

MITYA ALESHKOVSKY  
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To the Western eye, the youth of Russia have always been shrouded in mystery. Back when they were hidden behind the Iron Curtain, young Russians appeared studious, respectful of their elders and teachers; they valued their education, revered communist ideals and heroes of the World War II, exhibited exemplary behavior. At age 10, they were sworn into the communist youth organization the Young Pioneers—declaring "Always ready!" as their motto—then, in their teens, into the Komsomol, a prelude to the Party, as though they had some kind of authority. But that was an illusion. The youth, just as the public as a whole, were and always have been powerless. Sure, there had been sparks of individualism and self-expression along the way. But these sparks failed to solve Russia's growing problems. In their powerlessness, the youth became apathetic. So they committed violent crimes, that had reached a rampant pace by the end of the '80s. They sold goods on the black market for profit. They drank. Providing assistance to war invalids or orphans, helping to feed those who were going hungry because of the broken economy, was the last thing on their minds. Neither was it any kind of priority for the government. Instead, the country spent millions erecting new statues of Lenin, building expensive museums dedicated to the great leader. And people continued to suffer, society continued to decline.

In 1989, the West got its first, real glimpse of what daily life had become for Russian youth—stripped of politics—through the seminal feature film *Little Vera*, about a young woman searching for herself amidst the disorder of her everyday life. The picture was grim: A banal existence. All the decisions made at the top; you did as you were told. Everything was out of your hands. Life could not be controlled. Forget changing your environment, when you couldn't even find a change of clothes. The movie's heroine, Vera, wore the same striped v-neck in nearly every scene.

Fast forward to 2014. The Lenin museums have been replaced with five-star restaurants and hotels, and the clothing options have grown vastly, but the sentiment of powerlessness among the people prevails—what with Putin trying to control the masses with a Stalinistic iron fist, passing anti-gay propaganda laws, sending people to prison on bogus charges, corroborating with the church, which grows ever-powerful and functions as a government accessory. The turnout for the Moscow Mayoral elections in September was dismal; corruption is everywhere. The opposition is simply too strong. And in the face of that oppressive opposition, surfaces the old apathy—the same one observed almost thirty years ago in *Little Vera*.

But if you look closer, you'll find another layer of Russia's youth, who are giving their country a very different image. An image not of anti-gay hysteria, corruption and hyper materialism, but of caring, motivation, and activism. Activism that is not politically-motivated, but society-motivated. Armed with ipads and iphones, and tapped into social media, with an ability to travel, broadcast themselves to the world on their own terms, and with the kind of boundless energy that can only be possessed by twentysomethings, these tech- and media-savvy youth are determined to rebuild Russia, brick by brick. And they're doing it—through volunteering and charitable work. They are organized, well-connected and focused.

At the forefront of this new movement for change through volunteering is a 28-year-old former photojournalist and Moscow native Dmitry (Mitya) Aleshkovsky. His name has become synonymous with

apolitical Russian volunteerism—a new concept in a country that has little precedent for its citizens performing free, non-mandatory, apolitical work to help other citizens in need. Call him the anti-apathy crusader. Mitya believes that people can be united for good, regardless of their backgrounds and political inclinations. And that when they unite to do good, they can do what the government can't and won't do. He does not believe that waiting for authority figures to take care of a problem, when he and his fellow do-gooders can solve it themselves. And this is a kind of new ideology, which had never before existed in Russia's history. It's new, it's growing, and if Mitya Aleshkovsky has his way, it will change a "very sad and bleak Russia," he says, "revive it anew."

Mitya manifests his unwavering beliefs through his organization, "Nuzhna Pomosh'" (Need Help)—which functions as a kind of media project under an umbrella charity fund called "Mozaika Schastya" (Mosaic of Happiness). Need Help is developing a completely new way of effecting change. There is a website, [www.nuzhnepomosh.ru](http://www.nuzhnepomosh.ru), launched in November 2012, through which Mitya and his team of over 40 journalists—all volunteers—publish stories of the "projects" they select to help. A site editor works on the site, and the director of Mosaic of Happiness—Anna Puchkova, 30,—oversees the finances. Over the past year and a half, there have been over nine major projects—from helping save a local hospital from closing, to repairing a shelter. One on-going project involves the funding of an assistance programs that helps educate and assimilate the country's vastly neglected 600,000 orphans, who upon release from orphanages "have practically no chance for a normal life," says Mitya. "They either become alcoholics or drug addicts." Similarly, in a country where there is zero infrastructure for helping immigrants build new lives, Need Help is raising funds to create a center, where Russia's immigrant children can get support and proper education. No project is too big or too small. There is only one requirement: That it has the potential to help a group of people.

One of their "proudest moments," says Mitya, was saving Itomlinskaya Hospital in the Tver Oblast of Moscow, about 100 miles northwest of the capital. It was April 2013, and the hospital with a lone doctor serving patients from the 112 villages in the region (there were no other local hospitals left) was struggling to stay alive. Back in 1975, when Itomlinskaya first opened, it was thriving. All 30 beds were being used, treatment was free, and there was abundant care in the region. But times had changed, and healing the sick and elderly no longer held the same priority in Russia. So Itomlinskaya languished, with its outdated equipment, lack of staff, an unreliable transport vehicle, and only four usable beds. If the hospital was to shut down, the patients would have only one choice: Drive for two hours on bad roads to the city hospital, and get on a waiting list. So they started collecting signatures, writing letters to the governor, pleading for assistance. In return, they got silence. In a country of more billionaires than any place on Earth, no one seemed to be able to, or willing, to do anything. No one, that is, except for Need Help, which over the course of about a year collected enough donations to buy equipment, furniture, a new ambulance van. The hospital was saved. Their work has already served as a model for keeping other hospitals from closing.

In providing this kind of assistance, Need Help maintains no political agenda, no affiliations "Our site is for everyone," says Mitya. "It's not for anti-Putins, it's not for pro-Kremlinites, it's not for gays, not for Christians, for anti-police or pro-police. Our site is about everyone and for everyone. Because every person understands that, regardless of their political inclinations, they can find themselves in that situation."

**Anyone can give to the site—even Putin himself, if he chooses to—as long as** there is no mention of their political affiliations. This is part of the company's manifest, and it's something that has never been done before in Russia's history. Although Mitya himself is an outspoken liberal, Need Help as

an organization doesn't side with anyone. It sides with *everyone* who needs help. In essence, Mitya Aleshkovsky has invented a completely new model for helping people in his country.

It is a well-executed model. The first element of this model is that Need Help helps *projects*, not individual people. The organization helps those projects and organizations that are capable of helping a large group of people. He wants to build an infrastructure of maintaining these kinds of organizations that—instead of discarding people, or letting people in need fend for themselves—offer assistance, give them strength. The system has slightly changed since they started. "At the start of 2013, the only thing we did was search for people who are so-called 'social heroes,' who do their own thing," Mitya explains. "But now, we understand that those kinds of people are rare, that they're hard to find, and they're difficult to help. Then, we started helping not people—but projects. And we started supporting all the infrastructured projects that help all the people that encompass that project."

The funding process is well-honed. Once a project is selected for assistance, procuring funds begins by writing an article about the project by an experienced journalist, who volunteers to write the article (but is reimbursed for any travel required to coer a story). The role of the journalists at Need Help is integral. For they are the ones that can tell the story of the project in need, compellingly, in a way that will move to reader to donate. Mitya understands that the words have a direct impact. The site's editor, Katya Savina, oversees and organizes the content, and once the story is submitted, Mitya and his co-workers publish it on the site, then disseminate it across all media platforms, as well as through franchising partners: *The Free Press*, *Novaya Gazeta* (The New Paper), *Snob* (a popular cultural and news magazine, funded by the Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov), and others. Mitya relies on his vast reach of media contacts, which he has build thanks to his years as a photojournalist. The more coverage the stories get, the more traffic is driven to the site, and the more donations.

Once a sufficient amount of money is collected, and a goal is reached, the funds are placed into a bank account, and a legal agreement is drafted between the organization and the recipient of the funds, outlining how much money is being collected, for which purpose and how they will report the use of funds. "We have to answer for that money, so it's very important that everything is accounted for," says Mitya. As fund director, Anna Puchkova oversees the entire process. The work is carried out with transparency, and professionalism, with a lawyer and an accountant on board. The financial transparency (all of their statemetns are available on the website) is key, because the government is suspicious of volunteers, and has attempted to put road blocks in their way, including a bill that Mitya and a few other charity workers fought from being passed, which would have made running a charity fund significantly more difficult. "So, in essence, if you want to walk a granny across the street, you have to get insurance for yourself, for the granny, buy yourself a ticket back, and join some kind of organization, to get stamped to get approval to walk a granny across the street," as Mitya describes it. "It's that kind of gibberish."

Despite the obstacles, Need Help is growing, rapidly. Within the last year, it has raised 3 million rubles [approximately \$87,500], and, of those, 2 million were raised just in the last three months. Mitya credits the spike in donations in large part to their "new system" of helping not just "social heroes," but projects. "We have embarked upon a very powerful stage," he says. On January 25th, Need Help launched a so-called "Charity Tour," during which the organization plans to travel across all regions of Russia—one each month—and meet with local non-commerical organizations, who will be educated for two days by charity experts from Moscow on maintaining a healthy infrastructure. They will also run a grant competition, awarding the winner 100,000 rubles [\$2,900]. Their first stop was in the city of Kazan, capitol of the Tatarstan Republic, where the winner was a project called "Defending the Sick Behind Bars" by an organization called Agora. And this is key: By assisting projects that help all the people that encompass that project, Need Help is able to create more lasting, deeper changes in Russia. It's a "multiplying effect,"

as Anna puts it.

What's also remarkable is that Need Help has accomplished all this without any kind of sponsor. Every ruble has been raised through private donations. *From the people—for the people.* "We are the only fund in the entire country that has managed to carry out large projects, and survive for this long, without a single corporate financing," says Anna. They have been looking for sponsorship—to help them fund projects, as well as cover some of the operation costs, such as renting an office (they hope to have one by the summer)—but it's been difficult. "Large businesses exclusively handle help for sick children," points out Mitya. "No one wants to build hospitals to treat children as well as adults. In Russia, there is this opinion that once a person turns 18, he becomes an adult and doesn't get sick."

Furthermore, gathering funds from foreign sources is problematic, as that can be considered a "political activity." "According to law, those who engage in political activity are considered international agents," says Mitya. "But what is considered political activity is not specified. So any activity may be considered political. That's modern Russia."

**The weight of every project, its successful campaign and completion falls on Mitya's shoulders.** He is completely possessed with his mission to help others. His mind never stops working, thinking, planning. He talks rapid-fire, maintaining intense contact; when he speaks, each word is uttered with intent and no word is wasted. His energy seems to be boundless; he doesn't know how to relax. Nor does he want to. "My day is very simple: I work non-stop, around the clock," he says. There is no separation between his work and personal life. "Every problem we handle becomes my personal problem," he says. (He will often fall asleep while using his computer, wake up in the middle of the night and continue working; he admits to using his iPad while taking a bath).

Mitya is entrenched in, and completely dedicated to, his cause. He's become a kind of one-man non-government help center. He knows how to connect individuals in need with the right channels to help them. His project does not help individuals in crisis—only an organization that helps a group of individuals—but if he ever gets a call from someone, he has the right contacts to refer the person in need to. And thus, the cycle of help—without having to go through government bureaucracy—continues, and with each person helped, the society heals itself just a little.

Charming and well-spoken, he has a dry sense of humor, a sharp intellect and the ability to masterfully communicate his ideas. A self-proclaimed "incredible music fan," who "listens to everything from classical to hard rock," he relies heavily on the media to raise awareness about a given project and, thus, accomplish his goals. Indeed, this is why Need Help can also be called a "media project." Mitya is well-connected and respected—if his Twitter following of 42,000 is any indication. He has already made multiple TV appearances, and was nominated for "2013 Humanitarian of the Year" award by *The Moscow Times*, alongside supermodel Natalia Vodianova.

Mitya's story has now become somewhat legendary in Russian media. He is known as that photojournalist who quit working for TASS—Russia's largest news agency—after 8 years, following what happened in Krymsk. In the summer of 2012, the southern city became catastrophically flooded, essentially submerged under water, Katrina-style. Mitya and a group of fellow journalists decided to go down there and see what they could do. He had volunteered before a little bit, "here and there, but I didn't believe in it," he says. This time it was different. The scale of the catastrophe, his presence right in the thick of it, providing help that he could actually see—was life-changing. "I realized, dammit, that it's possible to be very effective," he recalls. Emboldened with a new perspective, he knew he could no longer work to benefit only himself. And so, despite his parents' concern, this young man, aged 26, left a respected, successful, promising career and decided to act upon an idea that had already been brewing in

his head: volunteering and charity work that unite people who come from different walks of life and political views.

Mitya feels a tremendous sense of urgency, and responsibility. He knows his country is in trouble — deep trouble. “Russia has ended as a society,” he says. “Society, sadly, did not work out in Russia. First, communists tried to destroy our society with Revolution; then, Stalin destroyed our society with camps.” And, then, “Putin happened,” as Misha puts it.

Three years ago, Mitya got an offer to work as a photo journalist in the U.S., and considered leaving. But the offer came just when Mikhail Khodorkovsky—former oil tycoon and oligarch turned political prisoner and Putin critic—was handed down his second sentence for supposed embezzlement. “So I thought, while he sits in prison, I’m not going to go anywhere, because he’s in prison for all of us,” says Mitya. Khodorkovsky’s release in December of last year has become even more reason for Mitya to remain in Russia.

That is a hallmark of his personality. He is steadfast. He takes examples from his own family members, who overcame the most difficult of circumstances. “My great-grandfather was in a Stalin camp,” says Mitya. “And upon leaving, he said that if there is an opportunity to leave alive and well, then it would serve every decent person to spend some time in prison. He was like granite. He was a person whom it was impossible to break. Those kinds of people inspire me. I understand that only being this way—in wholly not retreating from their ideals—can you do something for your country.”

He gives credit to his love of humanities and having been raised around the arts for his open-mindedness. His entire family is comprised of historians, writers and teachers. His father, Peter Aleshkovsky, is a famous writer, who had been nominated for the Russian Booker Prize multiple times. “The social circle in which I grew up always consisted of educated, intelligent people—those were beautiful people,” he recalls. “I studied in a wonderful school, I read interesting books.”

Perhaps it was thanks to those influences, that Mitya has never shied away from his beliefs. In Russia, where people don’t commonly express liberal views, Mitya is an anomaly. The opposition is strong, and violent, and those who do think differently are afraid to speak out. But not Mitya. “Being a person of liberal views, I don’t hide it and am proud of it,” he says. “I myself am not gay, but I stand openly for their rights, and people just look at me like I’m crazy, because in Moscow to say that I stand for the rights of gays is like being naked in the street.”

That’s putting it lightly. Admitting you are gay in public—which is considered a violation of Russia’s Anti-Gay Propaganda Law—will get you a \$200 ticket. Putin has created an environment of infighting among the citizens, in order to distract them from important government issues. This has sent an already highly homophobic country into a state of mass hysteria, where every problem is blamed on gays. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church, headed by Kirill Gundyev, who has an extremely powerful presence in Russia, works as an instrument of the regime, and reinforces the atmosphere of gay hysteria.

“We are one step away from establishing concentration camps for gays,” says Mitya, who regularly gets threatened via social media. Going to the police will have no effect, so the only thing left to do, is to “sit and treat it calmly and continue what you must do, and what will be—will be,” Mitya says. “I believe in what I’m doing, I believe that you have to be doing this, and that if not me, then who?”

**Mitya knows there is a long road ahead.** “Someday, for sure, good will win, but in the short term, if everything continues as it does, things will be very bad in Russia,” he says simply. But he will not become defeated. “Of course we don’t lose hope,” he says. “If we lose hope, there would be no point in doing this. The hope is that, when putting in the most basic resources—human, monetary, intellectual, time—it’s possible to change everything. Absolutely everything.”

He is himself an example of that change. Back in the summer of 2012, after he came back from Krymsk, obsessed with the idea of helping others through volunteering, his ideas lacked organization and expertise. That's when Anna Puchkova entered the picture. Already the director of her own recently-launched fund, Mosaic of Happiness, she had been working in fundraising and charity work since 2005. Mitya had been referred to her for consulting, and the two met for coffee. "He told me about his grand plans, and I understood that, without being provided expertise in charity work, he could make tons of mistakes," recalls Anna, "and I explained that to him, and about what I do." The meeting ended with Mitya asking her how they can arrange it so that she could stay with his project. It didn't take much convincing. "Fine. I'll stay," she told him, and a partnership began. "He's very capable of development," says Puchkova. "He worked very hard, really studied, changed his viewpoints."

Their partnership is another source of strength for him. "Anna made me into a person, you could say," Mitya reflects. "Because she didn't allow me to make those mistakes which I would have definitely made. Mistakes like instead of gathering money for one sick child, but raising money to educate the doctor who treats 100 children."

Good people doing good things for the common good. And there are others—"a huge number of people who still give a damn that somewhere in the country there are no roads or hospitals, pensions, that children are dying, seniors are dying in the street from the cold and hunger," says Mitya. "In this country, there remain people who still give a damn. Who live honestly. Who live not for their own pocket, but for their soul."

Still, it's impossible to imagine that, faced with a constant stream of upsetting stories of people in need, he himself doesn't occasionally feel defeated. "I do experience depression when something doesn't work out, when I understand that we can't raise money for such and such, or we can't solve their problems," he says. "In that moment, I make it even worse for myself, bury myself into an even deeper depression. Then, at some point, I understand: 'Enough. Rolled around a bit with my chin in my knees, under the covers, and that's it, enough. Time to get back to work.'" **END**