



Russia in Exile: Support for Russian Political Migrants as an Instrument to Increase European Security

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Executive Summary

Russia is currently experiencing the largest wave of politically driven emigration in its modern history. Among the hundreds of thousands of migrants, a relatively small but active group of civic activists, politicians, journalists and researchers is involved in rebuilding civil society, an independent media, expertise and political activism in exile. A commitment by like-minded democratic states to host and support these communities should be based on a long-term, coordinated approach and tightly linked to the pursuit of common European security objectives. As Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine required the prior suppression of fundamental rights and freedoms in Russia to prevent any significant anti-war resistance, the security order in Europe will not be restored without bringing competitive politics, the freedom of expression and pluralism into the Russian political system. Although this long and arduous process can only be carried out by the Russians, it cannot be successful without the support of the West.

The Nexus Between Domestic Repression and Foreign Aggression

The consistent crackdown on human rights, civic activism, free speech, and democratic opposition in Russia proved to be a precondition for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent suppression of all significant domestic anti-war protest. Russia will not abandon war as a tool of its foreign policy until the highly ideologised autocratic regime stops keeping the political-business establishment and the public under control.

Since the full-scale invasion started, the remnants of political debate have been suppressed in Russia, as have independent journalism, academic research, artistic practice, and civic activism. Actors operating in these fields have either chosen to collaborate with the political regime, to employ self-censorship in accordance with the Kremlin's expectations and red lines, operate underground, or relocate to other countries.

The Russian Federation is currently experiencing the largest wave of politically driven emigration in its modern history, estimated at least at 500,000–600,000.[1] It has been caused by the invasion of Ukraine that started in February 2022, the subsequent military mobilisation, adverse economic developments, as well as domestic repression. Within this larger migration a relatively small number of individuals form a group of political émigrés, actively involved in rebuilding civil society, academic research and analysis, an independent media and other channels disseminating information, as well as political movements in relocation. They focus on two tightly intertwined activities, reflecting the domestic-foreign policy nexus: first, the anti-war resistance combined with assistance to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, and second, help for their fellow-citizens who remain in Russia and are subjected to political repression.

According to estimates made by the authors of this text, there are no more than 10,000–15,000 of these actors, including their families. A substantial part of this group is already residing in the EU and other European countries. A significant number of activists have

expressed their desire to return to Russia one day – once it is safe for them. Their activities in exile play a potentially important role in the formation of a relocated Russian public sphere – a space of free debate and democratic communication referring to common interests, the exchange of ideas, and working out towards solutions to socio-political problems – that could constitute a “mini-laboratory” of democratic patterns for a future Russia.

Exiled Communities as Actors of Change

The authors of this text are deeply convinced that the only way to make Russia a more predictable and reliable member of the international security order is to rebuild the sphere of politics, public debate, and pluralism in the country. The long-term goal of the West should be to bring decision-making processes in the Kremlin into compliance with international law and subjected to scrutiny by domestic actors (interest groups in the ruling elite and the public). Even if Russia will never get on the Western bandwagon in terms of its interests and goals, it should be effectively deterred from using aggression and war crimes as parts of its foreign policy arsenal.

Many actors who could have steered the Russian Federation in a more pluralistic and predictable direction have left the country and now operate abroad, in whole or in part. Some of them already receive support from partners and donors within their new host countries, but this support lacks a well-defined and coordinated long-term approach. Other actors, that have emerged only once relocated, are also seeking new, often innovative ways of influencing their fellow citizens inside Russia to overcome the state-sponsored propaganda.

Support and temporary refuge offered to a limited number of actors forming a relocated public sphere linked to the Russian Federation should be regarded as an instrument of European security. As Putin's regime is becoming increasingly repressive, European governments and like-minded countries have few instruments to influence political developments inside Russia aimed at stopping the ongoing aggression against Ukraine and restoring peace and security in Europe.

The main instruments available are: firstly, a strong and multifaceted military, political and economic support of Ukraine, and secondly, holding Russia accountable for its violations of international law, including the implementation and enforcement of restrictive measures, such as individual and economic sanctions. However, making a future Russian state a predictable and reliable member of the international security order will require a much broader array of coordinated long-term steps. Hosting and supporting an emerging public sphere linked to the Russian Federation is one of the few additional instruments available. It should not be seen or defined as only a humanitarian project, but above all as a political enterprise aimed at the future long-term stability and security of Europe. All these instruments are parallel and interlinked.

Civil society activists, researchers, journalists, and politicians in relocation are an underestimated, yet invaluable, asset in the future transformation of the Russian Federation. Most of them are not likely to be decisive actors of change in post-Putin state politics. They may, however, play a vital role formulating solutions, standards, and political visions for the future transformation of their home country, in line with the ideas of liberalisation and pluralism. They could become a “conveyor belt” disseminating these ideas among the Russian public,

by means still available despite growing censorship. Their unique value in this respect, as compared to other groups of migrants, is that they have the ability and competence to do it in an organised way, pursuing strategic goals of influencing public attitudes inside Russia.

In particular, the independent media in exile continues to play a crucial role as the providers of information other than official propaganda. The number of their most active users (for example those who interact with other users and actively disseminate information) is estimated to be at least several million-strong. The most optimistic (albeit difficult to verify) estimates indicate that up to 25–30% of Russia's adult population regularly access independent sources of information. It is difficult to estimate the size of the likely bigger group of 'occasional' users.

If adequately supported and funded, these groups of actors will play an additional role as a source of knowledge on social and political developments inside Russia for European experts and decision-makers since most of them maintain contacts with people in Russia. It would be tremendously helpful to provide support for those Russians remaining inside the country who continuously oppose Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and who are subject to repression.

The Need for a Coordinated Approach

The response of individual European states to the exodus of Russian citizens will remain subject to domestic regulations and security concerns. However, to build synergy and avoid any unnecessary overlapping of actions or the spreading of resources too thinly, like-minded states need to commit themselves to the idea itself of fostering and supporting an independent public sphere relocated from the Russian Federation. This support should be based on coordinated, tactical measures as well as a set of long-term goals aimed at making the Russian Federation a pluralistic, predictable, and reliable neighbour in the future. It should encompass actions undertaken in the short-term (one–two years), mid-term (around five years) and long-term horizon.

The relevance of this support in terms of European foreign and security policy should in the mid-term perspective be measured according to three main criteria. Firstly, the actors' level of engagement in formulating new standards for, as well as visions of, the future Russian Federation. Secondly, their ability to generate knowledge contributing to public debates on social developments inside the country. Thirdly, their activities directed towards supporting anti-regime and anti-war views inside Russia.

Recommendations

The following recommendations should be viewed as a complementary, low cost and low risk instrument working in parallel with the other instruments of European foreign action.

Short-Term Goals: Support for Russian Emigrants

Responding to short-term, everyday practical challenges, during the next year or two the European states should offer selected individuals and their family members work and residence permits, making it possible for key actors to plan and carry out their activities in at least the mid-term perspective. Special consideration should be given to actors representing national minorities, regional communities, women, and other vulnerable groups. This would

help not only to provide a level-playing field for actors who are discriminated against in Russia but also encourage the badly-needed plurality of voices and perspectives in debates on Russia's future.

This commitment should be made jointly by a group of like-minded states. Making the support for the relocated public sphere a joint commitment would ensure an adaptable system able to respond relatively quickly to changing circumstances and to address the specific needs of different categories of relocated actors. The total number of key individuals in need of temporary relocation is rather limited and many of them have already been given interim residence and work permits in a European country.

Contrary to popular belief, it is often states with special security concerns that have taken on this responsibility and offered special tracks and considerable assistance to strategically relevant groups of actors. The further sharing of best practices and lessons learned between different states should be encouraged. A constructive dialogue between the branches of government formulating foreign policy and long-term security strategies and those handling domestic migration and labour policy has proven to be the key factor of success in solving issues related to legal frameworks and institutional practices.

Proposed short-term action:

- Make the fostering of the relocated public sphere linked to the Russian Federation a responsibility of as many like-minded states as possible. In each country, find the frameworks and solutions for residence and work permits that can meet the needs of relocated actors in line with the states' respective legal practices and security concerns.
- Create an informal coordinating mechanism for like-minded states and donors to encourage a joint, tactical approach based on common goals, principles, and criteria. Share lessons learned and best practice.
- Create special support mechanisms ensuring a plurality of voices within the relocated public sphere linked to the Russian Federation. Targeted support should be aimed at strengthening the visibility and advocacy capacity of initiatives representing national minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups. While women should make up around half of the participants of all supported events and programs, the percentage of people of non-Russian ethnic origin should reach at least 15–20% – in accordance with the available official data on the ethno-national makeup of the Russian Federation.
- Involve European experts in the long-term development of the support mechanisms and objectives.
- Create a mechanism which supports independent research and analysis on social, political, and economic developments within the Russian Federation. This would enable a strategic development of activities within the relocated public sphere based on facts and trends as well as realistic expectations. It would help to tailor the outreach and define the actual and potential audiences of the independent media, as well as civic or political initiatives and organisations. Ultimately, this research will also be necessary to evaluate the support offered by the European states to these actors. Evaluation should be based both on its relevance and impact in relation to future developments inside Russia. For all these reasons, it is important that the supported research is not influenced by political bias, nepotism, or cronyism.

Long-Term Goals

Support to the independent public sphere relocated from the Russian Federation should not only be based on the proposed tactical aims outlined above. All tactical aims and short-term actions must rely on a deeper understanding of how the current Russian political regime has used the nexus between internal repression and external aggression in how it is challenging the international security order. A coordinated approach by like-minded states towards Russian actors in exile needs to be based on the overreaching and generally non-divisive goal of making the Russian Federation a pluralistic, predictable, and reliable neighbour in the future. To achieve this long-term goal, competitive politics, freedom of expression and pluralism must be reintroduced in Russia. It would contribute to the dismantling of three pillars of autocracy: the overcentralisation of state power, the lack of confrontation with the totalitarian past, and the political disempowerment of citizens.

Overcentralisation of state power

There is a historically well-entrenched myth that Russia's vast territory can remain united and effectively governed only under an overcentralised model of rule, which is thus essential to preserve Russian statehood, while democracy and decentralisation would inevitably lead to its collapse. Vladimir Putin's rule has successfully exploited this myth and "sold" it both to the Russian public as well as public opinion in the West.

In fact, the overcentralisation of the Russian Federation and its highly diversified society has made the state dysfunctional and has made the interests of the state a priority over the interests of its citizens.

The regions are almost entirely dependent on financial transfers from the federal budget and have virtually no say in how policies are formed, at either the regional or the federal level. The institution of local self-government has been hollowed out both by this centralisation and by the large-scale manipulation of elections, depriving citizens of political representation. Regional elites have been brought to heel and are supposed to represent the federal states' interests across the country. The expression of regional identities is often labelled extremist, very much in line with the totalitarian idea of the homogenisation and atomisation of society. Checks and balances in the system have been eliminated altogether in the name of national unity. Legal channels of aggregating and expressing group interests against the federal or regional governments have ceased to exist.

Lack of confrontation with the totalitarian past

The lack of confrontation with the crimes committed by the Soviet state and the glorification of a much longer imperial past have ultimately perpetuated the role of the federal state as the binding force for the nation.

The current Russian government perceives historical narratives as a crucial instrument of legitimising the regime and thus an instrument of national security. This has led to a strong ideologisation and mythologisation of history in both historiography, political rhetoric and public manifestations of historical events and figures. The glorification of empire and territorial acquisitions is accompanied by narratives glorifying strong, even ruthless, rulers. This leads to the whitewashing of previous periods of political repression and its presentation as a vital precondition for order and stability to be maintained. It also glorifies and justifies acts of war against neighbouring states and peoples.

Vladimir Putin's regime can claim this legitimising historical link to the Soviet Union as no court of justice, neither national or international, has ever condemned or punished the wrongdoings made by representatives of this state. This has facilitated the chain of impunity stretching from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation that we see today. It has also been used to legitimise the increased state repression against its citizens as well as the violation of treaties and military aggression against sovereign states.

Political disempowerment of citizens

The two phenomena mentioned above have deprived citizens of the Russian Federation of political agency. Democracy is denigrated as potentially dangerous chaos posing an existential threat to both Russian statehood and identity. Paternalism – based on the assumption that the interests of the state are the same as the interests of its people – is presented as the only path to stability, security, and order. The executive power has claimed the right to define national interests and choose the instruments by which it should be implemented without any participation from society. Society in Russia is thus stripped of all political agency, with politics being an entirely, non-public domain.

This model assumes that the state, in the name of what is proclaimed as being for the good of the citizen, is entitled to restrict rights and freedoms in exchange for both stability and security as well as releasing the public of responsibility for its actions. The government goes to great lengths to make citizens believe that resistance is futile. This has resulted in an overwhelming sense of powerlessness among citizens of Russia and a lack of faith in their capacity to influence the public domain. Paternalism generates mistrust towards fellow citizens and worsened the already existing social atomisation inherited from Soviet times. Politics is largely perceived as a kind of virtual game, inevitably based on manipulation and fraud. What stems from this attitude is the lack of understanding of individual or collective responsibility for the activities, including the wrongdoings, of the state.

These unequal government-society relations, the sense of personal disenfranchisement, and the lack of a vision for the future, are often compensated for by a sense of personal or collective empowerment through the might of the state. In its worst form this need for compensatory empowerment is manifested in the participation in state-organised violence, including acts of war.

Long-term strategic goals:

- Restore the value of politics as a sphere of non-violent struggle for power and influence, where citizens freely express their interests and needs, organise, resolve conflicts, and freely elect representatives who are later held accountable.
- Restore the value of human life in Russia. The widespread experience of violence as the primary regulator of relations within the Russian state has become an essential element of the authoritarian political culture and will remain a long-term social problem, exacerbated by the war.
- Overcome the false juxtaposition between a Russian Federation that is either autocratic, or one which is weak and destabilised. There is nothing inherently unstable or weak in a state that ensures pluralism and the respect for constitutional freedoms.

- Re-empower local and regional populations, including ethnic minorities. De-centralising politics and political debate on the future of the Russian Federation can undermine one of the pillars of the current regime – the priority of the state's interest over that of its citizens. Gender-balanced, open discussions that include representatives of regional communities of various ethno-national origin should be organised to encourage ideas of how to renegotiate political-economic relations between the centre and the regions. One overarching principle should be that there cannot be one solution for all citizens in such a diversified and vast country.
- Strengthen the voices and possibilities for the advocacy of disenfranchised groups, such as women, national minorities, and other groups facing discrimination or legal persecution, including based on sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Encourage processes of collective confrontation with the country's totalitarian past, thus breaking the vicious circle of impunity that is deeply entrenched in Russian political culture. This should be tightly linked to the investigation and future prosecution of Russia's war crimes in Ukraine, as well as to the concept of transitional justice in the future political transformation of the Russian Federation.

End Remarks

Evaluating the strategic importance and outreach of the large number of initiatives and organisations run by Russian citizens abroad poses a challenge to European states. Decision-makers and grant-providers have often preferred to work with a narrow group of long-established and trusted actors. This is understandable given the risks and difficulties in navigating the many initiatives at hand. We encourage an inclusion of representatives of underrepresented groups and perspectives in all activities supported by European states. It should be possible to foster diversity, while not spreading the limited resources too thinly.

Creating an informal coordination mechanism will allow states and donors to work together and complement each other. This is also why it is important for decision-makers in Europe and other like-minded states to maintain a broad platform of contacts with as many actors as possible and monitor the internal developments within this field.

While supporting the emergence of politics and debate about the future of the Russian Federation, it is crucial to critically review who is given a voice in this process and what role this group or individual plays. Special attention should be given to the freedom of expert research, the independence of journalism, the autonomous advocacy of civil society organisations, and also to inclusion and broad representation. European financing should ensure the integrity and independence of watchdog functions within the relocated public sphere. Professional knowledge should also be given priority. Any kind of content directed at citizens inside Russia will have greater credibility if it is formulated from local or regional perspectives. Regional disparities, as well as other discriminatory practices, should not be reflected in the relocated public sphere.

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