

## Grassroots Urban Activism and the Use of Digital Platforms in Russia

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Citizens worldwide increasingly rely on information and communication technologies to organize themselves and push for social changes. Place-based collective actions are no exception: across continents and political regimes, citizens use digital tools to coordinate, communicate, recruit new members, and acquire public legitimacy in their fight against urban redevelopment projects. That being said, we believe that place-based grassroots actions use digital tools in a distinctive way. In Russia, despite the increasing restrictions on public displays of discontent following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, grassroots contention remains visible thanks to high-quality Internet access and the government's lack of capacity and willingness to constrain online communications further.

But how exactly can locals use digital tools to overcome both the traditional burdens of collective actions and the additional costs imposed by the autocratic nature of the regime? And what are the consequences of digitalizing local contention? We explore these questions through 186 interviews with participants and experts involved in urban conflicts in six Russian cities (Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Novosibirsk) between 2018 and 2022. We find that digital platforms allow activists to manage the scale of conflict, but they also impose organizational costs. The use of digital tools further presents organizational challenges regarding who holds access keys and how to avoid surveillance and disruptions perpetrated by opponents of these grassroots actions.

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## Place-Based Contention in Russia

Place-based (local) contention [remains](#) ubiquitous throughout Russia, even against the backdrop of severe restrictions on public life following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Urban development constitutes one of the backbones of Putin’s rule: it generates lucrative rents for the elites, helping to ensure their loyalty, but it also aims to satisfy the needs of mass constituencies through mortgage loans and small improvements to the living environment. This “authoritarian urbanism,” however, intrinsically [struggles](#) to balance elite and public interests.

In Moscow, where urban development has long been problematic (infill construction; the destruction of urban commons such as parks, squares, and forests; and urban sprawl), the notorious [Renovation](#) program sparked sustained collective actions throughout the city, laying the foundation for scaling up urban renewal (“brownfield” redevelopment) policy to the national level. A similar program in St. Petersburg prompted the formation of the city-wide “Stop-KRT”<sup>2</sup> movement, whose activists recently launched a [campaign](#) to prevent Governor Beglov from collecting the number of signatures from local councilmembers necessary to run for reelection. Mobilization against municipal land seizures under KRT legislation has also been observed in [Arkhangelsk](#), [Samara](#), [Novosibirsk](#), and smaller cities.

More recently, the rapid deterioration of municipal infrastructure has ignited collective actions. In December 2023–January 2024, hundreds of thousands of residents of Central Russia [faced](#) blackouts and were disconnected from the central heating due to extreme cold. Officials have also had to react to an alarming number of infrastructural issues this winter, among them an incident in Novosibirsk, the third largest city in the country, that left more than 100 houses without heat at a time when the outdoor temperature was -15C. Locals express frustration over unresolved infrastructure issues by [appealing](#) to the president and [blocking](#) roads.

The numerous instances of place-based contention are united by one feature: they increasingly rely on digital platforms to coordinate, communicate, and achieve their goals. Locals create Telegram channels (like [Stop-KRT](#) in St. Petersburg), public pages on Instagram, Vkontakte, and Facebook, and YouTube channels to send their messages to the wider public. They use chatrooms to coordinate and keep track of developments. Finally, residents put additional pressure on public officials by reaching out and tagging them on social media, organizing online petitions and letter-writing campaigns, and finding allies that can support their cause.

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<sup>2</sup> *Kompleksnoe razvitiie territorii* (complex urban development). In St. Petersburg, the program [implies](#) the demolition of housing stock built in the 1950s-1970s (so-called *khrushchevki*).

## Coordination through Chatrooms

Local mobilization differs from large-scale social movements and campaigns in several respects. First, locals rarely have prior experience of activism and thus lack experience of organizing collective actions. Second, they lack organizational support and must develop organizational structures from scratch or acquire such support in the course of mobilization. Third, because place-based collective actions usually raise local issues, they struggle to get the attention of media and the wider public.

Digital tools open up new opportunities for coordination within local conflicts. They reinforce the pre-existing local identities and attachment to place: expression of anger, indignation and frustration in neighborhood and house chats reveals the shared interest in protecting the territory. Chats are also helpful in defining immediate goals and tasks and distributing them among the participants. Once the residents solve the basic coordination problems, they use social media to spread the message and gain support from the wider public. WhatsApp, Telegram, and VKontakte/Facebook chats increase the organizational stability of a new team; facilitate the rapid exchange of opinions regarding what actions to take next; and serve as repositories for documents, templates, links, and other useful information on the conflict. Chatting creates a sense of “shared awareness” and identity: as one of our informants shares, “Thanks to social networks (WhatsApp and the like), we have been able to unite” (Informant E). Another informant, who has been involved in numerous urban conflicts, argues that social networks cross-pollinate activist experience and allow for increased involvement and communication: “People gather [in neighborhood chats] and discuss problems through social networks, and only occasionally go offline, e.g., “let’s meet, collect signatures, send appeals, say, to the prosecutor’s office” (informant F).

Digital platforms allow participants to deepen sympathizers’ involvement in a locally significant conflict, appealing to their professional or other interest in any component of the conflict. To do this, activists create parallel chats focused on specific tasks. For example, in a conflict over infill construction, a key activist recalls, in addition to the main chat with everyone interested in the topic, smaller chats were launched dedicated to public protests, petitions, etc. Another activist told us that chats are necessary to effectively organize a change in public control over a construction site.

However, the low cost of communicating and coordinating via chats and the accessibility of such platforms have a downside. Namely, who owns these chats – and thus has access to these online publics – influences whether mobilization is maintained over time. Similarly, organizing a horizontal local movement without clear leadership contributes to the broad involvement of supporters but is detrimental to the sustainability of the group. In addition, existing digital infrastructure can be taken over by adversaries, as has

happened in several cases where residents were invited to join chat rooms created by individuals associated with the authorities or developers and then deleted. In the absence of a central organization, access keys to various platforms are distributed among activists; in extreme cases, as one of our St. Petersburg cases shows, no one is fully aware of the actions of others (for example, Telegram channel administrators do not coordinate their actions with the Instagram team), resulting in uncoordinated campaigns.

### **All the *Facebookovka*: Communication and Recruitment via Social Media**

External communication is essential to local contention: it helps recruit new participants, reach out to professional media, and find powerful allies such as professional activists and politicians. Here, local activists point to multiple affordances of digital platforms that facilitate external communication. First, the ability to instantly spread the information via live streams and networks is crucial: on several occasions, locals have used digital tools to publicize ongoing violations of their rights (such as the demolition of buildings or the cutting-down of trees in a park), preventing their opponents from completing the task unnoticed. Audiovisual documentation of these violations serves as a spark to ignite wider discontent and provoke a reaction from public officials.

Another key feature of social media is their interconnectedness. Once the information about a conflict reaches a dedicated channel or VK/FB page, it spreads all over connected networks via reposts and mentions. An activist from Samara describes the process: “You write a text [about an urban conflict], go to Twitter, tag everyone you need, publish it, people start reposting, liking, and a snowball appears. Officials are terrified of this” (Informant O). Not only officials, but also seasoned activists react to new cases: as one professional activist from Novosibirsk put it, “This whole *Facebookovka* [circle of people who are active on FB] is very tight. Basically, it is 200–300 people who mostly know each other personally, too, who have no problem organizing somewhere” (Informant N).

In addition to social media, online forums were mentioned as a place to find allies. In Novosibirsk, the initiative group created a thread dedicated to their cause on one of the largest media portals in the city. The thread was picked up by an assistant of a local council member, who later approached the group with an offer to help.

Yet many ordinary participants are recruited through more traditional, offline actions like meetings, signature gatherings, leaflets, and canvassing. The need for such tools is justified by the importance of place in urban conflicts. While online communication can help spread the word to the broader public, offline communication is important in keeping those close to the location of the conflict informed and mobilized.

### **Resisting the Surveillance State**

The openness and accessibility of digital tools, which allow for the effective expansion of communication and coordination regarding conflict, also create political threats in an authoritarian context. Almost all our informants recognized the digital presence of state and developers' representatives: chatrooms are filled with their agents and public pages are monitored. The use of other tools of digital surveillance is also acknowledged by activists. One of our informants contends: "All networks are monitored. Politicians have grown accustomed to receiving condensed versions of the most salient topics" (Informant B). However, organizational responses to these threats vary. Some activists recognized the threat but did not take any countermeasures. Others took security seriously: they established parallel closed chats for coordination and internal discussions and maintained strictly moderated public groups for external communications. Overall, activists' knowledge of cybersecurity is moderate at best, but in some cases professional activists do their best to work around these issues.

Activists also try to leverage the constant surveillance by shaping the narrative and sending public messages to authorities and opponents. For example, in Moscow, in a conflict that involved a large university, the activist group publicized information about the pressure on students, which had the effect of reducing the pressure on them. In another case, the group created a channel where insiders could leak important information about the case anonymously. "Visibility management" on digital media has therefore become an integral part of collective action.

Activists also monitor the authorities, which leads to mutual learning: while the former acquire the skills to use social media to pressure the state, the latter – while demonstrating on paper their openness and accessibility – strategically manipulate activists by selectively approaching moderate flanks and pressuring less obedient participants. They block activists or put them on blacklists, preventing them from posting or sending messages; cleanse their social networks of negative comments and "uncomfortable questions;" and use disinformation to delegitimize local initiatives.

### **Conclusion: Taking Stock of Digital Tools in Local Contention**

Two decades ago, urban residents who faced problems with urban development had to rely on traditional offline organizational tools, which required physical presence, resources, and support from established organizations. With the rapid development of digital platforms, the costs of communication, coordination, and recruitment have been reduced dramatically. This has opened up avenues for mobilization even among the least likely residents. Yet when it comes to place-based contention, online tools are necessarily integrated with offline instruments. Locals rely on the traditional repertoire of tools – meetings, pickets, *subbotniks*, and offline signature collections – to highlight the importance of an issue on which they are fighting, put pressure on their opponents, and elicit media attention. Online tools greatly facilitate internal coordination and communication, including among those who have no ties to the location of the conflict but

can activate other identities that are congruent with the goals and values of the activist group.

The growing dependence on digital platforms creates new opportunities for activists to manage the scaling-up of conflict, something that was previously available mainly to authorities or developers. However, this brings new organizational problems of its own. The availability of digital tools requires new online communication skills, maintaining community in the virtual space, and ensuring the safety of activists in an environment of transparency.

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