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Building Up the Democratic Potential of the New Russian Emigrants

Oxana Schmies

ReThink.CEE

Summary

Estimates for the number of Russians who have left Russia since its full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 range between several hundred thousand and well over one million. The countries where they are concentrated include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Turkey, Serbia, the Gulf states, and the Central Asian states. Most Western countries have not been major destinations. The EU has adopted a restrictive visa policy toward those leaving Russia while the United States is also difficult to enter.

These recent Russian emigrants tend to be young, politically active, well-off, and flexible and dynamic. They include large numbers of IT specialists as well as journalists, politicians, and public intellectuals associated with Russian nongovernmental organizations or the liberal media that were closed after the invasion. Other significant categories are academics, teachers, cultural actors, and entrepreneurs.

The majority of the recent emigrants was more politically active in Russia than their predecessors and more clearly driven by current political circumstances or even political persecution. They also show a higher level of trust toward each other. For many, the reasons for leaving Russia include opposition to the war and a rejection of the regime.

In recent years, different initiatives by exiled political figures have provided some “voice from above” for oppositional forces outside Russia. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine many of them have tried to consolidate their efforts, and there have been new initiatives to help the emigrants. But any building of an “official” representation for oppositional Russians abroad should not hurt the efforts to develop a common vision and values across the emigrant landscape.

The emigrants have created initiatives and carried out activities that can be crucial for developing a broad democratic movement. Groups founded to meet urgent emigration needs are transforming into heterogeneous mutual aid communities of people who meet regularly for a wide range of activities. Organizations have been created and run by people with a high awareness of the need for civic participation. Some are beginning to consolidate the emigrant communities with an agenda aimed at democratic transformation.

Media and journalism initiatives are an important part of the bottom-up developments among the 2022 Russian emigrants. Media projects founded by journalists from cities in different regions of Russia aim to reach out to audiences there as much as in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Several projects aim at establishing horizontal links in society in Russia by covering the life of ordinary people there.

Supporting Democratic Potential

Whether the recent Russian emigrants can coalesce into a force for democracy will depend in part on support for their potential. Western governmental and nongovernmental actors should primarily aim at consolidating and strengthening the democratic convictions of a critical mass of emigrants. Four areas are promising for short-to-medium-term support that will contribute to pursuing this long-term goal.

Entry and Stay

The West still does not have policies to handle a large influx of Russian emigrants in terms of entry or stay. What is more, restrictive visa policies hamper the goal of strengthening the emigrant communities and their democratic potential. In particular, the need to ensure that individual emigrants do not pose a security threat and are committed to democracy makes the situation more difficult.

The EU, a critical actor in this regard, still does not have a unified policy, a situation complicated by the fact that migration is a shared competence between the EU and the member states. Mechanisms for dealing with the Russians who have entered the EU are deficient or lacking. There have been almost no concrete steps at the EU level to address issues such as a residence or work permit for the emigrants.

IT and Media

Supporting IT specialists and journalists from the recent emigration would serve pro-democratic goals. Both groups can reach out with information to audiences of millions outside and inside Russia.

The large number of IT specialists among the recent emigrants holds great potential. Grants and investments for

their projects or startups could consolidate different groups of emigrants, build organizational capacity and digital security for emigrant groups and activists, and connect those who have left Russia with people in the country securely and on a larger scale than currently. Activities based on digital technologies could also compensate for the restricted mobility of emigrants through the development of digital communities among them.

Support for grassroots journalist projects and media organizations from the recent emigration will increase the reach of independent reporting to people inside Russia as well as weaken the regime's propaganda at home and abroad. It can consolidate the community of emigrant journalists and improve their skills. However, the survival of promising grassroots journalist projects and media organizations is endangered by the insecure financial and partly legal situation of their staff in host countries. More prominent outlets emerging from the emigration should not be the only recipients of support because they target and reach larger nationwide audiences; it is equally important to sustain grassroots or region-focused journalistic projects.

Democratic Civic Culture

The recent Russian emigrants should be supported in enhancing the horizontal connections they have started establishing and to consolidate themselves in communi-

ties united by a common goal. This would strengthen their democratic civic culture. Out of this could evolve the basis for a broad democratic political movement of Russians abroad. Among the recent emigrants are many socially and politically active public intellectuals who can take pro-democracy and anti-war messages to Russians inside and outside the country. Sprouts of the process of rethinking Russia's past and present in order to envisage a democratic future can be seen in the speeches and writings of such figures as well as those of the exiled opposition and of emigrant journalists.

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There cannot be a vision of Russia's democratic future without Russians becoming aware that their country is an imperialist aggressor and that their goal must be to overcome its imperialist legacy. The participation of as many Russians as possible in the huge task of building the awareness for this change of worldview is a prerequisite for sustainable change in the direction of democracy. In this context, support for a political and societal rebirth of Russia should include strengthening the position of the recent emigrants, using their skills and democratic potential, and building the broadest possible pro-democracy community outside the country. Even if these Russians may not be able to return soon to Russia to work there for its democratic transformation, they can work effectively from abroad to bring this goal closer.

Introduction

Since its full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has experienced a wave of emigration of historical proportion and speed. Following the hundreds of thousands who left the country in recent years as the regime became more repressive and launched its aggression against Ukraine that culminated with the invasion, very likely many more than a million have left the country since last February. This massive emigration raises important questions when it comes to the prospects for democracy in Russia, not least as it is now clear that so many of the political opponents of the regime are in exile and perhaps the majority of independent and democracy-oriented civil society has relocated outside the country. In this regard, many of the recent emigrants are particularly noteworthy for their background of political activity in Russia and of professional activity in important spheres such as IT and the media.

Whether the recent Russian emigrants can coalesce into a force for democracy in Russia will depend in part on support for their democratic potential. Providing them with multifaceted support will contribute to the long-term goal of strengthening the community of emigrants and its democratic orientation. It will help the broad landscape of oppositional Russians outside the country develop a “voice” that can make a crucial contribution to the development of opposition to the regime within Russia. The Kremlin does not (so far) prevent the large-scale emigration of talented and critical Russians—in fact, it almost encourages it—apparently underestimating the democratic political potential they may realize abroad. Those who want to see a democratic transformation in Russia should use this miscalculation. Supporting the democratic potential of exiled opposition and emigrant community with targeted measures is the right strategic choice for the Western governments and institutions.

This paper first reviews the scale and nature of the emigration from Russia since February 2022. It then sets out the profile of the emigrants. The next section looks at the landscape of the exiled political opposition and that of the growing emigrant community with its several grassroots initiatives. Finally, it addresses how to build up the democratic potential of the recent Russian emigrants, focusing on four promising areas for short-to-medium-term support that

will contribute to pursuing the long-term goal of democratic strengthening of the community of Russian emigrants.

The 2022 Emigration Wave

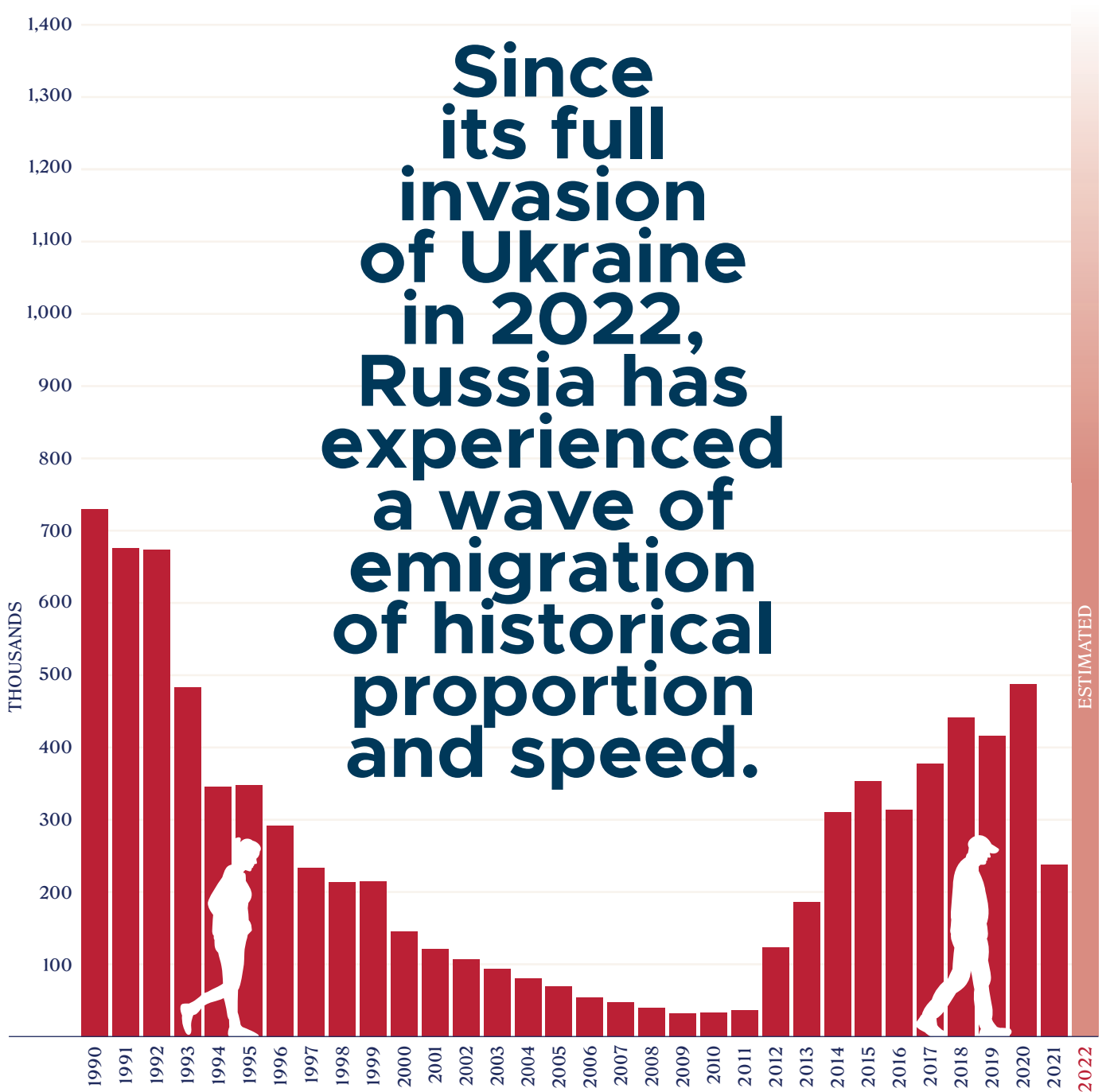
The wave of emigration from Russia in 2022 was probably the largest in the country’s history. The number of and speed at which people began to leave Russia immediately after its full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is unsurpassed in the last 100 years. The period 1918–1922, in the aftermath of revolution, is the last time emigration occurred on a similar scale in a similar short time. However, mass emigration out of President Vladimir Putin’s Russia was underway already before 2022. According to data from the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), the annual emigration figure declined consistently for a decade after Putin first became president in 2000. It then rose sharply in 2012 and 2013 following the fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2011 and the subsequent mass protests because of Putin’s announcement that he would return to the presidency in 2012. Emigration rose again sharply following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and stayed on an upward trend until falling again in 2021. (See Figure 1.)

Russia’s full invasion of Ukraine starting on February 24, 2022 boosted emigration hugely. In the first half of the year, according to the Institute for Demography in Moscow, “for the first time since 1975 there was a negative balance of migration exchange of Russia with other countries,” with for the first time migration intensifying natural attrition and accounting for more than 20 percent of population loss.¹ In early September 2022, Rosstat stated that 419,000 people had left Russia in the first half of the year, twice as many as in the same period in 2021.² The proclamation of partial mobilization on September 21, along with the sham referenda in four occupied regions of Ukraine, gave a new impetus to emigration. Between the invasion in February and the announcement of partial mobilization, estimates for

1 Ekaterina Shcherbakova, “[Demographic Report for the First Half of 2022 in Russia](#),” Demoscope Weekly, September 20–October 3, 2022. [In Russian.]

2 Rosbalt, “[Rosstat reports a doubling of the number of citizens leaving Russia in 2022](#),” September 6, 2022. [In Russian.]

Figure 1. Emigration from Russia, 1990-2022



Source: Rosstat via [Statista](#). (Except for 2022, which is based on a collection of estimates.)

the number of those leaving Russia range between several hundred thousand and one million, if not more. According to one Russian expert's estimate in late October, after mobilization "at least 250,000, more likely 300,000 [...] almost all men, left and did not return."³ This is roughly equal to the number of conscripts the mobilization was supposed to raise. Anastasia Burakova of the organization Kovcheg, which was launched to help those fleeing Russia (see below), estimates that one million left between the invasion and the mobilization and another million from the end of September to December.⁴

It is still too early to have fully comprehensive and reliable data for emigration from Russia in 2022, including in terms of the first or final destination of leavers. For now, one has to rely principally on Rosstat data as well as on a few independent surveys and different official and journalistic accounts. Rosstat data must be scrutinized critically for several reasons. In particular, the agency registers those who emigrate differently than do the United Nations or the migration authorities of OECD and other destination countries. Rosstat also does not capture or report the number of people who left and then returned to Russia in the course of the year. Thus, the most accurate possible data on the 2022 emigration will only eventually be obtained from different host countries. Rosstat also most likely understates the scale of the phenomenon. By one estimate, its data could be at least four times lower than that of foreign authorities.⁵ Another analysis states that, because Rosstat only counts people who de-register, which not everyone leaving the country does, the numbers from Western host countries for incoming Russians can be six to ten times higher.⁶ Another important proviso about any of the statistics so far available from different sources about the destination countries of those leaving Russia is the question of the first country they entered being only a destination

that they have already transited or intend to transit through. This complicates further the task of obtaining comprehensive numbers about their ultimate destination.

The choice of the first destination by those leaving Russia was opportunistic for many. Immediately the February invasion, given the suspended passenger air traffic between Russia and the Western countries due first to the coronavirus pandemic and then to sanctions, most went to those countries that could be reached by air and had no visa requirements for Russians or allowed a long visa-free stays. Armenia, Georgia, and Turkey were the three most popular first destinations as they were the easiest and cheapest to reach for most.⁷ In the first ten days after the invasion, about 50,000 people from Russia reportedly entered Armenia.⁸ By one estimate between 100,000 and 200,000 entered the country in 2022.⁹ In the first week after the invasion, more than 20,000 people reportedly entered Georgia from Russia,¹⁰ and almost 113,000 did so between January and September.¹¹ Turkey has not published official migration statistics since 2019; however, according to one source, 78,000 Russians emigrated to the country in 2022.¹² Official statistics show that, at over 16,300, Russians were by far the foreign group buying the most houses in Turkey last year.¹³

Central Asian countries also saw large numbers of arrivals from Russia after the invasion. For example, 760,000 were reported to have entered Kyrgyzstan from the beginning of 2022 up to September.¹⁴ Arrivals in Kazakhstan

3 RTVI, "[Demographer Alexei Raksha on the waves of migration](#)," October 25, 2022. [In Russian.]

4 Interview, Anastasia Burakova, Kovcheg, December 15, 2022.

5 Olga Vorobyeva, Ivan Aleshkovski, and A. A. Grebenyuk, "[Russian Emigration at the Turn of 21st Century](#)," *Filosofija Sociologija*, Vol. 29 No 2, 2018. [In Russian.]

6 Esli by' tochnym, "[Emigration in the 2000s: where and why people left Russia](#)," October 5, 2021. [In Russian.]

7 Margarita Zavadskaya, "[Anti-war wave of emigration: should I stay or should I go?](#)"

8 BBC News, "[Antiwar Exodus. Thousands of Russians have fled the country since the war with Ukraine began](#)," March 10, 2022. [In Russian.] CIVILNET, "[Is Yerevan the new Amsterdam? On the influx of Russians to Armenia](#)," March 12, 2022. [In Russian.]

9 Anna Kemerova, "[Klondike in the form of Russians](#)," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 29, 2022. [In Russian.]

10 Kozenko, Akhmeteli, and Atanesyan, "[Antiwar Exodus](#)."

11 Radio Liberty, "[Georgian Interior Ministry: There are 112,000 Russians who arrived in 2022](#)," October 26, 2022. [In Russian.]

12 Francesca Ebel and Mary Ilyushina, "[Russians abandon wartime Russia in historic exodus](#)," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2023.

13 TURKSTAT, "[House Sales Statistics](#)," December 2022.

14 Chyngyz Kerimbekov, "[More than 96% of incoming Russians have already left Kyrgyzstan - Ministry of Labour](#)", *Economist*, October 12, 2022 [In Russian.]

in the spring of 2022 were reported to be about 60,000 and a vastly greater number have transited through the country.¹⁵ One estimate has the number of Russians moving to these two countries as 30,000 and 100,000 respectively.¹⁶

Serbia reportedly saw more than 100,000 Russians registering between February and November.¹⁷ Israel was another popular destination, with the number of emigrants from Russian estimated by one source at of 37,000.¹⁸ Other destinations have included the United Arab Emirates and countries of Central and South America and Asia offering visa-free access to Russians. Finally, it is also probable that Ukraine was the destination for some Russians immediately after the invasion. According to Russia's Federal Security Service, 328,000 people left for Ukraine between January and March 2022; while this is very likely to consist of Ukrainians, it cannot be ruled that this number also includes Russians.¹⁹

After the announcement of partial mobilization on September 21, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Serbia, and Turkey were the most sought-after first destinations for those able to fly out of Russia. For those leaving by road, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia were the most popular. In November, Georgia's President Salome Zurbishvili said that more than 700,000 Russians had entered the country since the beginning of the mobilization, with 100,000 staying and the rest moving on to other countries.²⁰ The number of those fleeing to Kazakhstan was estimated to be about 300,000 at the end of October.²¹ More than 132,000

reportedly entered Armenia in September.²² And more than 10,000 reportedly entered Azerbaijan in the days immediately after the announcement of mobilization.²³ According to Turkey's authorities, about 800,000 Russians entered the country in September.²⁴

The mobilization announcement also caused a surge of leavers to less typical countries for Russians to emigrate to.

The mobilization announcement also caused a surge of leavers to less typical countries for Russians to emigrate to, such as Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan. For example, by one estimate, Uzbekistan recorded 78,200 entries by Russians in September.²⁵ Russia's national minorities and indigenous people—such as the Kalmyks, the Buryats, and the Tuvans—have been disproportionately conscripted into the army since the beginning of the war. Mobilization has been more intensive in the republics where such minorities reside than in Russia's regions in general, let alone than in its metropolitan areas. Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Uzbekistan have been attractive to these minorities not only for geographic but also cultural reasons. For example, 6,268 persons with Russian passports reportedly entered Mongolia after the mobilization announcement, with non-ethnic Russians exceeding ethnic Russians ones.²⁶ One source has the number of Russian emigrants to the country at 7,700.²⁷ These emigrants from minorities are perceived in the country as “part of the expanded Mongolian nation” and welcomed accordingly.

15 Stan Pribylov, “A new ‘wave of emigration’ in Russian history: Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” *Golos Ameriki*, November 2, 2022. [In Russian.]

16 Ebel and Ilyushina, “Russians abandon wartime Russia in historic exodus.”

17 Alexey Astapov, “100,000 Russians moved to Serbia in 2022, creating a housing rush,” *International Wealth*, November 29, 2022. [In Russian.]

18 Ebel and Ilyushina, “Russians abandon wartime Russia in historic exodus.”

19 RBC, “Where did Russians go in the first quarter of 2022? Infographics,” May 7, 2022 [In Russian.]

20 The Insider, “Zurbishvili: More than 700,000 Russians have entered Georgia since mobilisation began,” November 13, 2022. [In Russian.]

21 Pribylov, “A new ‘wave of emigration’ in Russian history.”

22 Gayane Sargsyan, “A second influx of Russians to Armenia: Risks for a small country,” *Jam News*, October 12, 2022 [In Russian.]

23 Kavkaz-uzel, “Relocates in Baku talk about the reasons behind their decision to leave Russia,” October 1, 2022. [In Russian.]

24 Arzu Geybullayeva, “Anti-war Russians find a new home in Turkey,” *Global Voices*, November 14, 2022.

25 KUN, “Uncertainty and overblown hype: a conversation with economists on the flow of migrants from Russia,” October 14, 2022. [In Russian.]

26 Idelreal, “Mongolian democracy and ‘non-Russian’ emigration,” October 20, 2022. [In Russian.]

27 Ebel and Ilyushina, “Russians abandon wartime Russia in historic exodus.”

Most Western countries have not been major destinations for emigrants from Russia. Immediately after the invasion, the EU and the United States closed their airspace to Russian flights and Russia reciprocated. There has been de facto no possibility for Russians to enter the EU easily since February and even more so after the September mobilization. This left Russians wanting to leave for the EU with crossing land borders as the only option. Several EU countries have suspended issuing visas for Russians and restricted immigration rules.²⁸ In September 2022 the EU suspended its Visa Facilitation Agreement with Russia, affecting short-term travel to Schengen area, and the European Commission issued guidelines stating that “Member States should assess the conditions under which Russian citizens can be issued Schengen visas in a restrictive and coordinated manner [including for those] fleeing military mobilisation.”²⁹ Since September, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have severely restricted the ability of Russian citizens to enter their territory.

According to the EU border and coast guard agency Frontex, almost one million Russians entered the EU in the six months after the February invasion.³⁰ As of the first week of October, the number had risen to 1.36 million.³¹ The EU countries with the highest numbers of Russian entrants were Estonia, Finland, and Lithuania, which have land borders with Russia. Between the invasion and early October, they recorded over 353,000, 513,000, and 363,000 entries from Russia respectively.³² In the week when mobilization was declared, according to the EU border and coast guard agency, there were almost 66,000 legal entries by land into the EU from Russia, mostly into Estonia (over 9,000) and Finland

(over 42,000).³³ Of the 1.36 million Russians who had entered the EU by early October, 1.31 million had returned to Russia.³⁴

The United States has stated its readiness to accept those fleeing mobilization, but this has limited practical application for Russians trying to leave the country quickly.³⁵ In 2022, many Russians tried to enter the United States, though much fewer than those who went to the abovementioned countries. Despite the difficulties and risk, many tried to do so illegally by crossing the southern land border.³⁶ US Customs and Border Protection reported at the end of 2022 that its agents had dealt with over 31,600 Russians crossing the southern border to seek political asylum since the February invasion, compared to 4,100 in the fiscal year 2021.³⁷

The 2022 Emigrants’ Profile

Those who left Russia between the February invasion and the September partial mobilization had a very clear profile. They were predominantly young, politically active, well-off, and flexible and dynamic—a demographic group capable of undergoing a radical change of environment and still continuing to be active professionally or politically. The people who left Russia between 2000 and 2021 were mostly between 30 and 40 years old and over 92 per cent of them had high educational status.³⁸ Those who left between February and September 2022 were at least as well educated but tended to be younger, with an average age of 32 years, and predominantly not in a marital relationship.³⁹ According

28 Kristyna Foltynova, “Closing Doors: How Europe Is Restricting Russians From Traveling,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 13, 2022.

29 European Commission, [Guidelines on general visa issuance in relation to Russian applicants and controls of Russian citizens at the external borders](#), September 30, 2022.

30 The Moscow Times, “[In Russians enter EU since Ukraine war start, border agency says](#),” August 26, 2022.

31 Foltynova, “Closing Doors.”

32 Statista, [Number of legal border crossings of Russian citizens to and from the European Union \(EU\) from February 24, 2022 to October 9, 2022, by country and border](#).

33 Frontex, [Update: Situation at the EU’s land border with Russia](#), September 27, 2022.

34 Foltynova, “Closing Doors.”

35 Meduza, “[White House: Russians Fleeing Mobilization Can Apply for Asylum in the U.S.](#),” September 27, 2022. [In Russian.]

36 Miriam Jordan, “[Antiwar Activists Who Flee Russia Find Detention, Not Freedom, in the U.S.](#),” New York Times, November 28, 2022.

37 Snejana Farberov, “[Russians join thousands of migrants waiting for end of Title 42 at US border](#),” New York Post, December 29, 2022.

38 Esli byt’ tochnym, “[Over the past 20 years as many as 5 million people have left Russia. What research says about a new wave of emigration](#),” March 4, 2022. [In Russian.]

39 Meduza, “[How does the current wave of emigration differ from others? Which professions have left? Do migrants intend to return? Sociologist Margarita Zavadskaia on the results of the emigrants’ survey](#),” July 31, 2022. [In Russian.]; OK Russians!, [Survey, Anti-War Wave](#), March 2022.

to one study, Moscow and Saint Petersburg residents form a very large proportion of these emigrants, more so than of the pre-2022 emigration.⁴⁰ IT specialists (developers, programmers, testers, data analysts, web designers, and those from the broader tech sector spectrum) made up about one-third of the emigrants at first,⁴¹ and their share had risen to about half as of the beginning of September 2022.⁴² One small but important group consisted of Western-oriented, liberal journalists, politicians, and public intellectuals associated with NGOs (such as Memorial) or the last remaining liberal media (such as TV Rain or radio broadcaster Echo Moskvy) that were closed soon after the invasion. Other significant categories include academics, teachers, members of the cultural sector, and entrepreneurs. Following the declaration of mobilization in September, those who left Russia were predominantly men of conscription age.

Contrary to the previous waves of Russian emigrants, those who left in 2022 show a high level of trust toward each other as well as toward people in their host countries.

The majority of the 2022 emigrants were more politically active in Russia than their predecessors and more clearly driven by current political circumstances or even political persecution.⁴³ Many supported Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and also displaced people in Ukraine following the first Russian invasion in 2014. They posted their dissent in social media, participated in rallies before and after the February invasion, and signed anti-war petitions. One survey of Russia emigrants by the organization OK Russians! reported that 86.4 percent of them followed the recommendations of the "smart voting" campaign of

Navalny's foundation in the 2021 parliamentary elections.⁴⁴ Many took part in the mass protests in major cities later that year following the regime's crushing of the foundation. Many of the emigrants were at risk of criminal prosecution for their political activity. They often encountered political pressure, such as in the form of a warning from their employers at state and educational institutions. Some also experienced more direct threats in the form of searches and detentions. Many faced administrative and even criminal cases for many years before 2022.

Kovcheg's Anastasia Burakova says that many who left after the February invasion cannot be called dissidents in the conventional sense but that among them are people who had signed anti-war petitions and lost their job as a result, who attended an anti-war protest, who spread the word about the war on social networks, or who sent money to the Armed Forces of Ukraine or to help Ukrainians and faced pressure from the authorities as a result. She adds that those who left after the September mobilization are less politicized and that, for example, her organization often did not see a single mention of the war by them on social media.

Contrary to the previous waves of Russian emigrants, those who left in 2022 show a high level of trust toward each other as well as toward people in their host countries.⁴⁵ Evidence gleaned from the activities of politically active emigrants, journalists, and human rights defenders, from Russian-language Telegram channels, and from interviews indicates that they tend to see each other as part of a politically like-minded people, which helps to establish links among them. They try to maintain close ties with Russia and with relatives and friends who have stayed there, and they are aware of all political developments in the country, unlike the pre-2022 emigrants.⁴⁶

When asked about their reasons for leaving Russia, the 2022 emigrants generally express disagreement with the decision to go to war in Ukraine, an unwillingness to live in an aggressor country and become accomplices to a crime,

40 According to Margarita Zavadskaya. Meduza, "[How does the current emigration wave differ from others?](#)"

41 OK Russians!, [Survey](#), March 16, 2022.

42 Meduza, "[How does the current emigration wave differ from others?](#)"

43 RiddleTalk, Margarita Zavadskaya, [Emigration during the war](#), September 5, 2022. [In Russian.]

44 Zavadskaya, "[Anti-war wave of emigration](#)".

45 Meduza, "[How does the current emigration wave differ from others?](#)"; NODA, [Survey: Six months in exile: How life of new Russian emigrants has changed](#), December 23, 2022, [In Russian.]

46 Ibid. Also Interview, Anastasia Burakova, Kovcheg, December 15, 2022.

and a deep disappointment with and shame about Russia's policy.⁴⁷ They also express clear opposition to Putin's politics and a reluctance to adapt to the repressive state, or in some case an unwillingness to be associated with Russian politics. For example, the journalist Kyrill Ishutin says: "I have been forbidden to write in Russia, to make (civic) projects, forbidden of everything."⁴⁸ For some, the reason for leaving was more self-interested, such as fear of being conscripted, losing or fearing to lose their job, the departure of an employer (usually in the tech industry) from Russia, the inability to continue engaging with foreign clients, or more simply the growing inability to have one's usual way of life, to access usual goods and services, or to travel. As one study put it, "Political and economic grounds may be closely entangled" for those leaving Russia.⁴⁹ For some, the feeling of being an outsider or part of a minority among other Russians who support the regime was also an important factor. As one interviewee put it, "For [the rest of the Russian population] we are traitors and spies who sold out to the West. Now there is no place for me in my home country. They won't let us work, we will be repressed, imprisoned."

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Initiatives

The Exiled Political Opposition

The exiled Russian political opposition landscape is diffuse. Its most prominent features are individual figures as well as the groups and organizations that emerged throughout the Putin years, founded by well-known personalities such as Garry Kasparov, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Alexei Navalny. It also includes exiled media outlets such as Echo Moskyv, TV Rain,⁵⁰ and Meduza and the figures associated with them, or persons and groups with their own YouTube channels

such as Tamara Eidelman,⁵¹ Ekaterina Schulmann,⁵² Michael Nacke,⁵³ and Popular Politics.⁵⁴ There are also online news outlets, such as DOXA⁵⁵ and Verstka (Layout),⁵⁶ founded by little-known Russian journalists and activists living now outside the country that do not get the same attention. There is also a wide range of politicians, activists, scientists, and representatives from the cultural sector, among others, who have fled political repression. The relations between all such exiled opposition or critical figures have often been characterized by disagreements, but since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine there has been an effort by many of them to consolidate their efforts.

In recent years, different initiatives have emerged through which some figures and organizations have provided a degree of "voice from above" for the exiled opposition. One major example is the Free Russia Forum, the Lithuania-based opposition conference founded 2016 by Garry Kasparov and Ivan Tyutrin that is held twice a year in Vilnius. The largest and the oldest meeting platform for the opposition based outside Russia, it has united many prominent politicians, activists, journalists, and human right defenders, such as Maria Alekhina, Dmitry Bykov, Evgenya Chirikova, Sergei Guriev, Andrey Illarionov, Vladislav Inozemtsev, Vladimir Karaturza, and Viktor Shenderovich. The organization says its goal is "the formation of an intellectual alternative to Putin's regime."⁵⁷ The composition of the participants at the Vilnius conference tends to be changing, and after the February 2022 invasion many prominent international speakers also took part. Even if no one of the opposition-minded people inside and outside Russia probably expects any breakthroughs from the Free Russia Forum congresses, it is remarkable that they have existed for so long and still manage to unite even temporarily the opposition somewhat.⁵⁸

47 Author interviews and OK Russians!, [Survey](#), March 16, 2022.

48 Taya Zubova, "[Eyewitness Trauma](#)," Novaya Gazeta Europe, YouTube, October 2022. [In Russian.]

49 Emil Kamalov et al, [Russia's 2022 Anti-War Exodus: The Attitudes And Expectations Of Russian Migrants](#), PONARS, September 2022.

50 Latvia's government revoked TV Rain's broadcasting license in December 2022. Subsequently, TV Rain was granted a five-year broadcasting license in The Netherlands.

51 Youtube Channel [TamaraEidelmanHistory](#).

52 Youtube Channel [Ekaterina_Schulmann](#).

53 Youtube Channel [MackNack](#).

54 Youtube Channel [Popularpolitics](#).

55 [DOXA](#).

56 [Verstka.Media](#).

57 [The Free Russia Forum](#).

58 Anna Plotnikova, "[Eleventh Free Russia Forum: Results](#)," December 21, 2021. [In Russian.]

Another example is the Free Russia Foundation founded in the United States in 2014 by Natalia Arno, which also has offices in Berlin, Prague, Kyiv, and Tbilisi. It describes itself as “an international organization supporting civil society and democratic development in Russia” and “uniting and coordinating the global efforts of activists, organizations and programs that share the vision of free, democratic, peaceful and prosperous Russia.”⁵⁹ In September 2022, the exiled politician Vladimir Milov joined the organization.

Different actors in the exiled political opposition have in the past year put forward initiatives to try to organize the growing number of recent Russian emigrants and to give the broad oppositional landscape a form of “official” representation.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s different initiatives operate out of the United Kingdom while his Open Russia liquidated itself in Russia in 2021 in the face of repression. He described it as “a “horizontal alliance” of individuals and groups.”⁶⁰ In September 2022, Khodorkovsky called on Russians who remained in the country to sabotage state structures to stop the war in Ukraine and spoke also of “armed resistance.” Khodorkovsky also seemed to raise the need to help those who “end up in a dangerous situation” as a result, presumably meaning helping them to escape detention or to leave the country, but it is not clear to what extent he and his team have any serious means to do this within Russia.⁶¹ Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation relaunched itself as a US-registered international organization in July 2022. The focus of the foundation appears to be on its sanctions lists and advocating for the blacklisting of allies of Putin and the seizure of their assets in the West. In October, a senior member of the foundation said that it would be reopening its

regional network in Russia to oppose the war and mobilization, operating as a “partisan underground.”⁶²

New organizations have also been created as a result of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Lithuania-based Russian Anti-War Committee was formed immediately after the invasion as a body promoting the interests of all Russians who take an anti-war position. Its founders include Kasparov, Khodorkovsky, and politicians Dmitry Gudkov and Vladimir Kara-Murza (who is now jailed in Russia).⁶³ The Russian Action Committee co-founded in May by Kasparov and Khodorkovsky is supposed to be the Russian Anti-War Committee’s “political representation” subsidiary. The structure of these two bodies has been subject of change and is not clear from the outside, including in terms of duplicating some functions and of how ordinary Russians are to reach out to them. The Russian Action Committee organized in Vilnius in the autumn of 2022 a Congress of Free Russia with the aim to bring together Russian and Western anti-war actors and “to build a global coalition in defence of Ukraine and against Putin’s regime.”⁶⁴ Not long after the February invasion, the Kovcheg (The Ark) project was launched with the goal to offer practical help to those who left Russia, supported by the Russian Anti-War Committee and Khodorkovsky. The organization supports anti-war Russians in the initial stage of emigration by providing them with accommodation, advice on opening bank accounts and legal or visa issues, and other forms of support for settling down in host countries. Kovcheg is evolving and it sees itself as an organization supporting exiles’ communities and dissidents being persecuted by the Russian state as well as trying to involve the emigrants in anti-war and opposition communities.

Different actors in the exiled political opposition have in the past year put forward initiatives to try to organize the growing number of recent Russian emigrants and to give the broad oppositional landscape a form of “official” representation vis-à-vis foreign governments and international institutions.

59 [Free Russia Foundation](#).

60 Mikhail Khodorkovsky, [What Is Open Russia?](#).

61 Shaun Walker, [“Exiled Russian calls on those still in country to ‘sabotage’ Putin’s war.”](#) The Guardian, September 5, 2022.

62 The Moscow Times, [“Team Navalny says relaunching regional network to resist war mobilization.”](#) October 4, 2022.

63 Radio Liberty, [“Khodorkovsky, Kasparov, Guriev set up Russian Anti-war Committee.”](#) February 28, 2022.

64 [The Congress of Free Russia](#), August 31–September 2, 2022. Lithuania, Vilnius.

In May 2022, Kasparov put forward an idea for the political representation of Russians abroad. This would be based on issuing an identification document to those Russians who are against the war and the Putin regime, and for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, that would make life in Europe easier for them. Khodorkovsky supported the idea. The proposed document became labeled by others as a “Good Russian” passport, which has not been helpful to the promotion of this idea. Those signing the anti-war declaration would delegate the Russian Anti-War Committee to represent their interests and would obtain the document that would facilitate their obtaining visas, bank accounts, and access to other services currently unavailable to Russians in Europe.⁶⁵ A subsequent step would be to form a self-regulated online community of Russian citizens opposing the war. When the number of people in it was large enough, it could gain then some kind of official international status such as the one enjoyed by the office of Belarus’s Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. Subsequently, the team of Dmitry Gudkov, a former Duma deputy who left Russia in 2021, claimed that millions of Russians within and outside Russia could be brought together in one platform, based on the Russian Anti-War Committee or Russian Action Committee, through a decentralized blockchain-based system of self-organization. This would be a simple scheme in which those signing an anti-war declaration could register and have their identity confirmed by others in the system, with also clear criteria for revocation of membership. In the words of Gudkov, this “could easily be converted into some digital country with its own MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs], as well as a payment system, a mutual aid fund, employment programs, help in relocation, and even the creation of a digital university.”⁶⁶ (One model for this could be the recently launched New Belarus online platform for the country’s emigrants.)⁶⁷ It is not clear whether Gudkov and his team were tasked with implementing Kasparov’s proposal or whether he simply emphasized his role within a broader,

perhaps not yet fully developed idea. In any case, nothing seems to have been done to implement this idea to date.

In the course of 2022, several of these exiled pro-democracy and anti-war groups also took initial steps toward the creation of a Secretariat of European Russia in Brussels. This would, in the organizers’ words, “facilitate an efficient flow of communication and coordination between the EU and pro-democracy Russians” and assist European actors “to develop the Russia policy initiatives that would help stop the war in Ukraine, support the Russian civil society and activists, and catalyze political change inside Russia.”⁶⁸ In November, a preparatory meeting was held with EU partners in Brussels to discuss “EU strategy on relations with a Future Democratic Russia.”⁶⁹ This new form of representation would take on the “voice” function of opposition Russians to appeal to European politicians to systematically defend the interests of Russians as well as addressing the information and advisory needs of the European policy-makers on Russia-related issues.

Not all anti-war and resistance political groups emerging inside and outside Russia are pro-democratic. Radical non-democratic actors are also trying actively to establish links to Western politicians and to present themselves as representatives of the Russian emigrants and opposition. One group that has attracted attention is the National Republican Army (NRA). According to Ilya Ponomarev, a former Russian parliamentarian living in Ukraine, this is an underground association of 500 to 1,000 people mostly in their early 20s, with the goal of overthrowing the Putin regime mainly through armed subversive activity.⁷⁰ However, many doubt the existence of such a group, or at least its scale. Also in this category are the Militant Organization of Anarcho-Communists (BOAK) associated with the NRA,

65 Asya Rudina, “Passport of a good Russian”. *Social media about Kasparov and Gudkov’s idea*, Radio Liberty, May 23, 2022. [In Russian.]

66 Activatica, “Gudkov: ‘The project has nothing to do with passports of good Russians.’” May, 21, 2022.

67 [New Belarus](#).

68 Free Russia Foundation, [Pro-democracy anti-war Russians present secretariat of European Russia in Brussels](#).

69 Free Russia Foundation, “[Representantes \[sic\] of Russian democratic opposition in Brussels. Discussing EU strategy on relations with a Future Democratic Russia — @Natalia_Budaeva, @v_milov, @gudkovd, @SobolLubov](#).” Twitter, November 14, 2022.

70 Irina Romaliskaya, “[As long as Putin is alive, the war will not end](#)”. *Former Russian State Duma deputy Ilya Ponomarev talks about plans for ‘armed resistance against Putin’*. Current Time, September 1, 2022. [In Russian.]

and some leftist and rightist movements as well the media outlet February Morning founded by Ponomarev. The most prominent liberal emigrant and opposition circles distance themselves from Ponomarev and his initiatives, which are anything but democratic and advocate violent methods.⁷¹ In August, the Russian Action Committee stated its “categorical disagreement” with him and refused to invite him to the Congress of Free Russia. Ponomarev was among the organizers of a Congress of People’s Deputies held in Poland in November that claimed to represent Russia’s transitional parliament.⁷² It also advocated violent methods against the regime. Assessments of the Congress of People’s Deputies by other oppositional Russians abroad have ranged from “a very cloudy event” to “very dangerous” because the approach and claims of the participants can give the regime a pretext to go after opposition figures and group in Russia on charges of terrorism or treason.⁷³

Some exiled Russians see the likes of the Kasparov, Khodorkovsky, and Navalny organizations, and the exiled political opposition in general, as disconnected from the “ordinary” people in the country. For example, the Free Russia Forum is criticized for the contrast between the grassroots initiatives inside and outside Russia that risk much through their activities and the political “celebrities” of the forum seen as claiming to be popular. The Free Russia Forum’s initiators and participants and the “ordinary” emigrants differ also in age, financial resources, and status, with the latter coming from “the bottom” and not feeling represented by the former. Such criticism is probably not unfounded and may intensify in the future. As one study notes, the integration of these new emigrants with their predecessors “is highly dubious as they differ in their political orientation, seek new leaders, and are much younger.”⁷⁴ The idea of the “Good Russian” passport idea has provoked similar criticism. The most justified comes from the on-the-ground civic initiatives that argued that this May 2022 Free Russian Forum meeting

in Vilnius focused too much on this idea and did not quite pay attention to their activities in Russia.

The questions of who belongs to and who leads Russia’s democratic forces is central to the contradictions within the exiled opposition. For a long time, there was no clarity among the leading exiled opposition figures about whether Russians who are in the country should be included in the opposition forces and how they should disassociate themselves from the regime. To be a part of the institutionalized opposition abroad was the core of the “Good Russian” passport idea, which became discredited because its initiators indirectly accused Russians remaining in the country of complicity with the regime.

The building of an “official” representation for oppositional Russians outside the country must not have negative effects on the efforts to develop a common vision and values across the heterogeneous emigrant landscape.

The building of an “official” representation for oppositional Russians outside the country must not have negative effects on the efforts to develop a common vision and values across the heterogeneous emigrant landscape—and it should perhaps even stem from it. It should not either undermine the development of a common ground between the exiled political opposition and the recent emigrants. It is important that there are prominent Russian figures abroad advocating for the country’s political opposition in the West and against its complete isolation, as well as taking a clear pro-Ukraine position. But, without the support of the mass of new emigrants, the current bodies abroad representing Russians will remain somewhat artificial entities with limited “voice.” The establishment of connections between the exiled political opposition and foreign politicians to put the former’s vision on the international agenda is therefore desirable, but supporting the lower-profile emigrants who can build civic structures abroad is a more important and urgent task. It is also important for the exiled opposition figures not to lose

71 Ilshat Zaripov, “‘A convention of exes’. Runet on Ilya Ponomarev’s Polish forum,” Radio Liberty, November 8, 2022. [In Russian.]

72 [1st Congress of People’s Deputies.](#)

73 Ilshat Zaripov, “‘A convention of exes’.”

74 Kamalov et al, [Russia’s 2022 Anti-War Exodus.](#)

the trust of the large number of recent emigrants who are democracy-oriented but not politically active, as they may have the potential for becoming so.

One obstacle to building a strong force out of the Russians who have left their country comes from the exiled political opposition being more interested in addressing Western peers and institutions than in engaging and supporting average emigrants. It is possible simultaneously to provide practical, especially emergency, support to emigrants and to build representative bodies to engage with Western political actors on their behalf. In fact, solving the problems emigrants face with matters such as employment, education, housing, visas and residence permits, and other urgent needs could help in uniting opposition forces and encourage people at the grassroots to participate in building a political organization and broader movement. The project for a Secretariat of European Russia in Brussels unites prominent organizations but does not so far seem to sufficiently address the importance of supporting horizontal connections between the average oppositional emigrants, or even underestimates it. This could lead to the various grassroots emigrants and their emerging democratic initiatives, as well as the ones within Russia, becoming more disappointed with the top-down representation of oppositional Russians abroad.

One initiative that could play a positive role in this context is the Congress of Russian Civil Communities in Europe, which first met in July 2022 in Prague. Bringing together groups from 14 countries, its aim was to acknowledge the existence of a wide range of Russian-speaking civil society groups and initiatives aimed at helping Ukraine and opposing the regime.⁷⁵ The congress describes as its aim as to “coordinate their actions and discuss what place the Russian opposition and the new Russian diaspora in general can take in the European political, economic and cultural agenda.” A similar effort is the Antiwar Initiatives Congress that met for the first time in Berlin in December 2022.⁷⁶ The organizers describe the goal of this platform as “to unite efforts to jointly resist war and dictatorship, as well as to build a dialogue between

the civil society of Russians and the political institutions of the Eastern Partnership and the European Union.”

The forming of horizontal connections among Russians who have left their country was a very new experience that emerged under the extraordinary conditions of survival in the initial stage of emigration. These emigrants are now trying to extend this experience in their efforts to consolidate their activities. Such horizontal connections are also a means to develop and unite democratic efforts outside Russia. The emigrants involved would probably welcome the existence of a genuinely representative “official” presence on the international stage; among other things, it could mean that they do not have to solve all their problems themselves only through horizontal links. They may even delegate their “voice” to such a representation if they trusted it. On the other hand, if the representation initiatives of the exiled political opposition ignore their efforts, this will undermine the consolidation of the emigrant landscape and in the end make the notion of representation “from above” meaningless.

If their goal is forming a comprehensive and lasting democratic opposition outside Russia, the opposition forces outside the country seem not to be taking into account the lessons from efforts in previous years to do so inside the country—and they therefore risk repeating earlier mistakes. The key experiences that they should draw upon are the attempts to develop grassroots oppositional communities in 2011–2012 and to build networks of these, the failures to coordinate activities and the overestimation of representative bodies in the process of opposition consolidation (like the ill-fated Opposition Coordination Council of 2012–2013), and the efforts needed to build an open civil society. The potential of those leaving Russia since February 2022 to weaken the regime has to be developed, ideally applying the right lessons from these earlier experiences. Beyond providing them with emergency practical help, that goal requires common activities that would help them to organize themselves and to become more networked and unified. The building of a strong opposition from the exiled political organizations and the grassroots emigrant initiatives will also require a common, unifying goal concerning the future of Russia—a goal that today can only be engaging the question of a collective guilt and collective responsibility for Russia’s

75 Radio Liberty, “[The convention of Russian civil societies in Europe opens in Prague](#),” July 3, 2022. [In Russian.]

76 [The Antiwar Initiatives Congress](#).

war on Ukraine, reparations and restoration for Ukraine, and with the wider question of how Russia came to this point over the years. (On this, see more below.)

Grassroot Emigrant Initiatives

Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, emigrants have created groups and carried out activities outside Russia that will be crucial for developing a broad opposition. These predominantly young people had acted on their democratic aspirations and showed their political commitment and resilience before emigrating, not least in the face of the Kremlin's decisive crackdown on the independent media since the spring of 2021. Despite the personal risk, they continue to work from abroad on projects focused not only on the experience of emigrants but also on the life of ordinary people in Russia and human rights ideals. They can reach out to people inside Russia and be a source of inspiration for them. These new grassroots emigrant initiatives very often come out of Facebook or Telegram groups and channels each with several tens of thousands of members, the largest so far being dedicated to relocation assistance and advice.

Groups founded for urgent emigration needs gradually are transforming into heterogeneous mutual aid communities of people who meet regularly in person for a wide range of activities. Such communities have emerged in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and other host countries. Some aim primarily at providing the foundations for life after fleeing Russia. Life for participants in these communities is being built on principles of horizontal self-organization and has more or less explicitly the character of a commune. Other emigrant communities are built around professional and interest groups. These are not focused on practical matters of survival abroad but unite mainly people in a better financial situation. Below are examples of such communities.

In Montenegro, the Pristanište (Haven) foundation is a private initiative (launched by Svetlana Shmeleva, who is also a member of the Russian Action Committee) that brings together people with an anti-war stance from Russia as well as from Belarus, Montenegro, and Ukraine. The initial goal was to provide short-term shelter and food to those fleeing the Kremlin's aggression, regardless of their citizenship. The foundation was later registered and it now provides

living support to about 30 families. Up to 1,000 Russian and local volunteers are involved. Pristanište also aims to help emigrants find jobs and housing, learn the local language, and get access to education for their children. It organizes events such as evenings and concerts, with proceeds from tickets going to meet its needs. Pristanište has also opened a space for meetings of volunteers and tenants. The fact that it helps Russians and Ukrainians in an EU member state complicates matters for its operations since the latter are covered by the EU's temporary protection mechanism but not the former.

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In Uzbekistan, Bahor (Spring), which describes itself as a self-organization of cultural workers, has operated since March 2022. It started with a charity music event in Tashkent to raise funds for Russian emigrants and, due to growing needs, it grew to organize cultural and educational events on a non-profit basis. About 100 people became active members and attended events. The local population and, in part, emigrants provide informational, organizational, and human support. The founders of Bahor believe it was important to anchor the Russian emigrants by helping them to understand the cultural and historical environment of Uzbekistan. The community has tried to address issues related to cultural dialogue between emigrants and locals, aiming for its events to become a platform for meeting, discussion, and integration with as many Tashkent residents as possible.⁷⁷

In Georgia, a group of Russian IT specialists has organized a Hackerspace in Tbilisi as a space for co-working and collaborative digital creativity like making electronic music, 3D modeling, and 3D art. It offers community members

⁷⁷ Syg-ma, "[Community is a superpower](#)," September 29, 2022, [In Russian.]

collectively owned equipment and hosts up to 100 guests a month. The organizers also hold events and produce reports. The financial basis is provided by 12 permanent members who pay rent for the Hackerspace. The organizers value their community as one of shared interests and the possibilities to connect with like-minded people, but they have no plan to open other spaces. There has also been in Tbilisi since April 2022 a community of Russian documentary filmmakers and film lovers, reflecting the fact that a large number of emigrants to Georgia came from Russia's film and art sectors. Bringing together more than 500 people, the community organizes documentary screenings attended by the filmmakers. As well as socializing, its members share their knowledge, experience, and equipment. The rent for the space for the community's activities is paid by volunteers and from donations, and money remaining from fundraising is sent to help refugees from Ukraine.

For emigrants from Russia, the experience gained through these initiatives, in terms of self-organizing and of interaction with local populations, based on horizontal ties and mutual assistance is often new.

Such organizations have been created and run by people with a high awareness of the need for civic participation who invest personal and even financial resources into a common goal. To maintain their projects, however, they are dependent on support from their host country's population and volunteers. For emigrants from Russia, the experience gained through these initiatives, in terms of self-organizing and of interaction with local populations, based on horizontal ties and mutual assistance is often new and shapes for them a new understanding of social connections. The emigrants are usually existentially dependent on each other, while inside Russia even the politically active may have had a sense of solidarity but could remain autonomous and disconnected from one another. At this stage, it is hard to judge if their experience of emigration will influence these Russians more than that of political activity in Russia. But the existential emigra-

tion experience requires so much interaction and confidence in being able to rely on each other, initially at least, that it could have a stronger effect on people's appreciation of the importance of horizontal ties to achieve common goals.

Media and journalism initiatives are an important part of the bottom-up developments from the 2022 wave of Russian emigrants. A large number of journalists and media professionals left Russia after the February invasion, and by some estimates this group, including their family members, may have numbered at least 1,000 by the end of the year. Countries like Armenia, Georgia, Latvia, and Lithuania now host not only the reincarnation of well-known independent Russian media such as TV Rain,⁷⁸ Mediazona,⁷⁹ Meduza,⁸⁰ and Novaya Gazeta.Europe⁸¹ but also many smaller news outlets and (sometimes interconnected) media projects reaching out to the Russian regions. The prominent outlets still reach large audiences in Russia. For example, former employees of the defunct Ekho Moskvyy radio station launched an Echo app⁸² in September 2022, which is claimed to have had in its first week about 1.5 million daily listeners, 60-70 percent of them Russian.⁸³ The smaller independent media projects reach Russian-speaking smaller audiences of sometimes up to 100,000 daily. Some operate with their journalists located in up to ten different countries. These independent journalistic projects cover the war extensively, unlike the major propaganda media in Russia. Their staffs were able to resume their journalistic activities within a very short time after leaving the country and being able to do so was in fact the driving force behind their emigration. They can reach relatively large audiences by using the freedom of expression they have outside Russia, but they do not perceive themselves fully to be a "voice" for opposition forces. What is more, the people involved see their professional work as important but, absent sustained support to keep operating

78 [TV Rain](#).

79 [Mediazona](#).

80 [Meduza](#).

81 [Novaya Gazeta Europe](#).

82 [Echo FM](#).

83 Interview Maxim Kournikov, Ekho Moskvyy, October 15, 2022.

beyond the short term, they can start doubting that they are providing a “voice” at all.

Several emigrant media projects were founded by journalists from cities in different regions of Russia and aim to reach out to audiences in these regions as much as those in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Their regional focus also helps them distinguish themselves from larger and better-resourced media that maybe are more associated with Russia’s two metropolises. Their founders overcame the initial shock and confusion of emigration often with the help of relocation assistance by the likes of Kovcheg. These projects have a clear oppositional and anti-war agenda, carry out small investigations, address political issues, and operate mainly via Telegram channels and YouTube and other web sources. Some examples are Ochevidcy (Eyewitnesses),⁸⁴ Novaya Vkladka (NewTab),⁸⁵ and 7x7.⁸⁶ Several of the civic and journalistic projects emerging from the 2022 emigration are clearly aimed at establishing horizontal links in society in Russia by covering the life of ordinary people there. They not only inform but also provide psychological support by conveying to anti-war and anti-regime Russians the message that “out there” are other people thinking and feeling like them. They understand their function as trying to support these people. The awareness of not being alone is very important for the activists and journalists involved too, and taking part in a common activity toward a common goal helps them to keep going. They are focused on their projects and feel relatively confident in the short term, but they also feel great uncertainty concerning their and Russia’s medium to long term future.

Supporting Democratic Potential

Whether the Russians who have left their country since the full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 can coalesce into a force for democracy will depend in part on the extent to which the West recognizes and supports the democratic potential in them and their activities. Given that a large number of people will probably continue to leave Russia whenever possible, the largely anti-regime views of the recent emigrants, and

the dynamics of their relations with the political opposition in exile, the West should work to strengthen the democratic aspirations of Russians now abroad and support their organizational consolidation. Currently, a combination of exiled political figures, emerging platforms of grassroots initiatives, and independent media provides a degree of “voice” for democratic Russians outside Russia. The development of a stronger, more united “voice” would not only be an indicator of the consolidation of an emigrant community that could be part of a future democratic transformation of Russia—it could also help drive this consolidation. The kind of official representation on the international stage that the opposition is seeking will only be meaningful if it has the trust of the wider emigrant community, including of those who are not particularly politically active. There can be a role for democracy-support actors in encouraging and supporting efforts to develop such trust.

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Western governmental and nongovernmental actors should primarily aim at strengthening the democratic convictions of a critical mass of Russian emigrants. Based on the analysis in this paper, four areas suggest themselves as promising for short-to-medium-term democracy support that will contribute to pursuing the long-term goal of strengthening of the community of Russian emigrants and its democratic orientation: entry and stay, democratic civic culture, and two groups in particular—IT specialists and journalists. These two groups can reach out with information to audiences of millions outside and inside Russia. They can also spread in the West information about political prisoners, protesters, and activists in Russia, or work on solutions to reach these people with support from outside.

84 [Telegram. Ochevidcy.](#)

85 [Novaya vkladka.](#)

86 [7x7.](#)

Entry and Stay

The mass emigration from Russia was unexpected and countries had to deal with the issues associated with so many people seeking entry from an aggressor state. The West remains for many Russians the ultimate goal, regardless of their initial destination, but it still does not have policies to handle a large influx of them in terms of either entry or stay. What is more, Western restrictive visa policies hamper the goal of strengthening the emigrant communities and their democratic potential. In particular, the need to ensure that emigrants do not pose a security threat and are committed to democracy makes the situation more difficult.

The EU is a critically important actor in this regard due to geographic proximity to Russia, but it still does not have a unified policy. This is complicated by the fact that migration policy is a shared competence between the EU and the member states. After the debate in 2022 on whether there should be a visa ban for Russians, the EU approach became more restrictive. This varies across member states, but restrictions on the ability of Russians to enter and stay prevail. For example, the European Commission's September 2022 guidelines called on member states' consulates in third countries like Georgia and Kazakhstan not to accept visa applications from Russian citizens there. Russians, including those who do not want to serve in the military and commit crimes against humanity, have the right to demand asylum from member states but in practice this is undermined by the security focus as applications must be made at the EU border at a time when entry is severely restricted.

Security concerns remain the underlying rationale. In October, the EU justified tightening its visa policy by referring to the illegal annexation by Russia of four Ukrainian regions and the attacks on pipelines in the Baltic Sea. This contradicts the call to differentiate between Russia's government and its people made by the European Parliament and the strong pro-emigrant position of many of its members.

The security focus also leads to restrictive measures concerning stay. It is one reason why mechanisms for dealing with those Russians who have entered the EU are deficient or lacking. There have been almost no concrete steps at the EU level to address practical issues such as a residence or work permit for the emigrants. As the member states diverge too

much, an EU-wide policy is unlikely in the short term. Almost the only positive development has been the introduction by some member states of humanitarian visas that Russians can apply for in third countries. However, humanitarian visas have often been denied to people who had been politically active in Russia for years.

The Schengen Agreement is the only major supranational framework regarding rights for Russians who have entered the EU. Those with a Schengen visa or a humanitarian visa can travel within the Schengen area. They are also able to carry out paid activities while they are in the EU, without being restricted to one member state; for example, keeping working remotely on projects funded by donor grants. However, this legal right does not apply to those who need to take up employment in the EU. Thus, while the issue of entry remains one for the member states, the EU institutions should urgently do more at their level for resolving the issue of residence and work permits for Russian emigrants. This is especially important for the development and sustainability of the pro-democracy groups and initiatives that should be supported. In this regard, one practical initial step that should be taken as soon as possible is the collection of data from the groups targeted for support to find out on what legal basis their members are in the EU.

Visa restrictions hide the lack of a real solution to any security threat that might be posed by some Russian emigrants. One way to address the security concerns of some EU member states would be for the EU institutions and the Russian opposition in exile as well democracy-support actors to work together on efforts that focus on demonstrating that individual emigrants do not pose a security threat and are committed to democratic norms. Initiatives like the "Good Russian" passport, regardless of their shortcomings so far, try to address these concerns and should be learned from and built upon. This could make it easier for the EU and other hosts to provide emigrants with, for instance, a two-year stay and work permit. The EU and Western countries should also understand that screening Russian emigrants for any connections in their background that suggest a security-risk potential can exclude people wanting to defect from the regime and state institutions in Russia or who have a clear anti-war position.

The Potential of IT

The presence of a large number of specialists from the IT sector among the Russian emigrants holds great potential not only for connecting the dispersed emigrant communities but also for encouraging their democratic orientation and for reaching back to the population in Russia. These emigrants are young and active; they have advanced knowledge and skills; they are experienced in dealing with the global technology and business worlds; and they have clearly expressed anti-war, anti-regime, and for many also pro-democracy views. Western governmental and nongovernmental institutions, including democracy organizations, should support putting their talents and energy to use in developing a wide range of technological solutions.

Grants and investments for emigrant IT projects or startups could consolidate different groups of emigrants, build organizational capacity and digital security for emigrant groups and activists, and connect those who have left Russia with people in the country securely and on a larger scale than currently. Activities based on digital technologies could also compensate for the restricted mobility of emigrants through the development of digital communities among them. Support should also help provide physical and digital community-building spaces for bringing together IT specialists and democracy activists to develop tech solutions jointly. It could also target the needs of Russian oppositional forces abroad with the development of decentralized administration and financial systems or provide solutions for the needs of other emigrant initiatives. Building on initial short-term projects, one next step could be supporting of a network of IT projects in the greatest possible number of locations. The successful completion of pilot projects could also help attract investment capital—from tech startup scene to global tech giants—for scaling up the activities and the number of the emigrants involved.

Democracy-support organizations involved in the elaboration of such emigrant IT projects and startups should ensure that they are based on a clear positive political vision and are run by professionals with a strong democratic commitment. The activities in developing and implementing these projects would also serve to further the commitment of individuals and groups involved to democratic ideals as they

see the impact of their work and evolve into a more formed political community. Successful projects would also mitigate the security concerns of host countries about Russian emigrants.

The emigrant IT sector is also well equipped to develop solutions to counter technology employed by the state in Russia for repression, including surveillance technology such as facial recognition used during protests and other forms of public mobilization. It could help devise solutions to protect democracy groups and activists in Russia against the capture or hacking of their personal data, as, for example, was the case with Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation's registration data in relation to a nationwide rally it was organizing in 2021.

Overall, such projects could also facilitate synergies between emigrant IT professionals and organizations and the IT communities of those host countries where there is considerable digital expertise, like the Baltic states. Germany, particularly Berlin, could be another attractive location for such projects as one of the leading world hubs for technologies like blockchain that allow decentralized protocols.

Finally, supporting Russian IT specialists and using their competence for the development of technical solutions would strengthen the cybersecurity resilience of Western countries against Russia and help advance democratic technology that can counter autocratic technology.

The Potential of Media

Support for grassroots journalist projects and media organizations from the recent emigration will increase the reach of independent reporting to people inside Russia as well as weaken the influence of the regime's propaganda in the country and abroad. Many of these have a clear democratic potential. The steps the journalists involved have made to reorient their lives and professional activities, and to forge new collaborations, in their host countries shows the seriousness of their intentions. Support and recognition are essential for these people to maintain their enthusiasm and activities and to increase their ability to reach audiences inside Russia. Supporting them can consolidate the community of emigrant journalists and improve their skills, especially with a focus on the promotion of demo-

cratic ideas and of rethinking Russia's past, present, and future, not only to people in the country but also to Russian-speaking audiences worldwide.

Because of, among other things, the inability to generate revenue from advertising or crowdfunding and to receive international support, the independent media in Russia almost completely ran out of viable economic models after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This and growing state intimidation, including criminal prosecutions, were the main reasons for the emigration of journalists. At the same time, though, the domestic audience for independent journalism grew in the first months after the invasion.⁸⁷ The promising emigrant grassroots journalist projects and media organizations could capitalize on this, but their survival is endangered because of the insecure financial and partly legal situation of their staff in different host countries. They also remain mostly invisible at the international level, and thus to possible supporters.

Prominent and large media outlets emerging from the emigration should not be the only recipients of support because they target and reach larger nationwide audiences; it is equally important to sustain grassroots or region-focused journalistic projects. Western governmental and nongovernmental institutions should provide different support options, from larger funding for new outlets to smaller grants to smaller projects and initiatives. Support should include providing assistance for obtaining work and residence permits, housing, and medical insurance, as well as psychological assistance for the journalists involved.

Support can also encourage connections between the Western media private sector and Russian emigrants for seed or ongoing investment. Examples of such engagement include US-based North Base Media helping raise funds for the launch of Helpdesk.Media⁸⁸ and the support for Repost⁸⁹ by Sweden's Bonnier News and Norway's Amedia group. Support could also help to establish capacity-building links and possible cooperation between emigrant media outlets

and projects and major Western media companies. This could include professional development programs for the emigrant journalists; for example, with international broadcasters such as the BBC and CNN. Fostering such ties could also help independent Russian media attract advertisers.

As in the case of IT actors, the process for obtaining media support should include the assessment of the democratic commitment of the applicants. Projects should have clearly defined goals, timelines, and measurable outcomes (for example, in terms of reaching an audience of a certain size.) If successful, they can be prolonged and scaled up.

Democratic Civic Culture

Western governmental and nongovernmental institutions should support efforts at overcoming the atomization and consolidating not only of the Russian emigrants but also of the opposition abroad. The recent Russian emigrants, like any people in emigration, strive for a sense of community and solidarity as well as encouragement. Therefore, they should be supported to build further the horizontal connections that they have started establishing and to consolidate themselves in communities united by a common goal. And supporting those with clearly expressed democratic aspirations would make them feel that they are seen and heard by those whose values they share. This would strengthen their commitment to democracy and increase their motivation to be active promoters of democratic ideas to the general emigrant population, the older diaspora, and Russians still at home.

Increasing the positive experiences of cooperation of emigrants among themselves (as well as with host communities and international supporters) would strengthen their democratic civic culture. Out of this could evolve the basis for a broad democratic political movement of Russians abroad, even if it is not highly institutionalized. Based on the 2022 emigrants' initial experience of trust in like-minded people and belonging to a community, support can be directed to developing their potential to turn from private to public citizens, in the sense of someone assuming "responsibility for the political life of his or her community."⁹⁰ Support could encourage

87 Yulia Balakhonova et al. "Novy Mir: [A Guide to Russian Media in the Times of Total Censorship](#)," Proekt, August 15, 2022.

88 helpdesk.media

89 [wearerepost](https://wearerepost.com)

90 Albert Hirschman, "Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History," *World Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 1993, p. 201.

the development of a sense of community and strengthen self-organization on the assumption that forms of political association can arise from joint actions by the emigrants.

Among the recent Russian emigrants are many socially and politically active public intellectuals well-known in Russia—human rights activists; members of the science, education, and culture sectors; and political figures—all of whom reach large audiences including through traditional public activities such as lectures or public talks. This group can transport pro-democracy and anti-war messages to Russians inside and outside of Russia. Democracy support should engage with this group too by funding, for example, educational and public outreach activities involving the emigrant public intellectuals, including opportunities for them to speak in cities with large Russian emigrant populations. Western foundations, nongovernmental organizations, and think tanks could involve such individuals also in providing programs of civic education for emigrant communities. Engaging them could also help to identify common goals and themes that would unite the emigrant population. Some emigrant organizations and initiatives are planning to establish platforms for those who want to take part in the democratization process in Russia after a collapse of the regime.

Finally, emigrant public intellectuals could be important partners in the necessary but lacking process for Russians, abroad and inside Russia, to rethink their country's past and present in order to envisage a democratic future. Sprouts of this process can be seen in their speeches and writings as well as those of the exiled opposition abroad and of the emigrant journalists in emigration—but it is a vast societal challenge that stretches beyond specific efforts to encourage a democratic civic culture among the recent Russian emigrants.

Conclusion

There cannot be a vision of Russia's democratic future without Russians becoming aware that their country is an imperialist aggressor and that their goal must be to overcome its imperialist legacy. The participation of as many Russians as possible in the huge task of building the awareness for this change of worldview in Russia is an essential prerequisite for change in the direction of democracy. This long process of a

societal recovery will need to overcome, in Alexei Navalny's words, "an endlessly self-reproducing Russian authoritarianism of the imperial kind."⁹¹ It must also include bringing to account those who are responsible for the war and who committed war crimes as well as reparations for Ukraine. Any democracy support to Russian emigrants and opposition forces abroad should reflect this understanding and include measures that encourage and facilitate this entire process. As noted above, the exiled opposition and politically active emigrants have started taking the step of condemning Russia's imperialist aggression and promoting a perception of it in the country.

Russians are not likely to overcome the autocratic regime quickly but the Russian human capital now outside the country can be used toward this end.

Russians are not likely to overcome the autocratic regime quickly but the Russian human capital now outside the country can be used toward this end. Support for a political and societal rebirth of Russia should include strengthening the position of these emigrants, using their skills and democratic potential, and building the broadest possible pro-democracy community outside the country. Any democracy support to the Russian emigrants should always have as a precondition making sure of their commitment to human rights and freedoms, to international security based on international law, to the right of countries to self-determination, and to the inviolability of borders.

The exiled opposition's goal of ending the regime being difficult to operationalize, it should therefore not be the aim of the joint efforts between itself, the emigrant community, and their Western supporters. The other opposition aim of the reintegration of a transformed Russia into the Western order, however distant, can also be counterproductive without the prior creation of a broad basis for real democratic change in Russia. This is why joint efforts by the opposition

91 Alexei Navalny, "[How to build a peaceful post-Putin Russia](#)," Washington Post, September 30, 2022.

and Western democracy supporters are necessary to consolidate the democratic potential of the emigrant community and its diverse emerging groups and initiatives. Involving the emigrants and the exiled opposition more in a community of values through joint activities can also help to integrate those who are not politically active. Regular exchanges between the exiled opposition, emigrant groups and grassroots initiatives, and Western democracy supporters could help define the most urgent issues that the opposition must solve and under which conditions support for the establishment of structures among the emigrants be made available.

The experience of supporting civil society from countries such as Belarus can be a source of lessons in this regard.

Many measures that can be taken outside Russia to support the large number of Russians who have left the country can help form the basis for a future democratic society. This is a long-term strategic goal that can be supported incrementally through pragmatic short-term and medium-term support programs. Even if these Russians may not be able to return to Russia very soon to work there for the democratic transformation of the country, they can work from abroad effectively to bring this goal closer.

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About the Author(s)

Oxana Schmies is an independent analyst specializing in Russian politics and society. She holds a PhD in modern history from the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies in Erfurt, Germany. She has worked in large academic research projects at German universities like Humboldt University of Berlin, and has worked with the Center for Liberal Modernity, the Martens Center, the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, and the Center for European Policy Analysis.

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