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ANALYSIS

Mapping the Opposition in Exile

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Abstract
This article examines the role of—and challenges facing—the Russian political opposition in exile. Operating from abroad due to security concerns, opposition groups are constrained yet remain active in influencing political dynamics in Russia. This preliminary analysis underscores the importance of maintaining connections with domestic constituencies to support "authoritarian erosion" and highlights how exiled communities contribute to the delegitimization of the regime through transnational networks. We map the landscape of political initiatives as supply-side politics for Russian exiles.

The conventional view is that an opposition that unsuccessfully attempts to change the existing regime through elections or revolt is a "failed" opposition (Bedford and Vinatier 2018: 687). In closed political regimes like Russia's, however, increasing repression means that the opposition is pushed into exile and "non-political" realms. Exiled oppositions often face a tradeoff between linkages to domestic constituencies and political relevance within the regime, on the one hand, and safety from political prosecution and self-preservation, on the other hand. Opposition groups that operate from exile cannot, therefore, necessarily be seen as "failed."

Maintaining contact with a sending society is of crucial importance to undermining an authoritarian regime from abroad (Bedford and Vinatier 2018: 69). Remaining politically visible and relevant to those who have stayed without losing ground on domestic political developments is a challenging task. To what extent do political and civic projects have meaningful contacts with Russians in Russia, if they are oriented toward them at all? After all, another potential constituency for these political groups is exiled Russians, whose interests diverge from those of Russians in Russia and may vary across host countries and other subgroups.

Exiled communities can challenge authoritarian regimes in their home countries and contribute to regime delegitimation through transnational networks (Burgess 2020; Betts and Jones 2016). Diasporas are dynamic, influenced by elites who bring money, networks, and ideas (Betts and Jones 2016: 8–9). They provide financial and ideological support, disseminate alternative information, and attract new supporters. Their influence includes international advocacy for civil and political rights, support for network creation, the establishment of alternative media sources, and the imposition of diplomatic pressure through lobbying for sanctions. The extent to which opposition elites engage with ordinary migrants shapes the diaspora's political efficacy.

This article analyzes political initiatives in exile, focusing on their engagement with both Russians abroad and those remaining in Russia. We offer a typology of these initiatives based on their strategies for expanding their political constituencies and cooperating with host societies and international officials. Using secondary sources, we categorize these initiatives according to their stances vis-à-vis both the diaspora and supporters in Russia; their mission; and their format. This framework helps map the landscape of political initiatives as supply-side politics for Russian exiles and assesses how well they meet existing demand (see our article "Russian Wartime Migrants: Matching Political Demand with Supply" in Russian Analytical Digest no. 316).

Beyond Parties and Elections

When an authoritarian regime becomes hegemonic, electoral and partisan opposition becomes unfeasible. However, other modes of resistance remain accessible. Bedford and Vinatier (2020) propose a typology of oppositional "resistance models" that differentiate between the electoral, media, lobbying, and education realms. We adapt this typology to diaspora politics by introducing a dimension that measures opposition groups and initiatives' orientation toward the exiled community.

The Russian opposition and anti-war movement abroad is diverse in its formats, target audiences, political orientations, and missions. Initiatives range from international political forums and coalitions, social movements, volunteer groups, media, and grassroots urban and environmental efforts to military units like the Russian Volunteer Corps and secessionist movements like "Free Buryatia" (Shamiev and Luchenko 2024). We categorize these initiatives by their main activities. Lobbying efforts include expressing support for Russian exiles and other groups (e.g., raising awareness of human rights violations and political prisoners) and advocating for eased legal arrangements for exiles. Media outlets include inde-

pendent TV channels, YouTube bloggers, and Telegram channels. Education initiatives encompass exiled university projects like Free University; emergent think tanks and research centers; and public lecturers like political science popularizer Ekaterina Schulman and history teacher Tamara Eidelman.

Some initiatives span multiple realms, like the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF), which uses YouTube channels and bloggers like Michael Naki and Aleksander Pluschev to spread news and political analysis. Mikhail Khodorkovsky's projects also operate across various platforms, supporting Russian exiles and defected businesses. While exiled initiatives rarely participate in elections, they gained prominence during Russia's most recent presidential elections by staging collective actions like "Noon against Putin" and supporting candidates like Boris Nadezhdin. Some projects focus on Ukraine, providing humanitarian aid or recruiting for Ukrainian military units, among them the Civic Council in Warsaw and Legion Free Russia.

Human rights organizations like OVD-Info and Memorial focus on defending human rights within Russia while attracting global attention. Media outlets like Meduza, Novaya Gazeta, and TV Rain serve the Russian audience by providing independent news. The Feminist Anti-War Resistance engages both domestic and diaspora audiences. Radical groups focus on military involvement, while national movements like Free Buryatia, Free Yakutia, and the Tatarstan independence movement address regional and ethnic issues, drawing international attention to their causes.

All these initiatives and realms of activities form a complex ecosystem of opposition activities abroad, some of which have a clear political focus, while others are more advocacy groups or activists' initiatives (see Figure 1 on p. 9).

Russians in Russia or Russians in Exile?

Unlike the Belarusian opposition, anti-war and anti-Putin Russians do not have unified political representation. Yulia Navalnaya, who assumed the role of leader following Alexei Navalny's tragic death in custody, has in fact become a spokesperson defending the interests of the Russian opposition, including those outside Russia. The latter was unequivocally formulated in her February 2024 address to EU politicians in Brussels:

> Always make a distinction between Putin and Russia. People fleeing war and dictatorship are not your enemies. They need sympathy and protection. They should not be punished, they should be helped. A mechanism like the modern Nansen Commission is needed. It is these people who will one day be part of the Beautiful Russia of the future. They want to help Russia become a normal country so that they can return home sooner. And you should help them to do the same (Yulia Navalnaya's address to EU politicians, February 19, 2024—Meduza 2024).

Almost two years earlier, however, Leonid Volkov, another prominent politician from the ACF structures, had said that Russians abroad were not the organization's target group due to their small number:

> We are a Russian political organization that fights for power in Russia and is engaged in representing the interests of anti-Putin Russians, Russian voters. For us, this is our focus, and we must not lose it under any circumstances. Everyone should do what they can do well. About 300,000–400,000 people left Russia after the war started, according to various estimates. There were 30–40 million anti-Putin Russians before the war, about 30% of the electorate. Now, I think there are more of them. That is, no more than one hundredth of them left, 99% stayed there. Our tasks, our projects, are aimed at those who have stayed (Leonid Volkov's interview with Radio Liberty, November 22, 2022—Shakirov 2022).

At the same time, many of the Russians who left were supporters of Navalny or at least supported some of ACF's initiatives. For example, more than 80% of migrants surveyed in 2022 were aware of what "smart voting" was and were likely to follow its recommendations (Kamalov et al. 2022), a share far higher than Russians in Russia (where 12.4 percent of respondents reported that they were aware of the "smart voting" recommendations in 2021—Levada Center 2022).

Free Russia Forum, with Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Khodorkovsky as its most prominent representatives, has closer ties with Western political institutions and de facto seeks to reinforce the capacity and internal cohesion of the opposition-minded Russian diaspora, including recent migrants. In their June 2024 op-ed for Politico, Kasparov and Khodorkovsky promoted the "Passport of Free Russia," a project intended to support the anti-Putin Russian diaspora by issuing them a document that would help them integrate into Western societies. This passport aims to encourage Russian emigration, thereby creating a brain drain that would ultimately weaken Putin's government by depriving it of intellectual and military resources (Free Russia Forum 2024a). Opposition-minded Russians in Russia are viewed as an asset in the hands of the Putin regime. However, systematic attempts to reach out to the Russian community are less visible. The resolution that came

out of the May 2024 gathering in Warsaw reaffirms the commitment of Russian expatriates and their allies to fighting against the authoritarian regime in Russia and promoting democratic changes, as well as highlighting the importance of solidarity among Russians living outside Russia in their efforts to instigate political and social change back home (Free Russia Forum 2024b).

These two major opposition forces manifest diverging approaches to the transnational community of Russians and take different views of their importance in political struggle. Navalny-affiliated groups like ACF are reluctant to draw the line between those who have stayed and those who have left or tend to emphasize their Russian origin. Free Russia Forum is an unambiguously diaspora-oriented project that not only advocates the rights of this group but has even promoted out-migration from Russia. The recent schism around the ACF documentary "The Traitors," narrated by Maria Pevchikh, illuminates the political and ethical reasons why ACF and the Free Russia Forum (or, more specifically, Khodorkovsky's group) cannot act as allies: the generational gap, ACF's lack of close ties with Yeltsin- or early Putin-era elites, and differing attitudes toward the legacy of the 1990s (Shamiev and Luchenko 2024). ACF's potentially divisive rhetoric and its refusal to engage in political advocacy for Russian emigres is likely to translate into decreased support among the exile community.

With Navalny's death and after two and a half years of war, fatigue has accumulated among emigrants and the fear of persecution has increased. All of this does not favor optimism and "investment" in long-term political and civic projects aimed at Russia. The fact that migrants remain active in terms of volunteering and donations is indicative of an orientation toward the emigrant community, assistance to Ukraine, and host countries' civic initiatives.

During the more than two years of war, discussions have revolved around whether democratization is even possible in Russia, and if so, how; who might be the agent of this change; and where Western politicians should therefore direct their efforts. There is also the question of who should be helped: the opposition in exile, migrants, those left inside the country, no one, or all? However, before thinking about this topic, it is important to answer the question of whom the public speakers who speak for the Russian opposition represent politically. Do they have any significant public resources inside the country, or do they focus on the Russian community abroad and are not primarily interested in the processes at home? Often, these projects—from ACF to the Free Russia Forum—are considered to perform a similar function, but this is not entirely true. Having categorize these initiatives by whom they target, their current ties to Russians in Russia, and how focused they are on emigration, it quickly becomes clear that 1) few of the initiatives aim at fighting for power in Russia; 2) these forces are less likely to target recent Russian exiles; and 3) the ecosystem of Russian exiled organizations also encompasses media, education, and advocacy projects that directly and indirectly prop up political initiatives. To what extent migrants themselves consider political organizations in exile to be their political representatives remains an open question.

About the Authors

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Figure 1: A Stylized Typology of Opposition Groups and Initiatives by Their Target Audience and Main Realm of Activity

	Russians in Russia	Russians in Exile	Host society	Ukraine	International organizations
Lobbying / advocacy	**"Humanitarianists"** OVD-Info Memorial Feminist Anti-War Resistance Vesna	**"Animators" or "creators" of diaspora** Kovcheg Free Russia Forum	**Diaspora associations** Rusos Libres in Spain, Russian Democratic Society in Serbia, Freies Russland NRW	**Volunteer organizations working with refugees** Friends of Mariupol in Estonia Emigration for Action in Georgia	**Points of dialogue with the anti-war, anti-Putin Russia** The Anti-War Committee The European Russia Secretariat
Media	**Independent media in exile** Meduza, TV Rain		**"Interpreters of Russian context"** Paper Kartuli Novaya Gazeta – Europe		
Education	Individual bloggers (prosvetiteli)	Smol'ny without Borders Free University			
Electoral and non-electoral politics	ACF Feminist Anti-War Resistance			Free Russia Legion	

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of research.