



RUSSIAN OPPOSITION IN EXILE, PART 1: INTERNAL HETEROGENEITY

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Russian Wartime Migrants: Matching Political Demand with Supply

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Abstract

Two and a half years in, Russia's unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine continues to inflict deep wounds on Russian civil society, affecting both those who remain in the country and those who have fled to Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and select (primarily visa-free) European countries. Drawing on 390 semi-structured interviews with Russian migrants across six countries, this article reveals a strong demand for collective action and reconciliation among the various factions of the Russian opposition in exile. It also highlights migrants' diverging political alignments, which are influenced by their individual trajectories and visions for Russia's future. A common complaint among respondents is opposition groups' lack of both a clear vision for Russia's future and the tools to achieve it.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a substantial proportion of Russian activists, local politicians, and intellectuals have emigrated, creating projects and initiatives ranging from elite forums in European capitals to volunteer organizations (see our article "Mapping the Opposition in Exile" in Russian Analytical Digest no. 317). However, the connection between these initiatives—which strive to achieve diverse goals—and Russian emigration is not clear. There is no systematic empirical evidence that new migrants identify with those who claim to speak on their behalf. Unlike the community of Belarusian exiles led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia, Russian migrants lack a single spokesperson who would represent them. The Russian opposition, though sizable, is generally perceived as significantly weakened by this lack of coordination.¹

Migrants often cut off contact with those who remain at home and are no longer oriented toward their country of origin, ceasing to "invest" in the creation of alternative images of the future. It is therefore important to understand who makes political claims abroad—and on behalf of which groups. Are their efforts focused on civil society in Russia or are they primarily engaged in advocating for the rights of the diaspora? Are Russian migrants themselves oriented toward the emerging diaspora or toward Russian domestic politics? Little is known about the demands of the new emigration or the political platforms of the opposition. By all appearances, however, supply and demand are still not optimally matched.

Under the auspices of the Russia's Anti-War Commons project, we analyzed 390 semi-structured inter-

views gathered from March to December 2023 among Russian migrants who spent some time in one of the following six destinations: Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Serbia, and Kyrgyzstan (Smyth et al. 2024). Informants were asked whether they followed any political initiatives, including those in exile, and what they thought about them. They were also asked whether their interests and political views were represented by any of the existing political actors, groups, and initiatives.

Discontent and Disengagement

It is a common complaint that no opposition groups propagate ideas that would resonate with respondents. As for political engagement, many respondents do not express an interest in politics, claiming that "they are done" and want to focus on their personal lives. Interviews reveal profound disillusionment with the Russian opposition due to the perceived ineffectiveness of its leadership, as well as a lack of faith in a positive political future for Russia. This disillusionment is compounded by the emotional toll of ongoing negative news and internal opposition conflicts. Many are explicit about their disenchantment, citing the incapacitation or ineffectiveness of those who might have spearheaded meaningful change—some have been jailed or killed, while those in exile are seen to lack influence or credibility:

I still keep track [of Russian politics], I don't know when I'll stop. My husband complains that it affects me emotionally: if I hear some news or someone says

¹ Political observers and opposition groups debate whether there is currently a political imperative to unite, given the consolidation and extremely repressive nature of the Russian regime. Calls for a unified coalition—and invitations to unite in one—are viewed as manipulative by representatives of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF), casting a shadow on the group's reputation (see Milov 2023).

something, it ruins my mood. As for the opposition, it seems there's nothing left to say about it; it seems to be non-existent. It's all shattered, they are all criticizing each other. I'm not even for Navalny anymore... Everyone, who's who? Some are jailed, some have left, and those who have left are at each other's throats (Serbia, female, 37 yo, 9 May 2023).

Migrants often mention Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a political representative of Belarusian exiles and an example for the Russian opposition:

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya lobbies for the lifting of sanctions and other positive decisions in favor of Belarusian emigrants, but here, there is nothing of the sort. Various questionable things happen, and I don't feel that anyone represents my interests (Germany, male, 25 yo, 4 July 2023).

This critique extends to the opposition's impact and approach, with respondents drawing historical parallels to the White Guards, who awaited change from afar without contributing effectively to it (Poland, male, 26 yo, 27 May 2023). This comparison underscores a recurring pattern of self-preservation and disconnection from the realities on the ground in Russia, as opposed to initiating substantial and pragmatic political action. On the whole, respondents seem to be resigned to the seeming inevitability of Russia's political decay and to dismiss the current opposition as a viable agent of change.

Many seek protection and advocacy for those in exile. There are widespread complaints that opposition groups do not care about "having the backs" of those who have fled Russia. The desire for protection has turned migrants away from those groups that focus explicitly on Russia, such as Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF), and toward those who even rhetorically express that migrants need to be protected. Initiatives like the Ark project seem to fill this gap and resonate deeply with many of our interlocutors, especially those who identify as part of the exiled community:

They [The Ark] have managed to do many good things for those who have left. Maybe more could have been done, I don't know, but what was done turned out well. For instance, the Ark project [...] helped many people. It literally saved lives at some point [...] (Armenia, male, 35 yo, 2 June 2023).

Demands for Reconciliation Among the Opposition

A common trope in our informants' narratives is the infighting within the opposition. The latter's lack of

a coherent and "constructive" program only deepens their skepticism about the potential of reform or the future creation of a "beautiful Russia."

I'm subscribed to Katz [Maxim Katz, a blogger who used to work with the Navalny team], Navalny [Aleksei Navalny, a prominent oppositionist who was murdered in prison in February 2023], Khodorkovsky [Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a Russian business tycoon who was jailed in 2004 on the grounds of tax evasion and released in 2013], and others; I watch them. It's very frustrating that all these people can't finally come together and agree among themselves to present a unified front. It constantly seems like Navalny's headquarters is fighting with Katz, and Katz with someone else. Enough already, guys (Kazakhstan, male, 28 yo, 30 August 2023).

Well, I mostly just follow the course of the war, and some Russian opposition... Well, I've completely lost any faith in the Russian opposition, and when I hear talk of a beautiful Russia of the future, I think: My God, what beautiful future Russia? There will simply be nothing left. It will most likely fall apart. [...] it is just heading toward destruction, it's like some biblical story about a global flood, damn, it's so rotten that it just needs to be destroyed for something new to grow (Armenia, non-binary, 24 yo, 21 July 2023).

Our conversations with Russian exiles convey a strong sense of disappointment and frustration with the Russian opposition, highlighting the latter's fragmentation and lack of cohesion. Many voices express disillusionment, noting that the opposition is plagued by infighting, personal ego battles, and a failure to rally around a common cause, especially in the face of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the political climate in Russia. The opposition is perceived as ineffective and more focused on internal conflicts than on presenting a unified front against the ruling regime. This lack of solidarity is contrasted with examples from other countries, such as Turkey and Belarus, where oppositions have managed to unite despite differing viewpoints. There is a repeated call for the members of the Russian opposition to set aside their differences and work together, especially given the pressing issues facing the country. However, the prevailing sentiment is one of pessimism, with many individuals feeling that the opposition will be unable to consolidate and present a unified stance, rendering it incapable of effecting meaningful change. The excerpts reflect a deep yearning for strategic collaboration within the opposition, yet they also

reveal a pervasive skepticism about the potential for positive outcomes.

Speaking about consolidated actions, some migrants highlight the “You Are Not Alone” marathon, held on Russia Day in 2023 in support of political prisoners. They frame the event as a rare moment of unity within the Russian opposition. Organized by the TV channel “Dozhd” (Rain), the initiative saw various media outlets collaborate on a 24-hour YouTube livestream featuring prominent opposition figures and media personalities, including those who had already left Russia. The event managed to raise the substantial sum of 40 million rubles in support of political prisoners and their families, a fact that many respondents to our study found inspiring and uplifting.

Exiles’ Initiatives Are Divorced from Their Constituencies

Some initiatives and politicians are disconnected from migrants. One illustrative example is the Russian Anti-War Committee’s “Good Russian Passport.” This initiative, intended to position those Russians who oppose the war as morally superior, faces strong criticism for being elitist and divisive. Many view it as embarrassing and counterproductive, as it implies a moral hierarchy based on wealth and the ability to emigrate, thereby alienating those who remain in Russia. Critics further see it as hypocritical, reminiscent of discriminatory practices, and ineffective at addressing the opposition’s fragmentation and the authoritarianism of the Russian regime. Overall, the project is seen as contributing to polarization rather than fostering unity or proposing a constructive solution to Russia’s political challenges.

Such individuals as Garry Kasparov and Ilya Ponomarev are rarely viewed as valid political representatives by the interviewed exiles—if they are mentioned at all. Both are divisive figures. Some view Kasparov as a sincere activist, while others accuse him of being more focused on career-building than enacting real change in Russia. Ponomarev is often painted as a controversial and radical figure, with many questioning his long-distance involvement in Russian affairs. Our respondents frequently doubt his motives, with some labeling him a potential FSS (Federal Security Service) provocateur, and express skepticism about his role in forums like the “Free Russia Forum.”

Drifting Away From the ACF

Alexei Navalny and his ACF are probably the most supported opposition group. However, even ACF provokes disillusionment and disassociation. Significantly, migrants distinguish between ACF and Navalny,² with

whom they strongly sympathize. Navalny remains a respected and admired figure in Russian opposition politics, viewed by many as a moral authority and a symbol of integrity. Yet significant criticism is directed at his organization, the ACF, particularly since his imprisonment. Many feel that the ACF has lost its effectiveness and connection with Russian society, struggling without Navalny’s leadership and appearing to focus more on internal disputes than meaningful action. There is a sense of disappointment and frustration with the organization’s current initiatives, which some perceive as disorganized, lacking impact, and even tarnishing Navalny’s legacy. While Navalny himself is held in high regard, his team is often criticized for being out of touch, ideologically rigid, and unable to carry forward his vision effectively.

Undoubtedly, we support Navalny. But not so much the ACF; honestly, I have had many questions about them lately. And I always support Mikhail Khodorkovsky as well; I like his idea of creating a coalition because I believe the most important thing is to be able to negotiate. I just don’t like the rhetoric of the ACF because they seem to have become very radical (Georgia, female, 30 yo, 2 July 2023).

Demand for a Positive Agenda

We observe clustering around Navalny’s group, Katz, Khodorkovsky, the Ark, and those associated with urban bloggers, journalists, and educators. At the same time, we identify a smaller group of consistent supporters of Ilia Yashin, a Russian opposition activist and former municipal deputy who was sentenced to a prison term on the grounds of spreading false information about the Russian army (he covered the Bucha atrocities in one of his videos in Spring 2022).

Many informants equate political opposition with media figures, bloggers, and educators. Perhaps because these groups do not claim political power, they are positioned “above the struggle” and are seen as “less confrontational.”

The Russian opposition is criticized for its lack of unity and constructive strategies, with many expressing frustration over its inability to collaborate and present a unified front. There is a call for the opposition to avoid radicalism, establish clear leadership, and develop a vision with practical steps to achieve meaningful change. The absence of a strong, charismatic leader further diminishes hope for effective reform, leaving many skeptical about the opposition’s ability to enact significant change post-war.

Please see overleaf for information about the author and further reading.

2 The fieldwork was conducted before Navalny’s tragic death.

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ANALYSIS

The Popular Geopolitics of the Russian Diaspora in Estonia: Gaps, Cleavages, Disconnections

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Abstract

In this paper, I am studying narratives of Russian immigrants who settled in Estonia and share anti-Putin and anti-war attitudes. I argue that they differ dramatically in their discursive strategies. My research shows that a major dividing line is the one separating those immigrants whose narratives are predominantly Russia-focused from those who seek to integrate themselves into the broader Estonian and European agenda of supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression. The existence of these two groups does not, however, prevent many Russian immigrants from seeking a balance between the two positions.

The new Russian diaspora in Estonia is comprised of a relatively small group of Russian citizens who fled their homeland because of the ongoing war and managed to settle in a country whose policy toward Moscow is one of the most intransigent in Europe. In my analysis, I am primarily interested in those immigrants from Russia who consistently produce politically relevant narratives from the vantage point of their positionality as anti-Putin and anti-war activists. However, these two common denominators neither guarantee the compatibility of individual storylines nor establish a common political frame for them. Despite having come to Estonia with a shared background as anti-Putin and anti-war activists, they nevertheless differ dramatically in their discursive strategies, including their political assumptions, assessments, and anticipations, and don't share a common identity in either ethnic or ideological sense.

A major dividing line that I would like to explore in this essay is the one separating those immigrants whose narratives are predominantly Russia-focused from those

who seek to integrate themselves into the broader Estonian and European agenda of supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression. The former group seeks to engage with Russian domestic politics, seeing such engagement as an investment in future regime change at home. The latter group, meanwhile, appears to be more skeptical about the prospects of positive transformations in Russia in the near future, prompting its members to focus on assisting Ukraine, whose success on the battlefield is seen as the precondition for any possible change in Russia. The existence of these two groups does not, however, does not prevent many Russian immigrants from seeking a balance between the two positions.

In this article, I approach this topic from the perspective of popular geopolitics (Saunders and Strukov 2017), a research sub-field that looks at how key categories of space, borders, territoriality, and center-periphery relations are discussed in a variety of public narratives aimed at broad audience(s), often in opposition to official foreign policy discourses. Popular geopolitics

is helpful for understanding different visions of Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, and Europe among the new Russian diaspora, as well as the policy practices that stand behind them.

Russia-Centric Narratives

Logically, for many members of the Russian diaspora, their home country remains the major focal point. Most of the narratives publicly produced by Russian immigrants circulate in Russian language, a fact that attests not only to their authors' political priorities, but also to the audiences they address. Several points are important to underline at this juncture.

Russia-centric voices contribute to promoting a Russophone alternative to Putin's discourse, debunking the key tenets of Russian propaganda and misinformation, particularly among those whom the Kremlin considers "compatriots living abroad." Thus, Boris Koval'sky, an ethnic Ukrainian musician who worked in Russia until 2022 and then fled to Estonia, on his YouTube channel popularizes radical assessments of Putin's regime as sharing many substantial characteristics with fascist states (Bylo Stalo 2024) and of Russian society as being replete with totalitarian practices of submission to dictatorial rule. Jan Levchenko, a former lecturer at the Higher School of Economics, in a series of regular public pronouncements, raises the important issues of collective guilt and responsibility. Anna Zueva, a journalist who left Buryatia for Estonia in 2023, covers domestic politics in Russia's ethnic regions from a decolonial perspective on her YouTube channel, emphasizing these regions' endemic dependence on the political will of the federal center.

This popular geopolitics resonates with such trends in Estonian discourse as the characterization of Putin's regime as a dangerous dictatorship that has made Russian society complicit in its crimes. Estonia is also interested in exploring the state of minds within Russia's ethnic regions as potential challengers to Moscow's colonial rule.

Other commentators, meanwhile, put forward narratives that mesh less well with those of their host government.

First, individuals who are heavily involved in seeking to influence the Russian domestic agenda often have rosy expectations for the future of Russia as a democratic state and a part of Europe. Thus, the Estonia-based Lyubov Sobol, a close associate of the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny, in June 2024 claimed that Russian civil society is blossoming, which is a prerequisite to Russia's normalization (The Breakfast Show 2024). This and many other similar statements do not chime with the official discourse of the Estonian government, which is openly skeptical about the potential

for positive change in Russia any time soon (DW *na russkom* 2023) and generally does not welcome the presence of Russian citizens in Estonia (EU Debates 2023).

As Sobol's narrative shows, the flip side of this optimistic belief in the inevitability of a new democratic Russia might be a soft distancing from the reality of the war in Ukraine. For example, members of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation do not participate in anti-war conventions organized by such opposition leaders as Garry Kasparov through the Free Russia Foundation and are reluctant to support Russian volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side.

Second, many Russia-centric speakers in one way or another reproduce some parts of the Kremlin's discourse toward the Baltic states, more often implicitly than explicitly. This relates, in particular, to critical attitudes toward Estonian policies that are considered by many newly arrived Russians to discriminate against them, including a ban on border crossings for Russian holders of Schengen visas, sanctions on vehicles registered in Russia, and the discontinuation of cultural and academic contacts with Russian counterparts.

Following the sentencing of Viacheslav Morozov, a former employee of the University of Tartu, for working in Russian foreign intelligence (GRU), some anti-Putin/anti-war voices criticized the Estonian law enforcement system, in the process de facto reproducing Putin's view of Europe as unwelcoming to Russians: "If you happen to have a wrong passport, you will be treated harshly and in an unpredictable way, and ultimately a decision regarding your case will be taken" (post on Facebook, June 19, 2024—anonimized). This consonance is not helpful to the acceptance and recognition of the voices of the new Russian diaspora in Estonia.

Another aspect of this problem is a collision between many Russian immigrants' to Estonia's criticism of the policy of isolating Russia, on the one hand, and the bordering policy of the Estonian government, on the other hand. What for the former is a matter of convenience is for the latter a national security issue. This gap is broadened by Russophones in other European countries who claim that the Baltic states differ from other EU member states in their attitudes toward Russia. In their interpretation, Baltic governments' decision to ban Russian cars is "shameful and stems from weakness and failure of sanction policy towards the Kremlin. Our approaches are radically different, and...we are ready to go to court," said Maria Pevchikh, one of the leading voices of the anti-Putin opposition (TV Rain 2023).

This perceptual cleavage paves the way for different visions of security and insecurity. For example, Sergei Kovalchenko, a journalist from St. Petersburg who

has resided in Estonia since the start of the full-scale war, challenged the claim that Russia was maliciously attempting to influence Russophone Estonians through patriotic propaganda: “Let Russians in Narva listen to the patriotic concert” staged on the Russian side of the border on Victory Day (May 9), he said (Dmitrii Gavrilov 2023). His interviews are replete with clichés about the inequalities between citizens and non-citizens in Estonia, as well as de facto denial of the Soviet occupation of Estonia (Pribaltaets 2023).

Critical attitudes toward Ukraine, quite widespread among Russians living in Estonia, represent another fertile ground for conflict. A highly illustrative example is the response of Toomas Hendrik Ilves, former president of Estonia, to an online post by a Russian entrepreneur who had recently moved in Estonia and was complaining about what he termed the “substitution” of the Russian language with Ukrainian in Estonia. “This is not your country... In Russia you can read all the Russian you want. It is not far away. Whining about the country in which you are a guest is rude. We don’t like rude people,” Ilves replied (Trumsi 2024).

These examples are characteristic of a broader trend: according to a recent study, integration into the host society is impeded by a high level of critical attitudes among the new Russian diaspora in Europe. Fully forty-five percent of Russian migrants reported having experienced discrimination, a share much higher than the European average. Across all European countries, more than half of those who changed their host country between September 2022 and summer 2023 cited discrimination as a factor in doing so (Kamalov and Sergeeva 2024). These numbers attest to the high expectations and self-assertiveness of newly arrived Russians in Europe, as well as widespread critical attitudes toward the countries whose authorities have allowed them to enter and stay.

Thinking Beyond Russia

A second meaningful cluster of discourses and practices of popular geopolitics generated by Russian immigrants aims to position these individuals beyond the Russia-specific agenda and break away from its constraints. More specifically, this entails explicit engagement with Ukraine and a consequent repositioning in relation to Estonian political discourse. The most visible figures in this realm are Evgeniya Chirikova, Andrei Volna, and Arkady Babchenko.

Chirikova, once an ecological activist in Moscow, is now a leading voice in the Russian émigré community publicly supportive of Russian citizens fighting on the side of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In her words, this is more important than sanctions or assistance to Ukrainian refugees in Europe, since only Ukraine’s

military victory has the potential to trigger changes within Russia. Chirikova has also advocated for President Zelensky’s peace formula and claimed that this support symbolically includes Russian anti-war activists in the Peace Summit held in Switzerland in June 2024 (Activatica 2024a). She was also part of a group of Russian oppositionists who visited Ukraine in March and June 2024 on the invitation of the Ukrainian government. In a series of vlogs from Ukraine, she characterized the Russian occupation as similar to the Nazi invasion (Activatica 2024b).

Volna, a top-level surgeon with an international reputation, left Russia in 2022, received refugee status in Estonia, and started regularly visiting Ukraine to work in military hospitals. Together with Chirikova, he has promoted a fundraising campaign to buy medical equipment used to save the lives of wounded Ukrainian soldiers. In his multiple public pronouncements and interviews with Ukrainian media, Volna has expressed full support for the strategy of military defeat of Putin’s regime and espoused the idea that Russian society shares responsibility for the war (Andrei Volna 2024).

Babchenko, a Russian journalist who moved from his temporary residence in Ukraine to Estonia, is also known for his practical support for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. His public narrative in Russian language is meant to address Russophones in Ukraine and Europe, and is marked by full solidarity with the Estonian state’s policy of restricting mobility from Russia. He has even suggested more radical measures, including complete border closure: “Instead of a bridge between Narva and Ivangorod, Estonia needs a trench with crocodiles. No Russians should be allowed in Europe. We are tired of you. You had eight years to flee but preferred to stay there. Now Russia is seen as a black hole, and Europe should not care too much about domestic Russian narratives” (Roman Tsimbaliuk 2024).

These three examples show that there is strong support for Ukraine among a subset of Russian immigrants, whose narratives align with the priorities of Estonian foreign policy. In particular, Babchenko and Volna were critical of Ilya Yashin and Andrei Pivovarov, Russian oppositionists released by the Kremlin as part of the prisoner swap, for their appeals to soften the Western sanctions on Russia and start peace negotiations with Putin’s regime. However, the Ukrainian side sees their activities as the work of individuals rather than of a politically meaningful and coherent group. Moreover, Ukrainians can hardly be sympathetic to any attempt to morally or politically equate Russian anti-war activists and Ukrainian society as two victims—or hostages—of Putin’s regime. One such example comes from Chirikova: “On July 8, 2024, Putin’s army attacked a chil-

dren's hospital in Kyiv, and on the same day two Russian civil activists, Berkovich and Petriychuk, were sentenced to six years in prison for nothing. Both tragedies are effects of one phenomenon—the war” (Activatica post on X, July 9, 2024). From the Ukrainian perspective, such statements might be considered an attempt to find a new frame of symbolic linkage with Russia—a Russian equivalent for the enormous suffering Ukraine has experienced due to the invasion.

Conclusions

Russian exile communities in Europe produce new geopolitical narratives and imageries, contributing to the pluralization of “Russian worlds” through their attempts to carve out alternative meanings of Russianness that might be integrated into the broader normative discourses common in Europe and Ukraine. Immigrants’ narratives seek not only to dissociate themselves from Putin’s Russia, but also to shatter the Kremlin’s monopoly on defining and representing Russia, from symbolic attempts to include the anti-war opposition in the peace process on Ukraine’s conditions to distinguishing Putin’s regime from Russian society and imagining a future Russia that would be compatible with Europe.

Like their Soviet-era counterparts, the post-2022 Russian immigrants have been going through the agency-building experience of struggling, as members of a minority group, to integrate into Estonian society. The “old” Russophones’ agency was premised on having the Russian state as a potential protector and defender, which led many Russian speakers to symbolic association with Moscow’s officialdom. The new Russian diaspora constitutes itself on completely different premises—through association with a hypothetical “democratic Russia” in the distant future, or with Ukraine’s military resistance to Russian attack. The former standpoint implies regime change in Russia impelled by domestic factors, while the latter envisions liberating Russia from Putin’s rule through direct and practical help to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. While both narratives and visions of the future are grounded in profound disdain for Putin’s regime (Soldatov and Borogan 2024), they tend to compete with—rather than complement—each other. This makes the prospect of a unified Russian opposition-in-exile questionable in the foreseeable future. Instead, it is likely to remain a loosely connected group of people seeking to find a common language and identify ways to translate their narratives into action.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

"Why Democratize, If It Already Works Well?" Power Hierarchy and Failed Democratization in the Russian Anti-War Community in Exile

Pavel Kronov

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Abstract

This article describes the power structure of—and struggle for internal democratization within—one of the Russian anti-war communities in exile. Although it protests against Putin's dictatorship, the community itself is governed by an unelected, unaccountable, and unchangeable Organizing Team, despite numerous attempts by dozens of activists to change the status quo. Two broad theories serve to explain this apparent paradox. First, the political socialization of many activists-in-exile occurred in Russia, where autocratic dispositions and corporate discourses were easier to acquire than democratic ones. Second, the very concept of democracy often excludes democratic practices as such, while focusing on efficiency, support of democratic politicians, and/or consumption of democracy-promoting content. After gaining experience of participatory democracy in the unsuccessful struggle to democratize this community, however, a large group of dissidents eventually created a new one on democratic principles.

While the socio-demographic characteristics and political views of politically active migrants from Russia are relatively well-known, the character of their political practices is unclear. No doubt, the new wave of migrants—and activist communities in particular—consists of richer, more educated, and more politicized people than those who have remained in Russia (Kamalov et al. 2022). Yet unless one follows the dubious presumption that the middle class is a cornerstone of democracy,

this says nothing about the political nature of the activism. To put it simply, the middle class as such can exhibit almost any views and implement any political practices.

The political structures in grassroots initiatives of those middle classes coming from an authoritarian regime with a highly atomized social structure and corporations-dominated economy must be especially vulnerable to autocratization. It is not guaranteed, therefore, that Russian anti-war, pro-democratic communities in

exile will follow basic democratic principles, be it elections, collective management of resources, accountability, or deliberations on equal terms. Nor is there any guarantee that explicit rules requiring compliance with the “general will” will be established.

The Case

The case analyzed here is the community of anti-war Russians (RAW), founded in 2022 in the capital of an EU member state. RAW has engaged in activities quite typical of Russians in exile: demonstrating against the war in Ukraine and repressions in Russia, fundraising and writing letters to political prisoners, organizing educational events with prominent speakers, commemorating Navalny and Nemtsov, and helping Ukrainian refugees. This makes the findings quite generalizable; other Russians in exile might have built similar power hierarchies.

I draw on three data sources. First, I analyze a document that explains the decision-making procedure and power structure of RAW. Second, I review the minutes of the community’s assembly, where democratization was called for. Third, I explore confidential interviews and documented informal conversations with community members, making it possible to compare formal proclamations with the reality on the ground. This diversity of sources also illuminates the differences between RAW’s activists on two key characteristics: how they approach political socialization and how they conceptualize democracy.

Power Hierarchy

My analysis of the power hierarchy juxtaposes a document called “How Does RAW [City name] Work? Answers to Questions. Version 1.0 of 02.05.24” against the experience of activists. Notably, as the title indicates, the first document regulating the functioning of the community was created in May 2024, more than two years after RAW was launched. With their “questions,” the community’s activists pushed the Organizing Team to make its decision-making and composition more transparent. The “Answers to Questions,” an activist explained, was created by a member of the Organizing Team in response to this growing pressure for democratization.

How Are Decisions Made?

First and foremost, the document explains the principles used by the Organizing Team in their work. None of them describe the role played by regular members or key activists in decision-making procedures at any level. It is therefore implied that the sole decision-making body is the Organizing Team—even if the Team is allegedly committed to “mak[ing] decisions based on data and expert

opinion where possible,” as well as “accept[ing] constructive feedback while withstanding destructive criticism.”

However, the discourse of data-driven management and reliance on feedback has little to do with democracy. Rather, it is rooted in corporate jargon and the attempts of authoritarian systems to conceal real power relations. The members of the Organizing Team (the word “Team” itself having been imported from sports to business and project management rather than coming from political realm) claim to be experts in community management. In their view, this alleged expertise justifies them in resisting the majority’s calls for collective deliberation and the accountability of power holders.

Similarly, while seemingly democratic in the sense that they allow members of the community to address the “authorities” directly, feedback mechanisms are far from democratic decision-making. Corporations issue a plethora of feedback forms, but these guarantee neither transparent consideration of the request nor that the desired change will be made. The final decision is always in the hands of those who receive the feedback, not those who give it. In addition, feedback may not be listened to if it contradicts the opinion of “experts.” The members of the Organizing Team position themselves as political entrepreneurs, leaving for the other activists the role of clients and followers.

Who Runs the Community?

Of course, a reliance on experts and feedback is not authoritarian per se—more important is how the body of decision-makers is formed and disbanded. The Organizing Team explains the procedure that legitimizes its power in the following way:

Active participants/volunteers of RAW can be added to the Organizing Team if all members of the Organizing Team are sure that the candidate meets the following criteria:

1. The candidate is actively involved in the life of the group and takes initiative.
2. The candidate will honor and support the group’s mission and principles.
3. The candidate will communicate and work respectfully and constructively with all other members of the Organizational Team and with the group as a whole.
4. The candidate passes a background check.

Notably, two of the criteria are formulated in the future tense: activists may or may not be accepted to the Organ-

izing Team on the basis of something they have not yet done. A third criterion, a “background check,” expresses distrust and is characterized by extreme vagueness. Even if the members of the Organizing Team resort to substantial arguments about risk and safety, the main danger is, perhaps, that no one has conducted a background check on members of the Organizing Team themselves. In practice, anyone can be denied access to power on such grounds.

Clearly, the document says nothing about the community’s power to elect the Organizing Team or change it—in whole or in part—in the event of unsatisfactory performance. It is impossible to disband the Team, while the recruitment of new members takes place only with the approval of old ones. As a result, the anti-war pro-democratic community is led by a permanent, self-appointed, and self-reproducing group of people. However, non-members of the Organizing Team do not necessarily see this as problematic, given the performance of the Organizing Team:

From the outside I don’t see anyone taking over. I just see all the organizers working hard for two years. (L, not from the Organizing Team, RAW Roundtable Minutes, May 3, 2024)

Yet the key problem with these rules is not their content, but the fact that the rules were made by the Organizing Team itself—without the participation of the community, and without the community being able to change them. Undoubtedly, this has reinforced inequality within the community and allowed the Organizing Team to concentrate power in its own hands.

Informal Power and Resistance to Democratization

Most activists, including former members of the Organizing Team, are deeply dissatisfied with the status quo, and some were willing to share their analysis and sentiments. All in all, the activity of the self-nominated Organizing Team has created a situation in which the power in the RAW belongs to individuals over whom the community has no control. While the document analyzed above attempts to formalize the hierarchy (as with the four criteria for admission to the Organizing Team), in reality the community is run by people with informal power. Such power is less visible but, as community activists claim, more influential. Access to power is often based on good personal relationships rather than community activity. To ensure legitimacy and functionality, informal community leaders surround themselves with activists who support them unconditionally, often to the point of having no opinion of their own. In reality, therefore, decisions are made not by the whole Organizing

Team (about 10 people), but by 1–2 people with the tacit consent of the other nominal leaders. Two “bosses” have been on the Organizing Team since RAW’s founding in 2022, even as other members have rotated off it. One of them lives in London and most activists have never seen him in person. This gives rise to conspiracy theories among activists that he works for someone like Russian oligarch-in-exile Mikhail Khodorkovsky and that RAW is one of Khodorkovsky’s projects for personal promotion.

Quite naturally, only those who support this system of power remain in such a dysfunctional environment. The other, no less active but more democratically oriented, members of the Organizing Team often leave the Team—and even the community—out of frustration, anger, and a sense of helplessness. The Team, as an interview with its unchangeable leader indicated, does not see this as a problem and does not do anything about it. As a consequence, active community members often feel used by the Organizing Team. Under the current arrangement, the sharing of effort and risk is in sharp conflict with the individual power of a small, unelected group over community resources and activities. The Organizing Team appropriates the deeds and ideas of others, whom it then squeezes out of the community. But yet again, due to a conviction that efficiency (i.e., the absence of negative product-related feedback) is more important than democracy, the status quo is defended:

All this [democratization] will paralyze the work. Why force each other? Especially if you have no complaints about our work. <...> The question arises: [if] this current enclosed structure is working with high results, why [make] radical changes, why, if it already works well? (K. from Organizing Team, RAW Roundtable Minutes, May 3, 2024)

Struggle for Democratization

The obvious export of big business vocabulary in an attempt to seem democratic implies a misconceptualization of democracy. Of course, anti-war Russians in exile hardly invented this discursive trick. Political scholar and former municipal deputy Alexander Zamyatin has pointed to the conceptual difficulties of various kinds of democracy (Zamyatin et al. 2020). Under his classification, the Organizing Team of RAW embodies a rather conservative democracy. Democrats of this sort believe that politics, first and foremost, must be effective, and power must be distributed on meritocratic grounds—to the competent people with supposedly good intentions. In its extreme version, democracy of this kind is confined to voting once every few years to delegate authority to professionals, as ordinary people lack time and knowledge and are easy to mislead. These “democrats,”

then, are those who are satisfied with free and fair elections, follow only the “right” oppositional media, listen only to “right” talking heads, and try to avoid ideological fights to keep the good people united against the evil. Yet the bitter historical truth, Zamyatin claims, is that these ideas come originally from the opponents of democracy (Zamyatin et al. 2020). Such activists lack both socialization into and even a conception of participatory democracy.

Participatory democracy, as opposed to RAW’s mix of elitist democracy and corporate project-management, implies democratic practices that go far beyond casting a vote once in a while: collective deliberations, management of common resources, and, of course, political struggle. Precisely because the Organizing Team was reproducing authoritarian practices, the most active part of RAW (40 activists) organized a fight for democratization. These activists drafted a proposed “Constitution” for the community, inviting every member to take part in the process and making decisions openly, either by majority vote or consensus. Yet the Organizing Team refused to accept any of the activists’ proposals. Then the dissidents called a vote for re-appropriation of control over the community’s resources from the Organizing Team. More than 90 percent voted that the Organizing Team must transfer control over the group chat. Even-

tually, on June 3, 2024, the Organizing Team shut down the common group to prevent any further deliberations. As of August 31, 2024, it remains prohibited to send any messages in the RAW group. The “efficient” community managers have disbanded the community itself.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how an anti-war, pro-democratic group in exile can reproduce typical authoritarian practices: ruling without rules, preserving power in a small group with informal relationships, and resisting any proposals for democratization. At the same time, such a power hierarchy allowed activists to try out real participatory democracy, which first and foremost means fighting for democracy. The Organizing Team’s use of corporate project-management discourses and its exclusive control of common resources pushed the majority of its activists to engage in collective deliberations about the development of the community. Eventually, the dissidents formed a separate group, based on collectively developed democratic principles.

This analysis calls for further discussion of how anti-war Russians are organized, as democracy is not a fancy label—it is first and foremost a difficult practice. It is all the more difficult for those who were socialized in an anti-democratic environment.

About the Author

Pavel Kronov holds a Master’s degree in political science. He works as a researcher with the Public Sociology Laboratory (PS Lab).

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Men's Words, Women's Work: Exploring the Reverse Gender Gap in Post-2022 Russian Emigration

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Abstract

Are men truly more engaged in politics or do they just talk a good game? Since February 2022, over a million Russians have fled political repression, and among them, a surge in female activism has emerged, challenging traditional gender roles. Despite having fewer resources than men, Russian women are more politically and civically active abroad. This “reverse gender gap” has been marked in interviews with exiled activists and consistently observed in the OutRush survey. Traditional predictors of political participation do not fully explain this gap, which seems to be driven by war-induced emotions. I demonstrate that efforts and rewards are unfairly distributed between the genders: while women engage in intellectual work, they are, *inter alia*, disproportionately burdened with emotional labor, as well as the “domestic” and invisible tasks within the movements, whereas men focus primarily on high-visibility roles.

Since February 2022, over a million Russians have fled political dissatisfaction, fear, and repression, forming part of a broader trend of crisis-induced migration. These well-educated, urbanized, resourceful migrants with gender-egalitarian attitudes are politically and civically engaged (OutRush 2024). Despite their displacement, many continue their activism, co-opting local populations and authorities to alter the situation in their homeland from abroad.

Among these emigrants, a surge in female activism has emerged, challenging traditional gender roles in politics. Russian emigrants have formed various grassroots initiatives within Russia and globally, including aid organizations and anti-war groups. The rise of women in these political and social movements has been particularly notable, especially with the emergence of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR).

The collected data indicate that women's activism is accompanied by high costs and requires more resources than that of their male counterparts. Inequalities in activism between the sexes are the product of entrenched patriarchal stereotypes and reflect the consequences of gender socialization within Russian society.

Theoretically, women's greater vulnerability and the barriers they face in the political sphere should reduce their activism. However, OutRush data show that Russian women emigrants are more politically and civically active in almost all types of measured anti-war and civic activism. This phenomenon, known as the “reverse gender gap,” is observed in all three waves of the panel survey, confirming the significant role of women in both the political and civic spheres.

In the final section, I argue that one reason for the rise in women's activism is war-induced emotions, which

are felt and channeled differently by men and women. Using OutRush data and a series of interviews with FAR activists abroad, this paper analyzes the differences between male and female activism among Russian emigrants and explores the reasons behind the reverse gender gap.

Gendered Activism During Wartime

The reverse gender gap in political participation, being a relatively new phenomenon, is under-researched. However, it has sparked debate as to whether women are more politically active than men in certain cases and what factors influence their engagement. Classic studies on political participation stress that political activism has been dominated by men, with women voting less (Almond and Verba 1963), showing less interest in political parties (Bennett and Bennett 1989), and generally being less politically active. Moreover, researchers highlight the quite consistent findings that women have less political knowledge (Dassonneville and McAllister 2018), ambition (Fox and Lawless 2014), and public support in this arena (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978).

As feminism and women's suffrage spread, the gender gap started to diminish, especially in some political areas. Some contemporary research uses both quantitative and qualitative data to explore this phenomenon, considering a variety of factors, such as age, types of activism or forms of participation. Qualitative data, in particular, provide deeper insights into the reasons for the gender gap.

For example, FAR activists argue that women are a driving force in activism, especially visible in volunteering. However, patriarchal structures and gender socialization often render their work invisible and their voices unheard. Anti-war feminist organizations during

the war exemplify gendered activism. Political crises and catastrophes, like war, cause societal changes, including shifts in gender roles, which often place additional burdens of responsibility and emotional labor on women.

Below, I will explore the qualitative differences in male and female activism according to FAR activists.

Differences in Difficulties: Qualitative Insights into Gendered Challenges in Activism

FAR participants highlight three key differences between male and female activism: agenda, risks and resources, and gender-based role allocation.

Agenda: Participants noted that gender socialization makes women more attuned to issues like domestic violence and professional inequality. These structural inequalities shape their activism. One activist explains, “It takes a long time to explain to men that for a woman to share her experience of violence, she must first endure it, process it, then verbalize it, and finally face condemnation and doubt” (QRIH011).

Risks and resources: Due to different privilege sets, women often need more resources to sustain activism and face higher risks. Women frequently bear a triple burden: regular work, family responsibilities and housework, and activism accompanied by personal challenges in emigration. Although it might seem that anti-war activism is less risky for women because authoritarian states are more lenient toward them, the reality is ambiguous. Almost all participants agree that women generally feel less safe, and this insecurity extends to the political sphere. Women may be more fearful at rallies or in police custody due to potential harassment and threats of violence, including rape and psychological abuse.

A male activist admits, “Of course, women’s experience of activism is worse, with additional barriers and problems from society and even colleagues. If a regular activist has a shot leg, women activists often have two shot legs and a weight attached to them. But most men in leadership don’t realize this. In all the communities I’ve been involved in, women have always been the main driving force” (DNIH014).

Gender-based role allocation: Not infrequently, gender roles are clearly assigned in social movements: women do the “domestic” and emotional work within the organization, while men take leadership positions, engage in intellectual work, and handle planning and representation. Thus, women are less visible in protest and political movements, often doing invisible but crucial work, while men become the public face of the movement. This is linked to gender roles and the perception of women in politics. Activists note that women are often not taken seriously and their voices receive less attention and credibility. Even in feminist movements, a charismatic male

figure is seen as more authoritative, while women face high barriers to entering politics and leadership positions.

For FAR participants, women’s activism often stems from daily life and addresses real issues they face, making them more empathetic and willing to work without expecting success. They suggest that for men, meanwhile, observing the results of their work may be more important in motivating them to continue it. As a consequence, women’s activism is often overshadowed by male figures, although in many cases it is women who are doing the lion’s share of the work to sustain the movement, both materially and emotionally.

It’s often easier for women to work without hope of success. I don’t know, maybe it has to do with female gender socialization, when you wash dishes every day, and you realize that tomorrow you will wash dishes, always you will wash dishes and nothing will ever change. A lot of women, they just do every day, there’s helping one family, second family, third family, one ticket, second ticket, without expecting the world to change tomorrow. And I’ve heard from women that they say, “Men often say, ‘You do your volunteering, and I’ll go write a strategy’” (QH027).

This inequitable division of labor and recognition is criticized by feminists. The public views politics as male-dominated due to patriarchy and prevailing stereotypes that elevate the visibility of men. Figuratively speaking, men do activism with their heads; women do it with their hands. While men do the words, women do the work. This is particularly significant given women’s greater vulnerability in life, exile, and activism.

Listen, women do more of the work; men do most of the words (RDIH005).

The Reverse Gender Gap: Quantitative Evidence

The theoretical assumption that women are less interested in politics is not supported by the OutRush data. There are no statistically significant gender differences in political interest. Across all three survey waves, 91% of women and 91% of men reported a high interest in Russian politics. Additionally, 67% of women and 64% of men are interested in the politics of their host country, and 50% of women and 51% of men talk about political issues often or all the time.

While interviews show that women are not necessarily less active but simply less visible, *quantitative data suggest that they are indeed more engaged*. In March 2022, OutRush data showed women were 7.3% more likely than men to engage in digital activism, 5.2% more

likely to protest, and 3% more likely to financially support initiatives in Russia. Women were also 13% more likely to help Ukrainian refugees, 3% more likely to volunteer (rising to 8.5% in September 2022), 1.9% more likely to support host country initiatives, and 4.1% more likely to assist fellow Russian emigrants. Despite the narrowing reverse gender gap over time, women's political and civic activism remains significantly higher than men's (see Figures 1 and 2 on p. 17).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the overall decline in activism over time among both genders and the narrowing of the reverse gender gap. In the next section, I will explain the reasons for these dynamics.

Unpacking the Drivers of Female Activism in Emigration

While women's significant involvement in political and civic activism is well-documented, the reasons behind this, particularly in migration contexts, require further exploration. Scholars highlight (see, for example, Martiniello 2005) various macro, meso, and individual factors influencing emigrant political participation. These include political beliefs, past political involvement, "institutional completeness" within immigrant communities, perceptions of residency status, feelings of belonging, understanding of political systems, and social capital. Traditional determinants like education, linguistic skills, socio-economic status, gender, age, and generational cohort might also play influential roles. Our analysis shows that the contribution of most of these variables to the gap is not that significant. Therefore, I focus on other factors, namely emotions caused by the war and subsequent emigration, which are often overlooked in studies of the gender gap.

War and subsequent exile have profound emotional impacts, and emotions are key catalysts of activism in social movement studies. Studies show (see, for example, Aroian, Norris, and Chiang 2003) that women are generally more vulnerable than men and, in emigration, are more prone to high levels of distress. Indeed, according to an OutRush survey conducted in the summer of 2023, women were 12% more likely to feel sad and 7% more likely to feel lonely than men (OutRush 2024). It is known that distress has a negative impact on subjective well-being, and theoretically, the worse a person's mental state is, the fewer emotional resources he or she has for activism. However, the case of Russian emigrant women shows that although distress may affect their activism negatively, it is not a determining factor. Despite their poorer emotional state, women are still more active, which allows us to assume the presence of some other significant catalysts for their activism.

In addition to the hardships of emigration, the realities of war bring about death and loss, with women mourning their sons, husbands, and grandsons. These

tragedies evoke a spectrum of emotions, from guilt and responsibility for the conflict's initiation to a longing for amends, alongside profound grief, suffering, and empathy for those affected. While some emotions (like grief, guilt, and depression) are passive, others (like rage, hatred, and a desire for justice) might lead to political action.

In September 2022, OutRush data showed that 55% of women felt guilty about starting the war compared to 48% of men (see Figure 3 on p. 18). Additionally, 64% of women and 57% of men felt responsible for the conflict. When it came to making amends for Russia's activities in Ukraine, 78% of women wanted to do so, compared to only 65% of men. Thus, war-induced emotions like guilt and compassion make women more prone to sympathize with victims and those affected by the conflict. This increased sensitivity to the human costs of war leads to a lower likelihood of endorsing military actions and a higher likelihood of participating in anti-war activism.

Although there are many predictors of political participation, war-induced emotions appear to be one of the main reasons for increased female activism among Russian migrants after February 2022. Being more vulnerable, women are more likely to empathize with the victims of war and to suffer from emotional burnout. The narrowing of the reverse gender gap in political and civic activism over time could be related to a reduction in the intensity and normalization of war experiences, as well as emotional burnout, which many female activists reported.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the dynamics of the reverse gender gap in political and civic activism among Russian emigrants after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, highlighting the quantitative and qualitative differences between male and female activism. Contrary to theoretical expectations, OutRush data reveal that Russian women in exile are more politically and civically active than their male counterparts. This increased engagement among female activists may be driven by war-induced emotions such as guilt, responsibility, and a desire for reparation.

The interviews with FAR activists further show that despite women's significant contributions to activism, they face greater risks, responsibilities, and systemic invisibility due to patriarchal structures and gender socialization. These challenges highlight the need for more support and recognition of women's roles in social movements. While acknowledging the significant contribution of Russian men to anti-war efforts in exile, this article underscores the fundamental role women play in shaping political landscapes and highlights the greater barriers they face in their activism.

Please see overleaf for information about the author and further reading.

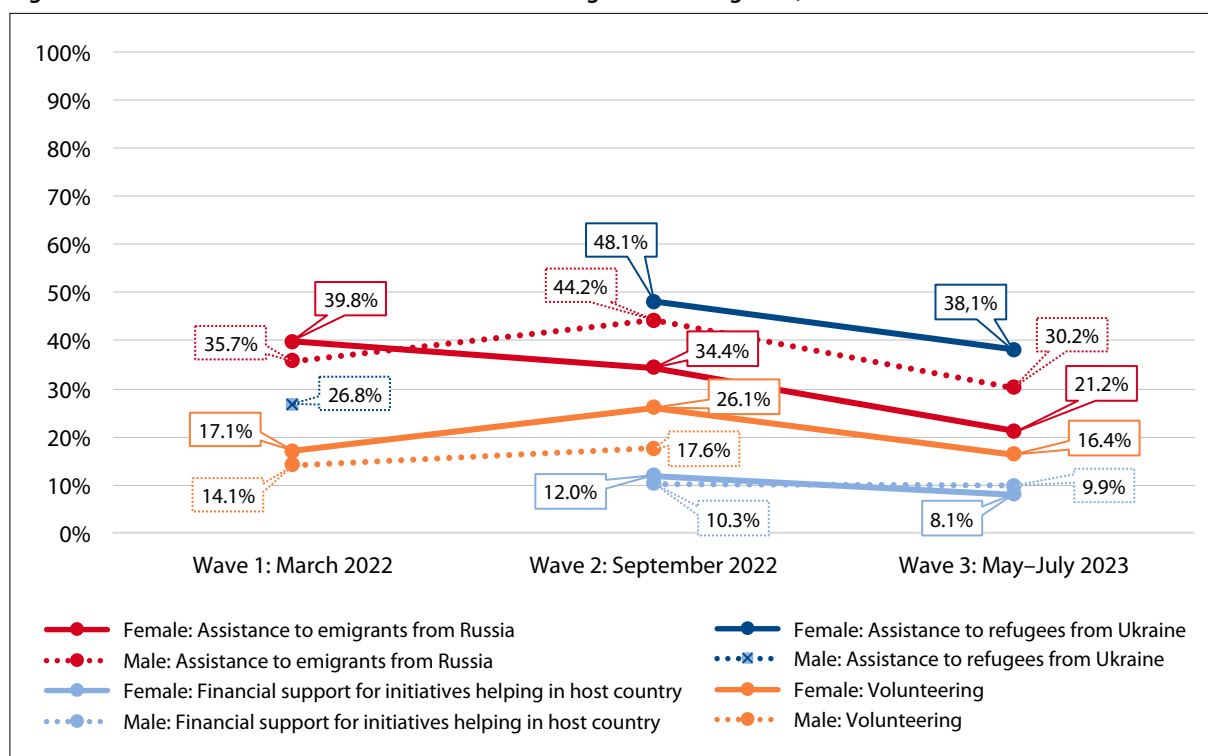
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Further Reading

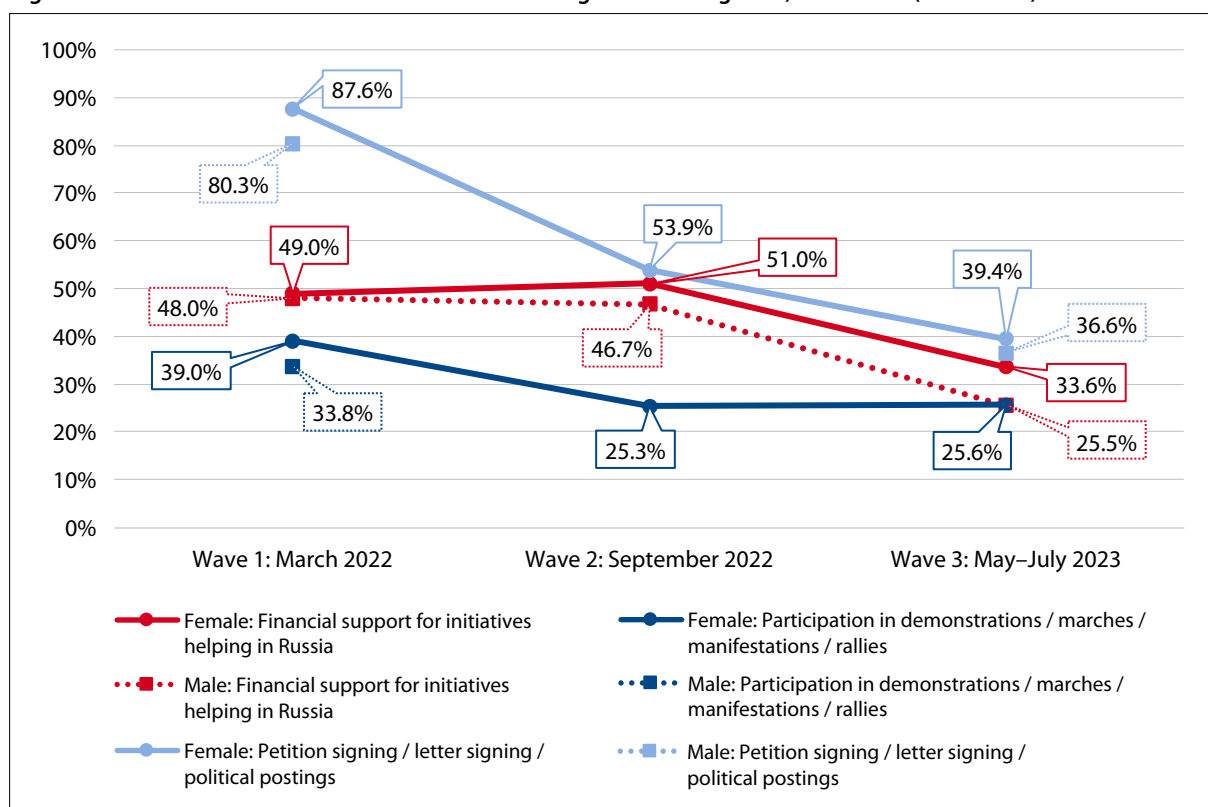
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Figure 1: Gender Differences in Civic Activism among Russian Emigrants, 2022–2023



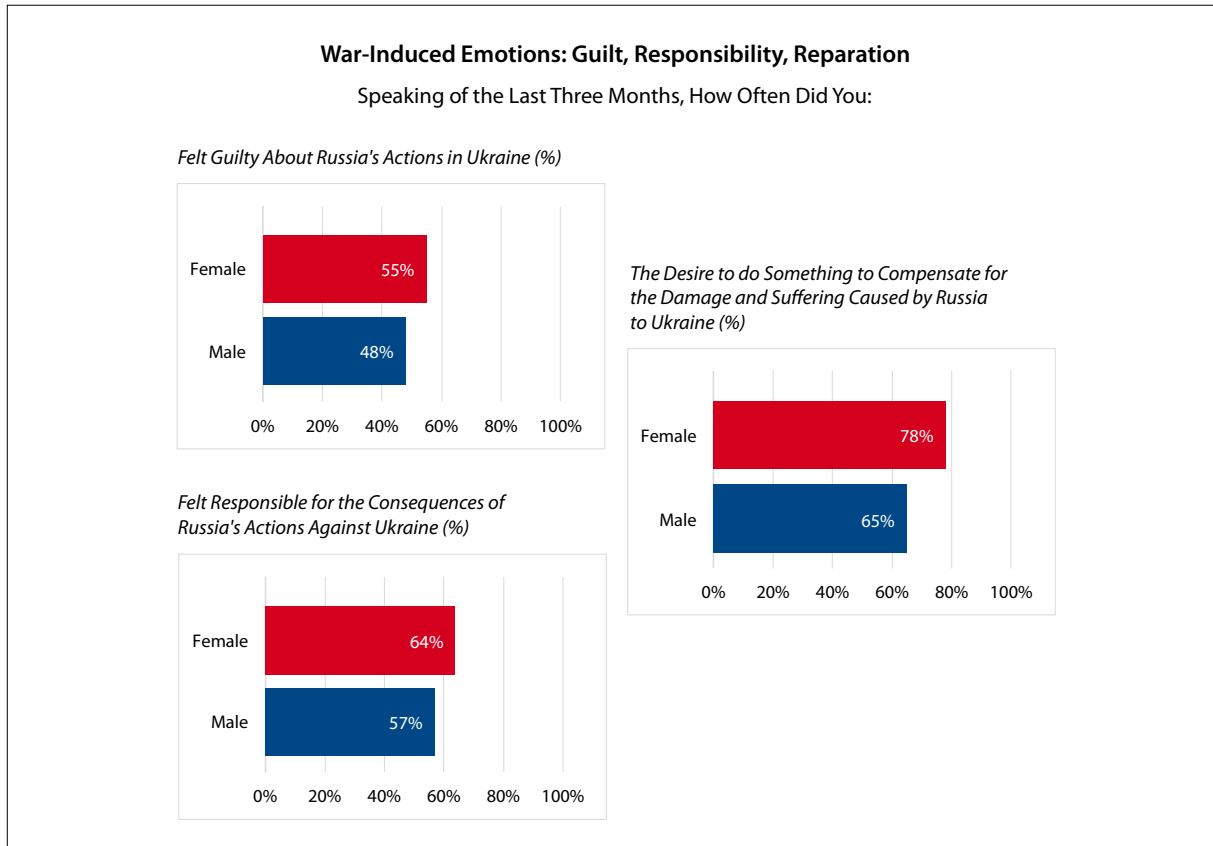
Source: Three Waves of OutRush Survey (<https://outrush.io/eng>): Wave 1: March 2022, Wave 2: September 2022, Wave 3: May–July 2023; N unique: 465

Figure 2: Gender Differences in Civic Activism among Russian Emigrants, 2022–2023 (Continued)



Source: Three Waves of OutRush Survey (<https://outrush.io/eng>): Wave 1: March 2022, Wave 2: September 2022, Wave 3: May–July 2023; N unique: 465

Figure 3: Gendered Aspects of War-Induced Emotions



Source: OutRush Survey (<https://outrush.io/eng>), Wave 2: September 2022

Intergenerational Dynamics among Russian-Speaking Anti-War and Pro-Democracy Activists in Germany

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Abstract

This essay examines anti-war and pro-democracy activism among migrants who associate themselves with Russia, exploring activism dynamics, various issue fields, and audiences. The study is based on qualitative interviews with migrants-turned-activists and activists-turned-migrants in Germany. While they share broad pro-Ukrainian and anti-regime orientations, they exhibit differences in political vocabulary, practices, and backgrounds. We focus on four distinct fields: transnational human rights activism, migration assistance, adaptation assistance, and humanitarian support for Ukraine. We discuss challenges related to long-term collaboration and the development of inclusive political organizations, which are partially caused by the differences in migration experience and the resources available to migrants of different generations.

Migration and Activism Among Russian Migrants in Germany

Russian-speaking migrants make up one of the largest linguistic minorities in Germany. Germany has seen several waves of migration from the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU), including Russia, with Russian-German “late resettlers” and Russian-Jewish “quota refugees” being the largest categories. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Germany has continued to attract a diverse range of migrants, including skilled workers, students, refugees, and those arriving through family reunification. According to the Federal Statistical Office of Germany, the number of residents holding only a Russian passport, without German or EU citizenship, increased by 33% between 2011 and 2020, with such individuals now representing 2.2% of the foreign population. The number of first- and second-generation immigrants from Russia totals 1.35 million people, according to the 2023 microcensus (<https://www.destatis.de/>). People in this broad category have diverse experiences, political orientations, and access to political rights and therefore demonstrate different patterns of social, economic, and political integration; some of them maintain strong cultural and linguistic ties to their homeland, a pattern that is often combined with a sense of otherness (Panagiotidis 2022).

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent increase in repression within Russia, thousands of civic and political activists fled the country, with some receiving temporary protection status in Germany. This period also saw a significant rise in activism among Russian-speaking groups in Germany, which have pursued diverse agendas ranging

from pro-Kremlin to anti-Putin and anti-war. Some of the anti-war and pro-democracy groups, which are the focus of this investigation, had formed a few years before the invasion and were spurred to action by the moral shock of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

This essay examines activism among different generations of migrants who associate themselves with Russia, exploring the dynamics of activism, various issue fields, and the audiences that activists target. We discuss how different generations of activists engage in distinct forms of transnational activism, then turn to analyze humanitarian visas and migration assistance. Finally, we discuss issues related to the adaptation of new migrants and community-building. Our interviewees represent various groups involved in pro-Ukrainian and anti-war activism, therefore the topic of Russia’s war in Ukraine was raised frequently during the interviews. The selected diverse and highly relevant fields of activism mentioned in the interviews illustrate the evolving dynamics of activism across different generations of migrants. The sample consists of interviews with 13 respondents who arrived before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and 16 who arrived afterwards. We spoke with several interviewees more than once. All interviews were conducted between July 2022 and August 2024.¹

Dynamics: Migrants-Turned-Activists and Activists-Turned-Migrants

As of 2024, among the Russian anti-war and pro-democracy activists in Germany are both activists-turned-migrants and migrants-turned-activists (Piper 2009). Due to longstanding cooperation between Russian and German actors in the sphere of civil society, on the one

¹ This study relies on and extends the research project “Political Migration from Russia and Azerbaijan,” <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/research/research-clusters/migration-and-diversity/political-migration-from-russia-and-azerbaijan>.

hand, and academic and cultural fields, on the other hand, Germany has long been a destination for political migrants from Russia, particularly since the decline of the pro-democracy mobilization of 2011–2012 and the tightening of the political regime. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent totalitarian shift in Russia's domestic political landscape, including the closure of the most remaining free public arenas, many civil society actors moved to Germany. This led to the emergence of a visible, war-induced wave of activists-turned-migrants who constitute a new generation in terms of shared migration and political experiences. In Germany, they have encountered "earlier generations," i.e., initiatives and groups involving political migrants who arrived before the full-scale invasion, as well as larger groups of migrants-turned-activists—individuals who had no experience in social and political activism prior to leaving Russia. Similar to developments in other European countries, "reactive" politicization, the founding of new initiatives, and transregional networking among migrants-turned-activists were triggered by Alexey Navalny's return to Russia after his poisoning and recovery, as well as the related protests in Russia in 2021. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 became another critical juncture that triggered mobilization. Among the "new" migrants-turned-activists, the continuation or discontinuation of engagement varies depending on their resources, networks, and preparedness for migration, ranging from a smooth transition to activism to complete retirement (see Fomina 2021).

The complex interplay between migration and engagement trajectories that we observe is crucial for understanding the organizational and mobilizational potential of the diverse group of Russian migrants in Germany involved in anti-war activities. One might expect that migrants from different waves would bring diverse skill sets to the development of shared projects benefiting all migrant groups from Russia and other former Soviet Union states. However, as pointed out by Darieva and Golova (2023), "disparities and inequalities in terms of social and cultural capital between activists who have lived in Germany longer and newer political migrants make cooperation and integration into existing initiatives challenging." Earlier arrivals typically possess stronger language skills and broader social networks in the host country, while those who have recently arrived from Russia have a deeper understanding of the current Russian social and political context. Our observations, particularly outside of Berlin, indicate that activists from different generations rarely develop strong and deep collaboration; interactions are usually limited

to co-participation in occasional events or short-term projects. Organizations rooted in Russian-speaking communities tend to involve migrants-turned-activists, who primarily invite newer political migrants to participate in existing projects. By contrast, activists-turned-migrants often prefer to conduct their initiatives in parallel to those of established Russian-speaking organizations.

Cooperation Patterns in Different Fields of Activism

Field 1: Transnational Connections and Human Rights Activism

The transnational connections and interactions between migrants of different generations are reflected in advocacy efforts for political prisoners in Russia and other awareness-raising campaigns. In contrast, assistance to Russians who refuse to serve in the Russian army during the war against Ukraine serves as a striking example of transnational activism predominantly driven by activists from the more recent wave of migration.

The first area of focus is activism and advocacy surrounding political prisoners in Russia. This issue is equally significant to both migrants-turned-activists from earlier waves of migration and activists-turned-migrants from more recent waves. Migrants from different generations have launched transnational campaigns aimed at raising awareness and mobilizing support for Russian political prisoners. For instance, left-wing activists support and advocate for their comrades in Russian prisons. Another example is an exhibition entitled "Faces of Russian Resistance," which has been displayed in 29 cities worldwide.² Developed by Russian political exiles based across Europe, this exhibition highlights political persecution and supports those in Russia who oppose the war. It has brought together activists from different generations, who pool resources to organize and promote the event. Aimed primarily at the local populations, the exhibition is part of broader efforts by Russian migrant communities to inform the public about political prisoners in Russia. In general, local organizations within Russian migrant communities consciously focus on the German public sphere, seeing this as the primary audience of their campaigns.

Another case of shared activism involves writing letters to political prisoners. Such low-cost, low-effort campaigns are organized sporadically by migrants from different waves and require minimal resources or preparation. Letter-writing evenings take place reg-

2 See the "Faces of Russian Resistance" website, <https://www.politzk.com/en>.

ularly in different cities across Germany and offer opportunities to meet and engage with like-minded activists.

A further instance of transnational activism is advocacy and support for conscientious objectors who refuse to serve in the Russian army and fight in the war against Ukraine. While migrants from earlier waves are less involved in this area, it is heavily supported by Russian human rights activists, many of whom were forced to relocate abroad after the beginning of the invasion. Engagement in this field does not require strong ties with local politicians in German cities or migrants of earlier generations. Such politicized humanitarian activism can be carried out by experts who operate from locations outside of Russia, using their skills, knowledge, and personal networks to advocate in political centers such as Berlin, Paris, and Brussels.

Field 2: Humanitarian Visas and Migration Assistance

Another area where Russian migrant activists collaborate transnationally, as well as with German and other European officials, politicians, and civil society actors, is in providing migration assistance to activists and others at risk of political persecution in Russia, such as LGBTQ+ persons. Of the two main aspects to this work—helping people flee Russia and securing legal entry to a safe country—the latter is particularly relevant to the German context. In the critical situation of spring 2022, Germany introduced a list-based procedure for issuing humanitarian visas under section 22, sentence 2, of the Residence Act for certain profiles of Russian civil society actors at risk, allowing broader admission. Networks that advocated for the introduction of such humanitarian solutions as a reaction to further totalitarian shifts in Russia included politicians, activists, and German NGO actors, among them those with Russian migration backgrounds and solid transnational expertise. Many had already cooperated with the German Federal Foreign Office, for example through the Eastern Partnership program, and were entrusted with the initial verification of applicant cases and the preparation of lists for further review by German authorities—an acknowledgment of their expertise on Russia and their well-developed networks. Initially, migrants from earlier waves, mostly migrants-turned-activists, were at the forefront of such “legalization assistance,” but as more newcomers became involved as volunteers, this migrants-for-migrants activism expanded as a form of solidarity with anti-war activists in Russia. Some Russian migrant NGOs offer letters of support for humanitarian visa applicants confirming their contacts with German society.

Field 3: Adaptation of New Migrants and Community-Building

New political migrants are confronted with various, sometimes contradictory expectations from German society and its political elites, both on a discursive and institutional level. As political subjects, they are expected to exercise their agency and work relentlessly against the Putin regime (an expectation that is particularly pronounced for beneficiaries of the humanitarian visa procedure), while as new migrants they are expected to make serious efforts to integrate culturally and economically. Specific challenges depend heavily on an individual’s legal status and migration path. For example, holders of a humanitarian visa and a corresponding residence permit are not confronted with the uncertainties of the asylum procedure. However, as long as they remain dependent on the welfare system, they are required to participate in the geographical distribution process, which often relocates them to remote areas where there are no relevant political communities, whether migrant or non-migrant. Their mobility is restricted by social transfer regulations and financial limitations, which hinder transregional networking and participation in street actions.

Newly arrived activists-turned-migrants face multiple challenges navigating the host country, particularly because their migration was neither planned nor prepared. While they may seek assistance through contacts with individuals, such support is rarely formalized as a standard service offered by migrant organizations. Among urban centers with visible pro-democratic Russian communities—Berlin, Cologne-Düsseldorf, and Munich—only Berlin, with its high number of migrants and diverse landscape of initiatives, has offered regular online and offline networking and consultation events that bring together “old” and “new” political migrants. New migrants often rely on information and support from those with similar experiences, such as leaving Russia after the full-scale invasion under the threat of persecution, applying for humanitarian visas, and engaging in comparable forms of political activism before migration. The exchange of tips among newcomers on navigating German bureaucracy may not always be effective at achieving the desired outcomes, due to a lack of broader knowledge of the bureaucratic system beyond the specific cases or limited German language skills. Nonetheless, these communication practices facilitate community-building and reduce feelings of insecurity and isolation among the newcomers.

The focus on shared experiences fosters solidarity and a sense of We-ness, but these do not necessarily translate into politicized activism or the formation of political organizations in Germany. For example, sev-

eral (former) municipal deputies mentioned that they receive support mostly from a network of Russian municipal deputies in exile. Their online-based support group comprises individuals with similar backgrounds and experiences. While such groups are often based on locally focused chats to facilitate networking, they do not evolve into collective political action in the host country. In the case of municipal deputies in exile, the organization Deputies of Peaceful Russia brings together individuals who credibly claim to represent some anti-war Russians. However, despite their shared anti-war stance and public recognition of Russia's responsibility for the war, differing political commitments and ideological positions on key issues—such as sanctions and reparations—hinder their ability to collaborate consistently.

Field 4: The Russo-Ukrainian War as a Focus of Activism

During interviews, the war in Ukraine emerged as a central topic, repeatedly being brought up by activists of different generations. Actions reflecting pro-Ukrainian and anti-war stances range from the provision of humanitarian assistance to Ukrainians to rallies with pro-Ukrainian agendas such as advocating for the delivery of weapons to Ukraine. Humanitarian engagement of both migrants-turned-activists and activists-turned-migrants is often depoliticized, seen more as a “duty” and “responsibility” of Russians in light of the wrongdoings of their country. Such activism manifests itself differently between generations of activists and depending on their resources: those with language skills can assist refugees as mediators with public administration, while more recent migrants may engage in labor-intensive work in warehouses handling humanitarian aid, provide “social services,” or assist with evacuation. Activists also organize donation collection and share calls for donations issued by other groups to support various initiatives in Ukraine. Unlike politics, humanitarian assistance remains a less controversial area of cooperation with Ukrainians.

Russian migrants involved in pro-democratic and anti-war initiatives often participate in demonstrations and rallies organized by Ukrainian organizations, but only in their personal capacity. Cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian groups was curtailed by the Ukrainian side as early as spring 2022. This resulted from the brutal Russian war against Ukraine, the wider Russian imperial tradition, and the reproduction of a “colonial attitude” by parts of the Russian opposition in exile. A distinct type of street action where cooperation is still possible is counter-demonstrations against pro-Kremlin—or effectively anti-Ukrainian—events. They unmask slogans that allegedly promote

peace but carry a pro-war meaning. Here, participants with Russian migration background challenge both the concept of “Russians” as supporters of the war and the Kremlin's symbolic power to define what it means to be “Russian.”

Conclusion

This essay explores the diverse experiences and forms of activism among Russian-speaking migrants in Germany, demonstrating how different waves of migration have shaped various pro-Ukrainian and anti-war political and humanitarian efforts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significantly mobilized activism within established Russian-speaking groups, while recent waves of anti-war activists and experts have introduced fresh perspectives and new agendas to the landscape of existing initiatives. However, the study also reveals challenges in developing deep collaboration between older and newer migrant generations.

Although these groups share a common origin, their integration into German society and involvement in activism are shaped by distinct migration experiences. For instance, in the realm of transnational activism, a division of labor is evident: while solidarity campaigns for Russia's political prisoners attract participants from various generations, support for conscientious objectors is primarily led by recent migrants, whereas migration assistance is driven mainly by migrants-turned-activists, with recent migrants contributing mostly as volunteers.

The field of new migrants' adaptation is grounded in the shared experiences of recent migrants but does not typically evolve into the formation of political organizations. While long-term residents involved in pro-democracy and anti-war initiatives are sympathetic to the goal of community-building, their focus areas differ, and their capacity to assist with adaptation is somewhat limited. Finally, although the specific forms of pro-Ukrainian humanitarian engagement vary between generations of activists based on their resources, this field remains a central focus for both recent arrivals and more established migrants.

Different generations of Russian anti-war migrant activists face the challenge of navigating the contrasts between “Russian oppositional” and “German” discursive opportunity structures—particularly regarding what is considered an acceptable anti-war position. For newly arrived activists, maintaining connections with fellow activists and non-supporters of the war in Russia remains crucial, with many still identifying as Russian activists in exile or “on a long-term assignment abroad.”

Challenges related to integration and the differences in resources available to various migrant groups com-

plicate long-term collaboration and the development of inclusive political organizations. The advancement of flexible and inclusive structures that respect and accom-

modate disparities in resources and audiences, while still sharing a fundamental anti-Putin and anti-war stance, may be more effective than striving for uniformity.

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Further Reading

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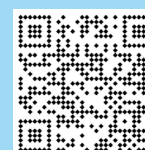
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