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The strategic dilemma facing Russia's political exiles

Is there a way out of the credibility gap?

Margarita Zavadskaya & Jussi Lassila

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Summary

- Since February 2022, Russia's exiled opposition has faced a dual credibility gap. In order to maintain their credibility within Russia, they must avoid being perceived as Western proxies. However, to gain support from Europe and Ukraine, they cannot hedge on issues such as occupied territories or accountability for war crimes.

- The Kremlin recasts any pro-Western stance as "treason" against society. At the same time, Kyiv and its European partners distrust those who avoid taking clear positions on fundamental issues, including recognition of Ukraine's 1991 borders, sanctions against Russia, and arms deliveries to Ukraine. This has fragmented the exile community, complicated engagement with the West, and limited its impact.

- Signals from Europe have been mixed: exiles are engaged in dialogue, but travel restrictions on ordinary Russian citizens have tightened, and Ukraine's scepticism towards "half-hearted" Russian opposition members has made some EU capitals hesitant to offer support.

- The EU must balance principled support for exiles with strategic caution, and engagement should amplify prospects for *real change* in Russia. Only actors without constituencies inside Russia can fully embrace Ukrainian rhetoric, while Western policymakers should neither assume universal support for Putin nor overlook the severe restrictions on opposition narratives inside Russia today.

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Introduction

Since February 2022, Russian exiles have operated under intensifying constraints and must constantly navigate a so-called "credibility gap": the tension between remaining credible to Russians inside the country and maintaining legitimacy with the opposition's European and Ukrainian partners.[1] Leaning too far in either direction risks losing both audiences. Full alignment with Ukraine and the EU would mean a further loss of relevance at home, and if exiled opposition leaders unequivocally embrace pro-Ukraine positions – endorsing all of Kyiv's demands and Western policies – they risk being labelled politically toxic within Russia. The Kremlin-controlled media and security apparatus would readily frame overtly pro-Ukrainian or pro-NATO stances as evidence of being "foreign agents", "undesirable organizations", or even "terrorists".

At the same time, hedging or remaining ambivalent means losing trust in Europe and Kyiv. If exiles soften their stance – dodging questions on Ukraine's territorial integrity, sanctions, or the supply of weapons – they will quickly forfeit credibility with Ukraine and pro-Ukraine partners. In Kyiv's eyes, any ambiguity regarding the recognition of Ukraine's 1991 borders or support for its self-defence is read as an unwillingness to accept fundamental red lines.[2] European institutions and member states, especially Russia's frontline neighbours, likewise view such hedging as a sign of unreliability. This has had tangible consequences: Ukrainian officials and civil society activists often refuse to cooperate with exile figures seen as equivocal, and EU policymakers lose interest in backing Russian opposition voices.

In essence, exiles who try to appease Russian public opinion by remaining non-committal on the war's key issues find themselves shunned by the very Western platforms that could amplify their cause. As a result, Russia's political exiles face a growing risk of becoming politically irrelevant — both in terms of representing the domestic opposition in the West and in shaping EU policies towards Russia.

This Briefing Paper outlines this critical dilemma and argues that, despite its complexity, concrete measures can be taken to strengthen the significance of Russia's political exiles for the EU's Russia policies. The EU is uniquely positioned to support exiled Russian democratic actors in ways that directly bolster its own policy toolkit. During the ongoing war, these exiled groups provide essential expertise for designing more effective sanctions and for collecting evidence of the regime's crimes – both against Ukrainians and against Russians.[3] If a peace agreement is eventually reached and the Kremlin seeks international recognition or reintegration, the EU should ensure that these democratic actors are not sidelined. By applying robust pro-democracy conditionality, the EU can anchor any gradual normalization to concrete political reforms and give exiled groups a meaningful role in shaping an eventual intra-regime transition. At the same time, it is the EU's main responsibility to uphold *core principles* in its support for exiled activists, including respect for borders, human rights,

1 Ginzburg, B. (2025) "Oppositionists or Opportunists? Ukraine's Distrust toward the Russian Opposition in Exile". PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 934. https://www.ponarseurasia.org/oppositionists-or-opportunists-ukraines-distrust-toward-the-russian-opposition-in-exile/.

2 Ibid.

3 Existing collaborations include the independent Russian rights group OVDInfo, which has expanded its mandate to offer legal assistance to detained civilians in Russia in the wake of the war. Similarly, Russian and Ukrainian civil-society organizations and independent media have increasingly allied to document war crimes, share evidence, and bolster investigative journalism across borders.

and accountability for Russia's war crimes, while also investing in strategies that genuinely resonate within Russia. In addition to clarifying expectations for exile-led activities, such an approach encourages exiled activists to better align their ideals with more effective outreach inside Russia.

Russia's political exiles: the credibility challenge

Dissent has effectively been suppressed and criminalized inside Russia since the all-out invasion of Ukraine. Even mild anti-war statements or social media posts now result in draconian prison sentences.[4] The Kremlin applies an ever-expanding set of labels — "foreign agent", "undesirable organization", "extremist", and "terrorist"— that covers almost everyone and creates severe difficulties abroad, since "terrorist" status, for instance, is recognized by all states. This onslaught has not only created a chilling effect, but also a near civic vacuum, as organized opposition within Russia's borders has been decimated or driven underground. In this context, thousands of political activists, civil society leaders, journalists, and tech-savvy critics have fled Russia since February 2022, seeking safe harbour in Europe, the South Caucasus, or elsewhere. The war and mobilization policies have also prompted a broader exodus of educated professionals, further enlarging the Russian diaspora. Yet those in exile face the harsh reality that their influence back home is severely limited by state propaganda and their designation as "traitors".

For instance, fearful or ambivalent Russian citizens, bombarded with state propaganda, often perceive exiles who support Ukraine's armed resistance as having crossed the line. Backing Russian volunteer units fighting on Ukraine's side – such as the Freedom of Russia Legion or the Russian Volunteer Corps – is not only criminalized in Russia but also creates frictions for those who oppose the war and the current regime.[5] Such support becomes a stigma that further marginalizes exiles in the eyes of undecided Russians.

4 OVD-Info (2025) "Persecution of the anti-war movement report: Three Years into Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. February 2025". 5 March. https://www.ovd.info/en/antiwar_3_years.

5 Fomina, J. (2025) "Warring for peace and democracy: Russian migrant dissidents resorting to violent means of contestation". *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1–24.

"Those in exile face the harsh reality that their influence back home is severely limited by state propaganda and their designation as 'traitors'."

Another inconvenient fact is that these armed groups also include individuals with unequivocally far-right views, which irritates many moderate oppositionists.[6] In short, a posture that wins praise in the West can render these exiled figures irrelevant to the "swing" constituents in Russia.

The political landscape after 2022 has also crystallized a weakness within the Russian political community, further complicating communication between those regime opponents who have remained in the country and those who have emigrated. For instance, when political exiles speak about the collective responsibility of Russians for Putin's rule and for the war, Russia-based activists often take this to mean that they are being personally blamed. Consequently, their political activism in opposing Putin is not seen as part of a broader political community, while views expressed abroad that would be politically impossible to express in Russia are perceived as hypocritical and as virtue-signalling.[7]

Prospects for exiles to make a difference

The Russian political groups in exile are heterogeneous and volatile, lacking a single hierarchy or clear programme. Some groups have formed formal organizations or "governments in exile" with defined structures, fundraising operations, and media arms. Others remain loose networks centred on prominent personalities or YouTube channels. Their agendas vary – from human rights documentation and

6 Burdyga, A. (2023) "Who are the far-right Russian groups fighting on Ukraine's side?" *openDemocracy*, 30 May. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-ukraine-belgorod-attack-putin-far-right/.

7 Rudina, A. (2024) "'Za drugikh ne otvechayu'. Sotsseti — o kollektivnoy otvetstvennosti rossiyan" ["I will not answer for others". Social networks – on the collective responsibility of Russians]. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 October 2024, https://www.svoboda.org/a/za-drugih-ne-otvechayu-sotsseti-o-kollektivnoy-otvetstvennosti-rossiyan/33156953.html; Zavadskaya, M. (2025) "White Coat and Civic Death: How Those Who Left and Those Who Stayed Are Pitted Against Each Other". *Riddle*, 3 September 2025. https://ridl.io/white-coat-and-civic-death-how-those-who-left-and-those-who-stayed-are-pitted-against-each-other/.

lobbying for sanctions to preparing for a post-Putin transition or building localized grassroots diasporas.

This diversity is a strength but also a source of fragmentation: exiled actors often compete for attention, resources, and legitimacy.[8] In the absence of electoral metrics or institutionalized representation, symbolic visibility in Western fora can sometimes be a substitute for genuine influence inside Russia. This creates skewed incentives. Crafting messages that play well in Brussels can take precedence over sustained engagement with Russian audiences because the former yields immediate rewards such as grants, media coverage and official meetings, whereas the latter is often a slow and thankless process. As a result, there is an emerging "moral political economy" of exile activism, in which each group jockeys to be seen as the *real* voice of democratic Russia abroad. Personal rivalries and branding battles – the Navalny-affiliated Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF) versus exiled business tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, liberals versus decolonizers[9] – further splinter the community. The lack of coordination means that the exile "ecosystem" often operates less like a unified movement and more like a collection of overlapping factions, each with its own patron networks and priorities.

Likewise, attitudes towards the West among Russians inside the country, although still predominantly negative, have softened slightly compared with the peaks seen in 2022.[10] These nuances mean that there is an audience inside Russia that is war-weary but also deeply suspicious of Western intentions. That is precisely the needle that exiles must thread in their messaging: tapping into the latent desire for peace without triggering the reflexive rejection of anything seen as imposed by the West. It also means that Western policymakers should not assume that all Russians uncritically back Putin, but they must recognize the constraints on opposition narratives in such a polarized environment.

The case of the Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces

European policy towards Russian exiles has been ambivalent and at times contradictory. On the one hand, the EU has enacted unprecedented sanctions against Moscow, and member states bordering Russia – the Baltic countries, Poland, and Finland – have severely restricted entry for ordinary Russian travellers as a security measure. On the other hand, European institutions have started to engage actively with anti-Putin Russians in exile as potential partners in promoting democratic change.

The clearest example is the new PACE Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces, launched in late 2023 with the backing of the Council of Europe, MEP Sergey Lagodinsky, former MEP and current European Commissioner for the Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS) Andrius Kubilius, and the PACE Rapporteur on Russia, EerikNiiles Kross.[11] The platform offers exiles an official channel for communicating with European policymakers: groups can nominate 6–12 representatives, plus reserves, who are then approved by PACE.[12]

However, the initiative also raises some sensitive questions: Who gets to nominate the delegates, and what criteria will be used? How can outreach to exiles be reconciled with the simultaneous message from Europe that *all* Russians bear responsibility for the war? Finally, whoever is selected would immediately become a political target for the Russian state. The rollout of the PACE platform illustrated these challenges. Seeking to establish a baseline for unity and legitimacy, the European organizers chose to

8 Shamiev, K. & Luchenko, K. (2024) "Life in exile: A new approach to Russian democrats in Europe", *ECFR Policy Brief*, 14 March 2024. https://ecfr.eu/publication/life-in-exile-a-new-approach-to-russian-democrats-in-europe/.

9 Tensions persist among Russian exiles between liberals, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Yulia Navalnaya, who advocate democratic reform within a unified state, and decolonizers, including Forum of Free Peoples of Post-Russia activists, who call for the dismantling of imperial hierarchies and support regional self-determination.

10 Levada Center (2025) "Predstavleniya o druzhestvennykh i nedruzhestvennykh stranakh, vzaimootnosheniyakh s Zapadom, otnoshenie k nekotorym stranam i napravleniya zagranichnykh poezdok" [Perceptions of friendly and unfriendly countries, relations with the West, attitudes towards certain states, and destinations of foreign travel]. 5 June 2025. https://www.levada.ru/2025/06/05/predstavleniya-o-druzhestvennyh-i-nedruzhestvennyh-stranah-vzaimootnosheniyah-s-zapadom-otnoshenie-k-nekotorym-stranam-i-napravleniya-zagranichnyh-poezdok/.

11 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2025) "PACE creates a 'Platform for Dialogue' with exiled Russian democratic forces". 2 October 2025. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/10042/pace-creates-a-platform-for-dialogue-with-exiled-russian-democratic-forces.

12 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2025) File 34536 – Rapporteur's Report on Russia. 2 October 2025. https://pace.coe.int/en/files/34536/html.

Russian opposition activists take part in an anti-Putin demonstration in Berlin, Germany, in November 2024.
Source: A.Savin / Wikipedia

require participating groups to endorse a common position statement committing to objectives such as ending the war, ensuring transitional justice, and securing a democratic future for Russia.

Controversy quickly ensued. The Berlin Declaration, a policy manifesto and prerequisite for PACE cooperation, had been drafted by a particular coalition of exiles – largely associated with ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Anti-War Committee – and was intended to articulate a shared vision for Russia's future. However, quite unsurprisingly, other opposition figures felt excluded or were reluctant to sign. For example, the camp led by opposition leader Alexei Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya, questioned why a manifesto they had no hand in writing was being treated as the "ticket" to European recognition.[13] Several prominent groups abstained from signing, initially resulting in PACE leaving them out.

From the European perspective, using the Berlin Declaration as a gatekeeping tool made sense to ensure that all participants would meet basic pro-Ukraine and pro-democracy standards. But from the exiles' perspective, it came across as an external imposition favouring one faction's vision. Navalnaya's group refused to sign the Declaration because some of the co-signatories were considered too toxic, and the initiative was perceived not as a unifying platform but as a tool for political infighting among exiled groups. This episode highlighted both the promise and the peril of Europe's engagement: it can empower the opposition, but if handled poorly, it can also inflame exile rivalries and legitimacy disputes. Transparency and broad inclusion will be key for such efforts going forward.

Meanwhile, Moscow's reaction has been predictably hostile – Russian authorities declared the PACE dialogue an "interference in domestic affairs" and, as noted, even used the Berlin Declaration's signatories as evidence in criminal cases accusing

13 Gretskiy, I. (2025) "Why PACE's New Russian Platform May Backfire". International Centre for Defence and Security, 9 October. https://icds.ee/en/why-paces-new-russian-platform-may-backfire/; Uvarov, A. (2025) "Opposition Without Borders: The Limits of Political Emigration". *Riddle*, 23 October. https://ridl.io/opposition-without-borders-the-limits-of-political-emigration/.

exiles of plotting to "overthrow the state".[14] European engagement thus both enables and constrains the exile movement: it offers resources and visibility but also imposes conditions and invites backlash.

Viewing the situation through Ukraine's sceptical lens

Ukraine has emerged as a critical arbiter in determining which exiled Russian opposition figures are taken seriously in the West.[15] Understandably, Ukrainian officials, intellectuals, and activists demand that any Russian claiming to be "democratic" prove it by fully recognizing Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity. Many in Kyiv view segments of the Russian opposition as being tainted by imperialist attitudes or as being unwilling to renounce claims on Crimea and other territories. For example, if an exiled leader dodges a question about Crimea's status, this is seen as casting doubt on their commitment to dismantling Russian imperialism. Similarly, calls by some exiles to ease certain sanctions, whether for humanitarian reasons or to incentivize political change, are interpreted in Ukraine as self-serving or naïve, given the ongoing aggression.

This normative gatekeeping by Ukraine has tangible consequences. Western events or initiatives involving "ambiguous" Russian exiles often face pushback from Ukrainian representatives. High-profile instances include public protests by Ukrainian diaspora groups against appearances by figures such as Yulia Navalnaya, when messaging from that camp on the war was deemed insufficiently clear. As a result, acceptance by Ukraine has become a litmus test for the legitimacy of Russian exiles in Europe.

On a positive note, Ukraine's engagement has expanded the agenda of the Russian opposition, putting issues such as de-imperialization, minority rights, and federalism on the table as necessary components of a post-Putin transformation. However, it has also exacerbated internal divisions, as exile groups adjust – or refuse to adjust – their platforms to meet Ukraine's expectations. In effect, Ukrainian as well as Baltic voices now shape Western perceptions of the Russian opposition: an exile movement distrusted by Ukrainians will struggle to secure high-level support in Europe. This dynamic encourages exiles to adopt the moral clarity of Ukraine's stance, even if it means losing some support in Russia. It is a strategic trade-off that many are still coming to terms with.

"European engagement thus both enables and constrains the exile movement: it offers resources and visibility but also imposes conditions and invites backlash."

Conclusions

Russia's democratic exiles currently face a real credibility gap – but it is not an insurmountable one. For the EU, it is crucial to establish explicit baseline principles for engagement. At a minimum, participating individuals or groups should publicly acknowledge the inviolability of territorial integrity, support accountability for Russian aggression, and respect the legitimacy of Ukrainian self-defence. These criteria should serve as non-negotiable reference points for grants, invitations, or partnerships. Enforcing this baseline will protect trust with Kyiv while giving Russian partners a clear understanding of what Europe expects. It will also deter opportunists who might otherwise try to play both sides.

On the other hand, it is important to differentiate between low-risk humanitarian or rights-focused activities and high-risk political or media advocacy. For example, providing legal aid and emergency visas to persecuted activists is relatively uncontroversial inside Russia and should be streamlined. In contrast, backing outspoken anti-Kremlin lobbying and investigative journalism is more politically sensitive and carries higher risks for both sides. This requires tailoring instruments of support accordingly – for example, protected fellowships and relocation grants for journalists and human rights defenders, separate funding streams

14 Trevelyan, Mark (2025) "Russia accuses Khodorkovsky and other exiled Kremlin critics of conspiring to seize power". *Reuters*, 14 October. https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-it-has-opened-new-criminal-case-against-exiled-kremlin-critic-2025-10-14/.

15 Ginzburg, B. (2025) "Oppositionists or Opportunists? Ukraine's Distrust toward the Russian Opposition in Exile". *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 934, 19 May. https://www.ponarseurasia.org/oppositionists-or-opportunists-ukraines-distrust-toward-the-russian-opposition-in-exile/.

for anti-corruption or justice initiatives, and discreet assistance for independent Russian-language media that expose war truths without heavy EU branding. By diversifying channels, the EU can support a broad range of exile projects while mitigating the visibility that could endanger them or discredit them at home. Finally, stronger integration with EU-based actors, such as the media, human rights defenders, and environmentalists, would lead to greater sustainability and mutual learning.

The success of the PACE initiative shows that the involvement of a Ukrainian partner does not inherently prevent the inclusion of Russian exiles; such initiatives can thrive if they adhere to the principles of the Berlin Declaration. Public positions that contradict international law – such as suggesting territorial concessions – should be disqualifying for any leadership role in exile forums, and this must be stressed as an EU policy principle distinct from the Trump administration's cynical stance towards territorial concessions. Making these rules transparent will prevent controversies and reassure EU sceptics that engaging with exiles is not a backdoor to "compromise" on Ukraine. In practice, however, fully formalizing these principles at this stage would be premature.

It is also important to continue granting humanitarian exemptions from travel bans and sanctions for genuine Russian dissidents and their families. The EU should remain a refuge for those who have taken risks in opposing Putin. At the same time, enhanced vetting of exile organizations that receive funding and other forms of support must be transparently implemented in light of security concerns. This should include thorough background checks to weed out anyone with ties to extremist nationalism, suspected espionage, or disinformation activity.

However, the capacity of receiving states remains limited. In many states, local law- enforcement and counterintelligence bodies are already preoccupied with monitoring other violent groups, meaning that targeted operations or investigations concerning the Russian opposition cannot always be a priority. For this reason, this Briefing Paper recommends fostering much closer cooperation with vetted diaspora leaders who can help collect and relay information about potentially suspicious individuals within their communities. Regular meetings with these representatives, combined with basic counterintelligence training and the introduction of frameworks such as MICE (Money, Ideology, Coercion, Ego), would help them understand recruitment motivations and patterns. It would also be useful to raise their awareness of typical secret service recruitment techniques. Where possible, cooperation with investigative journalists and NGOs that track Kremlin influence networks can help identify malign actors posing as opposition figures.[16] Balancing openness with scrutiny will maintain the integrity of European support programmes.

Finally, support should prioritize activities with domestic resonance over diaspora pageantry. The EU and its member states must guard against symbolic tokenism, whereby exiles are feted at European conferences that have zero impact on the ground. Instead, those opposition voices that still communicate credibly with people inside Russia should be platformed, whether through underground networks, social media, or even personal reputation. As a country that has also hosted a significant number of Russian dissidents, Finland should be particularly careful in this regard. As a host, it can quietly vet which exiles have genuine grassroots connections and avoid elevating politically irrelevant figures.

Russian political emigration, for all its limitations, remains an important element of Russia's transformation. If nurtured wisely, it can help keep the flame of alternative visions alive through dark times. However, neither the exiles nor their Western supporters should harbour any illusions: the fate of Russia will ultimately be decided by Russians at home. ⬢

16 Due to their capacity limits, they also prioritize high-profile targets.

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