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Russian Political Exiles: The Challenges of Forging an Anti-War Movement

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On December 6, 2022, Latvia [revoked](#) the broadcasting license of the Russian independent media organization TV Rain following news anchor Aleksey Korostelev's ill-fated gaffe. While on air, Korostelev expressed optimism that TV Rain could help Russian soldiers with "equipment and basic amenities at the front." In the eyes of Latvia's media watchdog, the awkward statement marked TV Rain's crossing of yet another [red line](#) and fed into suspicions of the channel's pro-Russian agenda. The decision to revoke the license prompted a worried [reaction](#) from other Russian media projects – most of which, similar to TV Rain, are currently in exile in Europe. In an open letter, more than 130 signees [expressed](#) support for the banned colleagues and condemned Latvia for contributing to the Kremlin's purge of independent journalists. The letter, however, failed to reverse the course of action, only adding more fuel to the fire of public criticism of the Russian anti-war diaspora that was [chastised](#) for its inability to admit mistakes and for [overstretching](#) the hospitality of host countries.

This episode with TV Rain exposes several core challenges that the Russian media and political exiles face at the moment while trying to organize resistance against the regime back home from abroad. At the root of highly emotional and polarising debates conducted predominantly on social media platforms are seemingly unbridgeable differences that fracture the Russian anti-war movement. The tensions exist around moral-ethical issues, such as collective guilt and the appropriateness of expressing sympathy towards Russians affected by the war, as well as around more pragmatic questions, such as acceptable means to stop the war and plans for the future rebuilding of Russia. Notably, the emigration brought together groups that, in more peaceful times, may not have consented or chanced to share a forum. In the new environment, the existing differences prevent the anti-war movement from forging a united bloc and weaken its ability to speak to Western donors and domestic audiences.

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A Ruptured Russian World

The first significant fracture in the Russian anti-war movement abroad became visible in the immediate aftermath of February 24. As young activists had to flee the clampdown in Russia, in exile, they became confronted with older, predominantly male circles of Russian intellectuals. The latter have already gained social capital and visibility in Europe, often thanks to their long-term residence outside Russia. Some may be inclined to dismiss the conflict, explaining it as an ever-lasting clash of generations: the elders were criticized for their exclusivism, lack of critical self-reflection, and sexism (for example, the [scandal](#) around feminist activist Lölja Nordic and Prague-based journalist and researcher Alexander Morozov). Yet the disagreement between the “old” and “new” émigrés embodied several abiding and deep-rooted grievances aggravated by the war.

The **generational gap** was felt exceptionally acutely against the divide back home: support for the war [has](#) been highest among older Russians who represent the core of President Vladimir Putin’s electorate, with urban youth speaking decisively against it. The young anti-war groups advocate for a more radical break with the dominant norms and discourses—something that an established opposition may not always be willing to do (such as the [critique](#) of the “Vozrozhdenie” (Renaissance) project expressed by the student platform Doxa). The younger generation is also highly aware of the immense **gender imbalance** in Russia. The lack of female interviewers in the conversation hosted by Russian oppositional media with President Volodymyr Zelensky in March did [not go](#) unnoticed; post-factum responses of the organizers further revealed the insensitivity to gender issues even among the most liberal and progressive Russian circles. Before the war, feminists’ struggle in Russia had been fringe activism, largely dismissed as an aggressively anti-male action. After February 24, more voices began speaking about the [interconnectedness](#) of [legalized](#) domestic violence, [notorious](#) mobilization practices, and war crimes [committed](#) by Russian soldiers in Ukraine. At this point, no one would question that the most prominent and successful anti-war grassroots organization today is [headed](#) by Russian feminists, even if not everyone is ready yet to give them credit for that.

Another divide splits the émigré communities along **ethnic lines**. Russia’s numerous ethnic minorities, despite historically being among the primary victims of aggressive Russian centralization, have been called to carry the blame for the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine. Russian opposition leaders, at first, showed little interest in sharing the stage with those perpetually discriminated against by the Russian state (such as [reactions](#) to the meeting held in May 2022 by the Free Russia Forum). Things turned even uglier when a few tried to [shift](#) the blame for Russia’s war brutalities onto ethnic minorities. Early numbers [suggested](#) that a large share of those fighting on the side of Russia were ethnically non-Russians; hence it became tempting to explain such atrocities as the Bucha massacre in racialized terms of ethnic minority behavior. Clearly, the nationalities question in Russia has worsened over the course of Putin’s presidency: few would doubt

the Kremlin's growing power centralization and ongoing crackdown on ethnic minority rights. However, as observers have been increasingly [defining](#) the war in Ukraine in terms of Russia's pursuit of imperial ambitions, the sidelining of ethnic minorities in the opposition grew increasingly problematic.

The anti-war campaigners' inability or unwillingness to listen to non-Russian fellow citizens suggested that even the most fervent opponents of Putin's regime could not free themselves from "imperial consciousness" (*imperskoe soznanie*). As a result, a share of the anti-war movement has been drawn to more inclusive platforms, such as the Free Nations of Russia Forum or the League of Free Nations, that directly [focus on](#) "indigenous" activists. These platforms have gained traction, yet reveal new disagreements. Minority representatives, for instance, show no unanimity regarding the future of Russia as a federation. While Free Buratia [says](#) an unambiguous "yes" to keeping but modernizing the federation model, the Free Nations of Russia Forum [insists](#) on ethnic minorities' emancipation, which, in their view, can be achieved only by creating independent republics. Ethnic minority advocates also lack legitimacy, as none have been officially endorsed to speak on behalf of a given minority community. Moreover, when the public eye closely watches Russia's ethnic minorities, [expecting](#) a return of separatist nationalism, the question of how to [represent](#) Russia's ethnic minorities without essentializing them becomes crucial.

Finally, there is no unanimity among Russian political exiles regarding **the nature and goals of political action** to end the war and bring regime change. The possibility for collaboration has diminished after parts of the opposition discredited itself last May. As European authorities were considering issuing blanket visa bans for Russian citizens, the organizers of the II Anti-War Conference suggested [introducing](#) "a-good-Russian" passports. The document was supposed to separate Russians who did not speak out against the war (in most cases because of fears for their safety and the well-being of family members in Russia) from those who did; such distinction would have enabled the latter to keep enjoying privileges in Europe. Expectedly, a few long-term émigrés were accused of growing out of touch with realities in Russia.

Other leaders, including exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former lawmaker Dmitry Gudkov, activist and former MP Ilya Ponomarev, and imprisoned **opposition** leader Alexey Navalny's supporters abroad, [advocate](#) for drastically different programs, further splintering the already unstable anti-war base. The end goal is shared: everyone endorses the idea of transforming Russia into a European-style parliamentary democracy without a strong president. The strategies, however, differ.

Ponomarev advocates for violent methods of resistance: he has been arguably cooperating with the recently created National Republican Army ([NRA](#)), a paramilitary organization of Russian soldiers who fight on the side of Ukraine. Last August, the NRA took responsibility for the assassination of Daria Dugina, the daughter of infamous Russian

philosopher Alexander Dugin. However, whether the NRA really [exists](#) and to what extent Ponomarev has actually [distanced](#) himself from the Russian elites remains a question. In the meantime, Navalny's supporters in exile led by Leonid Volkov and Ivan Zhdanov bet on a "partisan underground": in October, they announced the launching of a new network of activists. Unlike Ponomarev, Volkov and Zhdanov are wary of violent action, instead [advocating](#) for bringing together grassroots activists already engaged in humanitarian support and clandestine anti-war protest.

Reactions to the call were rather [critical](#): Volkov and Zhdanov, who at the start of the war were already living abroad, were criticized for a lack of previous communication with grassroots organizations; moreover, not everyone is ready to share their personal information within the new network, recalling the recent [harassment](#) of Navalny supporters by the Russian police after their data were leaked from an online database. Finally, the Congress of Free Russia that took place at the end of August-early September under the flagship of Khodorkovsky and Gudkov [offered](#) room for more peace-seeking discussions. A three-day discussion in Vilnius, however, did not lead to any [practical decisions](#). With time passing, the lack of any progress and further [foundering](#) diminish the credibility of Russian political exiles in being able to create a viable challenge to Putin's regime.

A profound [question](#) is whether the opposition in exile has the right to represent and speak on behalf of those still in Russia. Especially when splintered, the Russian anti-war movement in Europe struggles to maintain support and political presence with the "remainers." For some, relocation has led to losses in social capital (for example, see the [commentary](#) of political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann). Others have to deal with the consequences of a smear campaign staged to make them look like traitors (such as actress and philanthropist Chulpan Khamatova's [experience](#) of public hatred after her emigration). The mentioned problems of legitimacy, ethics, and access to first-hand information made certain groups refuse to engage in direct political action. Instead, they focus on grassroots support for those who deal with war consequences on the ground – for Ukrainian refugees in Russia, or for those who flee mobilization or experience prosecution for their anti-war position. The [conference](#) held in Berlin last December brought together such grassroots anti-war initiatives. The organizers openly acknowledged the existing diversity of political views and intentionally adopted a horizontal conversation format geared towards experience exchange rather than formulating an action program.

When Small Incidents Reveal Abysmal Problems

Combining an unambiguous anti-war position with support for those still in Russia has also been extremely risky, as the case of the TV Rain has proven. The channel caught fire not least because it attempted to maintain a common ground with the viewers in Russia. TV Rain's practical efforts to document human rights abuses among the Russian

mobilized soldiers were supposed to resonate more strongly with the recruits' family members than calls to topple Putin, though such efforts also expectedly placed question marks next to the allegiance of the Latvia-based channel. As prospects of returning to Russia remain foggy for most of the exiles, many have to endure living in limbo: neither being able to strike root abroad nor having the possibility to go back home. This “in-betweenness” puts grassroots activists in an especially precarious position.

On the one hand, they have to prove their adequacy to host countries that, not without ground, fear the growing influence of the Russian-speaking population. Even the existing Russia-friendly initiatives in Europe—cultural or educational—are often reluctant to collaborate with the anti-war movement: any association with Russia has become toxic and risks provoking a public backlash. On the other hand, the Russian activists continue to live in fear of the Kremlin's long hand. As many still hope to be able to return to Russia or worry about the safety of their family members, financial assets, and commodities back home, they have to adhere to the draconian foreign agent law. The [law](#) that places strict control over the activities of “foreign agents” requires activists to label anything they publish with a disclaimer indicating their status; they also have to file regular financial statements and activity reports with the Russian government and undergo annual audits. The list of “foreign agents” is continuously growing: in November, the parliament [suggested](#) attaching the label to another 30 anti-war NGOs operating from abroad. For these NGOs—run mainly by local volunteers—such an inclusion into the list means increased bureaucratic and financial burden, not to mention psychological distress.

Conclusion

The Russian anti-war movement in exile remains divided across political, ethnic, and generational lines. Under pressure and continuous scrutiny from various sides—fellow Russian citizens, Ukrainians, European governments, and the Kremlin—they have to walk a thin line when expressing their position without alienating audiences at home and causing backlash or a hefty fine in host societies. The opposition in exile has been learning from mistakes made at the early stages: grassroots action continuously evolves, often taking an ad hoc form and organizing itself without formal leadership. However, the toll of the dragging war weighs heavy on those Russian activists who hope to return: public activity comes with increasingly greater perils, while ties with Russia inevitably weaken as time passes.