

# Let the right one in.

## Building relations of trust

by **Ekaterina Kalinina**

**T**rust can be seen as a mechanism that reduces uncertainty and allows for expectations about other social actors' future behavior.<sup>1</sup> Hence the existence of trust between different actors in society is “the precondition of the possibility” for cooperation<sup>2</sup> among different actors both within and between communities.

Building mutual trust was for years one of the desired aims of international cooperation in the Nordic region; the existence of trust was intended to contribute to the reduction of political tensions and lead to more sustainable and peaceful region. In practice, working with international cooperation in the Nordic region, where Russia was one of the actors until 2022, has never been easy. One of the main obstacles on the way was the deficit of trust.

### Building trust in international cooperation

In the beginning of my work as international hip-hop events organizer it was difficult to establish relations of trust with representatives of the hip-hop subculture as subcultures are usually closed communities with their own hierarchies, authorities and rules of conduct, which are seldom open and transparent to the outsiders. *Out-group trust*, understood as the trust individuals and communities have in members of a different community,<sup>3</sup> was rather low in the particular case of the members of youth and subculture groups described here.

Having experienced a past relationship of abuse by commercial companies who appropriated subcultural capital for maximizing their own profits, the representatives of subcultures often had a utilitarian attitude towards anyone who approached them from outside, be it a commercial company or international organization, trying in their turn to manipulate the outsider in order to maximize their benefits from such collaborations.

Attitudes towards outsiders coming from the non-commercial

sector were also characterized by distrust of international institutions and neighboring countries, with the representatives of the subcultures finding it difficult to understand the motivations and intentions of international funds and non-commercial actors working with youth in Russia. For them it was not always easy to grasp why international agencies and neighboring countries are willing to invest time and money in the youth cultures in Russia. Despite this suspicion, the members of youth cultures often entered international cooperations under the lead of international NGOs as such cooperations were often seen as a possibility to earn some extra money and gain respect from the subcultural community. Young people also saw international cooperation as an opportunity for a dialogue and skill-exchange that might give them international career opportunities in the future. Therefore they would gladly joined any international project involving either international actors travelling to Russia or/and Russian youth travelling abroad if they had an opportunity to communicate with others, show their own skills and even earn some extra money.

**MOREOVER, INTERNATIONAL** cooperation and the organization of events of international significance were seen as an achievement and something desired not only by young people but also by the state. State actors, such as Houses of Youth and city administrations, saw in international cooperation a possibility to report on the activities that they were supposed to organize but had not done so for various reasons (such as lack of funding, and lack of competence and contacts with international organizations). International festivals and events were among the planned activities in regional and local Houses of Youth in 2015–2021, which were obliged to deliver such cooperation with minimal or almost no state funding. That is why Houses of Youth would agree to host an international event financed and organized by a foreign actor if they had an opportunity to report these activities as initi-



Sergei Chernyshev RUS (a.k.a Bumblebee) battles against Shigeyuki Nakarai JPN (a.k.a Shigekix) in the B-Boys Semifinal in the Playground at the Parque Mujeres Argentinas, Urban Park, during the Summer Youth Olympics in 2018.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

## **“THE DANCERS PRACTICING BREAKING [...] DURING THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS HAVE MANAGED TO WIN SEVERAL WELL-KNOWN AND GLOBALLY RECOGNIZED COMPETITIONS.”**

ated by the members of their own House. They would also be ready to turn a blind eye on the fact that the event in question was sponsored by a foreign NGO if the name of the NGO was nowhere to be seen on the promotional materials.

When it comes to commercial actors, I can say that festival venues or large festival organizers, would gladly host an international event, seeing a certain prestige in that, on condition that the international actor satisfied their commercial demands, which at times were outrageously high. A myth that an international actor had large budgets easy to milk was difficult to dispel, to say the least. Such attitudes of commercial actors, of course, did not make their international partners happy. But in the situation when the goal was to reach out to the largest possible public, a compromise that would satisfy all parties was

usually found. However, there were many both commercial and non-commercial actors in Russia that were very dedicated to the social cause and entered collaborations with no demands just to improve the position of the young people in Russia and broadened the horizon for cooperation.

**MEANWHILE, THE RUSSIAN** state turned a blind eye to international activities such as youth festivals, summer camps, workshops and conferences as long as they did not take any active steps towards changing the existing youth politics and fell under the umbrella of socio-cultural activities, aimed at filling the gaps in youth politics that state actors were unable to find solutions for. As the state actors had the goal of organizing youth leisure, it allowed international activities serving this purpose. Similarly,

it also allowed for activities where youth cultures in Russia were presented in a positive light as something progressive, rapidly developing, and beneficial for society.

This last part was not that difficult, as there had been many initiatives where young people from Russia managed to achieve quite a lot in terms of artistic performance. For example, the dancers practicing breaking (street style dance, which was officially included into the list of the Olympic sports) during the last several years have managed to win several well-known and globally recognized competitions such as Red Bull BC in Austria in 2020 and India in 2019, and the Summer Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires 2018. Such outstanding performance of the dancers in the international arena has resulted in the state showing a heightened interest in breaking which led to an interesting situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, when state organized competitions became almost the only events where dancers from the hip-hop subculture could show their skills. Such a situation is even more interesting from the point of relations of trust.

AS SOON AS BREAKING was announced as a part of the Olympic movement, many members of the Russian hip-hop community saw the ambiguity of this development. On the one hand, the members of the subculture, which originated in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1970s and had established a somewhat parallel or alternative culture in the USSR and Russia in the late 1980s, saw a dangerous maneuver of the state in trying to take over the subcultural agenda in Russia, using it to its own benefit. On the other hand, the members, who by 2018 were already working in Houses of Youth teaching youth and children breaking, DJ-ing, rapping and graffiti, saw many opportunities for career development in professional sport and event management. Hence, while some voiced their distrust of the state in matters that concern the community's future, others who had already chosen to trust state institutions by joining Houses of Youth as teachers and instructors had more trust towards the state "doing good" to the community.

After the Russian B-boys' victory at the Youth Olympics in 2018 and the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the rapid takeover of breaking by the state has resulted in continuous debates among the members of subculture about the role of the community in how and by whom the breaking events are to be organized and how breaking as a dance style will look, given that it is now classified as an Olympic sport. After a year of continuous criticism from the hip-hop community, the state organizers of the largest breaking event in Russia, Russian Open Breaking Com-

petitions (ROBC), have learnt from their mistakes and a number of prominent leaders of the breaking community have been given the opportunity to have their say on some issues. After some time, it became obvious that the large budgets for organization of the events stayed in Moscow, while organization of smaller regional events and selections remained solely on the shoulders of regional organizers who had to secure funding from other sources and even use international funding to cover their costs.

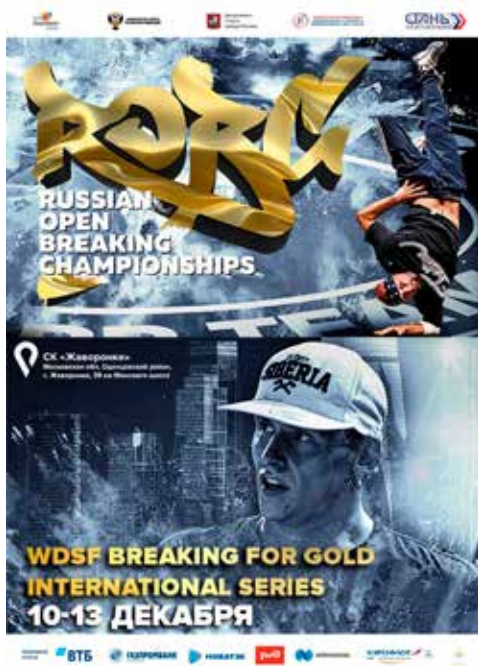
Despite some criticism from regional actors, the initial distrust of the state in the matter of managing events and breaking as a dance sport had been overcome. During the Covid-19 pandemic, state-organized events which were listed and announced as sport events dominated among events allowed by the local city administrations, due to strict Covid-19 disease preventive measures. Smaller subcultural actors had more difficulties in securing funding during the pandemic, while international actors had difficulty organizing events due to the Covid-19 restrictions. At the same time, young dancers saw many benefits in taking part in the official sport events as they promised not only financial gains, but winners were also granted sports category, which attracted more youth and children to breaking.

## The game changer and corrosion of trust

The reactivation in 2022 of the Russian military offensives in Ukraine (which the Russian state calls a special military operation) has put an end to many international cooperation projects in Russia. The military aggression by the Russian state and the response of international organizations and funders has resulted

in the corrosion of the relations of trust that different actors tried to build during the previous years. Several international institutions such as the Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg or the Danish Institute of Culture in St. Petersburg evacuated their staff in the weeks following the start of the invasion. Meanwhile international funders have announced force majeure and enforced an immediate end to all cooperation with Russian actors.

*In-group trust*, i.e. trust which is placed in members of one's own group,<sup>4</sup> was also shaken within the hip-hop community. If social media accounts of Russian hip-hop members in the very first days were full of anti-war statements, after the introduction of de-facto war time censorship<sup>5</sup> they became practically silent. At the same time, while in the first months all planned street culture events were cancelled in Russia, after several months of war, announcements of events started to pop up in social



Poster Russian Open Breaking Competitions (ROBC).



B-girl ART at the Nordance/Face&Laces, 2018, Moscow.

PHOTO: DMITRY TIBEKIN/@EKATERINA KALININA

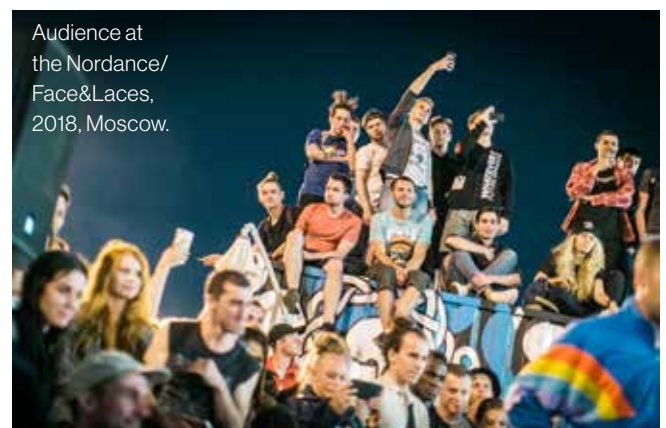
media. In-group trust, in this case trust within the hip-hop community between its Ukrainian and Russian members continued to corrode, with the Ukrainian members starting to question the ethical principles of the hip-hop community, which are summarized in the phrase *love, peace and having fun*, which were difficult to imagine during the ongoing shelling of Ukrainian cities. The more days and months passed, the more criticism was directed towards the Russian hip-hop community regarding its passivity. Social media posts of the Ukrainian hip-hop community revealed that having lost trust in Russians as neighbors, the Ukrainian dancers and hip-hop community members nevertheless still hoped for support from the Russian hip-hop community, with whom they have shared years of experiences, organized festivals and dance camps. After a year and a half of ongoing military actions and the silence from the Russian hip-hop community, the Ukrainian dancers demanded international organizers to ban any Russian participants at breaking events until the end of the war.

**MEANWHILE, RUSSIAN MEMBERS** of the community became divided along the axis of shared responsibility and collective guilt for the action of its own government. While some street culture members have left the country for political reasons or out of fear of military draft, others have stayed, arguing that someone has to remain in the country in order to teach young generations of dancers and support the remaining hip-hop community.



DJ Kroute in action at the Nordance/Face&Laces, 2018, Moscow.

PHOTO: DMITRY TIBEKIN/@EKATERINA KALININA



Audience at the Nordance/Face&Laces, 2018, Moscow.

PHOTO: DMITRY TIBEKIN/@EKATERINA KALININA

## “IF SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS OF RUSSIAN HIP-HOP MEMBERS IN THE VERY FIRST DAYS WERE FULL OF ANTI-WAR STATEMENTS, AFTER THE INTRODUCTION OF DE-FACTO WAR TIME CENSORSHIP THEY BECAME PRACTICALLY SILENT.”

Besides these, the reasons for staying among the street culture community correspond to those of the overall Russian population -- some had nowhere to go, some had family and work they could not leave behind, some saw an opportunity for development given that the state is currently investing in youth sports, and some argued that this is their civic position to keep on doing something that brings happiness to others.

**AT THE SAME TIME** with the start of the full-scale invasion, international organizations have questioned both the effectiveness of supporting cultural and youth projects in Russia and the ethical side of running projects in Russia and with Russian actors. In some cases, the distrust towards institutionalized actors in Russia outweighed the interpersonal and generalized trust that actors from both sides had tried to build over the decades. This abrupt stop of any cooperation has also resulted in the corrosion of trust the Russian actors had towards their international partners and funders. Left alone with their internal problems and with no funding, the Russian organizations had to either curtail their activities (with many employees leaving the country) or to seek help from the state and survive on crowdfunding. One should also keep in mind that one of the goals of many international civil society and cultural projects was to increase the capacity of civil society actors to promote its interests and make their voices heard among state officials, as well as to increase the representation of civil society actors in decision-making bodies. With the start of the war, as any cooperation with state actors was seen as toxic, the actors who had by that time managed to build cooperations with local administrations found themselves in a Catch 22 situation: they believed that they had previously been encouraged to collaborate with the state and now they are being punished for doing exactly what they had been taught. However, the interpersonal trust built during these years between Russian and international organizations has persevered, allowing for dialogue and even some action allowed within certain frames.

Even though for years this tactic of acting within the allowed frames was seen as a safe one, which allowed organizations to do good, it could now be seen as one of the main evils of international cooperation with Russia. Starting from 2012 when the federal law Ф3 N 121-ФЗ introduced the term “foreign agent” into everyday language, the frames for permitted action have been narrowed down, allowing for apolitical action or action where the political was carefully hidden. In a private conversation in 2019, I asked a leader of such project financed by one of the international funds how it is even possible to run a project on trust and discuss trust with young people without mentioning institu-

tional trust. She told me, “You know, we do what we usually do. We avoid sensitive topics and just run a few conversations about trust in general. Then we are done”. This avoidance of sensitive topics, the conscious avoidance of the role of politics in everyday life and making projects looking good on paper, has most probably led to the even deeper normalization of depoliticization of civil society. In order to survive in the pre-2022 conditions, some tried to stay apolitical, to work with culture for the sake of culture instead of using it as an opportunity to take up important topics. As one of the employees of a diplomatic mission once told me in a private conversation: “How tired we are of this constant pressure to include politics into the projects! Can’t we simply do art projects for the sake of the art projects?” At the same time, this avoidance of sensitive topics and conscious attempts to stay within the framework permitted by the current law often was, and still is, the only strategy of survival, as some would say. Whether this strategy will help to rebuilt trust today is, however, hard to say. ❌

Ekaterina Kalinina is Senior Lecturer at the Institute for Media Studies, Stockholm University.

### references

- 1 Niklas Luhman, *Trust and Power*, (Chichester: Wiley: 1979).
- 2 Reinhard Bachmann, “Trust, Power and Control in Transorganizational Relations”. *Organization Studies*, vol. 22 no. 2 (2001): 337–365.
- 3 Peter Thisted Dinesen; Merlin Schaeffer, Kim Mannemar Sønderskov, “Ethnic Diversity and Social Trust: A Narrative and Meta-Analytical Review”. *Annual Review of Political Science* vol. 23 (2020): 441–465.
- 4 Dinesen 2020.
- 5 Федеральный закон от 04.03.2022 № 32-ФЗ «О внесении изменений в Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации и статьи 31 и 151 Уголовно-процессуального кодекса Российской Федерации» [Federal Law No. 32-FZ of March 4, 2022 “On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 31 and 151 of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation]. Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202203040007>