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The Impacts of Host- and Home-Country Political Environments on Russian Activists Abroad

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The departure of thousands of activists from Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has created opportunities for them both to engage with new constituencies and to work with old constituents in new ways. Social movement theory—specifically the concept of "political opportunity structure" (POS), which Sidney Tarrow defined as "the consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national dimensions of the political environment that either encourage or discourage people from using collective action"—can shed light on the dilemmas faced by Russian civil society actors. Abroad, they are dealing with a particularly complex and "porous" POS due to their positioning in overlapping political worlds, which multiplies the opportunities, constraints, and risks. On the one hand, despite physically leaving their home country, they do not, in fact, leave its domestic POS; it continues to pervade their choices about which issues to prioritize and whether their tactics will endanger them or their colleagues still in Russia. On the other hand, they face an entirely new set of political opportunities and risks in the host countries whither they relocate. In this memo, we illustrate three main elements of this porous POS: influencing the government and/or society in Russia and host states, given the relative threat of repression in one place versus another; finding political allies; and obtaining financial support. We cite examples from 36 interviews with Russian feminist and environmental activists in Tbilisi, Vilnius, and Berlin, as well as representatives of a few foreign donor organizations, that we carried out between April 2023 and July 2024.

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Target Audiences of Exiled Russian Activists

Activists working in exile direct their campaigns at diverse audiences. A feminist in Tbilisi suggested that one key target group was Russian citizens in Russia who have not been politicized: "Our activity is aimed only at society, because we do not have any leverage over the state at this stage… Our goals are to tell more people, to convey to them why this war is not beneficial for them." However, an environmentalist also in Tbilisi noted the difficulties of working with Russian citizens from afar: "I have this feeling that Russian society is in a depressive mood, and I don't like that. I want to find instruments to change that, but… the situation is getting worse and worse every month and people are trying to adapt to this new situation."

At the other end of the spectrum are efforts targeting host-country politicians, in pursuit of antiwar and humanitarian goals. Examples cited by our interviewees include demonstrations in Berlin to raise awareness about Russian citizens in Europe who face threats from the Russian government and need European residency visa pathways, as well as Tbilisi protests against a proposed "foreign agent" law in Georgia. An LGBTQ rights activist in Berlin lobbied European politicians to change host-country laws on humanitarian refugees and at the EU level. An art exhibit was organized in Brussels, but not for the general public: "Mostly we want politicians to know about it and change the [visa] regulations."

Reaching out to host-country governments is often challenging. An environmentalist in Tbilisi noted, "As an immigrant, I lack language knowledge of Georgian laws, and most people in our community lack knowledge of the language. So I think we are least effective in doing the legal stuff, unfortunately, because this is a really important part of the problem. But we are good at… generating crowded events, we are good at sorting recyclables, and we are good at technology."

Other activists focus on forging new activist communities in exile through face-to-face interaction, whether to pursue overtly political goals or not. An environmental activist who organizes local park cleanups in Tbilisi said, "The majority of people [who attended the cleanup events] were those who had just come to a new country, and they wanted to build their social networks and participate in some initiative. They felt this urge to… do something and see the result. In Russia, many people missed out on the feeling that you can just come up with an idea and implement it. [Here] you don't have to get permission from some kind of authority, and you don't have this feeling that everything is prohibited by default like in Russia." A feminist in Vilnius described how she came across a demonstration by members of the Feminist Antiwar Resistance group and joined them in organizing another one in which someone donned a mask of Putin's head and stood inside a cage symbolizing prison: "Someone was responsible for the cage itself, someone was responsible for the costume, someone was responsible for the hands… Someone was responsible for the sign. We had a sign in Russian, Lithuanian, and English, with the inscription 'war criminal.'" Physical gatherings provide like-minded Russians a chance to

meet and cultivate solidarity, give back to the host community in a visible way, and demonstrate their antiwar stance.

Exiting Russia does not mean fully escaping the country's political context, particularly if an activist still wants to have influence among Russian citizens. Having left Russia, activists sometimes find themselves or their movement, or both, subject to Russian government disinformation campaigns back home. A feminist activist in Tbilisi reflected on the Russian public's misunderstanding of those who left Russia in protest of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine: "You can see lots of people kind of mirroring the propaganda message: That people who went abroad, they're living their best lives, they don't care, you know, they're… living off of grants, huge grants." Nonetheless, exile communities also provide an impetus to further activism. As an environmentalist in Tbilisi noted, "What is certain is that now there is a more active political crowd around me; well, simply because all the active ones went to Georgia, and everyone who wanted to somehow wait it out and relax, [they] went somewhere like Bali."

Several activists noted painful dilemmas that they had encountered when trying to continue their activism outside of Russia. These stemmed from ongoing persecution of their activist colleagues who remained in Russia. Russia's POS increased the challenges of collaboration for Russian activists in several ways. For instance, activists abroad, stymied by Russia's low-information and high-censorship environment, cannot have a full understanding of the situation on the ground for activists in Russia, while they also cannot publicly express shared political positions, since activists in Russia risk imprisonment for being explicitly antiwar. Some have found it necessary to distance themselves from direct involvement in projects in Russia with colleagues who remained there. One gender violence activist in Vilnius, who has been labeled a "foreign agent," explained: "If suddenly the government were to adopt a law on domestic violence, I would have to step away as a foreign agent and not get involved. I understand that I am dangerous. If someone needs to get something good done, I have to step back… and simply observe from the sidelines." Several activists also mentioned the difficulty of managing online platforms that have been penetrated by pro-government actors and others intent on monitoring their conversations.

Allies of Russian Activists Abroad

For activists, Russian identity complicates potential alliances in their host countries. In thinking about allies broadly, some activists—particularly feminists—have adopted an explicitly decolonial awareness of not wanting to draw attention or resources away from Ukraine or put Russian activists "ahead" of Ukrainian activists in their organizing. Even though Russian activists reject imperialism, finding allies in their host countries is complicated by situational politics. Russian activists sometimes find themselves deprived of their "natural" ideological allies due to cleavages on other issues. For instance, both Russian feminists and environmentalists in Georgia should naturally find allies on the left of the political spectrum, it would seem, but Georgia's left, as well as opposition

politicians and activists, are largely anti-Russian. Twenty percent of Georgia's territory is occupied by the Russian military due to previous conflicts, which makes the Georgian public largely anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian, even as the Georgian Dream government's foreign policy is more ambivalent. As one activist in Tbilisi put it: "We are liberal Russians who are against the war, against Putin. And the Georgian opposition is also against the war and against Putin. But the Georgian opposition is for introducing visas for and restrictions against Russians. Yet the Georgian opposition is also welcoming Russian activists to come to their rallies against so-called 'foreign agent' laws. So this is so complicated, and it makes me feel that I'd better move to another place." A representative of a Georgian environmental organization noted that her staff members were reluctant to cooperate with Russian environmentalists living in the country, even on shared goals. In short, although Russian activists abroad have taken the step of leaving Russia, their national identity inescapably shapes the political opportunities they face in their host countries, leaving them operating in a hybrid POS that combines the challenges of both Russian and host-country environments.

In Germany, the political left also has been fractured by the war in Ukraine, with left-wing pacifism sometimes winning out over the desire to support Ukrainians—a position counter to that of most of the Russian activists in exile whom we interviewed, who unreservedly support Ukraine and regard opposition to arming Ukraine as unacceptable. One feminist interviewee in Berlin put it this way: "What makes me really sad or frustrated is how, for example, this left-wing community of Berlin, maybe Germany… in this particular war, it's kind of sometimes pro-Russia, sometimes very pacifist in the [sense] that [they say], 'Let's just stop supporting Ukraine and let's see what happens, it's not our war.' Very… selfish in a way… Even the parties in Germany, which I kind of liked, are making these wrong choices. This agenda is really frustrating."

In Vilnius, activists have both benefited and sometimes felt frustrated by Lithuania's environment as a country of refuge for many of Russia's political exiles. In response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Lithuania largely restricted issuing new entry visas to Russian citizens except on humanitarian grounds (in many cases, for civic activists under threat). Moreover, Russian is spoken widely in Lithuania, thanks to the presence of transplanted Russians, as well as large numbers of Belarusian and Ukrainian refugees (although by mid-2024, we note, some language tensions seemed to be emerging). One Russian activist in Vilnius said: "Lithuania is one of the most hospitable countries in terms of acceptance… Both Belarusians and Russians continue to come here and escape repression here in all possible ways. And here, the internal policy favors those who come on humanitarian grounds. I cannot say that there is some kind of tension here."

Other friction exists within the Russian political emigrant community itself. Activists with the Feminist Antiwar Resistance, for instance, expressed frustration about hierarchies within the Russian political opposition abroad. As one of them, in Vilnius, complained: "I go to many political conferences where the Russian opposition is… It's mostly all men

who are 50, 60, 70 years old sitting there. They have been saying the same things for the last 10 years. Their words don't change anything. They have a very high opinion of themselves. And they don't actually do anything on the ground at all. Even though they are politicians, they don't do political work." Meanwhile, other activists felt more open-minded to making alliances, owing to the complicated and fluid political situation. Along these lines, one feminist activist in Tbilisi told us, "We have this principle: We cooperate with everyone, except for fascists. Because this is the only strategy that seems productive to us. And we don't want to become isolated. The entire opposition agenda is so far from the ordinary depoliticized Russian that there is no difference between us."

How Activism in Exile is Funded

From the perspective of donors, the best strategies to support Russian activists in exile remain a bit unclear. One of the goals is to help preserve "abeyance structures" that can be revived when Russian politics becomes less repressive. The representative of an NGO providing relocation assistance to some activists said, "I think that when we provide support specifically for the real pillars of human rights activism in the country, we are providing them with a safe space and the ability to continue their work however they can, and also just to get on their feet and stay sane or regain their sanity, as the case is with many. So it's triaging, but it's triaging for a particular community that we really believe in and that I really believe needs to be ready when the time comes to go back, because they all want to go back… They're the necessary component for a healthy democratic society." Nonetheless, only a small fraction of the activists whom we interviewed had received support from international or non-Russian NGOs. Most of the few who had received such support did so through connections with donors that they had cultivated in the past.

Ironically, if this trend picks up, and there is an increase in foreign funding for Russian activists in exile—from foundations or governments, or both—this could lead to destructive intracommunity competition, similar to what Russian activists faced in Russia in the 1990s, when they competed against each other for foreign grants. We observed the beginnings of such tensions in Vilnius, where newer, younger activists hinted at resentment toward established opposition figures, who attract most of the donor funding and diplomatic attention within the Russian exile community. The semipermeability of state borders that has allowed Russian activists to self-exile has simultaneously recreated a more fluid—and complicated—transnational opportunity structure for social movement funding.