Report

Not Quite Agents of Change

Russian Anti-War Grassroots Initiatives in Europe

| Igor Gretskiy |

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Cover page photo: An activist from the association Russian Liberties waves the opposition flag at Trocadero Plaza near the Eiffel Tower in Paris, on 17 March. AP Photo/Michel Euler/Scanix.

Photo No 2: Snow flakes coat a photograph of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny placed outside the Russian embassy in Bucharest, Romania, on 16 February 2025, a year after his death. AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru/Scanpix.

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List of Abbreviations

AFU	Armed Forces of Ukraine
CCRC	Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots
FBK	Anti-Corruption Foundation
FRF	Free Russia Foundation
GRU	Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (*Главное управление Генерального штаба,* Russia)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
RAWC	Russian Anti-War Committee
VPN	virtual private network
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Executive Summary

Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives in Europe largely originated from small groups of emigrants who, in 2021, organised rallies in support of Alexei Navalny following his return to Russia. Their administrative core consists primarily of pre-2022 Russian immigrants, who are well adapted to European societies. Following the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these initiatives adopted an explicitly anti-war agenda, expanding their ranks and numbers due to the inflow of new arrivals from Russia. Most grassroots initiatives, however, remain small, informal groups. Few managed to register as NGOs due to declining engagement among Russian immigrants, scarce resources, a preference for flexible activism, and a desire to avoid scrutiny from Russian authorities in order to maintain travel and asset access in Russia.

Since late 2022, Russian anti-war initiatives in Europe have been in decline. They face chronic funding shortages, limited personnel, and a lack of a culture of civic engagement. Yet the primary challenge is apathy among immigrants and the decreasing number of active participants. Some initiatives attempt to address this through lobbying for increased immigration from Russia and the easing of visa and travel restrictions. The latter is particularly relevant for recently arrived activists who continue to visit relatives in Russia, as restrictions cause them personal inconvenience.

Russian anti-war initiatives remain highly fragmented, both internally and in relation to one another. Moreover, there is no figure within the Russian anti-war diaspora in Europe who commands sufficient authority to consolidate them. They do not recognise any prominent Russian politicians in exile or influencers as their leaders, partly because these figures present themselves as Russian politicians primarily concerned with domestic audiences rather than the Russian immigrant community in Europe.

Most activists are deeply pessimistic about Russia's prospects and do not see their own future as connected to the country. While they would welcome the collapse or transformation of the Putin regime, grassroots initiatives generally do not pursue this as a goal. They are even further removed from the idea of an armed revolution in Russia. Shaping public opinion within the country is not a priority either. Instead, their efforts concentrate on activities within their host societies, such as countering anti-European disinformation and supporting newly arrived Russian immigrants in their adaptation. Their primary focus is on consolidating and enhancing their influence in Europe.

Overall, Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives appear neither capable nor willing to act as "agents of change" in Russia or to function as a "conveyor belt" for transmitting democratic ideas back into the country. At this stage, their ability to mobilise Russian émigrés in Europe should be assessed as extremely limited, and their capacity to influence the population inside Russia is even smaller. Looking ahead, most of their informal communities are likely to fade due to a lack of resources, while a few larger registered groups may gradually evolve into permanent diasporic organisations.

For European experts and policymakers, it is, therefore, advisable not to overestimate the potential of Russian political activists in Europe or to expect the sudden emergence of a democratic Russia. Instead, it should be assumed that Russia will remain a primary source of security threats to the continent in the long term. Effective deterrence will require substantial investments in Europe's own defence capabilities, continued comprehensive support for Ukraine, and a readiness to assert Europe's vision for its future security through bolder measures and a far more determined stance against Russia.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sparked a wave of grassroots anti-war initiatives created by Russian immigrants across Europe. Since then, experts have begun to question whether these communities could play a role in Russia's future transformations.[1] Some argue that they are an underappreciated strategic asset which, if supported, could become "the strongest tool the west has to shape a future Russia."[2] Russian public figures in exile echo this view, often portraying grassroots initiatives as the "bedrock of the new [Russian] civil society" and "catalysts for the nation's transformation," while framing the new wave of Russian emigration as the builders of a future democratic Russia.[3]

These claims usually rely on three assumptions. First, it is assumed that after Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia will become less authoritarian, and that during a transition of power, opposition forces and emigrants will have an opportunity to influence political processes at home. This idea resonates with the notion of a "window of opportunity," widely promoted by Russian influencers and politicians abroad, which is expected to "open sooner or later" to allow them to return and "lead millions" toward a European, democratic future.[4]

Second, analysts often assume that Russian emigrants are motivated to act as agents of political change in Russia. The thinking goes that if the country's political trajectory shifts in a more favourable direction, emigrants will return – both for career opportunities and to become the "backbone of the administrative apparatus" of a new, less repressive regime.[5] In this view, the anti-war diaspora becomes a "mini-laboratory" of democratic practices, ready to deploy their experience when political conditions at home improve.[6]

Third, it is assumed that Russian emigrants have enough influence among Russians to effectively promote democratic and pluralistic ideas.[7] In this context, some experts even describe politically active Russian emigrants as a "conveyor belt."[8]

To evaluate the true political potential of these grassroots anti-war initiatives, it is essential to understand how they function

Yet to evaluate the true political potential of these grassroots anti-war initiatives, it is essential to understand how they actually

1 Nicolas Bouchet, Anastasia Burakova, "Russia's Recent Emigrants: Mobility and Engagement," *GMF*, February 2025, 2.

2 Stephen G. F. Hall, *Getting a Foot in the Door: Creating a Future Russia Now* (Henry Jackson Society, November 2023), 5; Maria Domańska, "Russian Civil Society Actors in Exile: An underestimated agent of change," *SWP*, Comment 2023/C 26, 11 May 2023; Maria Domańska, Stefan Ingvarsson, "Russia in exile. Support for Russian political migrants as an instrument to increase European security," *OSW,* Commentary no. 551, 15 November 2023; Ekaterina Sachkova, "Why isn't the West supporting these Russian exiles?," *Chatham House*, 9 June 2025.

3 Yuri Terekhov, "A Survey of Russian Grassroots Anti-War Resistance," *Wilson Center*, Kennan Cable no. 84, October 2023; Sergej Metlev, "Активистка из России: Запад сам вскормил фашистскую диктатуру, теперь пусть хоть замерзнет, но это надо прекратить! [Activist from Russia: The West itself nurtured the fascist dictatorship, now let it freeze, but this must be stopped!]," *Postimees*, 8 September 2022.

4 Fedor Krasheninnikov, Vladimir Milov, *Нормальная Россия будущего: да, мы можем* [A Normal Russia of the Future: Yes, We Can] (Free Russia Foundation, 2023), 41-45; "Yulia Navalnaya spoke at the Munich Security Conference," Platform of a Future Russia, 15 February 2025; Leonid Volkov (@leonidvolkov), "Провел день рождения на работе, все как мы любим. Но это стоило того! [Spent my birthday at work, just the way we like it. But it was worth it!],"X, 11 November 2024; Mumin Shakirov, "Екатерина Шульман: Мне не нравится термин "российская оппозиция [Ekaterina Shulman: I don't like the term "Russian opposition"]," *Radio Svoboda*, 16 June 2023; Russie Libertés (@russie.libertes), "Владимир Кара-Мурза в Париже [Vladimir Kara-Murza in Paris]," Youtube, 20 September 2024.

5 Dmitry Gudkov, Vyacheslav Inozemtsev, Dmitry Nekrasov, "Новая российская диаспора:вызов и шанс для Европы [The New Russian Diaspora: A Challenge and Opportunity for Europe]," *IFRI,* Russie. Eurasie.Reports, no. 47 (June 2024): 31; Kirill Shamiev, Ksenia Luchenko, "Life in exile: A new approach to Russian democrats in Europe," *ECFR*, Policy brief, 14 March 2024.

6 Domańska e al.,"Russia in exile."

7 Adam Balcer, Pavel Havlíček, Aleš Khol, "EU-Russia Relations in the Area of People to People Ties: New Strategic Framework for Cooperation in the Future," *Association for International Affairs (AMO),* Policy Paper no. 7 (September 2025): 9.

8 Domańska e al.,"Russia in exile."

function. Research on this topic is still limited. While Russian opposition figures and influencers receive extensive attention from the media, as well as the expert and academic communities, grassroots initiatives are much less visible.

This report aims to provide a clearer picture of Russian grassroots anti-war initiatives across Europe. It draws on 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2025 with representatives of diaspora-type Russian anti-war communities in countries including Germany (6), France (2), Finland (2), Poland (2), and one each from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. 22 of them are founders, directors, board members of NGOs, or leaders of informal associations.

The first part of the report explores how these initiatives position themselves, the goals they pursue, the strategies they employ, the successes they recognise, and the challenges they face. The second part examines their views on Russian opposition figures and slogans, their relationships with the Ukrainian diaspora, their perceptions of European sanctions on Russia, and their visions for Russia's future

1. General Description

By the end of 2023, researchers had identified over 100 Russian diasporic anti-war grassroots initiatives, though this number is likely somewhat inflated.[9] Most of these groups are informal, made up of just a few activists, and tend to dissolve as initial enthusiasm fades.

In the communities studied, three groups of activists stand out: 1) those who left Russia after the 2022 invasion, 2) pre-2022 emigrants, and 3) European-born descendants of earlier waves of Russian emigration. The latter two groups make up the majority of these communities. Better integrated into their host societies, they often take responsibility for the core activities of grassroots initiatives.

Most of the diasporic anti-war grassroots groups are informal, made up of just a few activists, and tend to dissolve as initial enthusiasm fades

As for the overall size of the Russian anti-war activist community in Europe, self-reported numbers from the most prominent anti-Putin diaspora groups estimate it likely does not exceed 2 500–3 500 people. Some estimates, based on refugee residence permits, suggest that 4 000–5 000 opposition activists arrived in the EU after 2022.[10] Yet not all of them remained active; receiving refugee status does not automatically mean joining grassroots initiatives.

A typical Russian grassroots anti-war initiative – registered or not – has a core of 3–10 people carrying out most of the work. Around this core, 20–60 others participate occasionally. These initiatives usually operate publicly, sharing updates on social media accounts that range from a few dozen to about 1 500 followers. Only the largest registered NGOs exceed this level.

Most grassroots initiatives trace their origins back to rallies in support of Alexei Navalny, arrested in January 2021. Amid COVID restrictions and repressive laws targeting NGOs, he returned to Moscow from Germany and called on Russians to protest "Putin's gang of crooks."[11] Many expected this high-profile arrest to spark widespread sympathy, radicalise opposition sentiment, and trigger a major wave of demonstrations ahead of parliamentary elections.[12] Some even imagined that the regime could be vulnerable and that street mobilisation might trigger a collapse of Putin's authoritarian rule.[13]

[9] Terekhov, "A Survey of Russian Grassroots Anti-War Resistance."

[10] Gudkov et al, "The New Russian Diaspora, 6.

[11] Navalny Live (@NavalnyLiveChannel), "Не бойтесь, выходите на улицы: обращение Навального [Do not be afraid, take to the streets: Navalny's appeal]," Youtube, 18 January 2021.

[12] TV Rain, "Возвращение Навального. Спецэфир Дождя [The Return of Navalny. Special broadcast on Dozhd TV]," Facebook, 17 January 2021.

[13] Jonathan Tepperman, "Russia Is in Agony, but Putin's Dictatorship Is Going Down," *Foreign Policy*, 26 January 2021.

In reality, the Russian public responded with indifference. Protests occurred in over 100 cities, but turnout was small. Most Russians were apathetic, and among middle-aged and older generations, Navalny was seen as a threat to the stability they valued, provoking irritation rather than support.[14]

Meanwhile, pro-Navalny rallies also took place in European cities, led mainly by middle-aged emigrants who had left Russia after 2010 for study, work, or family reasons. Navalny's return reignited hope for change and prompted the anti-Putin diaspora to organise itself. The most active participants began communicating in new social media groups and chats, planning events and fundraising efforts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accelerated the consolidation of the active anti-Putin diaspora. While the 2021 rallies were mostly Navalny supporters, by February 2022, they were joined by those eager to publicly reject the war and voice opposition to the Kremlin's aggressive policies.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 accelerated the consolidation of the active anti-Putin diaspora

The surge in activism during the early months of the invasion raised the question of formalising grassroots initiatives. Registering as an NGO opens access to grants, facilitates donations, and eases cooperation with national and international institutions, but only few eventually completed this task. The low proportion of registered grassroots initiatives is often attributed to host countries supposedly "regarding associations of Russians with considerable caution."[15] However, observations hardly support this hypothesis. On the contrary, the main obstacles appear to be structural and resource-related factors, as well as the socio-cultural characteristics of the Russian immigrant activist environment. These include:

- **Declining engagement.** Initial enthusiasm sparked discussion about the future of the activist community and possible NGO registration. In many cases, however, the mobilisation effect faded within three to six months, and interest in formal registration waned.

- **Resource and personnel limits**. Grassroots initiatives rely on a very small core (3–10 people) to organise actions, manage social media, and liaise with the press – all done in their spare time. Few can maintain such a commitment consistently.

- **Preference for flexibility.** Some respondents deliberately avoid formalisation. For them, hierarchy carries negative connotations. They prefer informal, spontaneous actions, avoiding extra stress. NGO registration brings obligations – legal compliance, reporting, coordination with donors – which many find burdensome.

- **Avoiding attention from Russian authorities**. Some feared that registration might increase the risk of being labelled a "foreign agent" or "undesirable organisation." They noted that such a designation could complicate access to property and assets in Russia and make visiting relatives there more difficult.

The main obstacles appear to be structural and resource-related factors, as well as the socio-cultural characteristics of the Russian immigrant activist environment

2. Key Aims

For most politically active Russian emigrants, the ideal scenario is for Russia to become a "normal" country by European standards. Yet very few are willing to openly challenge the Putin regime or take an active role in political struggles inside Russia. This report analysed the programmes of 18 of the largest registered and informal Russian diasporic communities across Europe and found that all position themselves as groups condemning the war in Ukraine and promoting universal human

[14] Andrei Kolesnikov, "Why Navalny Makes Many Russians Uncomfortable," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* 10 March 2021.

[15] Terekhov, "A Survey of Russian Grassroots Anti-War Resistance."

and democratic values. Only two explicitly aim to change Russia's political regime; three focus on supporting its democratisation; and four declare backing for its "civil society," acknowledging that opportunities for engagement are increasingly limited.

Eighteen largest registered and informal Russian diasporic communities across Europe position themselves as groups condemning the war in Ukraine and promoting universal human and democratic values

At the same time, most grassroots initiatives direct their efforts not towards Russia, but towards their host countries. Eleven of them prioritise countering Russian propaganda and informing local populations about events in Russia. Seven aim to bring together Russian emigrants opposed to the war and help them adapt to life in their new countries.

In practice, the primary objective of most grassroots initiatives is profound integration into their host societies – embedding themselves within local social and political life. The longer Russian immigrants reside in Europe, the less attention they devote to developments in Russia and the less they identify with its political processes. Instead, their focus gradually reorients toward the realities of the host environment. In this context, support for democratic change in Russia functions less as active political engagement and more as a form of normative alignment with the values of their host societies. Through this process, they enhance their social and political agency, consolidating a meaningful role within the new system of coordinates.

Support for democratic change in Russia functions less as active political engagement and more as a form of normative alignment with the values of the host societies

3. Main Activities

The activities of Russian grassroots anti-war initiatives are quite diverse. This report focuses on several main types: public demonstrations; volunteer work and support for immigrants; counter-propaganda and educational efforts; and writing letters to political prisoners in Russian jails.

3.1. Rallies and Demonstrations

Since the beginning of the invasion, grassroots initiatives have organised anti-war rallies as a way to "cope with the shock" of the invasion and distance themselves from the Putin regime. Most of the respondents noted that attendance at these rallies was higher than at the pro-Navalny actions held in 2021. However, in many cases, the size of anti-war rallies was bolstered by the participation of local populations in European host countries.

Regardless, the relatively high turnout at the first rallies against the invasion was an encouraging event for anti-Putin Russian activists. They viewed large attendance as an important contribution toward challenging the perception of the Russian diaspora as a predominantly pro-Putin community. In some countries, these rallies achieved a significant, though short-lived, media impact. Moreover, the rallies sparked discussions about the need for NGO registration and motivated activists to expand the scope of their work. However, following this initial wave, attendance at rallies sharply declined. For example, in June 2022, only a few dozen people – including non-Russians – participated in an anti-war march in Warsaw.[16]

A second surge in participation in public demonstrations was observed between September and December 2022. This was linked to the start of mobilisation in Russia and a new influx of emigrants to countries that did not require Russian citizens to obtain visas.

[16] Paweł Auguff, "Dzień wolności Rosji od putinizmu. Protest Rosjan w Warszawie [Russia's day of freedom from Putinism. Russian protest in Warsaw]," *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, 12 June 2022.

In Belgrade, for instance, several hundred Russians attended a rally with slogans such as "Peace for Ukraine! Freedom for Russia!" and "This is not Russia's war, it is Vladimir Putin's war."[17] Yet after this period, both the frequency of rallies and their attendance again declined.

The frequency of rallies and their attendance has declined

Looking back, many respondents acknowledge that sporadic demonstrations are not effective in changing the perception of Russians as a silent pro-Putin community, as the events are very small and occupy a marginal place in the media landscape. Some initiatives still hold weekly gatherings in front of the Russian embassy, but attendance is limited to just a handful of participants.

3.2. Volunteer Work and Support for Immigrants

Since the start of Russia's invasion, assisting Ukrainian refugees has been a central priority for most Russian anti-war initiatives. Activists played an active role during the peak months of summer and autumn 2022, offering help that ranged from collecting and distributing hygiene products and medical supplies to working in refugee accommodation centres. In some locations, such as Prague, they even organised informal recreational spaces for Ukrainian children.

By early 2023, however, the bureaucratic systems of European countries had efficiently channelled refugee flows and were able to quickly provide documentation, temporary housing, access to healthcare, facilitated entry into the labour market, and social benefits. Some refugees had found employment, while others returned to Ukraine. As a result, by mid-spring 2023, volunteering for Ukrainian refugees was no longer the primary focus of Russian grassroots initiatives.

Nevertheless, some activists continue to work on specialised projects supporting refugees or participate in international aid campaigns.

Against this backdrop, the focus of Russian grassroots initiatives gradually shifted toward assisting new migrants from Russia and advocating for their interests. Many activists recognise that their political agency in host countries depends largely on the scope and visibility of their activities. As a result, a substantial part of their efforts focuses on consolidating the anti-Putin Russian-speaking diaspora and expanding its ranks. Hence, they actively help Russian emigrants adapt to new conditions, provide psychological and legal support, and create and promote educational content to familiarise them with the culture and political system of the country where they now live.

A substantial part of their efforts focuses on consolidating the anti-Putin Russian-speaking diaspora and expanding its ranks

> R11: "When [Russian immigrants] first arrived, going out to protest the war was important. Now, it's more important for them to get back on their feet. It's crucial to help people integrate, to understand Dutch politics, and to get them engaged in our agenda more quickly."

3.3. Counter-propaganda and Education

Some Russian grassroots initiatives focus on contesting pro-Russian narratives in the information space. The most active communities in this regard are based in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal. Their work includes posting critical comments in pro-Putin Telegram channels; creating and distributing materials on how to recognise and avoid disinformation; reporting online ads soliciting donations for Russia's "special military operation" to the authorities; and

Contesting pro-Russian narratives relies on a handful of dedicated volunteers and remains largely unprofessional and irregular

[17] "В Белграде несколько сотен россиян протестовали против войны в Украине [Several hundred Russians protested against the war in Ukraine in Belgrade]," *Krym.Realii*, 25 December 2022.

promoting bans on public displays of St George ribbons, which are widely regarded as symbols of Russian aggression. Yet all of this effort relies on a handful of dedicated volunteers and remains largely unprofessional and irregular.

There are also projects aimed at debunking Russian propaganda narratives rooted in myths and manipulations dating back to the Soviet era. For example, in Berlin, activists organise a small tent camp every 8–9 May in Treptower Park, displaying exhibits to educate the public about the crimes of the Soviet regime during World War II. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that many still choose to march under Russian and Soviet flags during these commemorations.

Anti-war activists target the pro-Putin Russian-speaking community in host countries

It is important to note that the primary audience for these counter-propaganda and educational activities is rarely the population of Russia itself. Instead, anti-war activists target the pro-Putin Russian-speaking community in host countries – primarily members of earlier waves of Russian emigration, sometimes referred to as the "sausage emigration," emphasising that their relocation was largely motivated by economic considerations.

According to the respondents, in countries such as France, Germany, Finland, and the Czech Republic, pro-Putin groups form the majority of the Russian diaspora. Their centres of consolidation in Europe include Russian diplomatic missions, Russkiy Dom cultural centres under Rossotrudnichestvo, the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots (CCRC), and institutions linked to the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). While their activity declined sharply following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these platforms still occasionally host events.

Alongside these structures, there exists a 'grey zone' of cultural and religious organisations with varying degrees of connection to Moscow. These groups have not taken a clear stance on the invasion and occasionally engage in pseudo-pacifist actions. Some Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives view these organisations with distrust and prefer to keep their distance. Others maintain contact, hoping to gradually influence their views and bring them into their 'sphere of influence', though they acknowledge that this strategy has yet to produce tangible results.

There exists a 'grey zone' of cultural and religious organisations with varying degrees of connection to Moscow

3.4. Letters to Political Prisoners

One of the most common activities among grassroots initiatives is organising "evenings of letters" to Russian political prisoners. Some groups send up to 200 letters per month, making a deliberate effort to reach those who are relatively unknown and whose cases have received little media attention.

Amid the widespread frustration within the Russian diaspora following Alexei Navalny's death and the declining interest in attending rallies, leaders of grassroots initiatives view letter-writing evenings as one of the few effective ways to diversify their activities and maintain community engagement. For some initiatives, writing letters to political prisoners has gradually become the only activity they continue to carry out.

Activists often describe the evenings of letters to political prisoners as the "safest form of protest" against Putin's aggressive policies. When asked why they view other actions – such as rallies in relatively safe European countries – as risky, respondents explained that they fear drawing unwanted attention from Russian authorities. Such exposure, they believe, increases the likelihood of being labelled a "foreign agent" or an "undesirable organisation." These designations, in turn, discourage potential activists from joining anti-war groups, since they can result in losing the ability to visit relatives in Russia or retain access to property there.

4. Achievements

Most of the respondents currently consider their main achievement to be the fact that they are still afloat and operational. Some even emotionally described this as a "miracle." In 2022, a few managed to organise relatively large anti-war rallies, attended not only by Russian emigrants but also by crowds of local residents. Despite this progress, few have so far succeeded in institutionalising their structures, registering as NGOs, introducing membership fees, or running regular fundraising campaigns.

Most of the respondents consider their main achievement to be the fact that they are still afloat and operational

Among the reported achievements is the creation of shared structures for horizontal communication, which enable activists to amplify their voice at the European level. Examples of such structures include Platforma, the Russian Anti-War Committee (RAWC), and Free Russians Global, where communication takes place in private chat groups. Curiously, the RAWC is described by respondents not so much as a network but as a more hierarchical structure supported by Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Interactions between Russian anti-war initiatives also take place offline through conferences, the most prominent of which is organised by the NGO *Russie Libertés* in France. From time to time, initiatives based in Germany hold similar events in Berlin.

Participation in these network structures sometimes allows grassroots initiatives to obtain microgrants for small expenses to organise meetings and exhibitions. Activists also try looking for funding opportunities in their host countries. For instance, in Germany, several Russian anti-war groups have been accepted into federations and associations of civil society organisations, giving them access to additional grants – a significant step forward in community development.

A third notable achievement is increased visibility at both local and national levels. The vast majority have established good relationships with local journalists, who frequently turn to representatives of Russian grassroots anti-war initiatives for commentary. Nevertheless, many respondents acknowledge that local media interest in their activities is currently limited, as their projects and events are not considered "hot topics."

Many initiatives have gained experience in engaging with local politicians, and some have developed stable linkages with members of national parliaments and governments

Furthermore, many initiatives have gained experience in engaging with local politicians, and some have developed stable linkages with members of national parliaments and governments. Respondents consider such connections to be strongest among initiatives in France and Finland. Notably, Ilya Yashin and Oleg Orlov were granted honorary citizenship of Paris largely due to the close contacts Russian grassroots anti-war initiatives maintain with municipal authorities.[18]

However, establishing political contacts in European countries is generally challenging for Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives. For western politicians, the benefits of such engagement are often unclear, while the reputational risks are considerable. Activists report that public figures exercise extreme caution when dealing with Russian diaspora organisations due to recurring media reports about the high activity of Russian intelligence services within these communities. Notable cases that attracted significant attention include the arrest in Estonia of Vyacheslav Morozov, a professor at the University of Tartu, sentenced to over six years in prison for cooperating with the GRU, and Pablo González (Pavel Rubtsov), a GRU officer who, for a long time, posed as a journalist while spying within the Russian immigrant community.[19]

[18] Russie Libertés (@russie.libertes), "Илья Яшин в Париже. 21 октября 2024 [Ilya Yashin in Paris. 21 October 2024]," Youtube, 1 November 2024.

[19] Office of the Prosecutor General, Estonian Internal Security Service, "The court convicted Viatcheslav Morozov of intelligence activity," 18 June 2024; "Prokuratura oskarżyła Pawła Rubcowa vel Pablo Gonzaleza o szpiegostwo [The prosecutor's office charged Paweł Rubcow, alias Pablo Gonzalez, with espionage]," *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, 14 August 2024.

5. Problems

The rallies of February–April 2022 marked the peak of activity for grassroots Russian anti-war communities. The next surge occurred in February 2024, following the assassination of Alexei Navalny. Yet it would not be an exaggeration to say that, since the end of spring 2022, there has been a steady decline in their activity. This trend reflects a range of challenges these initiatives face. Here, this report highlights only the most significant ones.

5.1. Lack of Funding

One of the most pressing issues for grassroots initiatives is the chronic deficit of funding.

One of the most pressing issues for grassroots initiatives is the chronic deficit of funding

None of the respondents described the financial situation of their community as stable. Informal initiatives operate entirely on a volunteer basis, with activities funded collectively by members. Expenditures are primarily allocated to renting equipment for events, purchasing materials for posters, sending letters to political prisoners, and participating in events held by allied organisations in other cities. A key vulnerability of these groups is that activists typically earn modest incomes, and in some cases, up to half of them are unemployed, relying solely on social benefits.

For some activists, financial instability is not so much a vulnerability as a matter of deliberate choice

For initiatives registered as NGOs, financial sustainability typically relies on membership fees, both one-time and recurring. This practice is particularly common in countries such as Germany, where annual fees range from €50 to €180. However, many initiatives are already facing a decline in engagement, which increasingly complicates efforts to maintain stable membership levels, let alone expand them. As a result, many are exploring opportunities for one-off grants and longer-term partnerships with institutional funders.

For some activists, however, financial instability is not so much a vulnerability as a matter of deliberate choice. A significant portion of respondents, from both registered and informal initiatives, consider attracting external funding highly undesirable. Many were extremely disheartened by the decision of the new US administration to sharply reduce USAID funding, which impacted well-known organisations and opposition Russian media. Some even argue that professional diaspora activism funded by donors cannot be truly effective, as it is no longer based on voluntary and unpaid engagement.[20] They also fear that potential funders would inevitably interfere in decision-making processes and exert decisive influence over their activities.

5.2. Reduction in the Activist Base

Another key challenge is the shrinking number of active members within the Russian diaspora. Even registered NGOs lack sufficient personnel to systematically manage social media outreach, engage with authorities,

Even registered NGOs lack sufficient personnel

stay in contact with volunteers, and manage fundraising. Below are the main reasons for this, as identified by the respondents.

5.2.1. Shrinking Influx of Migrants from Russia

The community of Russian political activists is shrinking because the inflow of emigrants from Russia has significantly decreased. The main wave of invasion-induced emigration occurred in 2022–23, and its peak has passed.[21] Moreover, some families gradually returned to Russia after believing that the initial alarm over Putin's "partial mobilisation" had subsided.

[20] R1, R10, R25.

[21] Igor Gretskiy, *New Russian Immigration to the EU* (ICDS, October 2024), 7.

Many grassroots initiatives complain that countries bordering Russia have restricted the grounds for issuing visas to Russian citizens. Across several European countries – such as Bulgaria, Czechia, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom – measures have been adopted or are under consideration to tighten requirements for foreigners regarding visas, residence permits, and citizenship.[22] Russian grassroots anti-war initiatives generally view these measures very negatively. Some even describe the tightening of policies toward Russians as "discriminatory," though they are reluctant to state this openly, fearing irritation among Ukrainians and the "politicised segment of the Russian diaspora," instead framing it as a form of populism.[23]

This negative perception of recent changes in European immigration policy is partly driven by a very real challenge: grassroots initiatives are experiencing a serious decline in the number of active members. Reversing this trend and expanding their social base depends on attracting new emigrants from Russia who share similar worldviews. Here, the interests of grassroots initiatives align with those of Russian opposition politicians. For instance, Mikhail Khodorkovsky has called on European authorities to create more opportunities for Russian emigrants,[24] while Garry Kasparov has argued that the EU should allow members of Russia's intellectual class who declare support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and opposition to the Putin regime to enter freely.[25]

Hence, many grassroots initiatives, like opposition politicians in exile, support and lobby for the liberalisation of EU procedures for Russian migrants.[26] This advocacy is underpinned by the belief that Europe can and should contribute to the democratisation of Russia. The idea is that admitting a relatively small number of anti-Putin Russian migrants could provide them with an "emotional and moral incentive" to adopt European values, and that when a "window of opportunity" opens in the post-Putin period, these individuals could return to Russia to make the Russian state and society more democratic.

Many grassroots initiatives, like opposition politicians in exile, support and lobby for the liberalisation of EU procedures for Russian migrants

Grassroots initiatives registered as NGOs often provide recommendation letters to individuals seeking asylum or visas in EU countries to improve their prospects. These letters are generally issued for volunteers who participated in events organised by such initiatives, some of which have been officially designated as "undesirable organisations" by the Russian government.

Among those whom grassroots initiatives seek to assist, Russian draft evaders constitute a significant portion

Among those whom Russian grassroots initiatives seek to assist, Russian draft evaders constitute a significant portion. Activists often argue that, for safety reasons, Europe should admit as many of them as possible – "those who do not want to kill Ukrainians" – as this is believed to weaken the Putin regime and hasten an end to the war. Interestingly, draft evaders, like all Russians who arrived in Europe immediately after the invasion, are often referred to within grassroots initiatives as "refugees," although, strictly speaking, there are serious doubts about whether they meet formal criteria for such status. Respondents note that most draft evaders left Russia not for political reasons but out of fear of being sent to the frontline. They had

[22] UK Government, "Restoring Control over the Immigration System," May 2025, 68-69.

[23] See, for instance: Russian Democratic Society (UK) (@rusdemsociety), "Мы призываем всех резидентов Великобритании написать письма своим депутатам [We urge all UK residents to write letters to their MPs]," Telegram, 21 May 2025.

[24] Mikhail Khodorkovsky (@khodorkovsky_en), "France just broke a crucial barrier for Russian deserters," X, 22 October 2024;

[25] Kate Tsurkan, "Garry Kasparov: 'You never hear Russian opposition actually say Ukraine must win'," *The Kyiv Independent*, 8 January 2025.

[26] Dmitry Gudkov, Vasily Bernstein, *Альтернативы паспорту Нансена* [Alternatives to the Nansen Passport] (CASE, April 2025), 7.

not engaged in political activity before or after the invasion, and following the announcement of mobilisation in September 2022, chose to leave the country to wait it out. As a result, some respondents acknowledged that the low approval rate for asylum applications from Russian draft evaders in Europe is justified, since many among them are Putin supporters or otherwise choose to remain neutral in the conflict.

Nevertheless, grassroots initiatives understand that the likelihood of changing administrative procedures for new Russian emigrants is extremely low in the current political climate, where European electorates increasingly demand immigration restrictions. Additionally, they lack the scale, systematic organisation, and coordinated action necessary to influence immigration policy effectively.

5.2.2. Apathy Across the Immigrant Community

The decline in grassroots activity follows a clear chronological pattern. The initial wave of activism triggered by the Russian army's invasion of Ukraine began to wane by the summer of 2022. The mobilisation in Russia, however, provided a temporary resurgence. The first significant slump was felt in the summer of 2023, when the Ukrainian counteroffensive failed to achieve a breakthrough and Prigozhin's spontaneous revolt did not topple the Putin regime. At that point, many realised that the war between Russia and Ukraine was likely to be prolonged.

The next major surge of activism came after the imprisonment and subsequent assassination of perhaps the most prominent Russian political activist, Alexei Navalny. Mourning rallies were held in over 100 European cities, though attendance was modest – around 500–600 people in Berlin, 200 in Prague, and approximately 100 in London.[27]

One of the factors contributing to this decline in activism is the widespread frustration that has taken hold within much of the Russian anti-Putin diaspora. For many middle-aged Russian immigrants of the pre-2022 wave, Navalny embodied hope for positive change in their homeland. His death shattered the fragile belief in a foreseeable democratisation of Russia and triggered apathy within the Russian anti-war community. Most respondents acknowledged that, despite his sometimes contradictory statements on foreign policy, Navalny had considerable potential to unify the anti-Putin segment of the Russian diaspora, and they currently see no alternative among other politicians or influencers.

Most respondents acknowledged that Navalny had potential to unify the anti-Putin segment of the Russian diaspora, and they see no alternative among other politicians or influencers

> R10: "For many of us, Navalny was the leader. He was killed, and now his place is vacant. There is currently no one who could truly represent our community."

After Navalny's death, both the number of rallies and participants dropped sharply. Some grassroots initiatives reorganised their activities, reducing street actions in favour of evenings of letters to political prisoners, lectures, and film screenings. Occasionally, memorials are established in European countries in his honour, sometimes attended by Navalny's widow, Yuliya, and representatives of the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK).[28]

Russian emigrants generally lack a stable motivation for sustained activism

However, interviews indicate that apathy among the anti-Putin diaspora has other causes as well. Many note that Russian emigrants generally lack a stable motivation for sustained activism. Respondents reached a consensus that only a very small percentage

[27] "Russian emigres gather across Europe to mourn Navalny, denounce Putin," *Reuters*, 17 February 2025; "World leaders blame Putin for Alexei Navalny's death in a Russian prison," *The Associated Press*, 16 February 2024.

[28] "В Лиссабоне был открыт первый в Европе мемориал Алексею Навальному [Europe's first memorial to Alexei Navalny opened in Lisbon]," *The Insider*, 12 November 2024.

of the diaspora engages in long-term activism. During high-profile events that provoke strong emotions, the task of grassroots initiatives is to channel these energies through public rallies. But such events are rare, and without them, Russian emigrants do not develop a culture of regular activist engagement and participation. If they see no prospects for an immediate positive outcome, they lose interest in activism entirely.

> R12: "[Recently at a board meeting] I called everyone and asked, 'Will you come?' And they replied, 'No, things feel different now. The opposition has failed, and all of this is meaningless.'"

5.2.3. Burnout Among Activists

Some respondents admitted that over the past three years, their ranks of activists and volunteers have thinned, while likes and comments on social media posts have steadily declined. Today, it is not uncommon to encounter abandoned websites, social media posts announcing the closure of Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives, or accounts left inactive for more than six months.[29]

The main source of new members for grassroots initiatives comes from rallies tied to high-profile events with a negative connotation. During these events, some participants independently reach out to organisers and offer their assistance. However, it is rare for Russian immigrants to sustain activism at a long distance. Within six months to a year, most disengage from grassroots initiatives. People grow tired, burn out, and stop attending events.

Within six months to a year, most disengage from grassroots initiatives

Leaders of grassroots initiatives often note that those most capable of long-term activism are Russian emigrants who are well integrated into their host country – those who speak the language fluently, have stable incomes, and secure housing. Yet such profiles remain exceedingly rare within the Russian diaspora in Europe.

Those most capable of long-term activism are Russian emigrants who are well integrated into their host country

Newly arrived emigrants are generally eager to engage in activism during the initial period after relocating to European countries. They are motivated to find their place within new social coordinates and establish useful connections, which leads them to proactively contact grassroots initiatives. Once they have more or less adapted to a new environment, however, their engagement in activism declines. Leaders of grassroots initiatives frequently lament the high turnover among volunteers, noting that they have little ability to influence either the motivation or the quality of their work. Regardless of the volunteer's enthusiasm, the quality of their contributions is consistently lower than that of a contracted worker.

Many Russian activists who relocated to Europe after the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine lack stable employment and experience economic hardship.[30] There were two cases of unregistered grassroots initiatives where at least half of the members still do not have stable jobs or sources of income.

Respondents also noted that those who have integrated into European societies relatively quickly, secured stable incomes, and achieved a higher standard of living than in Russia tend to show little interest in participating in diaspora grassroots initiatives. Even individuals who, while in Russia, actively volunteered for Navalny's FBK, donated to OVD-Info, and participated in anti-government rallies often avoid grassroots initiatives after emigrating. Having settled into their new lives, Russian immigrants frequently do not see value in cultivating their political agency as members of the diaspora or engaging in activism related to Russia. Instead, they tend to focus increasingly on maintaining a comfortable standard of living and simply retreat into everyday routine.

[29] See, for instance: "Democratic Movement for Freedom in Russia - Vienna, Austria," Facebook; "Russen gegen Krieg"; "Антивоенное сообщество Эльзаса," Facebook; "Ассоциация «Za Wolną Rosję»"; "Tallinn antiwar/ Таллинн против войны," Facebook.

[30] R1, R6, R10, R15, R18, R25.

R22: "Finland is a very calm country – it's wonderful here. There's a real opportunity to live well. Many [new Russian immigrants] have simply focused on their personal lives."

5.3. Internal Divisions

Some of the respondents admitted that the Russian anti-war immigrant community suffers from a lack of internal cohesion due to significant disagreements and mutual distrust. Occasionally, grassroots diaspora initiatives within the same host country find themselves in complicated relationships – "we stay in touch, but there is no love lost" (R15). There are multiple reasons for this. One stems from suspicion that larger, more established organisations are attempting to incorporate smaller, informal initiatives.

Russian anti-war immigrant community suffers from a lack of internal cohesion due to significant disagreements and mutual distrust

Another factor is ideological divergence. Some initiatives are closely aligned with a progressivist left-wing agenda, advocating for gender equality. Their social media accounts often announce events focused on these topics. While all initiatives operate in a spirit of tolerance and human rights promotion, some members feel that the emphasis on feminist and LGBTQ+ agendas sometimes overshadows anti-war activities.

Additionally, in recent years, there have been instances in Europe where Russian emigrants were detained on suspicion of working for Russian intelligence agencies, creating an atmosphere of wariness across the Russian diaspora. Some respondents noted that such incidents undermine trust toward colleagues in other grassroots Russian organisations.[31]

This, however, does not represent an exhaustive catalogue of disagreements within the activist community. The following sections highlight the issues that have generated the most intractable debates and, at times, open conflicts among Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives.

5.3.1. The Flag

Many activists consider political symbols to be a principled matter of public image. For their events and logos, most Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives use the white-blue-white flag. This choice allows distancing themselves from both the aggressive policies of the Russian government and the pro-Putin groups in Europe who frequently use the official Russian tricolour. They are unwilling to support or participate in any events that allow the use of Russian state symbols. For example, when Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara-Murza posted an announcement of an anti-war march in Berlin in November 2024, illustrated with both Russian and Ukrainian flags, it provoked widespread outrage within the Russian activist community in Europe. Some grassroots initiatives have even developed detailed protocols on how to respond if someone attends their events displaying a Russian flag.

The white-blue-white flag allows distancing themselves from both the aggressive policies of the Russian government and the pro-Putin groups

Still, seemingly wishing to avoid alienating parts of their potential audience, Russian political opposition figures prefer not to ban the Russian tricolour outright. Instead, they adopted a neutral stance, asserting that the question of the flag should be decided by the parliament of a future Russia.[32] For four respondents, this stance was one reason their groups chose not to participate in the second Berlin march on 1 March 2025.[33]

Nonetheless, some segments of the Russian diaspora continue using the Russian official flags at their events. This includes youth

[31] R1, R9, R15.

[32] Nikolai Klimeniouk, "Befreit bitte die Ukraine von Putin [Please liberate Ukraine from Putin]," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 November 2024.

[33] R2, R9, R11, R25.

left-wing organisations such as Vesna and Volnitsa, libertarians, supporters of blogger Maxim Katz, and several grassroots diasporic initiatives in Germany and Denmark. For some, this appears to stem from a subtle anti-Ukrainian resentment – a muted discomfort with the rising visibility of the Ukrainian diaspora in public life since the invasion.

5.3.2. Aid to Ukraine and Its Military

The overwhelming majority of respondents stated in interviews that they support Ukraine. However, the forms this support might take vary widely, often provoking irreconcilable disputes within initiatives. Above all, Russian immigrants are deeply divided regarding the necessity of donating to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). More than half of respondents favour the continuation of western military assistance to Ukraine, yet only in three Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives is there full internal consensus on this matter, along with experience of publicly raising funds for Ukrainian military units. In most of them, however, such issues are not treated as principled ones and are left to the discretion of individual members. Typically, among informal groups of Russian activists, these topics are avoided altogether so as not to jeopardise the already fragile sense of unity.

The idea of directly contributing to the Ukrainian military effort is not popular

Overall, the idea of directly contributing to the Ukrainian military effort is not popular among Russian activists in Europe. Some categorically reject any form of violence and firmly adhere to a pacifist stance.[34] Others struggle with the moral dilemma that donating money for strikes on Russian targets could make them complicit in attacks on places where their relatives and friends still reside.[35]

Part of the explanation also lies in the fact that many activists continue to travel to Russia periodically and wish to avoid jeopardising this possibility in the future. They fear losing it if they attract the attention of Russian diplomatic missions or security agencies during border checks or while inside Russia. For this reason, this category of activists participates in anti-war demonstrations but is unwilling to engage in any form of assistance to the AFU.

> R7: "[Supporting the AFU] is not the mainstream at all. We had only a couple of people who thought it was a bright and wonderful idea. But they drifted away from our community."

5.3.3. The War's Conclusion

The community of anti-war Russian activists also remains divided over how the Russia-Ukraine war should come to an end. Two opposing views coexist on this issue. One holds that Ukraine must win; otherwise, Russian society will have no chance for positive democratic change in the future. In this perspective, victory should include the return of occupied territories to Ukraine, reparations from Russia for the damage caused by the war, as well as the softening or transformation of the Russian political regime, followed by trials of those who initiated the invasion.

Most respondents, however, acknowledge that the chances of such a scenario being realised are diminishing over time, not least due to increased political pressure on Kyiv from US President Donald Trump. Thus, in the interviews, the call for Ukraine's victory was often followed by a more compromise-oriented formulation: "We are for peace on Ukraine's terms."

The opposite camp consists of those who advocate an immediate peace settlement, essentially at the cost of political and territorial concessions from Ukraine. In their view, since the front line is not shifting and Russia enjoys a resource advantage over the Ukrainian army, Kyiv should agree to the proposals put forward by the new US administration. With Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office, this group of activists appears to place its hopes on a quick truce, a "return to normality," and the lifting of restrictions and sanctions on Russia. Tellingly, they regard Garry Kasparov's call to fight until the Ukrainian banner is raised over Sevastopol as utopian.

Some leaders of grassroots initiatives contend that debating possible war outcomes is counterproductive, as it further undermines

[34] R9, R17, R23.
[35] R15, R25.

their attempts to consolidate an already highly fragmented Russian immigrant community in Europe. Respondents underscore that such discussions are particularly prone to conflict, since they intersect with other politically sensitive issues. For example, internal debates have occasionally touched on the status of Crimea, where certain initiatives articulate positions that diverge from the official policies of the European countries where they reside or from those advanced by Ukraine.

Debating possible war outcomes is prone to conflict, since they intersect with other politically sensitive issues

> R7: "[At the outset of the invasion], when support for Ukraine was at its peak and Ukrainian flags were ubiquitous, opinions within our community on recognising Crimea [as Russian] were split roughly 50–50. Today, we no longer discuss the outcome of the war, but I have a sense that many would be reluctant to see Crimea returned to Ukraine."

5.3.4. Collective Responsibility

Only five respondents agreed that Russians bear collective political responsibility for the invasion of Ukraine, and in all these cases, they were people who had left Russia before 2022 and were well integrated into European societies.[36] They argue that being a citizen of a country means not only enjoying its benefits and privileges, but also bearing responsibility for the consequences of the government's actions – even if one did not vote for that government. Nevertheless, even within this cohort of pre-2022 Russian immigrants, scepticism toward this approach predominates.

Much more popular within the anti-war Russian émigré community is a concept in which guilt and responsibility – whether intentionally or not – are treated as synonyms. It also seems that they do not distinguish between political and criminal responsibility, believing that accountability should apply only to those directly engaged in the war by giving orders and taking up arms, or indirectly supporting the Russian army by weaving camouflage nets, producing weapons and ammunition, or working in state propaganda. Those who previously took to the squares of European and Russian cities with anti-Putin slogans, they argue, bear no responsibility and are instead victims of the war, just like the people of Ukraine. This approach, in turn, leaves the Ukrainian diaspora perplexed, as it is seen as Russian immigrants' unwillingness to critically reflect on the history of their homeland.[37]

Those who previously took to the squares of European and Russian cities with anti-Putin slogans, they argue, bear no responsibility and are instead victims of the war

> R24: "In our community, this is a hard line – it's all nonsense and lies! There is no responsibility [for the invasion of Ukraine] on us. The blame lies with Putin and his team."

At the same time, there are those who argue that accepting collective political responsibility is harmful to the anti-war community for purely practical reasons, as it creates a negative and oppressive emotional atmosphere. Combined with the apathy that already pervades the Russian émigré community, this only further discourages participation in grassroots initiatives.[38] They believe this "philosophical question" only deepens internal divisions and, therefore, prefer to ignore it in public debates, leaving individuals free to find their own answers privately.

5.3.5. New vs. Earlier Immigrants

The materials collected for this report reveal clear tensions between those who settled in Europe long ago and more recent arrivals. According to the former, the latter grew up and came of age in Putin's Russia and, therefore, often have no understanding of how European institutions function or what democracy, civil society, and parliamentarism mean.[39] Until

[36] R2, R9, R10, R14, R16.

[37] Andrei Makarychev, "New Russian migrants in Estonia: performative agency in insecure times," *European Security*, 2024, vol. 33, no. 4. (2024): 537-556.

[38] R7, R10, R17, R20, R25.

[39] R6, R8, R10, R14, R18, R21.

2022, many of the newcomers were very distant from politics – the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the subsequent mobilisation was what jolted them into action. Besides, they can discuss certain issues at length and with great enthusiasm, but do not attach proper importance to majority-based decision-making procedures. Their initial burst of emotion often fails to translate into systematic work and a willingness to assume responsibility.

For the recent arrivals, their initial burst of emotion often fails to translate into systematic work and a willingness to assume responsibility

The two cohorts also differ in their perception of rallies. Earlier waves of anti-Putin émigrés view street demonstrations as an opportunity to deliver messages to governments and electorates. In other words, they appeal not to Russians inside Russia, but to the societies of their host countries. Newer émigrés do not always grasp this point. Many see rallies instead as an outlet to release emotions in the company of fellow opponents of the despised Putin regime. The size of rallies is of secondary importance to them, as is the location and whether the local population is paying attention. They are more drawn to slogans directed at Russian-speaking audiences back in Russia, since many of them believe the war will end soon, they will return home, and they will not need to integrate into host societies.

Organisational matters are more often handled by Russians who arrived before 2022, have sufficient command of the host country's language, and understand how local social and political institutions work. In this respect, newcomers feel much less confident.

During the interviews, differences in attitudes toward Alexei Navalny also stood out. Respondents from earlier waves of migration observed that recent arrivals, especially younger migrants who left Russia after mobilisation began in September 2022, were and remain largely indifferent to him. By contrast, for those who emigrated in the 2010s and are now aged 35–50, Navalny's figure holds much greater significance. At the height of his political activity in 2011–13, many of them became interested in politics, began attending rallies, or donated to the FBK. They initiated memorials and commemorative plaques in European cities. Even after Navalny's death, they continue to see themselves as his followers – while remaining cautious or sceptical toward the FBK and his widow at the same time.

5.4. Limited Media Coverage

One of the problems most frequently mentioned by grassroots initiatives remains the lack of meaningful media support from Russian opposition outlets. Activists are interested in cooperating with Russian-speaking journalists and influencers, hoping to increase their visibility within the Russian-speaking anti-Putin community.

Yet despite all respondents having contacts, their interactions with Russian journalists, in their words, leave much to be desired. While grassroots initiatives' representatives are always ready to respond to interview requests, invitations from major Russian media platforms are few. Activists complain that larger Russian opposition outlets often ignore their activities, creating the impression that grassroots initiatives do not exist at all. They also use closed chats and platforms such as Free Russians Global to share photo and video materials from events, but the demand from independent Russian media for this content is minimal. Grassroots initiatives' activities are regularly covered by *SotaVision* and *Activatica*, but both outlets have a relatively tiny audience. According to Semrush, in June 2025, their monthly reach was only 12.2 thousand and 3.3 thousand unique users, respectively.

Activists complain that larger Russian opposition outlets often ignore their activities, creating the impression that grassroots initiatives do not exist at all

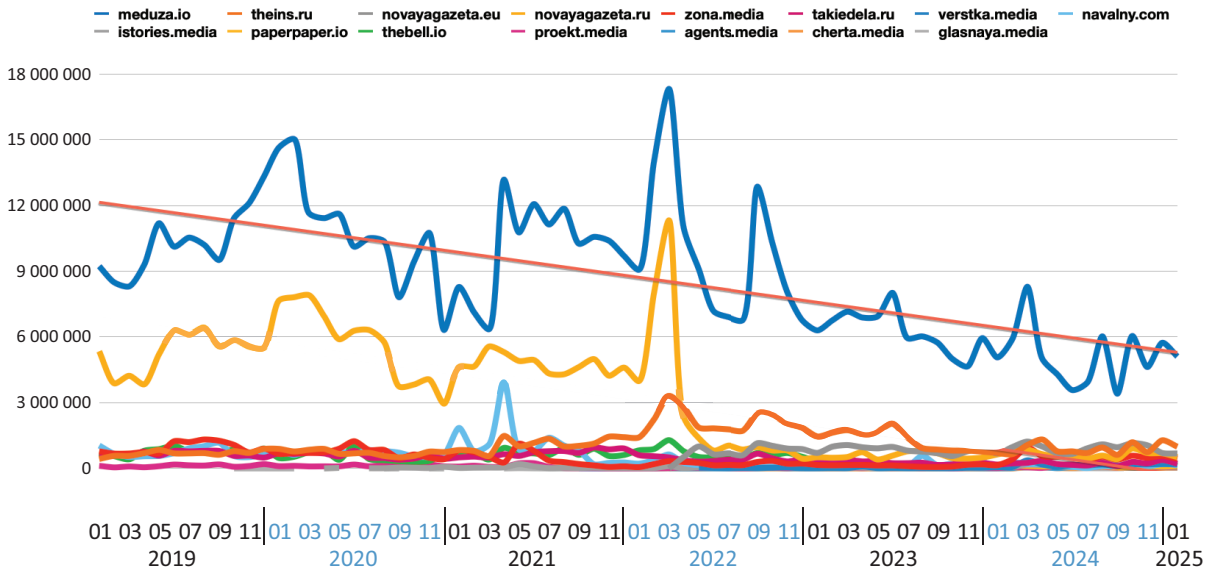

Figure 1. Selected Russian opposition electronic media by monthly unique users worldwide, 2019-25. *Source:* Composed using Semrush database.

In this regard, the sharpest criticism is directed at the TV channel *Dozhd*. Interestingly, the channel does not position itself as an émigré medium for Russians abroad, but as an "anti-government Russian outlet in exile," aimed primarily at audiences inside Russia.[40] Although the widespread use of VPNs makes it difficult to determine the exact composition of the audience, the *TV Dozhd* editorial team keeps insisting that the majority of their viewers reside in Russia.

Many respondents pointed out that host-country media engage with them much more readily than Russian opposition outlets. Some attribute this to the insularity of the Russian journalistic community – formed back in 2011–12 – that is hard for newcomers to break into. Others explain it by the simple lack of correspondents among Russian opposition media in the diaspora, making it impossible for them to provide full coverage of all the activities undertaken by émigré communities.

Indeed, over the past several years, Russian opposition media have been in a deep crisis. Key factors include the steady decline in their audiences since early 2020 (Figure 1), the shrinking opportunities for monetising their products, and the freezing of grant support from major American donors, which triggered large-scale cutbacks and layoffs.[41] In other words, amid sharply intensified competition for an increasingly scarce pool of funding and a dwindling audience, Russian opposition outlets simply lack the resources to establish meaningful cooperation with grassroots initiatives. In this context, it is highly doubtful that they are "winning new audiences in Russia" or that they will be able to do so in the foreseeable future.[42]

Russian opposition outlets lack the resources to establish meaningful cooperation with grassroots initiatives

At the same time, the initiatives themselves acknowledge the limitations of their own resources for organising systematic media outreach. Even relatively large and registered organisations lack staff who would engage in PR and promotion in a consistent manner.

[40] Maxim Zagovora, "Объективность - это выдумка, ее не существует»: интервью с Тихоном Дзядко [Objectivity is a myth, it does not exist': an interview with Tikhon Dzyadko]," *Republic,* 17 February 2025.

[41] Ken Bensinger, Benjamin Mullin, "Federal Funding Crackdown Imperils Global Newsrooms," *The New York Times*, 26 February 2025; Strana i mir (@ Ostraneimire), "День 2. Сессия 8. Русскоязычные медиа: между уехавшими и оставшимися [Day 2. Session 8. Russian-language media: between those who left and those who stayed]," Youtube, 29 November 2024.

[42] Maria Domańska, "The new wave of Russian political emigration to Germany," *OSW,* July 2023, 27.

6. Attitudes

In addition to describing the internal organisation of Russian grassroots anti-war initiatives in Europe, a second important objective of this study is to learn more about their positions on specific political issues, as well as their relationship with other actors. This report is most interested in their attitudes towards Russian opposition leaders and the Ukrainian diaspora, as well as towards European sanctions and travel restrictions against Russia and the prospects for change within Russia.

6.1. Russian Opposition Figures

With the assassination of Alexei Navalny, the question of who would assume leadership of the Russian political opposition quickly emerged in the media.[43] Following his release from prison, politician Ilya Yashin has sought to claim this role, setting himself the task of uniting anti-war initiatives across the world and transforming them, in his own words, into "a large informal movement of anti-war Russians."[44] Alongside Yashin, Yulia Navalnaya has been widely portrayed in the media as a "new leader," a "moral symbol," and a potential "catalyst for uniting the fractured opposition."[45] This view is also seconded by some Russian émigré experts and bloggers.[46] Other individuals frequently mentioned as potential leaders within the Russian immigrant community include former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Israel-based blogger Maxim Katz, libertarian blogger Mikhail Svetov, and chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov.

At times, the coexistence of people with different political preferences within the same grassroots initiative leads to tensions and even deep rifts. For instance, conflicts often arise between followers of Alexei Navalny and supporters of Maxim Katz. The latter ironically nicknamed "unicorns" for their excessive optimism regarding the prospects for regime change in Russia, or more derisively, "Katzists." Yet in most cases, sympathies for particular politicians or influencers are not of a principled nature, and a rigid alignment with any single public figure remains rare in the grassroots environment.

Sympathies for particular politicians or influencers are not of a principled nature, and a rigid alignment with any single public figure remains rare in the grassroots environment

In other words, the Russian anti-war immigrant community is extremely diverse, and no politician or influencer commands unquestioned authority or respect within it. Attempts by anyone to present themselves as a leader are typically met with reactions ranging from disdainful irony to outright rejection. The strongest pushback is provoked by efforts to portray Yulia Navalnaya in such a role, as activists argue that leadership among democratically minded Russians cannot be transferred by family lineage as if it were private property or a monarchical title. Beyond this, however, there are several additional reasons why none of the current figures of the

[43] Liam Nolan, "Can there be a Russian opposition after Navalny?," *RTÉ*, 18 February 2024; Katharine Khamhaengwong, "Who Is Left to Lead Russia's Opposition After Navalny?," *The Moscow Times*, 28 February 2024.

[44] TV Rain (@tvrain), "Иду по минному полю». Яшин о тюремщиках, армии наемников и скандале с триколором на марше в Берлине [I'm walking through a aminefield. Yashin on prison guards, mercenary armies, and the scandal with the tricolour flag at the march in Berlin]," Youtube, 16 November 2024.

[45] Max Seddon, "Yulia Navalnaya, Russia's new opposition leader," *The Financial Times*, 23 February 2024; Emma Burrows, "Yulia Navalnaya once avoided the limelight. Now she's Russia's newest opposition leader," *Associated Press*, 22 February 2024; Ada Blakewell, "Why Yulia Navalnaya Could Be the One to Unite Russia's Divided Opposition," *The Moscow Times*, 9 April 2024.

[46] Fedor Krasheninnikov, "Эмиграция и будущее России [Emigration and the Future of Russia]," *Free Russia Foundation*, 14 September 2023; Konstantin Sonin (@k_sonin), "Heading to the airport in Vilnius," X, 10 November 2024; The Breakfast Show (@The_Breakfast_Show), "Форум Навальной, Как помогать Украине, Марш 17 ноября, Шлосберг и Кац. Идем по звездам. Илья Яшин [Navalny Forum, How to Help Ukraine, March on 17 November, Shlosberg and Katz. Following the Stars. Ilya Yashin]," Youtube, 11 November 2024.

Russian opposition are perceived by grassroots initiatives as genuine leaders, some of which are outlined below.

6.1.1. Lack of Solidarity with Ukraine

For that segment of Russian émigré grassroots initiatives that openly advocate for Ukraine's victory, most figures of the Russian opposition do not appear to be truly standing with Ukraine. This matters not only because activists want to feel that a given Russian influencer is on the same wavelength as themselves, but also because in their countries of residence, comprehensive support for Ukraine has become one of the central foreign policy priorities. Even those who describe themselves as "not particularly Ukraine-centric" find it odd that, for instance, Vladimir Kara-Murza speaks primarily about Russian political prisoners rather than about Ukraine. Many are puzzled and even outraged by Yulia Navalnaya's inability to show empathy towards Ukrainians.[47] Equally off-putting is her tendency at major public events – such as the Academy Awards ceremony for the docu-mentary Navalny – to avoid mentioning Ukraine altogether. When Navalnaya opposed western arms supplies to Ukraine on the grounds that "the bombs also fall on the heads of Russians," it sparked widespread controversy.[48] After that, even representatives of the German political establishment began to describe her as "a defender of Russian imperial ambitions."[49]

Besides, when Russian politicians make questionable statements – or avoid mentioning Ukraine altogether – this generates questions from the Ukrainian diaspora, which often have to be addressed by the representatives of Russian grassroots initiatives themselves. Hence, grassroots activists are highly unlikely to rally behind a politician who is perceived unfavourably in the eyes of the Ukrainian communities.

6.1.2. Rejection of Centralised Leadership

Grassroots initiatives view with considerable scepticism attempts by Russian opposition figures to speak on behalf of the entire diaspora at meetings with national governments of European countries or international organisations. They emphasise that they want to represent themselves independently, without delegating this function to individual dissidents, influencers, or politicians. Unilateral claims to leadership are perceived as an encroachment on their autonomy, and some even see in this the danger of a personality cult. The few respondents who did not object, in principle, to the idea of a single leader of the Russian opposition, nevertheless, stressed that such a person would need to have "sufficient legitimacy."

Grassroots initiatives want to represent themselves independently, without delegating this function to individual dissidents, influencers, or politicians

Activists are much more comfortable operating in a decentralised mode, autonomous from one another but with the possibility of close horizontal coordination

Overall, activists are much more comfortable operating in a decentralised mode, autonomous from one another but with the possibility of close horizontal coordination. Many see the value of their work not in finding a leader who could organise them – although they admit that such a goal was once on their agenda – but rather in self-organisation to address common problems and carry out joint events.

> R12: "In 2021, when Navalny was arrested, everyone expected the FBK to take us under its wing. We had neither professional politicians nor professional activists, but in 1–2 years, we caught up. We don't need a shepherd anymore."

[47] Dasha Dudley, «об интервью Певчих [on an interview with Pevchich],» Facebook, 24 March 2023.

[48] Alice Bota, Michael Thumann, "Irgendwann fange ich an zu trauern [At some point, I will start to grieve]," *Die Zeit*, 26 October 2024.

[49] Lena Glöckner, "Nawalnaja empört mit Ukraine-Aussagen [Navalnaya causes outrage with statements on Ukraine]," *Bild*, 27 October 2024.

This cautious approach toward leadership is also reflected in grassroots initiatives' views on the idea of establishing permanent representative bodies of the Russian diaspora to interact with European governments and international organisations. More than a third of respondents support the creation of such bodies at the national level.[50] In their view, this would grant recognition, provide a channel for communicating their needs to European decision-makers, and serve as a means of information exchange on developments in Russia. Conversely, grassroots initiatives are far more dubious about establishing such structures at international organisations such as the European Parliament or the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which they consider largely ineffective.

Most of the informants believe that any representative must have a mandate from the Russian anti-war diaspora community. Activists express readiness to participate in electronic voting to elect representatives, but struggle to envision what such a process could look like and doubt they would have the resources to properly organise it. Many, therefore, lean toward the idea of a "collegium" composed of delegates from different Russian immigrant groups, who could conduct a dialogue with the European political establishment on a stable basis. In their view, such a mechanism could be successfully integrated within *ad hoc* parliamentary groups or commissions on Russia.

Many lean toward the idea of a "collegium" composed of delegates from different Russian immigrant groups, who could conduct a dialogue with the European political establishment on a stable basis

Some Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives cooperate closely with the Free Russia Foundation (FRF) and appear to mirror its approach to this issue, namely that creating unified representative bodies is unnecessary, since the FRF already has offices in Washington and Brussels.

[50] R2, R3, R5, R7, R9, R16, R17.

6.1.3. Disconnect from the Immigrant Community

Within grassroots initiatives, one often hears complaints that figures of the Russian anti-Putin opposition show little interest in the pressing problems of the Russian diaspora. Opposition politicians themselves have said as much, both publicly and in closed-door meetings with activists. For example, Leonid Volkov has stated that working with the diaspora is not a priority for the FBK.[51] According to the respondents, at a closed meeting with activists in Prague in May 2023, Maria Pevchikh made the same point, adding that the FBK is primarily focused on the situation inside Russia.

According to the informants, Russian opposition figures concentrate excessively on events within Russia. They primarily position themselves as the voice "of all the normal, democratically minded people in Russia" and foster the impression that they can shape the Russian public opinion.[52] They often emphasise that they do not see themselves as emigrants but rather remain in Russia "in spirit and at heart."[53] They openly admit that they do not call on Russians to donate to support the AFU, since such a position is not popular among the Russian population.[54] In other words, many Russian opposition politicians see their primary audience as being inside Russia – not in the diaspora.

This reveals one of the fundamental contradictions between Russian opposition figures and activists in the grassroots anti-war initiatives across Europe. The latter, in the overwhelming majority, tie their own future to the countries where they now reside rather than to Russia. Only a small minority are truly prepared to return to their homeland at the first opportunity. As a result, the target audience

[51] A pogovorit (@apogovorit), "Леонид Волков. Деньги от Фридмана, убийство Татарского, харассмент, отравление Навального [Leonid Volkov. Money from Friedman, the murder of Tatarsky, harassment, the poisoning of Navalny]," Youtube, 7 May 2023.

[52] Yasmeen Serhan, "'Russia Will Be Democratic.' Vladimir and Evgenia Kara-Murza on the Fight for a Free Russia," *The Time*, 15 August 2024.

[53] TV Rain, "I'm walking through a minefield."

[54] The Breakfast Show," Navalny Forum."

of grassroots initiatives is not the Russian population but rather the European public and decision-makers. Consequently, the rhetoric and slogans employed by Russian opposition politicians often feel alien to grassroots initiatives. Activists consider events organised with Russia-aimed speeches and slogans as an unaffordable waste of resources.

The target audience of grassroots initiatives is not the Russian population but rather the European public and decision-makers

The rhetoric and slogans employed by Russian opposition politicians often feel alien to grassroots initiatives

6.1.4. Dirty Laundry Battles

One of the characteristic features of the Russian political opposition in emigration is the persistence of internal conflicts, which intensified following the murder of Alexei Navalny in February 2024. The most high-profile episodes included four incidents: the release of the FBK-produced documentary series "Traitors," alluding to Mikhail Khodorkovsky's oligarchic past;[55] the FBK's accusation against Leonid Nevzlin, a close associate of Khodorkovsky, for orchestrating a brutal attack on Leonid Volkov;[56] blogger Maxim Katz's allegation that the FBK assisted in "reputation laundering" for unscrupulous Russian bankers;[57] and the FBK's counter-investigation suggesting that Katz and his spouse continued to receive payments from Kremlin-controlled VKontakte and Gazprom-Media for promoting bloggers even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[58]

These contradictions stem from both the opposition's inability to challenge the Putin regime effectively and competition over dwindling resources and a shrinking base of supporters. The atmosphere within the Russian opposition is further worsened by chronic mutual distrust, sometimes based on suspicions of compromises with the Kremlin authorities in the past. Fierce internal disputes have led some philanthropists and businessmen who left Russia to publicly distance themselves from the Russian opposition.[59]

Grassroots initiatives behave similarly in some respects. Most are indifferent to scandals among prominent Russian politicians and bloggers, yet they acknowledge that such conflicts indirectly negatively affect their work. First, these disputes damage the reputation of the entire Russian émigré community, as figures of the Russian opposition are often perceived in Europe as collective representatives of the anti-Putin segment of the Russian diaspora. This likely contributes to the scepticism of anti-war grassroots initiatives regarding the feasibility of consolidation under any well-known political figure.

Conflicts within the Russian opposition reinforce a sense of fatalism among grassroots diaspora initiatives and demotivate their activists

Second, conflicts within the Russian opposition reinforce a sense of fatalism among grassroots diaspora initiatives and demotivate their activists. Many respondents believe that without these disputes, the community climate would be more positive, and more

[55] Alexei Navalny (@NavalnyRu), "Предатели [Traitors]," Youtube, 16 April 2024.

[56] Alexei Navalny (@NavalnyRu), "Похитить. Избить. Поджечь. Кто пытается уничтожить команду Навального? [Kidnap. Beat up. Set on fire. Who is trying to destroy Navalny's team?]," Youtube, 12 September 2024.

[57] Maksim Katz (@Max_Katz), "Расследование - как украсть миллиарды и выдать себя за оппозиционера. ФБК и Пробизнесбанк [Investigation: How to steal billions and pass yourself off as an opposition figure. FBK and Probusinesbank]," Youtube, 1 October 2024.

[58] Навальный LIVE, (@NavalnyLiveChannel), "Вконтакте с Кремлем. Как семья Максима Каца зарабатывает на блокировке ютуба [In touch with the Kremlin. How Maxim Kats' family makes money from blocking YouTube]," Youtube, 5 February 2025.

[59] Yevgheniy Chichvarkin (@totsamychichvarkin), "Чичваркин: я принял решение выйти за рамки оппозиции [Chichvarkin: I have decided to go beyond the opposition]," Youtube, 1 November 2024.

volunteers would join – a concern particularly acute given the growing apathy and dwindling volunteer base. For this reason, while activists hold numerous grievances against well-known Russian opposition figures such as Ilya Yashin, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and others, they generally refrain from raising these issues in public, so as not to exacerbate the already oppressive atmosphere within the diaspora.

6.2. Anti-War Rallies in Berlin

Among those mentioned as potential leaders of the Russian opposition following Alexei Navalny's assassination, the most frequently cited were his widow, Yulia Navalnaya, as well as Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin, who had been exchanged in August 2024 for Russian intelligence operatives and assassins. In order to consolidate the émigré community under their leadership and legitimise their status in the eyes of the European political establishment, the three organised two "anti-war marches" in Berlin.

The first of these took place on 17 November 2024. When outlining the objectives of the event, Ilya Yashin stated that it was necessary to demonstrate the presence of "tens of thousands" of anti-war Russians in order to "strengthen our position in dialogue with western politicians" and to show that Russian opposition figures do not speak solely on their own behalf.[60] Observers believed that, to achieve these aims and avoid appearing politically marginal, Yashin, Navalnaya, and Kara-Murza would need to assemble "a five-digit number of participants for the march."[61] Naturally, this required maximum support from grassroots anti-war initiatives.

Initially, Russian anti-war activists expressed strong reservations about the 17 November march. Some were unsettled by the first statements made by Kara-Murza, Yashin, and the director of Open Russia, Andrei Pivovarov, immediately after their release, in which they declared that the primary goal would be lobbying for the loosening of anti-Russian sanctions. Others were concerned that the slogans announced for the march were too vague and did not mention the call to support Ukraine. A third group was perplexed that the march's slogans were addressed to the Russian authorities, reflecting a complete disconnection of Russian opposition figures from the European political context.[62] A fourth group expressed disappointment that the march had been announced less than three weeks in advance, without any consultation with anti-war activists, some of whom had already planned events in their cities to mark the 1 000th day of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Finally, a fifth group argued that many Russian grassroots diaspora initiatives had already participated in similar marches in spring 2022, and that the time for such demonstrations had passed.

Despite these concerns, most activists ultimately agreed to give the recently released opponents of Putin a chance. They either participated in the Berlin march or held similar events in their own cities under different slogans. After all, not only did well-known figures of the Russian opposition require the organisational resources of grassroots initiatives, but Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives needed recognisable figures to increase visibility and expand their capacity to recruit new members. Both sides, therefore, moved quickly to resolve misunderstandings and establish cooperation, culminating in a Memorandum on 1 November 2024 on regular interaction, mutual media support, and coordination of demonstrations.[63]

Meanwhile, the 17 November march failed to attract the "tens of thousands" that its organisers had hoped for. While some western media described it as "the first major consolidated protest action of the Russian

[60] Populyarnaya Politika (@Popularpolitics), "Яшин про перемены в России, марш в Берлине и форум Навальной Честное слово с Ильёй Яшиным [Yashin on changes in Russia, the march in Berlin, and Navalny's forum Honest Talk with Ilya Yashin]," Youtube, 12 November 2024.

[61] Viktor Shenderovich, "В Это Воскресенье. Берлин, 17 Ноября [This Sunday. Berlin, 17 November]," Facebook, 12 November 2024.

[62] The Breakfast Show," Navalny Forum."

[63] "Memorandum on cooperation between anti-war Russian communities and opposition Russian politicians and public figures," Anti-War and Democratic Communities of Russians around the World, Free Russians Global, 1 November 2024.

opposition in exile,"[64] according to German police data, only 1 800 people participated.[65]

Just a month after the first march, Navalnaya, Kara-Murza, and Yashin, without consulting grassroots initiatives and in violation of the previously signed Memorandum, announced their intention to hold a second anti-war march in Berlin on 1 March 2025.[66] This provoked a wave of indignation within the Russian immigrant community and severely undermined trust in the new leaders of the Russian opposition. The backlash was particularly strong among major Russian anti-war diaspora organisations in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Finland, and the bitter aftertaste seems to persist to this day.

Additionally, confusion arose over the inappropriateness of the slogan chosen for the new march – "Putin, stop killing!" – which was vague and poorly aligned with the current priorities of the host countries. Furthermore, given that the activist community had long reached a consensus to refrain from displaying any Russian official state symbols at public events during the war, the organisers' decision to allow several columns under the Russian flag further provoked strong disapproval.

Respondents also noted that February is traditionally an extremely busy month, marked by multiple memorial anniversaries: 16 February (the murder of Alexei Navalny), 24 February (Russia's invasion of Ukraine), and 27 February (the assassination of Boris Nemtsov). Most Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives simply lacked the resources to stage another event within a very short period of time.[67]

For all these reasons, the majority of grassroots initiatives refused to participate in the second Berlin march. Without their support, the event was lacklustre and far less attended. According to Berlin police estimates, between 500 and 800 people took part.[68] In other European capitals, eyewitness accounts indicated that attendance at similar demonstrations was likewise several times lower.

6.3. European Sanctions and Travel Restrictions

Russian émigré influencers often claim that western sanctions targeting Russia's banking sector and content monetisation on social media have dealt a severe blow to Kremlin critics and created significant difficulties for them.[69] However, this research found little evidence to support such assertions. Nearly all respondents reported that the sanctions had no impact on the activities of grassroots initiatives. Some activists in Poland and the Czech Republic did encounter difficulties when opening bank accounts, but these issues were ultimately resolved.

Nearly all respondents reported that the sanctions had no impact on the activities of grassroots initiatives

Nevertheless, according to some respondents, the sanctions did create certain personal inconveniences. For example, Russian students enrolled in European universities faced greater difficulty receiving transfers from their parents in Russia, and, conversely, Russians working in Europe found it harder to send money to relatives in Russia.

The necessity of implementing and maintaining general economic pressure on Russia to halt its aggression against Ukraine is widely accepted

[64] bbcrussian (@bbcrussian), "В Берлине прошел антивоенный марш [An anti-war march took place in Berlin]," X, 17 November 2024.

[65] "Russische Exil-Opposition demonstriert in Berlin gegen Putin [Russian opposition in exile demonstrates against Putin in Berlin]," *RBB24*, 17 November 2024.

[66] Vladimir Kara-Murza, "Обращение к демократическим и антивоенным силам России [Appeal to the democratic and anti-war forces of Russia]," Facebook, 12 December 2024.

[67] R1, R2, R7, R10, R12, R23.

[68] Anastasia Tenisheva, "Russian Opposition Holds Protest in Berlin Against Ukraine War," *The Moscow Times*, 1 March 2025; "Russische Oppositionelle protestieren gegen Putin – und Trump [Russian opposition figures protest against Putin – and Trump]," *Berliner Morgenpost*, 1 March 2025.

[69] Fedor Krasheninnikov, "Emigration and the Future of Russia."

Overall, however, among Russian grassroots initiatives – particularly those who relocated to Europe before the invasion – the necessity of implementing and maintaining general economic pressure on Russia to halt its aggression against Ukraine is widely accepted. Proposals to lift such sanctions are met with little understanding in this community. For instance, the suggestion made by FBK leader Maria Pevchikh to exchange Russian political prisoners for the partial removal of western sanctions was received with puzzlement by representatives of the pre-2022 wave of Russian immigration.[70]

By contrast, visa and travel restrictions imposed on Russia generate far greater concern among grassroots initiatives. One-fifth of respondents indicated that their organisations are seeking ways to persuade European governments to adopt alternative approaches in this regard. Consequently, they were receptive to statements made by the recently released Russian opposition figures at the first Berlin press conference, in which they expressed an intention to focus on lobbying for the easing of western restrictions for "ordinary Russians" – despite the fact that such rhetoric sparked disappointment among European audiences.[71] To achieve this goal, this segment of the Russian diaspora seeks to promote Alexei Navalny's narrative that Russia and Russians are not synonymous with Putin and his regime.[72] They argue that western visa and travel restrictions should apply only to those Russians whose involvement in crimes against Ukraine or espionage is proven. Essentially, they propose treating Russia as a political entity that, in itself, does not pose a security threat to Europe.

Essentially, they propose treating Russia as a political entity that, in itself, does not pose a security threat to Europe

The primary reason for the negative stance of some grassroots initiatives toward European visa and travel restrictions on Russia is that many activists, mostly newcomers, still have close relatives and property in Russia. Many continue to travel to Russia without publicising these visits on social media, in order to avoid attracting the attention of Russian authorities, while simultaneously advocating in their host countries for the relaxation of visa and travel restrictions on Russia. Therefore, it can be inferred that the more extensive an activist's remaining connections to Russia and the later they relocated to Europe, the more likely they are to view visa restrictions not as a matter of host-country security, but as an issue of personal convenience.

6.4. The Ukrainian Diaspora

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, by mid-2025, there were more than five million Ukrainian refugees in Europe.[73] The majority settled in Germany and Poland, as well as in the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, and Spain. It is also noteworthy that the ratio of Ukrainian refugees per 1 000 population exceeded 10 in 17 countries (Figure 2). Evidently, this contributed to amplifying the Ukrainian voice in Europe. Most Russian activists acknowledge this fact, noting that the Ukrainian diaspora is far more active and mobilised, its influence has grown significantly in recent years, and its connections with European decision-makers are much stronger than those of the Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives.

Although there has never been formal or systematic cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian diasporic groups, prior to February 2022, it was not uncommon for them to attend each other's events. Even during the first days of the invasion, there were several instances of this practice continuing, with some actions coordinated through Ukrainian diplomatic missions.

[70] Популярная политика (@Popularpolitics), "Мария Певчих и Руслан Шаведдинов. Прямой эфир Честное слово [Maria Pevchikh and Ruslan Shaveddinov. Live broadcast Honest word]," Youtube, 30 December 2024.

[71] DW in Russian (@dwrussian), "Срочно: Илья Яшин, Владимир Кара-Мурза и Андрей Пивоваров отвечают на вопросы прессы. Прямой эфир [Urgent: Ilya Yashin, Vladimir Kara-Murza and Andrei Pivovarov answer questions from the press. Live broadcast]," Youtube, 2 August 2024.

[72] Alexei Navalny, *Патриот* [Patriot] (Zibalai: One Book Publishing, 2024).

[73] UNHCR, *Ukraine Situation Flash Update no. 77* (UNHCR, 29 January 2025).

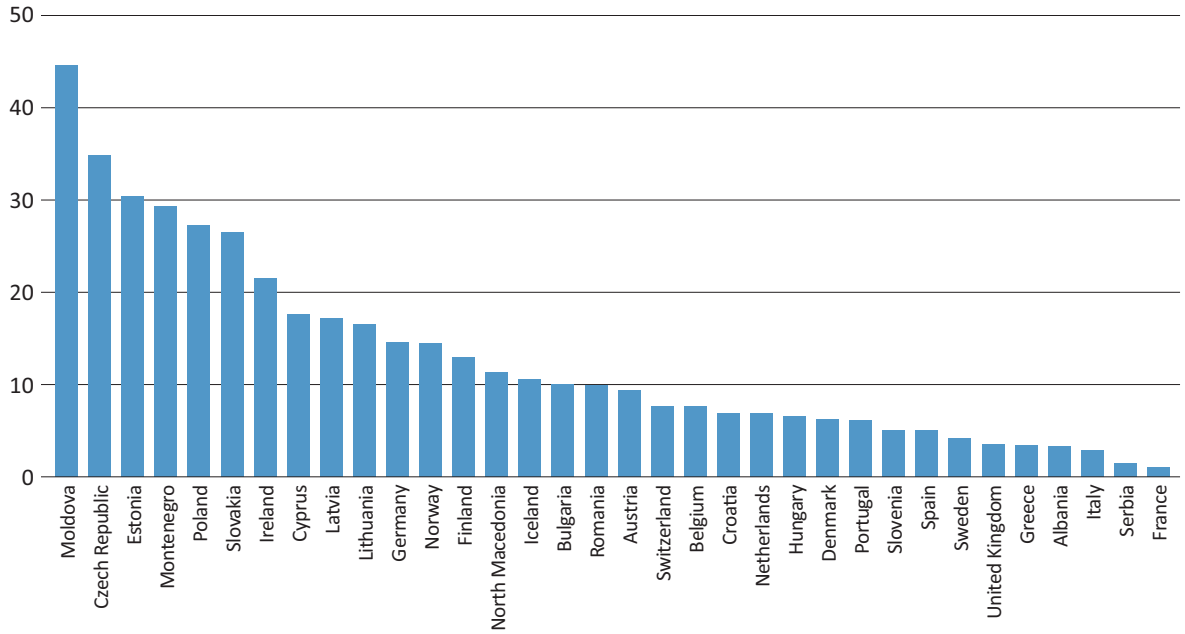

Figure 2. Number of Ukrainian refugees per 1 000 inhabitants, 2025.
Source: Calculations based on the UNHCR's data.

A sharp change occurred after reports emerged in April 2022 of genocidal practices by Russian soldiers in Kyiv suburbs such as Bucha, Irpin, and Borodianka. Following these events, Russian activists were asked not to bring their symbols or posters to Ukrainian events, or were no longer invited at all. Beyond the moral and emotional rationale, there is also a practical explanation: organisers wanted to avoid incidents between Russian activists and Ukrainian participants, among whom there were increasingly refugees, wounded veterans, and relatives of soldiers.

Almost all respondents view these measures with understanding and empathy. They believe it is inappropriate to draw attention to themselves during Russia's ongoing military aggression and that it is better to let Ukrainians tell the world about their suffering and the need to increase European support for their country. Only a very small minority of Russian grassroots initiatives expresses poorly concealed dissatisfaction with the dominance of Ukrainians in the informational space and their growing influence on public discourse in host countries.

Russian activists describe their relations with the Ukrainian diaspora as "tense and cold," although in most cases they are simply non-existent. No formal contacts or cooperation are maintained, and rare communication occurs only informally. Russian initiatives try to avoid holding events on the same day as Ukrainian organisations. For example, there is a consensus that 24 February is a "Ukrainian day." When scheduling conflicts occur, Russian activists generally yield time slots and venues without dispute, even if they were the first to submit applications to local authorities. Overall, there is broad recognition in the Russian anti-war community that conflicts over venues and competition with the Ukrainian community for media attention should be avoided.

The relations with the Ukrainian diaspora in most cases are non-existent

According to some informants, poor relations with Ukrainian organisations are further exacerbated by inappropriate – and at times deliberately provocative – statements from many prominent figures in the Russian opposition. This indirectly harms the image of Russian immigrant communities and widens the already significant gap between them and the Ukrainian diaspora.

Interestingly, respondents often distinguished between "moderate" and "radical" Ukrainian organisations. The former, they said, represent a very small segment of the Ukrainian diaspora,

generally adhering to left-wing pacifism. Their representatives sometimes attend Russian anti-war events, such as evenings of letters to political prisoners, in a personal capacity. The latter, who constitute the overwhelming majority, rigorously and uncompromisingly advance the interests of their community; they speak Ukrainian consistently, actively seek opportunities to donate and support the AFU, and maintain a strict distance from Russian initiatives.

6.5. Changes in Russia

Optimism regarding Russia's near-term future is extremely limited among Russian grassroots émigré initiatives. Fifteen out of twenty-five respondents acknowledge that even in the medium term, a theoretical prospect of democratic change in Russia is scarcely visible. In their view, the already low demand for change in Russia will continue to decline due to systemic indoctrination of schoolchildren, intensive propaganda, and escalating repression. Following the complete failure of Prigozhin's mutiny, few believe in the possibility of mass uprisings or revolutions. Fragile hopes for change are primarily tied to potential fractures within the political elite that might occur after the departure or death of the Russian dictator.

Optimism regarding Russia's near-term future is extremely limited

Only six informants are confident that Russia will inevitably have an opportunity for democratic transformation. Their belief is grounded in the notion that dictatorships and dictators are not eternal, and in the conception of Russia as a classical empire that embarked on a war it cannot win, may experience at least some "softening of the political regime." However, many in this cohort immediately qualify that, in the coming years, this prospect appears highly unrealistic. They concede that the historical pendulum may swing toward democratisation only after several generations have passed.

Almost all respondents acknowledge that grassroots émigré initiatives cannot substantially influence politics or public sentiment within Russia. Even those who claim otherwise ultimately link hopes for change to the west, expecting that with its pro-active, subtle influence, "ordinary Russians will begin to understand that regime change is inevitable and necessary." In doing so, these Russian anti-war activists implicitly recognise that they are incapable of achieving this goal themselves and will not serve as drivers of change within Russia.

> R6: "There are bridge organisations connected with Russian activists. If [western] support for civil society in Russia is channelled through them, it can cause significant damage to the [Putin's] regime. Our task is to hammer it into [western] politicians that this needs to be done, because otherwise nothing [in Russia] is likely to happen."

Accordingly, one of the key objectives of Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives is not so much to influence political and social processes inside Russia, but rather to strengthen their standing in host countries. More than half of the respondents explicitly stated that, whatever happens, they do not intend to return to live in Russia. Most of those who arrived in Europe before the full-scale invasion have found employment and have established roots. Even under the most favourable developments in Russia, they are willing only to visit occasionally as invited consultants on media freedom and local governance reform, election observers, or educators.

One of the key objectives is not so much to influence political and social processes inside Russia, but rather to strengthen their standing in host countries

Those prepared to return to Russia are generally either older adults or young people who have very recently relocated

At the current stage, grassroots initiatives primarily focus on assisting newly arrived émigrés and educating those who wish to return to Russia to participate in building

a democratic society. In practice, such individuals are few. Those prepared to return to Russia "on the first flight" are generally either older adults or young people who have very recently relocated.

> R15: "Good people will build a democratic Russia without me, and I am ready to support them in every way and serve as their ambassador in Europe. My place is here, [not in Russia]."

Activists' views on Russia's future are likely influenced by the fact that, following the invasion, relations with family members in Russia have become strained. Discussions of politically sensitive topics regarding Russia's domestic situation and the war in Ukraine, as well as attempts to persuade each other, generally ended in deadlock and have long since ceased. Some have completely cut off contact because their relatives consider them "traitors." Cases in which the remaining family in Russia share the anti-war views of Russian grassroots initiatives are so rare that such individuals are considered "extremely fortunate." This may indirectly corroborate sociological findings that most ordinary Russians either support aggression against Ukraine or accept it with passive acquiescence.[74]

Interestingly, when retrospectively reflecting on their activism, some respondents reassessed their earlier views, admitting that they were "naïve idealists" when hoping for political change in Russia through elections, demonstrations, and social media activity. Nevertheless, this does not translate into increased support within the community for achieving change through armed struggle, which remains highly unpopular and marginal.

Support within the community for achieving change through armed struggle remains highly unpopular and marginal

This perspective is illustrated by attitudes toward figures such as Ildar Dadin. In the early 2010s, Dadin was one of the most prominent faces of anti-government protests and became the first person in the post-Soviet Russian history to be criminally convicted under the repressive article of the Russian Criminal Code concerning "repeated violations of the established procedure for organising or conducting rallies," later referred to by activists as the "Dadin article." After serving more than a year in a Russian prison, Dadin joined the AFU following the invasion. Disillusioned with peaceful protest, he viewed armed struggle as the only viable means to effect positive change in Russia, regarding all alternatives as a "deceitful and cynical defence of our own inaction."[75] Dadin's death on the battlefield in October 2024 went largely unmarked by commemorative events, both within activist communities and among prominent Russian opposition figures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report highlights several persistent characteristics of Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives in Europe. Most of them remain predominantly small and weakly institutionalised communities. The administrative core of the predominantly registered grassroots initiatives is largely composed of immigrants who arrived before 2022 and descendants of earlier waves of migration, who have attained a much higher level of adaptation to European societies.

The primary objective of anti-war émigré grassroots initiatives is not the transformation of Russia's political system, but their own deeper integration into host countries. While the transformation – or even collapse – of the Putin regime would be a desirable outcome for them, they do not demonstrate a willingness to act as revolutionary overthrowers of Vladimir Putin or as agents of change. Their professed commitment to democratic values and anti-Putin stances functions largely as a means of gaining legitimacy with host societies and authorities, rather than indicating a readiness to assume significant

[74] Russia Watcher (@russia_watcher), "As talk of negotiations continues, ordinary Russians remain uncompromising," X, 8 September 2025; Levada Centre, "Конфликт с Украиной [Conflict with Ukraine]," Levada, 9 September 2025.

[75] Matthew Luxmoore, "A Battlefield Death That Spelled the End for Russia's Opposition," *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 May 2025.

risks or participate in actual political struggles for power within Russia.

The activity of grassroots initiatives is situational, determined by external triggers rather than sustained internal mobilisation. Since the end of 2022, activism within the Russian émigré community is invariably declining. Several factors contribute to this pattern. First, a chronic funding deficit limits their capacity for long-term planning and sustained activity. However, many anti-war communities – primarily small and informal – consciously avoid external institutional funding, fearing dependency on donors and interference in their operations.

The activity of grassroots initiatives is situational, determined by external triggers rather than sustained internal mobilisation

Another significant challenge is the scarcity of personnel. Even large, formally registered NGOs face difficulties in sustaining an active membership base. This reflects both widespread apathy within the Russian immigrant community and the lack of a tradition of sustained civic engagement. In the context of the latter, some generational differences are evident. While for earlier migrants, activism serves as a tool for long-term influence on decision-makers in host European countries, for the post-2022 Russian immigrants, it functions primarily as a means of immediate emotional release.

One solution grassroots initiatives see for maintaining a stable level of community activity is a continuous influx of Russian émigrés. Consequently, they often advocate for the easing of travel restrictions and the simplification of EU immigration rules for Russian citizens, including draft evaders. Here, their interests coincide with those of the Russian opposition, which, aware of its inability to influence political events in Russia, seeks to consolidate the Russian-speaking diaspora to enhance its indirect influence on decision-making processes in Europe. They fully understand that, over time, the vast majority of Russian immigrants will naturalise in their host countries and become part of the electorate.

However, replenishing their activist ranks is not the only reason grassroots initiatives sometimes advocate for the relaxation of European travel restrictions. Many anti-war Russian activists continue to travel to Russia to visit relatives or manage property, and European restrictions create significant inconvenience, particularly for those who have relocated most recently. At the same time, the ongoing trips and property holdings make Russian immigrants in Europe more susceptible to influence and pressure from Russian authorities. Unwilling to lose these opportunities, activists increasingly focus on general anti-war narratives and less public, "low-risk" activities, such as writing letters to political prisoners. This approach, while reducing personal risk, also limits the prospects for radicalisation and constrains the political potential of grassroots initiatives regarding Russia.

Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives have achieved a certain level of visibility at the local level, yet interest in them from Russian journalists who have relocated to Europe remains very limited. Despite a willingness to collaborate, grassroots initiatives face minimal engagement from major Russian opposition media platforms. The primary issue appears to be that these media outlets position themselves as Russian media for audiences within Russia – rather than for émigrés.

Even though most activists share antipathy toward the Putin regime, anti-war slogans, scepticism toward armed forms of resistance, and a left-progressive agenda, the community itself is neither cohesive nor unified, but highly fragmented. Such topics as the flag used in public events, collective political responsibility for the invasion of Ukraine, and donations for the AFU remain highly sensitive and continue provoking irreconcilable disagreements. For some, supporting Ukraine is a matter of principle, while many others advocate for any "peace deal," regardless of the price Ukraine has to pay. In fact, "anti-war" does not necessarily mean "pro-Ukrainian." As a result,

Unifying the Russian immigrant community becomes more difficult, limiting its capacity to act strategically

unifying the Russian immigrant community becomes more difficult, limiting its capacity to act strategically.

Relations between the Russian opposition and grassroots diaspora initiatives in Europe are extremely ambivalent. On one hand, both sides objectively need each other: prominent politicians require the organisational and human resources that activists possess, while activists benefit from well-known figures capable of enhancing their visibility. On the other hand, differences in strategic priorities, a lack of transparency, and inconsistent actions lead to serious crises of trust. The Russian opposition in exile often repeats past mistakes, operating according to personal ambitions rather than strategically coordinated planning. This results in frustration among Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives and reduces their willingness to cooperate with prominent Russian opposition politicians.

The Russian anti-Putin opposition and anti-war grassroots initiatives pursue mostly divergent agendas

More importantly, the Russian anti-Putin opposition and anti-war grassroots initiatives pursue mostly divergent agendas. The former are minimally involved in diaspora life and position themselves as Russian politicians, with their messages directed primarily at the domestic Russian population. By contrast, the primary audience of Russian anti-war groups is the societies and authorities of European countries.

Some observers had hoped that the opposition politicians and dissidents released in August 2024 would be able to unite the Russian diaspora and pave the way toward a post-Putin Russia.[76] However, neither they nor Yulia Navalnaya nor other prominent Russian influencers are perceived by the émigré community as recognised leaders. At present, there is no opposition figure whom grassroots initiatives regard as possessing sufficient authority to fulfil this role. It is also significant that those grassroots initiatives for which support of Ukraine and recognition of the collective political responsibility of Russians for the invasion are fundamental principles will hardly follow leaders who do not share these values. Moreover, persistent public quarrels among Russian opposition figures create a negative impression within the activist community.

Relations between Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives and the Ukrainian diaspora remain strained, and this strain is unlikely to ease in the near future. Formal collaboration is almost entirely absent, although informal contacts persist.

Russian émigré grassroots initiatives in Europe generally exhibit deep pessimism regarding Russia's near-term prospects. It appears that whatever remnants of belief in a "better Russia of the future" may have existed have faded with the demise of Alexei Navalny. Most activists do not anticipate meaningful democratic change even in the medium term. Although they maintain contact with relatives and close associates in Russia, a sense of mutual estrangement persists in most cases. Moreover, they experience an increasing detachment from Russian reality.

There is no strong evidence to believe that grassroots initiatives can function as potential alternatives to Putin's political regime

Consequently, there is no strong evidence to believe that grassroots initiatives can function as a "conveyor belt" – that is, an effective channel for disseminating accurate information about the war in Ukraine and potential alternatives to Putin's current political regime within Russia.[77]

Even if a political thaw were to occur in Russia after Putin, it would hardly trigger a wave of Russian emigrants returning "on the first flight." Those who have established roots, found employment, secured housing, and learned the language of their host country

[76] Marie Mendras, "Vladimir Putin has paid dearly for the return of his spies to Russia," *Le Monde*, 5 August 2024; Miles J. Herszenhorn, "Washington lawmakers hope released opposition leaders revive anti-Putin movement in Russia," *Politico*, 5 August 2024.

[77] OSW (@centreforeasternstudies), "How the Russian opposition abroad can help keep Europe safe," Youtube, 29 November 2023.

are unlikely to sacrifice these gains to return to Russia. Most likely, only a few who failed or chose not to integrate into host societies will return, and they are unlikely to bring with them European values, but rather a sense of bitterness over unfulfilled hopes for a better life in Europe and anti-western resentment.

Informal communities that emerged are likely to dissolve over the coming years due to a lack of resources

To sum up, the surge of grassroots activity among Russian émigrés in Europe that began in 2021–22 has been on a downward trajectory for several years. Informal communities that emerged during this period are likely to dissolve over the coming years due to a lack of resources. Few larger, formally registered NGOs, by contrast, may follow a different trajectory. Their networked structure provides the basis for a gradual transformation into diaspora communities that are likely to maintain adherence to left-progressivist ideas. In this case, they may play a more visible role in influencing the domestic and foreign policies of European countries, while their direct impact on the political situation within Russia will remain nearly negligible.

Based on the conclusions outlined above, the following recommendations can be made:

- **Manage expectations and communication appropriately**. European governments should not regard Russian anti-war grass-roots initiatives as "agents of change in Russia" or frame expectations in these terms. Émigré activists lack the resources, organisational infrastructure, and motivation for such a role. Clearly articulating realistic expectations will help avoid mutual disappointment and unnecessary financial expenditures. In the same vein, it would be prudent to curb any wishful thinking about Russia's brighter political prospects.

- **Steer clear of misconceptions about "mini-laboratories" for a future Russia**. The idea of framing émigré activists as future "agents of change" in Russia is unlikely to be viable. Graduates of such "mini-laboratories," developed in a sheltered environment, would be too detached from the harsh realities inside Russia to effectively compete for political power or serve as credible sources of information capable of influencing audiences in Russia.

- **Avoid imposing leaders on Russian anti-war grassroots initiatives.** The community is characterised by polyphony and a preference for horizontal structures. Intrusive attempts to present any current opposition politician as their representative will only reinforce alienation. Over time, more coordinated diaspora communities may emerge around registered large NGOs, potentially developing their own leadership structures.

- **Prioritise the 'Europe First' concept in discussions of the future security system.** European security strategy should not rely on dependencies or fragile illusions, such as the notion that only a democratic Russia can guarantee the continent's security. The claim that Europe can secure its own safety only after a political regime change in Russia is mistaken and creates a false impression that Europe can influence internal dynamics within the Kremlin. Instead, focus should be on what is realistically within Europe's capacity to effectively deter aggressive actions from its eastern neighbour: developing its own defence capabilities, strengthening societal resilience across Europe, and continuing support for Ukraine. European security ultimately rests in Europe's hands.

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