a vacuum and can only benefit from the work of independent academics, policy analysts, and researchers. We will take advantage of the resources and rich networks that OSF maintains as a global organization in order to reach our goals.

Outcome A: A cohort of institutions serve as alternative venues for Russians' global engagement

The space for independent academic and policy work has been narrowed. A new directive on higher education, passed in May 2013, requires universities to obtain the approval of the Ministry of Education for all international research grants. Even if the law stops short of direct censorship of academic work, the resulting threat has already inspired fear and isolation in the academic community. Meanwhile, prominent policy thinkers have seen their influence gradually diminish.

There is a clear need for alternative institutions to serve as venues for collaboration between Russian intellectuals and their international counterparts. This collaboration is hardly restricted to the academic community and includes journalists, businesspersons and civil society practitioners as well. By allowing Russians to work outside of their home institutions, such spaces allow individuals to not only contribute to global debates in the field but also to expand the relevance of their work across disciplinary lines. In addition, these venues can serve as an intellectual safe haven and a place of community for individuals facing pressure or threats to their safety in Russia (the need for such safe spaces was underscored by the sudden departure in May 2013 of liberal economist and New Economic School Rector Sergei Guriev). There is a dearth of funding currently for such global efforts. While the MacArthur Foundation has a “global dialogues” priority, for instance, their focus is primarily on geo-security concerns. Other donors support direct exchange and scholarship programs; though these have their value, they do not meet the need that established intellectuals have for sustained collaboration with their international peers.

We will continue to support and strengthen those individuals and institutions that are already successfully working globally, including the Carnegie Moscow Center's policy analysis and the New Economic School's Center on New Media and Society. We will also seek out new partners, so that four years from

now we have a solidly established group of core institutions committed to global dialogues in multiple spheres. Several of these will serve as host institutions for Russians in exile. Success will be signaled by the sustained engagement of academic, think tank, and civil society players in collaborative projects. Progress will be assessed based on the number of collaborating institutions, the joint scholarship projects produced, and the visibility and influence of their work.

Outcome B: Online spaces provide Russians with an engaged global audience

Digital media has become an essential tool for Russia's intellectual communities. Activists, experts, and academics all make use of online platforms to discuss and debate topics not covered in traditional media, ranging from police abuse to the politicization of history textbooks. These online discussions – whether via a Facebook community page, a LiveJournal blog, via support of liberal media like Echo Moscow, RosBusinessConsulting, Vedomosti newspaper or an analytical news sites like Polit.ru and other – can be a powerful force for influencing Russian public opinion on key issues of the day.

Very little of this Russian-language material reaches international audiences, however. While some Russian newspapers have English-language versions, the voices of those outside the mainstream rarely appear. Yet there is considerable international interest in Russia's domestic and foreign policy, whether on issues like the conflict in Syria, Russia's hosting of the G20 and the Sochi Olympics, or the Kremlin's ostensible fight against corruption. Many Russians are eager to be integrated into global conversations on these topics and, to be sure, their voices are essential for a deeper and more complex understanding of contemporary events.

The openDemocracy website is an example of an online platform that provides English speakers with the analyses and perspectives of leading Russian experts on a diverse range of themes. oD Russia's readership has grown at an impressive rate, testament to the demand for these alternative points of view. Its authors greatly value the integration into global discussions that publication on oD provides. Another such platform is Global Voices' RuNet Echo, which curates and analyzes the most active and visible discussions taking place on Russian blogs and social networks. Its content is translated into over 30 languages.

The RP will continue to support sites like oD Russia and Global Voices, pushing them to further expand their audiences in order to amplify the Russian voices that they publish. Page-views and reposts will be primary measures of success, as will the broader resonance of particular stories in both traditional and online media outlets. We will also initiate new opportunities for such online exchanges, particularly on topics receiving insufficient coverage. To that end, we will provide project grants to existing platforms so that they can better serve as avenues for Russian participation. This might include translation costs, new editorial content, improved promotion, or the development of a special series focused on a timely topic relevant to both Russian and international audiences.

Initiative 3: Mainstream the issue of LGBT rights and dignity within Russian civil society

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals represent one of the most marginalized social groups in Russia. Laws prohibiting “the propaganda of homosexuality” have passed in multiple regions and a federal law is under discussion, with strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church. Violent hate crimes against LGBT individuals are prevalent, especially in the regions. OSF's Human Rights Initiative and Russia Project have endeavored to combat this grim reality through our joint institutional support of leading organizations like the LGBT Network and Coming Out. Over the long term, OSF funding aims to repeal the “propaganda of homosexuality” legislation, ensure adequate legal protections for and increase social acceptance of LGBT individuals, and strengthen the developing LGBT movement across Russia's regions. Realistically, though, these changes will not come in the next four years.

In the short to mid-term, the RP aims to engender broader civil society support for this highly marginalized group. Our comparative advantage lies in the deep and wide networks that we have fostered these past years. A strategic use of these networks will maximize the long-term impact of the work that LGBT rights organizations are doing. LGBT rights groups in Russia are professional and effective, yet they lack the capacity to reach far beyond their immediate communities and galvanize other civil society players necessary for their long-term success. Their opportunity to do so is more limited than ever: two

leading LGBT organizations in St. Petersburg, Coming Out and the Side by Side Film Festival, are both facing legal charges under the “foreign agents” law. This initiative is therefore focused not on the LGBT organizations themselves, but rather on their potential allies and supporters.

We are aware of the risk to our partners: participating organizations are putting themselves at even greater threat of being deemed “foreign agents,” as fighting for LGBT rights could potentially be considered “political activity.” Therefore, we will ensure that our partners have qualified legal counsel and take all necessary measures to minimize risks. In the long term, we hope that our efforts will allow LGBT rights to be accepted as fundamental to human dignity and not a question of politics per se.

If successful, we hope to deploy the tools that we have developed to mainstream the rights of other marginalized groups in semi-authoritarian contexts. Using lessons learned from this Initiative, we plan to work with the Public Health Program on an analogous approach for addressing drug users’ rights in Russia as well (see section 6 - “Other Significant Collaborations”).

Outcome A: LGBT rights is a subject of critical discussion by the Russian public

Promoting spaces for public debate and discussion has been a core strategic priority for the RP. Thanks to our success in this area, we now have a robust network of partners, ranging from physical discussion spaces like the Sakharov Center to online analytical platforms like openDemocracy Russia. Some of these have already included LGBT issues in their programming (openDemocracy just launched a Queer Russia series), but most of these efforts have been one-offs: as our funding provides mainly institutional support, many of our partners lack the human and financial resources to work systematically on a new issue area.

Through targeted project grants, the RP seeks to encourage our partners to engage more deeply on the question of LGBT rights, particularly in the regions. For example, the Sakharov Center’s Gogol.tv site could do a special series of video debates, incorporating the voices of regional activists who are absent from mainstream media discussions of the issue. The Stalker Human Rights Film Festival might collaborate with the Side by Side LGBT Film Festival, holding screenings and discussions of LGBT issues in areas where Side by Side is unable to work. Over the next two years, at least five ongoing and productive partnerships should be established between LGBT activists and the public discussion platforms that we support. Progress will be assessed by event attendance and media attention; web traffic, reposts, and critical discussion of LGBT issues in the Russian blogosphere (tracked by Global Voices’ RuNet project); and the extent to which the partnerships have led to new projects that were not initiated by OSF.

Outcome B: Independent NGOs incorporate LGBT issues into their work

Many of the groups we now support have unique resources that they could contribute to supporting LGBT rights. These might include their relationships with the authorities, their broad constituencies, and their regional networks and partnerships. At the same time, these organizations’ activities could benefit from the strategies and tactics employed by those who advocate for the rights of a marginalized population: their communication strategies, for example, or their ability to mobilize volunteers. By encouraging cross-issue cooperation, especially on such a contested theme, we hope to inspire greater unity among civil society activists in the face of the state’s crackdown on the sector.

We have already begun canvassing our partners, only a few of whom have prioritized LGBT rights in their work thus far – often simply due to a lack of human and financial resources. We will then identify a pilot group of core partners across sectors with a strong interest in collaborating with LGBT organizations. In particular, we will look for those key players who have the capacity and motivation to work beyond their fields of specialty. We will then solicit proposals for joint or network projects. Promising topics for intersection might include freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and gender equality.

While we resist the utopian impulse that our work will reverse discriminatory legislation immediately, these efforts can mitigate the legislation’s implementation, as well as reduce the risk of physical violence and social vulnerability faced by LGBT individuals. Progress will be assessed by the number, quality, and results of collaborative projects initiated; the media coverage and resonance of these projects; the percent

increase in volunteers and allies for the LGBT Network; and qualitative feedback from both the LGBT organizations and the NGOs incorporating LGBT issues into their portfolio of work.

5. Contributions to Shared Frameworks

The Russia Project is not currently contributing to the few extant shared frameworks under discussion. However, we are in close conversation with the International Migration Initiative and the Central Eurasia Project with respect to a potential shared framework on a critical open society challenge in the region – that of migration and its multifarious deleterious consequences. We are also eager to jumpstart a Souk conversation on how to innovatively mainstream rights concerns in closing environments. We hope that the RP’s efforts with LGBT communities, for example, could be a touchstone for comparative work both in Eurasia and beyond.

6. Other Significant Collaborations

Geographic: Developments in Russia resonate across Eurasia, sometimes leading to a “copycat” effect in neighboring countries. For example, soon after the “propaganda of homosexuality” law was passed in Russia, a similar law appeared in Ukraine. Therefore, the RP seeks to deepen its collaboration with staff from the Central Eurasia Project and the National Foundations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, particularly on key issues like migration and LGBT rights.

Thematic: While working to mainstream the issue of LGBT rights (Initiative #2), the RP aims to develop best practices that could apply to other marginalized populations. Drug users in Russia are a high priority: they are incarcerated at alarming rates, subject to poor conditions and inadequate medical services, particularly in pre-trial detention. Therefore, while monitoring our success on Initiative #2, we will continue to co-fund the key players representing drug users’ rights in Russia – grantees of PHP’s Law and Health Initiative and International Harm Reduction Development Program. Then, we will develop a work plan in collaboration with our PHP colleagues, aimed at similarly mainstreaming the rights of drug users. The approach will be based in part on the lessons learned from working on LGBT issues, while recognizing the important differences between the two populations.

On an ongoing basis, the Russia Project works closely with OSF’s Human Rights Initiative, along with the Public Health Program, the Youth Initiative, and the Network Media Program. To be sure, the global engagement aspect of our work is associated with the efforts of the East-East: Partnership Beyond Borders Program. Going forward, we aim for greater collaboration with the International Migration Initiative.

Outside OSF: The RP is in regular contact with the other major Western donors in Russia, collaborating and co-funding as appropriate. In 2010, the RP convened an online community of these donors via KARL, which has since been used for discussing both macro issues and individual shared grantees. The group meets one to two times per year to discuss our respective strategies. We foresee even greater collaboration in the coming months as we develop shared approaches to safeguarding our grantees.

7. Internal Organizational Plans

Given the large number of grants in the RP portfolio, we see a need for additional staffing in order to implement our strategic priorities and effectively monitor our activities. However, as a number of programs in the Eurasia region are being restructured, we are awaiting the results of this transition before making any substantive recommendations.