

## Russian civil society actors in exile: an underestimated agent of change

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# SWP Comment

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## Russian Civil Society Actors in Exile

**An underestimated agent of change**

*Maria Domańska*

**The current wave of emigrants from Russia can play an important role in the country's political transition in the long term. As Russia's aggressive wars are a consequence of the personalist dictatorship that has embraced the imperialist idea, a regime change towards a more pluralistic model of rule would be in the West's strategic interest.**

Russia is currently experiencing the largest wave of politically motivated emigration in modern history. Most of it is due to the situation created by war, military mobilisation and bleak economic prospects. It includes well-educated, young, professionally active and creative people, including entrepreneurs and IT workers, who began leaving Russia immediately after the invasion was launched on 24 February 2022. The overall scale of this wave of emigration in 2022 is estimated at around half a million.

People who are directly involved in political and civic activities and independent media (hereinafter referred to as civil society actors in exile, political emigrants or activists in exile) make up a small portion of these migration flows. Unlike other migrants, they had to leave their country due to direct persecution or repressive laws that made their work in Russia impossible. This new wave of emigration began in 2021 – the year marked by unprecedented repression against the democratic opposition and civil society structures. In particular, it targeted groups linked to Alexei

Navalny – the most important opposition leader, as well as some NGOs and independent media. According to the Free Russia Foundation, more than 1,500 activists and journalists left Russia in 2021, going mainly to Georgia, Lithuania and Ukraine.

The scale of the political exodus of these groups was much greater in 2022: Precise data is lacking, but activists themselves estimate it at several thousand people at least. With the aggression against Ukraine, the Kremlin's policy took on a neo-totalitarian character. It is marked, among other features, by the unprecedented encroachment of the state into the private lives of citizens, the growing ideologisation of the public discourse and top-down efforts to mobilise public support for the war using sabre-rattling techniques. Mass propaganda and indoctrination of the public (including the promotion of hate speech in schools and universities) accompany increased surveillance and wartime censorship. Speaking the truth about Russian war crimes in Ukraine carries penalties of up to 15 years in prison. According to the estimates, around 500



journalists left Russia in 2022, as almost all major editorial offices of independent media have moved abroad. The few anti-war protests have been swiftly suppressed. At the same time, the borders are still open: The government prefers to remove “disloyal elements” by encouraging them to emigrate rather than risk the emergence of a significant protest threat in the country. The map of emigrants’ destinations is more diversified than previously thought and includes EU countries, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. One of the most important destinations is Germany.

The analysis is based on around 30 in-depth interviews conducted with representatives of the Russian diaspora and complemented by interviews with their partners from German civil society and donor organisations.

### Why Russian activists choose Germany

The choice of country for relocation is usually based on several factors: requirements regarding entry documents (passport, visa), procedures for obtaining residence permits, having contacts on the ground and the emigrant’s financial situation. In precarious conditions, social benefits offered by local authorities may prove crucial. Assessing the level of personal safety in the host country is also relevant. It includes the public’s attitude towards Russians in general — and critics of Vladimir Putin’s regime in particular — the activities of Russia’s secret services and the risk of deportation to Russia for those facing politically motivated criminal charges.

If evacuation from Russia is urgent and unplanned, Germany is generally not the first country of choice due to the visa regime and the suspension of flights between Russia and the EU. In such cases, other countries, such as Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan, are initially chosen as relocation routes. Conversely, other factors make Germany attractive for those who can arrange their travel in advance.

The longtime cooperation of Russian civil society actors with their German counterparts (sometimes dating back to Soviet times) has formed a large community of Russian activists, journalists and researchers in Germany who have built an institutional framework for civic activism. The Russian-language edition of *Deutsche Welle*, the Ost-West TV channel, the Dekabristen organisation (a Berlin-based NGO that supports Russian civil society, including independent media) and the Nemtsov Foundation are just a few examples of the pre-2022 diaspora that formed due to the growing political repression in Russia. These groups fundamentally differ from previous waves of Russian emigrants to Germany since the downfall of the Soviet Union. In the case of the latter, the emigrant representatives often express pro-Putin views and mostly remain indifferent to various forms of civic-political activism.

Emigrants of the new wave usually point to Germans’ positive attitude towards Russians. They do not have to fear possible deportation to Russia, nor do they seem seriously concerned about the activities of Russia’s secret services in Germany.

Those who have been politically persecuted and are eligible to apply for refugee status or a so-called humanitarian visa are entitled to a generous social assistance package. However, the oft-mentioned downside in this case is the principle of the random settlement of migrants, who would rather cluster in big cities to keep in touch with their compatriots. Those who do not qualify for humanitarian support can attempt to make a living on their own after obtaining a work or “freelance” visa. According to those interviewed, a frequent inconvenience they face is the high level of bureaucracy and time-consuming immigration procedures, as well as non-transparent, complicated regulations.

The interest in supporting Russian activists and journalists in exile is shared among all political parties in Germany (with the exception of the AfD party) — despite the existing differences concerning desired strategies towards Putin’s regime. The am-

bition to create a “hub” for Russian independent media is clear. It is evidenced, for example, by the government’s engagement in launching the Hanna Arendt Initiative in October 2022 and the Berlin-based JX Fund. Both aim to support independent journalists affected by political persecution.

## **Main activities of Russian civil society actors in Germany**

Drawing up a precise “map” of Russian civil society organisations, projects and initiatives operating in Germany is nearly impossible due to the early stage of their self-organisation and the dynamics of their cross-border movement and expanded cross-border networks. Additionally, the activists — as well as their German partners and sponsors — face qualitatively new challenges due to their relocation abroad, which often requires new institutional solutions. Above all, it is about redefining the existing cooperation mechanisms that were previously adapted to work within Russia.

Political emigrants, as a rule, do not maintain contact with the “old” Russian and Russian-speaking diaspora, that is, those who came to Germany in previous decades, mainly for economic reasons. These groups often display “apolitical” attitudes while passively consuming Kremlin-sponsored propaganda, and they frequently sympathise with Putin’s regime.

The activities of Russian political emigrants in Germany focus on three main areas, with the anti-war stance being their common ideological platform. First, the activities are ad hoc and target the needs of the diaspora itself and those forced to leave Russia. They aim to save more activists from repression and organise their stay abroad. Second, the majority of the new diaspora is involved in one way or another in helping Ukrainian refugees in host countries, assisting Ukrainians who were forcibly deported to Russia (including their evacuation from there, if requested) and/or helping Ukraine in its struggle against the aggressor. However, there is virtually no

cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian activists in the public sphere. Ukrainians do not want to be publicly associated with Russia in any way, even though they may appreciate their Russian colleagues’ work. Also, the priorities and needs of the two diasporas differ.

Third, the emigrants engage in the continuation and development of Russia-oriented civic activism. This area is the most important one in relation to the West’s strategic interests. Although the organisational framework of civil society in Russia has been destroyed in the last two years, its previous resilience in the face of increasing repression testifies to the enormous potential, professionalism and commitment of these communities. Most emigrants declare their willingness to maintain links with Russia and return there once it is safe. They reconstruct civil society networks in exile, search for funding, legalise their activities in host countries and organise human resource bases, including volunteers. Activists are also improving mechanisms for coordination, exchange of know-how and synergies between existing and newly emerging projects, initiatives and organisations. The independent media seek effective ways to counter Kremlin propaganda among the Russian public and to reach it with the truth about the war and other crimes of Putin’s regime. Some initiatives aim to defend human rights in Russia, including providing lawyers for those accused in political trials, while also documenting and publicising human rights violations.

## **Main problems and challenges**

### **Funding**

Most often, the interviewees mentioned financial problems as one of the key barriers to their political and civic activities. It obliges them to seek volunteers to make up for the lacking human resources. However, the volunteer formula does not allow for devoting enough time and energy to full-scale activism. In the short term, this leads

activists to focus on the most urgent and immediate issues and does not allow them to deal with strategic projects, institutionalisation and planning for the long-term development of core civil society work.

Western grants will likely remain the key funding source in the coming years. Other fundraising methods have become difficult to operationalise, such as crowdfunding and online media content monetisation. It stems from the restrictions on financial flows between Russia and the EU as well as the restrictions on online monetisation imposed on Russians by multinational IT corporations. Moreover, the Russian government has, in fact, criminalised any kind of support from Russian citizens for anti-regime groups. The deteriorating financial situation of the Russian public will likely bring adverse consequences as well.

However, many activists are calling for autonomy from Western sponsors. They point to practical reasons, such as more flexibility in planning their work, and image-related issues. They want to get rid of the reputation of being “grant-eaters” and gain firm credibility in the eyes of the Russian public. Given the growing repression in Russia and the expected increase in emigration numbers, competition for EU funding for Russia-related projects will likely grow in the coming years – especially as they will have to give way to Ukraine’s priority needs. The lack of alternative sources of funding may lead in the short term to the shutdown of many small, worthwhile projects and organisations that will not be able to transition to a commercial operation model. This also applies to the media.

In the long term, the chronic underfunding and financial insecurity may result in an outflow of civic activists to other sectors that offer stable livelihood opportunities. This scenario will greatly undermine these communities’ potential for supporting future changes in Russia and will run against the strategic interests of the West. In this context, the need for a greater financial commitment to support the media and NGOs that comes from the broader Russian

diaspora, including businesspeople residing abroad, is increasingly apparent.

## **Communication with the Russian public**

Forced exile may lead to weakened bonds with the home country and an erosion of previous recognition or authority in the eyes of local communities – especially given the increasingly harsh censorship measures and massive levels of war propaganda employed by the Kremlin. One of the most important challenges is to reach the broader public, which largely remains indifferent and is distancing itself from the war narrative. The legitimacy of Putin’s regime is based both on the active support of 15–25 per cent of the fervent “patriots” and on the tacit acquiescence of another estimated 60 per cent of the population. These numbers, cited by some sociologists in private interviews, are implicitly corroborated by recent surveys of public opinion. Sociological studies show a relatively high level of declared support or passive acceptance of the Kremlin’s policies (up to 70–80 per cent), a reality that often stems from a prevailing sense of powerlessness among the respondents and the lack of a political alternative. A significant segment of society does not see how it can possibly change the situation and focusses instead on economic problems and day-to-day survival. This situation manifests itself, among other ways, in the lack of motivation to seek alternative information in the independent media. Around two-thirds of Russians still cite state-controlled television as their main source of information.

The lack of reliable tools for examining public sentiment under neo-totalitarian rule impedes the development of an effective communication strategy vis-à-vis Russian society. So far, independent media outlets are claiming to have regained the attention of Russian audiences that they had temporarily lost due to relocation. However, the challenge is to go beyond the “liberal bubble” of media consumers with entrenched democratic and anti-regime

views. Although some projects seek to burst this bubble (among them the prominent anti-war initiative the Feminist Anti-War Resistance) and reach out to the broader public, this process may take years.

Another major challenge is to find ways to sustain interaction and channels of support for civil society in Russia amid the country's deepening isolation and growing domestic repression. Contacts with foreign entities are increasingly being criminalised. At the current stage, new forms of activity are being developed – of a dispersed and horizontal “rhizomatic” nature – that will prove to be a more difficult target for the repressive regime apparatus.

A further task is to adapt civil society activities in exile to the conditions in the host countries while maintaining the overall priority, which is orientating these activities towards Russia. It is not easy due to emigration communities being dispersed across many countries. It is not uncommon for members of the same teams – including the editorial offices of independent media – to operate in different legal and cultural environments.

## Internal divisions

Political emigrants also face deep divisions in their ranks. Russian civil society hardly ever cooperates with the Russian democratic opposition in exile. Activists do not perceive Russian politicians as representatives of their interests, values or visions. It is not uncommon to hear reproaches that the opposition ignores or instrumentalises civic initiatives and does not treat activists as natural allies or partners while developing political strategies. If any cooperation occurs between politicians and civil society, it is mostly based on personal links rather than broader and regular inter-group work.

Divisions are also present within civil society, although it remains united by an unequivocal anti-war stance. These divisions often stem from intergenerational disputes over values and the language used to describe political realities. This cleavage is even harsher between young activists and

the older generation of democratic politicians. Among the younger generation, the importance of anti-colonialist discourse, anti-imperialism, feminist discourse and queer language is visibly increasing.

## Communication with the West

In the long term, a crucial task will be to develop permanent channels of dialogue and work between Russian political emigrants and expert circles and decision-makers in host countries. Western decision-makers and the public at large need to learn how political emigrants will reshape public attitudes in Russia and handle future socio-political developments.

Western governments need to revise their strategic thinking about Russia in order to bring sustainable peace to post-war Europe. The first step should be to stop identifying the Russian state with the autocratic regime and firmly include the “other Russia” (the regime opponents) in Western “mental maps”. To achieve this goal, the civil society actors in exile need a recognisable “signboard”: an organisational structure uniting a significant segment of the diaspora that is able to formulate long-term strategies and visions for Russia's future. Since activists are highly sceptical about vertical structures – perceived as inefficient and paternalistic – this representation may take the form of a loosely coordinated network based on shared values.

There is also a risk that Russian civil society may become a victim of the fallacious policies of some Western states, including Germany, towards Ukraine and Russia. For decades, many Western politicians did not adequately react to Russia's successive acts of aggression against its neighbours (Georgia and Ukraine) and the growing violations of human rights and political freedoms in the country. Political and business relations with the Kremlin were valued more than the principles of international law.

Although much has changed since 24 February 2022 and the EU's and NATO's assistance to Kyiv continues in an unprecedented

way, its scale remains limited. Chief Western decision-makers still consider the possible consequences of Russia's military defeat to be more dangerous than the continuity of Putin's aggressive regime. They have apparently fallen prey to two powerful myths, neither of which seems to be well founded. The first is that possible political turmoil in Russia could lead to "someone worse than Putin" coming to power. The second is that the demise of autocracy would lead to the state's collapse and serious destabilisation in Eurasia. This way, the key legal principles and values can once again be sacrificed in the name of Russia's autocratic "stability".

While this approach focuses on the least likely scenarios, it seems to ignore the obvious: Any outcome other than Ukraine's unequivocal victory on the battlefield (regaining all the occupied territories) would only strengthen Putin's neo-totalitarian regime at home and abroad. It would, in turn, only create more incentives for Russia to launch another revanchist war sooner or later. The efforts of Russian democrats to transform their country and break the vicious cycle of authoritarian path-dependence would be severely hindered for a long time. The catchphrase "Russia cannot be changed" would thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **The political potential of civil society actors in exile**

December 2022 saw the first serious attempt to integrate and consolidate Russian civil society actors in exile. The Congress of Civic Anti-War and Humanitarian Initiatives, held in Berlin on 3–4 December, brought together almost 300 representatives of more than 150 initiatives and organisations operating in 30 countries. It was the broadest representation of anti-war civil society groups to date in terms of their thematic profiles, generational crossover and ethnic-national origins. The participants represented various spheres of activity, including human rights defence, education, politics of memory, feminist activism, environmental activism, LGBTQ+ movements, relocation initiatives

and independent media. There was a large proportion of people in their twenties and thirties and a vocal group of activists representing the nations of Chechnya, Buryatia, Tuva, Kalmykia and Sakha, among others. Some of the immediate results of the Congress have been better networking, the pooling of resources, specialisation, the exchange of information and a joint search for funding. Practical work on setting up a horizontal, widely recognised structure based on shared values is underway — one of the aims of which is to improve the visibility of Russian civil society in the international arena.

Civil society abroad would hardly play a decisive role in the political changes or the government's configuration in a post-Putin Russia. It is doubtful that popular political figures could emerge in exile and develop leadership status. However, activists may play an invaluable role by serving as a broad base for the future transformation of their home country. As emigrants, they can expand their knowledge about the pros and cons of various mechanisms that foster grassroots democracy and self-governance. Their vast expertise about electoral systems and effective state administration acquired abroad and their ability to adapt it to Russian realities would allow them to play an active role in implementing political reforms. Another formidable task that awaits the emigrants back home is to enlighten their fellow citizens and lead them through a painful, profound transformation of collective mentality and identity along non-imperialist lines.

Regarding the independent media outlets, their limited reach in Russia expands whenever the government's decisions endanger the public. One example is the partial military mobilisation announced in September 2022, when all independent media temporarily saw a significant increase in audience. Although this tide usually ebbs once the public gets used to the new situation, there is a chance that audiences of the independent media will steadily grow as time goes on and Russia's failures on the front-line continue. This growth may help to overcome the artificially created belief in an



active, overwhelming pro-Putin majority. However, it would still not be enough to topple two main pillars of the regime: the lack of political alternatives and the citizens' overwhelming sense of political disempowerment. It is the united democratic opposition that must tackle both issues.

Due to their contacts with compatriots, the activists in exile will also remain an important source of knowledge for Western experts and policy-makers concerning Russia's political situation and the population's mood. They can also constitute an important link between Russia's civil society back home and its Western counterparts — as long as the Russian government does not close the borders.

Before a narrow window of opportunity opens for political transition once Putin departs from office, those in exile can thus play an important role in shaping EU and NATO policies towards Russia. The voice of the "other Russia" could contribute to a better understanding of the oft-ignored ethnic, cultural and socio-political diversity of Russian society. The Kremlin-conceived myth that Russian society is a pro-war monolith should be debunked. However, as the example of Germany indicates, most Russian political emigrants have so far not integrated into their host societies in a way that would allow their narratives to reach the local public on a wide scale. Although some of them appear on German media and are politically active at the local level, the general public's knowledge about their activities remains very limited. This is partly because of the language barrier experienced by many newcomers but also the relatively short amount of time they have spent in the host country.

Political emigrants may also play a stabilising role in Central and Eastern Europe in the future. Many activists and journalists, including ethnic Russians, are reshaping the dominant discourse about Russia and its neighbours, and deconstructing the imperialist, colonialist and patriarchal clichés that underpin Putinist revanchism. If there is anyone who can bridge the gap in relations between Russia and Ukraine, it

is Russian civil society that is involved in helping occupied Ukraine. A common view among these groups is that Russia can only change with an unequivocal Ukrainian victory on the battlefield.

### **How to support Russian civil society actors in exile**

As Russian activists are dispersed across many countries and operate within cross-border networks, the Western strategy of support should be flexible and multi-level. In the EU, this strategy needs to be implemented through close coordination between member states and EU institutions. Each host country is currently gaining its unique experience of working with Russian emigrants, thus better communication and co-operation would lead to essential synergies. At the same time, EU institutions may offer horizontal legal solutions and more effective pooling of financial and intellectual resources. For instance, while Germany has a potential to become a hub for Russian independent media, Poland has a long tradition of conducting research on Russian imperialism and non-Russian minorities, and Lithuania is a stronghold of Russian democratic opposition — a large portion of which is still reluctant to take into account the anti-colonialist narratives. An additional challenge would be to address the specific needs of those activists who live in non-EU countries, such as Georgia, Armenia and Turkey, where coordination with local governments is unlikely.

The West's strategy should be based on two core principles. First, Western governments and donors should be open to new high-quality initiatives and a new generation of activists. This approach will require strong expertise in Russian domestic politics and the situation within the political diaspora. Second, the link between the emigrants and local civil societies should be developed, including through joint responsibility for the implementation of projects.

Because of the large number of organisations and initiatives run by Russian emi-



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grants, it will be a challenge to design Western organisational, legal and financial support to foster diversity and – at the same time – not spread limited resources too thinly. Russians will need support for a long period. This support will be costly if it is intended to achieve substantial results, for example a good quality media product. In the coming years, a forced partial consolidation of projects may prove necessary, even if activists are sceptical about it, fearing centralisation and hierarchisation. The positive effect may be a more efficient pooling of financial resources and greater visibility in host countries and international fora.

Most often, those interviewed pointed to the need to make Western aid mechanisms more flexible and to limit the red tape. In this context they referred to entry regulations and the legal mechanisms for residing and working in the EU for those persecuted by Putin's regime, and cooperation with those who are continuing their work in Russia. Given that civic activism has, in fact, been made illegal under Putinism, the procedures for financial and organisational support need to meet the growing challenges in light of neo-totalitarian repression and control and promptly adapt to the narrowing room for manoeuvre.

Because of the growing number of initiatives and activists abroad, interviewees expressed interest in enhanced consulting mechanisms and building know-how about the effective management of NGO projects. One of the key spheres is the development of IT tools to bypass state censorship, boost the security of trans-border communication and educate the Russian public on how to access independent content. In the latter case, the suggestion that Western IT giants provide Russians with VPNs free of charge deserves special attention. Also, media outlets need unconventional content distribution models, including mobile apps, to win the digital race with the Kremlin.

Expanding independent media coverage in Russia also requires investment in research on local media markets – including the specific interests of various audiences. Given the need to reach the large group of

“apolitical” people with anti-war and anti-regime messages, support is needed both for reporting and investigative journalism, as well as for those who write on “non-political” topics: culture, science and ecology.

However, all the mechanisms mentioned above will have limited impact if there is no broader strategy adopted by Western governments that defines their possible contribution to the future liberalisation of Russia's political system. While under Putin no liberalisation is possible, the next political leadership class – seeking domestic and external legitimacy – will automatically be weaker and more susceptible to pressure, especially if Russia suffers a crushing defeat on the battlefield and is forced to leave Ukraine entirely. Before new rulers are able to consolidate their power, the West's priority should be to widen the window of opportunity for reform so that Russians can freely shape their post-dictatorial political system. Given the expected strong resistance against reforms from the current beneficiaries of Putinism, pro-reformist pressure from abroad – exerted by Western governments and the Russian democratic diaspora – is crucial to level the playing field between empire-savers and democracy-builders.

## Conclusion

The West's support for Russian emigrants should be one element of a broader strategy aiming at sustainable political change in Russia. Although civil society actors in exile are unlikely to play a decisive role in possible systemic changes in the post-Putin period, they can be an important intellectual and operational base for them. They can also immensely contribute to their sustainability. For this to happen, the structures abroad of civil society actors must expand, and they must develop mechanisms for their long-term impact on the Russian public. The voice of “other Russia” also needs to be better heard and understood in the West, where the harmful stereotypes mentioned above often favour Putin's regime.