



Supporting Russian Civil Society

A Report of the Transatlantic Forum on Russia

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Introduction

Since Russia re-invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, repression inside Russia has worsened. The trend toward greater repression predates Moscow's unprovoked invasion. The Kremlin had already increased its crackdown on all facets of Russian civil society, including targeting journalists and political opposition and tightening the country's information environment ahead of its parliamentary election in September 2021. Since the invasion, the Kremlin has intensified its repressive efforts to shut down the possibility of dissent and insulate its hold on power from any blowback from the war. Experience from authoritarian regimes like Putin's Russia suggests that high levels of repression are here to stay as long as Putin remains in power—authoritarian regimes are unlikely to walk back repression for fear that doing so would indicate regime weakness and embolden activists who advocate for political change.

Rising repression inside Russia created immediate risks to journalists, activists, and other Russians who support a freer and more democratic Russia (as well as to their families). In the longer term, it also creates a potential barrier to a less confrontational relationship with a post-Putin Russia. As repression has risen, the Kremlin has doubled down on anti-United States and anti-Western rhetoric and shut down opportunities for exchanges between Russian scientists and academics and their Western counterparts. The Kremlin's propagation of anti-Western messages and the lack of exchange between Russians and the West—exacerbated by a loss of economic ties amid Western sanctions—engender mistrust and misunderstanding, creating a long-term barrier to a less confrontational relationship. Steps to deny Russian tourists visas and other forms of collective punishment, while understandable, have the potential to sour Russian attitudes toward the West, hurting the prospects for any future improvement in relations with a post-Putin Russia.

This policy brief identifies how the United States and Europe together can continue to support Russian civil society despite the dismal state of relations with Russia. It outlines the state of play of the Kremlin's crackdown on Russian civil society, U.S. and European responses to date, shared interests in coordinated support, and recommendations for what the transatlantic community can do to support Russian civil society in this new era of relations with Russia. Given the barriers to supporting activists inside Russia, this memo's recommendations focus on assistance to those Russians who have left the country.

State of Play

Since mid-2020, and especially since the Kremlin's attempted assassination of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the Russian government has dramatically escalated its crackdown on Russian civil society. Compared to previous repressive waves, this crackdown targeted virtually all segments of Russian civil society, including opposition activists, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and academics. Beginning in 2021, the Kremlin designated many journalists, individual activists, influencers, and organizations as "foreign agents" or "undesirables." This designation curtailed their access to funding, restricted their ability to spread information, and/or altogether banned them from operating in Russia. In late December 2021, the Kremlin took the additional step of liquidating Memorial, the country's oldest civil rights group.¹ Beyond nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, in 2021 the Kremlin also launched over 90 criminal cases against protest participants, sentenced two dozen protesters to jail, and introduced new legislation that bans individuals associated with "extremist" organizations from running for election. On June 9, 2021, a Russian court designated Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and regional offices as "extremist."²

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these trends have continued. In October 2021, ahead of the invasion, Russian authorities expanded the "foreign agents" lists, which now include Russia's most prominent pro-Western influencers, journalists, and thinkers. After the invasion, the Russian parliament passed a bill in June taking things even further. The bill allows the Ministry of Justice to create a unified registry of present and former individual "employees and members of organizations" that "have been declared 'foreign agents' or who are associated with them." Those "associated" would include "individuals deemed by the state to have been politically active and received money or assistance from 'foreign agents.'"³

The State Duma has also increased the costs for Russians speaking out against the war. Russians accused of disseminating disinformation concerning the Russian armed forces, "discrediting" the armed forces, or calling the Ukraine conflict a "war" or an "invasion" may be charged with up to 10 years in prison.⁴ Within seven months of the beginning of the war, about 20,000 people were detained at anti-war rallies.⁵ The Kremlin has also cracked down on Russians accused of participating in protests and stepped up its harassment of opposition leaders. For example, additional arrest warrants were issued for several close associates of Navalny, who himself faces an additional criminal sentence that would extend his current sentence by 15 years. Russian authorities also arrested Kremlin critics Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin, who now face long-term imprisonment.⁶

In the information domain, attacks on media and internet freedoms have also accelerated. The authorities blocked over 180 media outlets, including the flagships of independent journalism—the Echo of Moscow radio station and TV Rain. The frequency of the Echo of Moscow has been transferred to the propagandist station RT. The Novaya Gazeta, whose editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov won the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, suspended publication for the duration of the Ukraine "special operation" after two official warnings from Roskomnadzor. Popular social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have been blocked.⁷ While many Russians use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass these restrictions, authorities are taking steps to limit VPN access.⁸

These trends have contributed to a major exodus of Russians from the country—a trend that was already underway prior to the war. According to the Russian statistical agency Rosstat, the number of people leaving the country has grown each year for the last several years: 122,700 people left in 2012; 310,400 in 2014; and 440,800 in 2018. The majority of those leaving are young people between 20 and 34 years old. Since the beginning of the war, these numbers have grown. By some estimates, somewhere near 200,000 Russians left the country in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.⁹ Then, following Putin’s announcement of “partial mobilization” in September 2022, up to 300,000 more people are estimated to have left Russia within a single week. The real emigration numbers are likely larger but hard to estimate.

Among those leaving Russia are human rights defenders, political and civil activists, independent journalists, bloggers, scientists, environmentalists, and others who are civically active. According to various estimates, in recent years, about 10,000 civil society actors have fled Russia—and that number is undoubtedly higher now since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Unlike past waves of émigrés, many of today’s self-exiles appear intent on returning to Russia rather than seeking to integrate into their host societies. The large number of Russian civil society actors leaving Russia provides an opportunity for the United States and Europe to support these individuals and groups, especially through steps designed to enable these actors to sustain their work from outside of Russia.

U.S. and European Actions and Responses

Coming into office, the Biden administration sought to reinforce and establish new guardrails on its relationship with Moscow. A key pillar of that approach entailed appealing to Russians and increasing support for civil society. In Europe, too, support for Russian civil society featured prominently in member countries’ and the European Union’s (EU’s) approach to Russia even as Europe’s relations with the Kremlin deteriorated. In September 2021, for example, the European Parliament issued a recommendation for developing a comprehensive EU strategy toward Russia that emphasized the importance of and included detailed suggestions for supporting Russian civil society and fostering the EU’s independent cooperation with regional and local actors.¹⁰ Likewise, in Germany, the new governing coalition agreement published in December 2021 promised increased support for Russian civil society and specifically referred to practical measures to support Russian journalists, activists, and human rights defenders outside Russia. These efforts build on long-standing eastern European and Baltic support for Russian civil society and Russian dissidents and opposition in exile. Since 2015, for example, Lithuania has provided political refuge for many exiled Russian activists, including many members of Navalny’s organization.¹¹

Clearly much has changed since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the United States and several EU countries have taken steps to support Russian civil society in exile, including:

- Germany facilitated the issuance of long-term-stay visas for critics of the Russian Kremlin, including human rights defenders; employees of organizations considered foreign agents; representatives of democratic opposition, NGOs, or civil society; journalists; and scientists.¹²
- The Czech Republic began granting asylum to Russians and Belarusians on the basis of so-called humanitarian visas and expanded the humanitarian reasons for family reunification. These visas are primarily issued to human rights advocates, independent journalists, and activists.¹³
- Latvia has hosted Russian NGOs and at least several hundred Russian journalists who fled the country once Russia’s parliament passed a law making publication of “fake news” about the war in Ukraine punishable with up to 15 years in prison.¹⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), its 24/7 Russian-language network Current Time, the Moscow bureau of Deutsche Welle, and the independent Russian television station TV Rain were issued a broadcasting permit allowing them to broadcast their content from Riga.¹⁵

- In May, the United States announced its plans to make it easier for Russians with a master's or doctoral degree in the fields of science, technology, engineering, or math to apply for a visa without first obtaining an American employer sponsor to move to the country.¹⁶

While there has been a significant movement in Europe to limit (and even outright ban) tourist visas for Russians, there remains a recognition of the importance to support Russian political activists, journalists, and civil society actors that oppose the regime and face persecution from the Kremlin. It remains in the interest of the United States and Europe to enable these individuals and groups to sustain their work outside Russia.

Shared Transatlantic Interests and Barriers to Supporting Russia's Exiled Civil Society

The Biden administration renewed Washington's focus on strengthening democratic values and norms, both at home and internationally. In formulating its approach to Russia, Washington emphasized efforts to engage Russians and Russian civil society. The Kremlin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine put U.S.-Russia relations on a new footing, but the importance of outreach to these groups remains. Europe is now home to hundreds of thousands of Russians and therefore plays a vital role in supporting and working with these communities. The United States and its European allies and partners share the following goals for supporting Russian civil society:

Provide for the safety and support of Russians forced to relocate. Even in exile, activists are not completely safe. Transnational repression continues to be a threat for civic and political actors fleeing Russia and inadequate protection policies in host countries exacerbate the threat. For example, in cases when an activist must leave family members behind, the immigration restrictions in host countries often limit opportunities for family reunification. These actors also require more extensive legal assistance, including with visas, residence, and work permits; emergency assistance with housing and food; psychological assistance; language and professional training; and networking support and fellowship and job opportunities.

Prevent Russian attitudes about the West from creating a barrier to a less confrontational relationship with Russia. U.S. and European relations with Russia will not improve as long as Putin is in power. Once Putin exits, the United States and Europe share an interest in creating a less confrontational relationship with Moscow. However, the lived experience of the war in Ukraine—namely, Kremlin propaganda, Russians' lack of access to non-Kremlin information, and the lack of people-to-people ties—means that Russian attitudes about the desirability of good relations with the West could deteriorate and limit future leaders' efforts to restore relations. Working with exiled Russian civil society groups and diaspora provides an opportunity to mitigate this risk as these groups sustain their networks and serve as a conduit of information into Russia and many of them will seek to return to Russia in the future. As such, support for these individuals and actors should be viewed as an investment in a more stable relationship with a future Russia.

Enable exiled civil society actors to sustain their work. For Putin and other autocrats like him, allowing Russians to leave the country can enhance stability—serving as a pressure-release valve for the regime. While there are limits on the ability of exiles to advance democratic norms and values from abroad, the United States and Europe share an interest in helping exiled Russian civil society actors to remain in the fight for democracy and human rights. Sustaining the work of investigative journalists, for example, can enable Washington and Brussels to enhance the implementation of sanctions and anti-corruption efforts by exposing loopholes in the sanctions regimes and legislation. The exile community can also serve as a conduit for information, including by injecting non-Kremlin sources of information into their networks that are still in Russia. Media outlets operating outside Russia, such as Novaya Gazeta, Meduza, Echo of Moscow, and TV Rain, for example, continue to make their journalism available inside Russia through Telegram and YouTube.

Harness the talent and knowledge of Russian exiles. In many cases, exiled Russian civil society members will seek to return to Russia. Investing in their skills and capacity will position them to serve as more effective catalysts for change once they return. In the meantime, Western governments should seek to use the valuable expertise of exiled Russian journalists, experts, and activists in understanding Russia. These exiles represent a considerable potential asset for the United States and Europe—by empowering them, Western governments are investing in the intellectual foundation for a more effective transatlantic Russia policy. Concurrently, the United States and Europe should also encourage Russia's brightest minds, including in the technology realm, to come to the West and harness their skills and talent to enhance our own competitiveness.

Efforts to build on these shared transatlantic interests will need to account for several challenges, including:

Unintended obstacles created by Western sanctions. The U.S. and Western sanctions have been unprecedented in their scope and constitute a key pillar of Western efforts to constrain the Kremlin's ability to sustain the war in Ukraine and its aggression more broadly. While necessary, they have unintended consequences for Russian activists. For example, under current U.S. and EU sanction regimes, activists remaining in Russia who relied on European banks for their work or received revenues through paid advertisements on YouTube have often faced restrictions based on their nationality, making it more difficult for them to continue their efforts. Similarly, a decision by Visa and Mastercard to suspend all operations in Russia has proved particularly painful for pro-Western liberal groups in Russia who are fleeing the country in the aftermath of the aggression. Private sector overcompliance with sanctions also continues to create challenges for these actors.

Disjointed diasporas. Russians have moved to numerous Western countries over the past several years. The most common destinations have been in central and eastern Europe, as high costs of living and other barriers have made western European and American destinations less feasible. The fact that the exiles are spread across many locations has diluted any sense of urgency to support them. Moreover, diaspora communities across different countries lack strong connections with one another, hindering efforts to coordinate between Russian exiles in support of prodemocracy actors remaining in the country.¹⁷ Even historically, Russian exiles have failed to form a coherent or united front, creating challenges to organization.

Recommendations

Supporting Russian civil society is simultaneously more difficult and arguably more important than it has been in the past. While rising repression inside Russia makes it ever more difficult to support civil society actors remaining in Russia, the significant exodus of activists creates new opportunities. Looking back, the United States had a strategy for engaging Russian exiles during the Cold War—efforts that led to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.¹⁸ Today, Western policymakers could learn from and build on that experience, starting with the following steps:

Fund research on the scale and needs of exiled Russian civil society. To understand and effectively support Russian exiles, the United States and Europe need to fund and conduct proper research on how many people have left, their profiles, and their needs. Such research should be conducted in close coordination between the United States and Europe.

Increase funding to support exiled Russian civil society. There are already efforts in place to provide assistance to new émigrés in areas such as housing support, psychological help, coworking facilities, and language training, including through organizations such as the Free Russia Foundation and the Ark. However, these initiatives remain isolated and underfunded. To address these shortcomings:

- **Washington should create a title program for human rights defenders and journalists.** Such a program should provide U.S.-based professional fellowships for persecuted human rights defenders and journalists, language training, and linkages to professional networks in the United States and abroad.

— **The United States and Europe should create a transatlantic fund for exiled Russian civil society actors.** In addition to a lack of funding, identifying sources of funding and completing applications is a time- and resource-heavy effort. The United States and Europe should pool and consolidate resources by establishing a fund supported by multiple governments or expand the mandate of existing mechanisms like Lifeline. Such a consolidated hub could also serve to facilitate connections—whether in person or virtual—among Russian activists and between these groups and other exiled activists from places such as Belarus.

Introduce mechanisms for cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian diasporas. The United States and Europe should boost mechanisms (like crowdfunding or providing refugee support) through which exiled Russians could help Ukrainians. While multiple grassroots initiatives are already in place, they remain fairly small in scale and isolated. The United States and Europe could help increase the Russian diaspora's awareness of such initiatives and provide tools for better cooperation. This could also help spread awareness among Russians about the hardships Ukrainians face and provide an early model for future Russo-Ukrainian dialogue, which could emerge after Putin leaves power.

Improve visa support. Many at-risk Russian civil society members seek refuge in countries with visa-free regimes or where visas are easily available, like Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Turkey. However, their safety there is not guaranteed due to bilateral extradition treaties. The United States and Europe need better coordination with governments on visas and should install processes that allow Russian activists to receive year-long, preventive visas that would allow them to leave for a secure location quickly.

Provide legal status to the Russian émigrés. Russians in exile need support with work permits and refugee identification. While several such initiatives are already in place in countries like Germany and the Czech Republic, this effort might also involve a new immigration designation (different from asylum) that allows for expedited processing of Russian exiles.

Expose and curb transnational repression. It is important to recognize that the Kremlin's aggressive transnational repression tactics target not only high-profile former insiders or the regime's political opponents, but also many lesser-known names, particularly by using Interpol mechanisms. The United States and European allies must use their political capital to increase the transparency of the Interpol system and should scrutinize each report of a stolen or lost travel document or Red Notice issued by the Russian Federation. It is critical to train U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other law enforcement personnel to establish that Red Notices are not necessarily equal to arrest warrants under national laws.

Anticipate and account for negative externalities of sanctions and anti-money laundering (AML) measures. U.S. and European financial regulators must take proactive steps to analyze weak points in the implementation of anti-corruption and sanctions policies that cause collateral damage to persecuted civic actors. Holistic analysis is necessary to understand which financial sectors over-comply with the U.S. Treasury and other international directives, and why and how they do so, and to develop systematic solutions to exclude bona fide civil society actors from undue AML scrutiny. Another weak point is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Automatic Exchange of Information, which has opened up dangerous opportunities for autocratic regimes like Russia to access information on financial accounts of their citizens abroad.

Issue high-level statements that separate Putin from Russia. There is a significant debate over whether this is Putin's war or a war that Russians broadly support. As a matter of policy, U.S. and European leaders should signal that they see a difference between Putin and Russia. It will only be when Putin and his inner circle are seen as failing—and held accountable for the atrocities committed—in Ukraine that Russians will turn on Putin and his regime and change course. The United States and Europe must set the conditions that Russia must meet for a return to a more stable relationship. But Russians must be able to envision that if those conditions are met, that a better relationship with the West is possible.

In addition, Western leaders should meet with exiled actors publicly and privately. With participants' consent, governments should publicize these engagements in the media because such attention provides exiled activists and journalists with diplomatic support, strengthens their legitimacy, and helps attract public support for their causes.

Conclusion

The mass exodus of civil society actors from Russia provides a new opportunity to support Russians who share a vision of a freer, more democratic Russia. Although there are limits to what these groups can accomplish from outside Russia, investing in the continuation of their work has tangible benefits for the West and is consistent with Western norms and values. Moreover, support for exiled Russians can have knock-on effects benefiting those activists who remain in the country. Many of these in-country activists desire continued engagement with the West, deriving encouragement and tenacity from the feeling of solidarity with partners across the democratic world. The current outlook for U.S. and European relations with Russia is dim, but supporting exiled activists, journalists, and other civil society actors is a necessary investment for a better relationship with a post-Putin Russia.

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