



Standing Alone, Together

Arshak Makichyan

Moscow, Russia

In the largest country in the world, Russia, Arshak Makichyan stood for the climate – for a long time – all alone.

Starting in March 2019, every Friday the 24-year-old stood for two hours in the center of Moscow’s Pushkin Square holding a simple sign: “Strike for Climate.” Every week, for over a year he led his solo strike, braving the cold, the snow, the sun, and the police.

He wasn’t striking all alone because he wanted to. He’d seen the youth-led movement around the world growing - people marching by the hundreds, thousands, and even millions. But in Russia, striking *en masse*, unlike in other countries, is against the law. If there is more than one person, they must be approved by the government.

So he stood for the climate alone because he had to.

Arshak hadn't always been solo in his stand. In fact, his introduction to climate activism had been just a few days earlier, on March 15. Inspired by Greta Thunberg’s global FridaysforFuture movement, a small group of activists had gathered in “Hyde Park,” a small section of Sokolniki Park, far from the center of Moscow. Since not very many people go there, that was the place the government had assigned to them on their permit.

There, about 50-70 activists – mostly young people – gathered to send out a call to Russia’s leaders, asking them to do more to protect the environment. After all, Russia is the world’s fourth biggest emitter of carbon dioxide. And the activists were painfully aware of the myriad ways climate change is affecting Russia. There are forest fires in Siberia; there is flooding in the Irkutsk region that is melting the Arctic permafrost. That in turn destabilizes biodiversity, and creates a feedback loop that leads to further global warming.

So standing in an out-of-the way park just wasn't enough for Arshak. He knew that protesting in a preapproved place, far away from those who most needed to hear their message, wasn’t going to attract enough attention. So he decided to venture out on his own and take the message to the public in a bold new way.

“What can I do to support FridaysforFuture in Moscow?” he wondered. He thought about it, and researched the laws about single-person strikes. “It seemed like that was the only way,” he says. Then he chose to stage his solo protests in Pushkin Square because it is one of the most frequented plazas not just in Russia, but in the world.

“After that, I started to strike by myself in Moscow's city center, where lots of people could see my protest,” he says. “I thought maybe they would be inspired if they saw me there with my sign every week,” he explains. And he adds, “As fellow Russians, they knew that I was risking a lot by striking openly, and talking about it openly.”

Next, in solidarity with other global youth climate activists, and in order to share his message with other Russian youth, Arshak started posting photos on social media. He was fully aware of the risk he was taking - everything from being arrested, to doing jail time or getting a heavy fine; or even being subjected to physical violence.

Soon people around the world began to notice his protests. One of them was Greta Thunberg, who began to follow him on Twitter and retweet Arshak’s messages.

His solo protests began to morph into a shared experience, as the internet and young activists across Russia and around the world took notice. Then other young Russians began to mirror his actions, and the community of climate activists in Russia began to grow. “People started to think that maybe it’s okay to do it,” he says. “And that it’s not so scary – they started thinking they can do something too.”

In a way, Arshak’s story of solitary activism didn’t really start in Russia. It started in the mid-1990s, in Yerevan, Armenia, where he was born. Arshak’s parents had fled to Russia from their Armenian homeland when he was just one year old. They were escaping a ten year-long armed conflict that had devastated their country, reduced neighborhoods to shambles, and destroyed the economy.

Growing up in Moscow, Arshak had felt a profound sense of isolation. School was difficult for him, and other kids picked on him because he was a foreigner. “It’s quite complicated to tell what it is like to live in Moscow,” he says. “When I was a kid, I faced lots of challenges because I was Armenian.” But instead of letting the bullying get him down, Arshak dove headlong into learning music. He picked up the violin at an early age and began to practice incessantly, learning ballads and other tunes. He developed a special affinity for the music of Chopin. At the age of nine, he was accepted to an academy for aspiring musicians, where he began his classical training.

And so, throughout his life, Arshak had spent a lot of time alone. Perhaps that’s what gave him the determination and the stamina to go through with his solo strikes, despite the cold and wind of a Moscow winter, and his fears about breaking the law.

Even when he was still in the Russian school system, Arshak had realized the environment wasn’t being studied. In fact, environmental issues weren’t being taken seriously at all. Yet Russians have good reason to be concerned about the havoc climate change could wreak on their country and its economy. Scientists have warned that Russia’s carbon dioxide emissions are warming at a rate twice that of the global average. As a world leader in international organizations, and with a seat on the United Nations Security Council, Russia has an important voice in deciding what the climate’s future will look like.

“Other countries can say, if Russia doesn’t act, then why should we?” Arshak says. “So, it’s very important that every country should start acting as if this is a crisis, and reduce their emissions dramatically. Now!”

Arshak began to gain international renown for his activism. He was invited to join Greta Thunberg on stage at the 2019 COP 25 conference in Madrid. He realized that he might have to spend time in jail when he returned to Russia. But from the stage he told the people gathered, “I am not afraid to be arrested. I am afraid not to do enough.”

Upon his return from the conference, Arshak returned to Pushkin Square for his strike. This time, he was arrested by the Russian police for staging an unlawful “mass protest” – of three people—and sent to prison for six days. As everyone knows, Russian prisons are infamous for their treatment of dissidents. People were worried about him and his future. Across the country and around the world, a wave of support swelled up from his peers.

Though his prison sentence was intended to slow down the climate movement in Russia, it had the opposite effect. During each day of his prison sentence, crowds gathered outside of Russian embassies in cities around the world to protest. Thousands more tweeted and posted messages of support. And after his release, the movement came through even stronger than before.

Arshak was touched by everyone standing up for him. “It’s even helped our movement a little bit.” He pauses, then adds, “It’s not so scary to be in jail for six days. It’s more scary not to have a normal future, I think.”

The more involved he’s become involved with climate activism, the less lonely Arshak feels. The sense of solidarity he feels with other climate activists has even had an effect on his everyday life. “Before, I was playing violin, reading books, sitting at home and studying, but I was really quite lonely,” he says of his life before joining Fridays for Future. “After I became a climate activist, I found a lot of friends, other activists who were supporting me, or striking with me. I was so much more lonely when I was just a person studying, and living my life.”

Thanks to Arshak's efforts the climate movement in Russia is slowly growing, in spite of the restrictions on public protesting. They've found creative ways to get around the limitations imposed by Russia's authoritarian system. For example, during the global climate march in September of 2019, Arshak was joined by about 70 other "solo" protesters, who took turns staging their own personal protests one by one in Pushkin Square. They organized queues and as each protestor took his or her turn, they would exchange posters, while other protestors stood nearby "so we didn't feel alone." About 700 people in more than 25 other Russian cities joined the climate march. He organized an online "flash mob" with the hashtag #LetRussiaStrikeForClimate.

People who are afraid to strike can share pictures calling for climate action, and others from around the world can support them. Through his activism, Arshak has expanded the FridaysforFuture movement beyond Moscow to seven other cities across Russia. He attributes the success of the growing movement to a constant process of education and advocacy.

"We are not just striking," he says. "We are organizing lectures; we are communicating with all the movements that are trying to build a new society, and to find some ways to do it. So, I'm not alone anymore."

But he also knows that for every step forward, there are many more to take. "People are suffering from the climate crisis now in a lot of places," he says. "We cannot prevent everything from happening; but we can try to do something beautiful and good for our future."

The future depends on what you do today.

Mahatma Gandhi

Call to Action: Support Arshak by using the hashtag #LetRussiaStrikeForClimate on social media platforms. Join with Arshak and those organizing climate action strikes on the Fridays for Future website: <https://www.fridaysforfuture.org>.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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