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EU-Russia Relations in the Area of People to People Ties:

New Strategic Framework for Cooperation in the Future

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CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

KEW

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Summary

- There are no signs of a change in the behaviour of the Putin regime either towards Ukraine, or towards the EU and the wider West, which is considered an enemy and a critical threat to the very existence of the Russian regime.

- In this context, the EU's Russia policy represented by the so-called "war-time approach" has exhausted itself with more divergence among the EU member states than several years ago after the start of the full scale invasion.

- Thus, it is necessary to promote a new way of thinking, which should, however, avoid recognising the Putin regime or its legitimacy over Russian society.

- Instead, the EU should direct its efforts more firmly toward Russian civil society and other like-minded groups critical of the regime, fostering trust and cooperation with them within a new framework.

- To achieve this, the EU should come back to its original dual-track policy of differentiating between the regime and the civil society and place one of the original guiding principles related to support to the Russian civil society once again at the core of its policy on Russia.

- By investing in people, the EU both promotes the circle of its friends and allies on the side of the Russian people and part of the elite, and also invests in the future cohort of individuals that might be ready to move away from confrontation, aggression and imperialism that the Kremlin is fostering and promoting day after day.

Recommendations

→ The EU should invest in longer-term thinking and a common strategy for the EU 27, addressed towards Russian civil society and that should go beyond the current "war-time-approach", which has exhausted itself and has not yet provided meaningful strategic action. This strategy should particularly focus on the preparation of very detailed plans for Russia's transformation into a liberal democracy based on rule of law, protection of human and minority rights and devolution of power to federal republics.

→ The EU should promote an internal critical discussion on the individual components of its Russia policy, especially the people-to-people ties requiring more financial, organisational or visa support to the Russian civil society that should stand at the core of the "upgraded" strategic framework. This latter must provide the Russian third sector with the instruments to allow it to fight effectively against the criminal policies of the Putin regime.

→ A radical improvement of communications is necessary for achieving greater awareness among EU citizens about the importance of the Russian civil society, whose victory over the Putin regime is in the fundamental interests of the EU. This communication should also include an element of strategic signalling inside the Russian society towards the like-minded group fighting the Russian regime already today.

→ Czechia and Poland, especially their civil societies, should increase their cooperation with other EU and Russian NGOs based on common fundamental democratic values within the framework of projects co-founded by the EU.

→ The Czech and Polish third sectors together with their EU and Russian partners should pressure Czech and Polish political elites (using a "bottom-up" approach), demanding the creation of more favourable legal and institutional conditions for the collaboration between them. A smarter and more flexible visa policy as well as a concrete set of financial tools and other instruments could help both Czech and Polish civil societies to intensify cooperation with relevant Russian partners constitutes one of the most urgent issues.

Introduction

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia and the defence against its aggression have become central topics in European politics. With the Putin regime considered the key challenge to European security, both the EU and NATO rushed to develop policy responses on how to contain Russian actions and isolate the regime globally. Both alliances' logical focus has been on deterrence and defence posture as well as building domestic resilience, which has been the primary focus for the EU. Although Brussels' contemporary actions are widely considered extensive and decisive when compared to a lukewarm approach in the past, with some unprecedented sanctions expeditiously imposed on Russia, one policy response within the wider toolbox remains largely unexplored several years into the conflict: offering more extensive support to the Russian civil society.

Originally, this was one of the so-called Five Guiding Principles of the EU towards Russia, implemented in the post-2014 period during the increasing authoritarianism in the country. However, given the increasingly aggressive actions of the Russian regime, culminating in February 2022, an official EU "war-time approach"[1] to Russia prevailed, which replaced any attempts to promote a coherent strategy or any kind of longer term thinking. More than three years on from the start of the full-scale invasion, the EU policy response to Russia could benefit from a more strategic, long-term and sustainable way of thinking, which should be built around the support of trusted actors within Russian civil society.

This is important since after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, a large number of democratically minded and critical Russian citizens left the country in fear of persecution by the Putin regime, consisting among others of experienced academics, journalists and NGO workers. Since then, these exiles have been successful in forming grassroots transnational networks with some considerable influence on the Russian population back at home, depicting the crimes of the Putin regime and advocating for a different, more democratic future for Russia. While some EU member states in particular provided safe haven to a considerable number of such exiles, attempts to cooperate with Russian civil society have thus far been scarce. This paper therefore seeks to explore the potential of this cooperation, shedding light on the challenges which previously prevented such efforts, and how these might be overcome in the future. First, the context of the current relationship between the EU and Russia is discussed, exploring the current shape of Russian civil society and their operations. Then, two case studies of Czechia and Poland follow, illustrating in detail how the diaspora operates in both countries, and how they interact in this new reality given their complicated historical ties to Russia. Finally, the contemporary state of affairs in the EU as a whole will be elaborated upon, exploring several forms that future cooperation could take, and ending with several recommendations on the matter.

[1] European External Action Service, "Report of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; CFSP Report – Our Priorities in 2023," https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10732-2023-INIT/en/pdf.

1 Russian civil society and the EU

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian civil society has been the main factor in maintaining democratic values in Russia through upholding checks-and-balances, public accountability for politicians and media coverage of corruption and stark violations of laws or ethics by the state authorities. With the passing of time, however, Vladimir Putin's regime has strengthened its grip on all aspects of the Russian state and society. Through a slow, insidious dismantling of democratic institutions, including through nepotism, corruption and politically motivated violence, Putin has dealt a serious blow to Russian civil society. It perseveres, however, both in the form of exiled organisations and underground humanitarian initiatives, but also as publicly acting entities which are under constant danger of persecution and destruction.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of civil society members, including scientists, cultural and IT workers, protested against the invasion and, subsequently, faced persecution and other forms of administrative bullying. As of 2025, the situation has degraded severely, including the challenges of cuts of Western, and above all U.S., financial support. Any kind of public display of peaceful protest or dissatisfaction with the government or its political direction can result in draconian prison sentences. The judicial system has now been for many years under the total control of the regime and serves merely as an extension of its grasp over society. Any public expression of LGBTQ+ identity or support has been labeled as extremist - on the same level as terrorism.[2] The reemergence of Soviet era population control practices are evident throughout the society, from evidence planting to reporting on neighbours for "subversive activities", including in the digital space.[3]

Despite the increased personal risk and inhumane treatment, civil society still persists and tries to keep Russian citizens informed about the crimes of the regime, both at home and abroad, primarily in Ukraine. Tremendous effort was also invested in creating transnational networks that assist victims of the regime and its war in Ukraine in various ways: Russian anti-war activists help return kidnapped Ukrainian children, assist draftees who refuse to partake in an illegal war and facilitate the trilateral dialogue together with colleagues from Ukraine and the EU.[4] Russian lawyers, whilst powerless against the grip on the judiciary by the state, cooperate with activists in secret and advise them on best courses of action.

In the face of the abovementioned, for the EU, those freedom-minded and pro-democracy Russians could in their own way contribute to rebuilding security and creating a lasting peace in Eastern Europe. Russia, at least under the existing regime, is incompatible with the broadly recognised democratic European values and has created and actively promoted an opposing identity contradicting those values. This "traditionalist" identity is used in contrast to the freedom-based European one for the sole reason of creating a subservient citizenry, convenient for the regime. Once the war in Ukraine is over, one of the essential questions for Europe, Russian, and particularly the Russian civil society is going to be reforming the Russian state and society towards a lasting, sustainable democracy and decentralised form of governance that can maintain peaceful coexistence with its European neighbours.

While Russian political representatives or the civil society currently do not possess the structures to act as a fully-fledged government-in-exile, unlike the democratic forces of Belarus led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, or to be directly

[2] "Russia: First Convictions under LGBT 'extremist' Ruling," Human Rights Watch, February 27, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/15/russia-first-convictions-under-lgbt-extremist-ruling.

[3] This applies both offline and online in the digital domain. Source: Vadim Shtepa, "Russia Ramping up Authoritarian-Style Virtual Repression," Jamestown, July 24, 2025. https://jamestown.org/program/russia-ramping-up-authoritarian-style-virtual-repression/.

[4] Sergey Lukashevsky, Polina Filippova. Resisting Authoritarianism: A European Strategy for Engaging and Supporting Russian Civil Society. Unpublished manuscript. Berlin: Radio Sakharov, 2025, 4.

affiliated with the existing EU political structures, it is crucial to keep such actors in the global advocacy framework, and not exclude them. Direct political affiliation would be counterproductive and fuel Russian propaganda against the dissent and opposition groups, which are labeled "foreign agents". Creating non-political structures, such as academic institutions or joint EU-Russia NGO initiatives could both keep Russian civil society alive and engaged as well as help avoid political instrumentalisation.

Currently, considerable challenges exist for the Russian civil society actors operating in Europe, who are often not recognised by the EU side, preventing further cooperation or inclusion in its support programmes. For instance, academics and cultural workers are struggling in exile, facing both administrative, legal and financial obstacles. Activists could benefit from joint EU-based NGO initiatives and projects, which could strengthen their presence and legitimacy in the eyes of the European public. Additionally, there is a lack of positions within the EU institutions, both governmental and otherwise, for the exiled professionals who, until their exile, worked for the better future of Europe.[5] Steps towards remedying these shortcomings would not only strengthen Russian civil society, both internationally and domestically, but also provide to the EU much needed human resources to counter authoritarian Russian influence in the union's countries.

2 Case study: Poland

Poland's attitude towards Russian civil society distinguishes itself within the EU by a variety of ambivalences and constraints deeply rooted in Polish history and culture. Poland is unique as a member of the EU in sharing a border with Russia, Belarus (currently a *de facto* Kremlin vassal state) and Ukraine, waging war against Russian aggression. However, as opposed to the Baltic states or Germany, Poland is not home to a sizeable Russian community. The number of Russians with Polish citizenship or citizens of Russia living in Poland slightly exceeds 35 thousand people.[6][7] Russia's neo-imperialism represents a fundamental threat to Poland's security not since 2022, but since the beginning of the 21st century, gradually intensifying after the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and especially against Ukraine in 2014. Consequently, a fear of Russia is widespread among the Polish society and elites, accompanied by a strong antipathy towards Russians already before 2022, but especially after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[8] Furthermore, as Russia represents a fundamental threat to Poland, interest in the Russian culture, language and history in Polish society remains below expectations, as marked by the post-1989 Polish decisive turn to the West. A persistent low enrolment in Russian philology and East European studies among Polish students clearly confirms this phenomenon.

[5] Nicolas Bouchet. Democratic Russian Civil Society Outside Russia? A Window of Opportunity for Support. Berlin: The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), 2024, 1-30. https://www.gmfus.org/news/democratic-russian-civil-society-outside-russia-window-opportunity-support.

[6] "Mapy I Dane Statystyczne." Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców, https://migracje.gov.pl/en/.

[7] "Final Results of the National Population and Housing Census 2021." Statistics Poland, https://stat.gov.pl/en/national-census/national-population-and-housing-census-2021/final-results-of-the-national-population-and-housing-census-2021/.

[8] According to CBOS, an opinion polling institute, in 2022 82% of Poles felt antipathy towards Russians and only 6% expressed sympathy. In 2025, their feelings towards Russians have slightly improved (72% antipathy, 8% sympathy). However, the attitude of Poles towards them fluctuated. During the period of rapprochement between both states (2009-2012) only slightly more than 30% of Poles declared antipathy towards Russians and the level of sympathy towards them was very similar. It changed after 2014 when the number of Poles feeling antipathy to Russians rose to 50% and sympathy fell to 20%. Source: Małgorzata Omyła-Rudzka, "Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów." Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS), February 2025. https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2025/K_008_25.PDF.

The fear of Russia and Russians stems not only from developments that occurred in most recent years. It is shaped strongly by the legacy of the difficult past, namely centuries of confrontation for dominance in Eastern Europe in the early modern period. It began with Poland's defeat and the establishment of Russia's indirect or direct rule/tutelage over Poland (most of its territory or in its entirety) lasting for three hundred years with the interwar interruption (1918-1939). Russians mostly occupy in the historical memory of Polish society the position of main villains. Moreover, Russia, defined as Asian/Eastern/Oriental/Tatar-Mongol, barbaric and despotic, also became a key antithesis of Poland's self image as Western/European, civilised and democratic. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine only strengthened the Polish self-identification built along this binary opposition. In effect, the perception of Russia as an autocracy inhabited by "slaves" who will always remain authoritarian/totalitarian and a priori unable to embrace democratic values, enjoys today a wide popularity in the Polish society and elites. These strong prejudices should not be reduced only to justify Polish historical grievances but also exemplify the Polish superiority complex towards Russia. On the other hand, there is a long and solid historical tradition of Polish cooperation with democratic Russian forces. It is rooted in the self-perception of Poland as a bridge towards the East which under the Polish historical motto "for our freedom and yours" "exports" liberty whilst also hiding patronising overtones (the Polish civilising mission).

The fear of Russia provokes a relatively high endorsement in Poland for the idea of its break-up, including from some Polish politicians. On the other hand, an obvious contradiction exists in Poland between the support for independence of non-Russian nations and perceptions of these communities which can only be described as a mix of arrogance and ignorance blurred with a high level of Islamophobia and Orientalism. A serious self-critical reflection on the above-mentioned shortcomings and contradictions is highly unlikely in Poland due to the widespread conviction that Polish society and elites possess a particular knowledge of Russia in contrast to Western Europeans.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Poland's institutional and financial support for the Russian civil society because of Russia's key importance in the Polish foreign policy, was larger than in the case of most European countries. However, Poland provided the Belarusian, Georgian and Moldovan and Ukrainian civil societies with a radically more substantial aid than their Russian counterparts.[9] The situation has not changed fundamentally since 2022 though attempts to increase Polish engagement with Russian civil society should be acknowledged (see below).

Poland has become a relatively important place of self-organisation of various groups of Russian exiles. In November 2022, Poland allowed certain groups of Russian opposition to launch the Congress of People's Deputies which gathers former Russian deputies of different levels. The Congress claims to be the transnational parliament of the Russian Federation.[10] Between November 2022 and June 2024 Poland hosted five meetings of the Congress. However, the organisation did not manage to unite the Russian opposition due to considerable divergences. For instance, support for Russian volunteers fighting on the Ukrainian side and armed resistance in Russia, expressed by key leaders of the Congress, met with the serious objections of other representatives of the Russian opposition. Michał Kamiński, deputy chairman of the Polish Senate who participated in the last meeting of the Congress in June 2024, announced the establishment of the inter-parliamentary group "For Free and Democratic Russia" which was supposed to gather together Polish MPs and representatives of the Russian democratic opposition. Kamiński was the first Polish politician to take part in a meeting of an organisation of Russian exiled

[9] Katarzyna Szeniawska, Katarzyna Zalas-Kamińska, "Polska Współpraca Rozwojowa Raport 2024," Grupa Zagranica, February 2025. https://zagranica.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Raport_Polska_Wspolpraca_Rozwojowa_2024_GrupaZagranica.pdf.
[10] "The Congress of People's Deputies," https://rosdep.org/en/glavnaya-english/.

politicians. However, the inter-parliamentary group has not been established and the Congress has not met again for 15 months. In May 2022, Poland was the birthplace of The Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum founded by exiled separatists from Russia (including also Russian regionalists)[11], as well as their foreign collaborators, which advocates for the disintegration of Russia. The organisation was registered in Poland. Besides the first Forum also the third one took place in Poland in September 2022. This one was co-organised by Anna Fotyga, the former minister of foreign affairs and at that time a Polish MEP from Law and Justice (PiS). The event was co-funded by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), a political group in the European Parliament, co-chaired by PiS. Since then, 14 Forums have been held across the world, all of them outside of Poland, with no significant Polish representative in attendance. Both cases show that the Polish actors played an important role in their development but their interest gradually faded away.

One of the key limitations of Polish engagement with the Russian civil society are suspicions concerning the Russian diaspora related to the war. Generally, Poland admits refugee status to Russian citizens very reluctantly in comparison to many EU member states. After 24th of February 2022, the Polish authorities approached many Russian exiles with an a priori additional distrust being afraid of Kremlin spies hiding among them. Between 2022 and 1st of June 2025 more than 5,300 citizens of Russia applied for asylum in Poland.[12] The great majority of them did not receive this status and certain asylum seekers decided not to pursue their applications. Moreover, the Polish government issued full bans on almost all tourist visas for Russian citizens which resulted in a particularly huge decrease in the number of Russians visiting Poland. Certain public scientific programs (for instance the ones operated by the National Science Centre) that exclude participation of Russian scholars who fled to the EU constitute another example of this distrust towards the exiles from Russia. Finally, Poland remains the only EU member state that after 24th of February 2022 extradited Russian citizens back to Russia (three persons) or arrested them (two persons, one of them several times) on the basis of a warrant issued by Moscow. Almost all of them were Muslims.[13] These cases of Poland's complicity in Russia's transnational repression exemplify the persistence of Islamophobia that constrains Polish engagement with certain sectors of Russian society.

A decisive change of current *modus operandi* between Poland and the Russian civil society is highly unlikely. Moreover, serious challenges are looming over cooperation with the Russian third sector. The far-right candidates won almost 55% of votes in the first round of the Polish presidential election in May 2025. All of them perceived at least lukewarmly or even negatively the idea of promotion of democracy across the world. Additionally, most probably this result of the presidential vote will bring a decisive shift to the right of the Polish political scene in the parliamentary election in 2027 or even earlier in the case of a snap election. Moreover, the rise of the far right in Poland is accompanied by a considerable deterioration of political and social Polish-Ukrainian relations. This process weakens Poland's potential to play a role as facilitator of the dialogue between Russian and Ukrainian civil societies which is of crucial importance for the reconciliation between both nations in the future.

[11] "The Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum," https://www.freenationsrf.org/en.

[12] "Ochrona międzynarodowa w I połowie 2025 r.," Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców, July 14, 2025. https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/postepowania-dotyczace-ochrony-miedzynarodowej-w-i-polowie-2025-r.

[13] "Transnational Repression by the Russian Federation: Threats, Tendencies, Solutions," OVD-Info, May 14, 2025, https://reports.ovd.info/en/transnational-repression-russian-federation-threats-tendencies-solutions.

3 Case study: Czechia

The Czech approach towards Russia, Russians and by extension Russian civil society is best understood against the backdrop of the historical development of relations between the two countries. From the Czech perspective, these can be characterised as remarkably ambivalent ever since the revival of modern Czech nationhood in the 19th century. While one movement historically stressed a connection to Russians as part of the pan-Slavic movement, another emphasised the geographical distance and approached the major Eastern neighbour with distrust. While for long decades, both approaches maintained some popularity, a major break came after World War 2 when Czechoslovakia found itself in the Soviet "sphere of influence", in effect being subjugated to its leadership and forming a satellite state within the Soviet imperial project. Under the communist regime, the Czechoslovak state fully embraced an image of the Russia-dominated Soviet Union as the "bigger Slavic brother", relying on its extensive propaganda apparatus to cement a sense of friendship between the two socialist countries. Despite this, the relationship became severely strained after the Prague Spring events of 1968, when armed forces of the Warsaw Pact countries under Soviet leadership invaded Czechoslovakia to end a liberalising movement within the national communist party. In the following decades until the break-up of the communist regime itself, a unique situation emerged, as elites continued voicing the pro-Soviet propaganda, while an opposing sentiment quietly grew among the general population, largely perceiving Soviets negatively as those responsible for the invasion.

After the country declared a post-communist "return to Europe" in the 1990s and firmly committed to Western structures, a major question emerged as to how to settle relations with Russia given the complicated historical ties between the two countries.[14] Though some sense of the historical ambivalence has returned, the policy which in the end mostly prevailed throughout the 2000s was one of rapprochement, hoping to benefit from the mostly good relations economically, while expecting that the Putin regime would eventually complete its transformation into a fully fledged democracy. Albeit the first serious sense of deterioration in Czech-Russian relations could be observed with the illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea, the definitive blow came with a 2021 revelation that Russian secret service operatives from the GRU had been behind large-scale explosions in ammunition depots in Vrbětice, in effect accusing the Russian regime of carrying out a major act of sabotage on Czech sovereign soil.[15] Since the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, official relations between the two countries have turned ice cold, and a broad image of Russians as ruthless invaders has re-emerged into public discourse.

Consequently, the 2023 Czech Security Strategy named the contemporary Russian regime as a principal threat to national security. At the same time, the country has become one of the major refugee hubs for exiled Russian civil society members, with one estimate claiming over 10,000 exiles in the post-invasion period.[16][17] Based on its objectives, Czechia therefore has a strategic interest in helping

[14] Ondřej Ditrych, "The Sorry State of Czech-Russian Relations," War on the Rocks, October 4, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/the-sorry-state-of-czech-russian-relations/.
[15] Pavel Havlíček, "Czech-Russian Escalation as a Case of Deeper EU-Russia Crisis: Time for a United and Credible Action," Europeum, October 31, 2024, https://www.europeum.org/en/articles-and-publications/policy-paper-czech-russian-escalation-as-a-case-of-deeper-eu-russia-crisis-time-for-a-united-and-credible-action/.
[16] Nicolas Bouchet. Democratic Russian Civil Society Outside Russia? A Window of Opportunity for Support. Berlin: The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), 2024, 1-30. https://www.gmfus.org/news/democratic-russian-civil-society-outside-russia-window-opportunity-support.
[17] Overall, based on the estimates of the Czech Ministry of Interior, the Russian diaspora accounts for around 38 thousand people. Source: Adam Tichý, Zuzana Najvrtová, "Rusové v Česku: Češi by chtěli, abychom měli na čele, že nenávidíme Putina," Seznam Zprávy, August 24, 2025.

all anti-Putin forces, including assisting those Russians who can help the country become more peaceful and democratic from below, eroding support for the regime through contact with the Russian population. Furthermore, such support could complement existing security efforts in a relatively inexpensive way. Therefore, Czechia stands in a unique position, where it possesses both the motivations and resources to develop policy in assisting Russian civil society members to resist the Putin regime.

Accordingly, Czechia's track record of supporting Russian civil society has traditionally been among the most significant in the EU, and over time this is more and more the case. The first line of emergency support was provided in the form of humanitarian visas to Russian activists, primarily the human rights defenders and other pro-democracy actors with whom Czechia had previous work ties, but also others. In general, Czechia's visa policy was instrumental in helping those in need while being otherwise restrictive to Russian tourists, at least when compared among the Schengen zone countries. Apart from that, Czechia offered some limited level of support also to independent academia and critical thinkers who were forced to flee from Russia. This, for instance, helped the Charles University in Prague to become a regional leader in Russian Studies, run by the daughter of Boris Nemtsov Zhanna, developing national expertise in understanding the region while also providing safe haven to several democratically minded Russian academics in exile.[18] Secondly, the Prague Civil Society Centre, a leading NGO which has a long tradition of supporting ties with civil society and independent journalism all over the Eastern European and Central Asian region, has been able to provide an established network for many exiles, including from Russia. Third, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself operates a small-scale programme aimed at offering assistance to incoming Russian civil society representatives, independent journalists and academics, also supporting cooperation efforts with Russian communities through its embassy network.[19] Finally, the political sphere also became involved in the post-invasion period, with deputies grouped in the recently created Czech Friends of a Free Russia platform committing themselves to bringing topics of active support towards democratic Russian forces into the country's political discussions.[20]

Despite this, several challenges persist in making the cooperation with Russian civil society more efficient and far-reaching. As the relationship between the two countries remains tense diplomatically, the radicalisation of populations on both sides remains an issue. For instance, many Russian communities in Czechia have traditionally been under the strong influence of the Russian embassy and other official bodies, fulfilling objectives of the Kremlin regime and preventing the increasing involvement of the Russian diaspora in anti-regime activities.[21] On the Czech side, as this rift gained significant salience in the post-invasion period, a social cleavage emerged between pro-Russian and anti-Russian forces.[22] The consequences thereof have already begun to materialise, as for instance new controversial legislation has been enacted in the country, ruling Czech and Russian citizenship to

https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-rusove-v-cesku-cesi-by-chteli-abychom-meli-na-cele-ze-nenavidime-putina-284353.

[18] Sergey Lukashevsky, Polina Filippova. Resisting Authoritarianism: A European Strategy for Engaging and Supporting Russian Civil Society. Unpublished manuscript. Berlin: Radio Sakharov, 2025, 1-10.

[19] "Program Občanská Společnost," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/informace_pro_cizince/aktuality/program_obcanska_spolecnost.mobi.

[20] Alexey Ageev, "Russia and Czechia on the Outs. How Russia Turned from a Friend into a Terrorist for Prague in Just 10 Years and How It Affects Russian Nationals in the Country," Novaya Gazeta Europe, November 25, 2022, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/11/25/russia-and-czechia-on-the-outs-en.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Adam Tichý, "Válka mění pohled Čechů na cizince. Jsou vstřícnější k Ukrajincům," Seznam Zprávy, February 19, 2025. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-cesi-jsou-vstricnejsi-k-ukrajincum-i-k-vietnamcum-270335.

be mutually incompatible, making it harder for new democratically minded exiled Russians to stay and settle in the country.[23] Although the act has since been challenged in the country's Constitutional Court, the political effort to pass it is indicative of the general challenge Czechs have in distinguishing democratically minded Russians from those supporting the Putin regime. As the Putin regime further embraces its hybrid warfare efforts in the Central European region in anticipation of several upcoming elections, such existing social and political cleavages can only be expected to deepen, casting a rather dim outlook for increased support to Russian civil society.

4 Implications for the EU

24th February 2022, the day of Russia's full scale aggression against Ukraine, constitutes a decisive turning point in relations between the EU and Moscow concerning the issues of human rights, rule of law and democracy. On the one hand, the process of authoritarian backsliding of Russia accelerated dramatically after the invasion transforming it into a totalitarian state. On the other hand, the EU finally realised that projects such as "Wandel durch Handel" (Change through Trade) or Partnership for Modernisation are unsustainable in relations with authoritarian Russia due to the fundamental clash of values, the Kremlin imperialistic and militaristic foreign policy and its permanent massive interference in domestic politics of EU member states which aims to undermine their democracies. The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine provoked a massive exodus of NGO activists, opposition politicians, independent experts, journalists and scholars from Russia who settled mostly in the EU. This exodus represents another new key development in EU-Russian relations. The EU gained a status of key safe haven for the Russian civil society and anti-Putin opposition. These asylum seekers belong to a huge wave of Russian refugees and immigrants which considerably increased the size of the Russian community in the EU. Its presence in the EU constitutes an opportunity but at the same time a challenge. The Kremlin seeks to use this diaspora population as a conduit for its influence and "soft" power in the EU and it will continue to do so in the coming years. At the same time, Moscow's attempts to infiltrate the Russian diaspora has strengthened the perception of Russian exiles by some Europeans as the potential fifth column of Russia. Nevertheless, the Russian NGO activists and independent journalists and EU citizens of Russian background with credible democratic credentials should be treated by the EU rather as an asset than a liability, that is to say key influencers shaping opinions of the Russian society in the homeland.

Indeed, Russian civil society, though seriously weakened by the state repression, was not destroyed by Putin's dictatorship. It remains resilient, thanks to extending "internationalisation" (involving especially the EU) and decentralisation of networks, an increase of digital activism, and the establishment of new informal groups, and grass roots initiatives operating underground and in exile. Russian civil society, not being a political party, cannot serve as a formal political counterweight to the regime, however, still by its activities it plays a relevant role in countering totalitarian tendencies, increasing awareness of human rights violations and fighting against state propaganda which promotes militarism, nationalism and neo-imperial ideas. This role consists particularly in reaching out with independent information to the Russian society. Moreover, the Russian civil society operates with remarkable

[23] "Novela Lex Ukrajina 7 postoupila ve Sněmovně do 3. čtení. Rusové na základě poslaneckého návrhu získají české občanství, jen když se vzdají ruského," Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, https://mv.gov.cz/clanek/novela-lex-ukrajina-7-postoupila-ve-snemovne-do-3-cteni-rusove-na-zaklade-poslaneckeho-navrhu-ziskaji-ceske-obcanstvi-jen-kdyz-se-vzdaji-ruskeho.aspx.

economic efficiency in the media sphere. According to a report by the JX Fund,[24] Russian exiled media, with a total budget of slightly more than 40 million euros (mostly funds originating from EU institutions, member states and third sector), reach an audience of at least 35 million people in Russia.

Coming to terms with their own responsibility for the war in Ukraine and the crimes committed during it represents one of the most important challenges for the Russian society and at the same time, a precondition for any democratisation of the country in the future. Meanwhile, exiled Russian activists in the EU have engaged in dialogue initiatives with Ukrainian counterparts in order to promote just this reconciliation and accountability of the Russian state and society for the war which are crucial for the future democratisation of Russia. This cooperation with Ukrainian civil society is aiding in the documentation of war crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine, the search for missing persons, the return of kidnapped Ukrainian children, and the provision of legal assistance to Ukrainians abducted and forcibly deported to Russia.

The Russian civil society's performance is substantially better than the Russian opposition based in the EU which is deeply divided ideologically and institutionally, and often inconsistent in its attitudes towards key issues related to the war in Ukraine (for instance, the status of Crimea, the responsibility of society). Sometimes their key representatives express opinions which indicate that their understanding of democracy is rather ethnic, majoritarian and populist, rather than civic, human rights-oriented, minorities friendly or liberal.[25] Of course, these shortcomings occur also among the Russian civil society but to a much smaller extent than in the case of the Russian opposition.

The EU (both in terms of institutions and member states) has conducted an inconsistent policy towards Russian civil society since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, it provided Russian NGOs and independent media with some support (the traditional line of the EU to support democracy promotion) but this engagement has had its limits due to a "silent" assumption that Russia is too big to be influenced from abroad and does not possess sufficient democratic historical traditions.[26] The backsliding of post-Soviet Russia's democracy in the 1990s that from the very beginning was filled with serious flaws, was treated as a self-fulfilling prophecy allegedly confirming this assumption. Finally in 2004, at the beginning of Putin's second term, Russia transformed into an electoral autocracy and its authoritarian slide continued without interruption, making the external support of Russian civil society qualitatively much more difficult. The EU's mainstream reacted to the authoritarian slide with a "pragmatic" appeasement of the Russian "reality". The economic deals with Moscow and limited trust in the strength of Russian civil society overshadowed "problematic" issues such as massive violations of human rights in Russia. In consequence, the EU's mainstream maintained some support for the Russian civil society in order to ease its conscience but in line with the "silent" assumption avoided a decisive increase of assistance even though it was a badly needed response to Russia's deepening autocratisation. The European "business as usual" approach towards the Kremlin began to experience a serious crisis after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. However, only the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 served as a watershed in relations between the EU, Russia and the Russian civil society, though some old challenges have not disappeared.

[24] "Sustaining Independence: Current State of Russian Media in Exile," JX-Fund, December 5, 2023, https://jx-fund.org/newsroom/news/sustaining-independence-the-current-state-of-exiled-media-from-russia/.

[25] Franziska Davies, "Anti-Putin does not mean anti-imperial. Why the romanticisation of Russian dissidents is misleading," November 15, 2024, https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/anti-putin-does-not-mean-anti-imperial-why-the-romanticisation-of-russian-dissidents-is-misleading/.

[26] Pavel Havlicek, "Could the Russian Opposition Deliver Meaningful Change in the Kremlin?", Visegrad Insight, March 6, 2023, https://visegradinsight.eu/could-the-russian-opposition-deliver-meaningful-change-in-the-kremlin/.

On the one hand, in the post-2022 period against the backdrop of an exceptional geopolitical and ideological confrontation with Russia, the EU started to support the Russian civil society on an unprecedented scale in modern history due to the above mentioned exodus of Russian NGO activists, anti-Putin oppositionists and independent journalists. Particularly the EU third sector (NGOs, universities, think tanks, independent media, etc) intensified cooperation with Russian CSOs, experts, scholars and journalists which facilitated the integration of the exiled Russian third sector within the EU. The EU member states and their civil societies launched the process of creation of new positions and units in government institutions, universities, research centres, and NGOs that are focused on analysis of Russia and engagement with Russian-speaking communities in Europe. Various EU universities, think tanks and media started to include some Russian experts and activists in policy discussions on Russia and European security as legitimate representatives of Russian society. However, there is still huge room for improvement and untapped potential of the presence of Russian civil society in the EU. Its long-term sustainability requires a further increase of financing and enhancement of institutional networks by the establishment of new multilateral formats or developing the existing ones. This "tuning" is even more urgent than before, because the transformation of Russia into a totalitarian state is (mis)used by the growing number of sceptics within the EU as an argument that the support for Russian civil society is becoming a lost cause. A possible ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine which probably will be more favourable for Moscow than for Kyiv may stabilise the Putin regime and further strengthen voices in the EU critical of the support for the Russian civil society as useless and doomed to fail.

Organisations of the Russian civil society are deeply convinced that the EU should decisively increase its institutional and financial support for the Russian third sector in exile and in Russia because it "is not just a moral obligation but a strategic necessity for European security, complementing military deterrence, preserving democracy and achieving sustainable peace for Europe through the possible future." It will also "limit the Kremlin's capacity to influence the European public sphere."[27] However, today's EU support for the Russian civil society is facing considerable challenges related to global and European anti-democratic trends. Currently, the EU is witnessing the constant and considerable rise of popularity of far right parties contesting democratic values at home as well as their promotion abroad. Many of them express at least some understanding of Putin's Russia and sometimes even admiration of the Kremlin. Accordingly, democratic decline looms over EU member states, with especially Hungary turning into a hybrid regime – a mix of autocracy and democracy and the first one in the history of the EU, with for instance Poland and Slovakia following to a lesser degree. Unfortunately, more EU member states (such as Czechia) soon may follow, especially taking into consideration that several states in the EU remain democracies coping with serious flaws. Finally, Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, resulting from many years of democratic backsliding in the US, severely limits chances for cooperation between Washington and Brussels concerning assistance for the Russian civil society. Indeed, the nationalistic-populist Trump administration perceives Putin and other autocrats with a sort of fascination and openly rejects the promotion of civil society, human rights and democracy across the world as a "left-liberal" eccentricity.

In these difficult times, both state and non-state EU actors, believing in the necessity to maintain assistance to the Russian civil society, need to be more vocal than ever in advocating their position. At the same time, the EU needs to reinvent its relationship with the Russian civil society and simultaneously with the Russian political exiles and between them. First of all, the EU should assist Russian watchdogs in civic education ("back-to-basics"- human and minority rights, rule of

[27] Sergey Lukashevsky, Polina Filippova. Resisting Authoritarianism: A European Strategy for Engaging and Supporting Russian Civil Society. Unpublished manuscript. Berlin: Radio Sakharov, 2025, 1-10.

law, culture of dialogue, etc.) of Russian political dissidents that sometimes, as has already been mentioned, cope with a lack of understanding of the Western liberal democratic order and its work in practice. The national question of Russia and the future of its state system should become the leitmotif of any new awakening subsequent to the Putin regime. The recentralisation of the state (stripping the autonomy of the republics) and the rise of the Russian imperial chauvinism accompanied by assimilationist policies imposed on non-Russians were crucial elements of Russia's authoritarian slide under Putin. Despite the ethnic diversity of the Russian Federation (a huge share of people with non ethnic Russian backgrounds and immigrants in the entire population), the main Russian opposition political groups which found shelter in the EU are almost completely dominated by ethnic Russians. The main Russian political groups in exile maintain very limited contacts with organisations of diasporas of non-Russian nations of Russia living in the EU. Some of their leaders publicly subscribe to opinions concerning their non-Russian co-citizens that are a mix of ignorance, arrogance and various other negative stereotypes and prejudices. The Russian watchdogs rightly stress the fundamental importance of individual human rights but sometimes they do not pay enough attention to the fact that non-Russian citizens of Russia and immigrants are considerably overrepresented among the victims of violations of human rights.[28]

[28] For instance, according to OVD-Info „as of 2024, Crimea has recorded the highest number of politically motivated criminal and administrative cases, as well as the highest rate of politically motivated detentions per 100,000 people compared to any Russian region [...] Since 2014, we have documented 349 individuals prosecuted in politically motivated criminal cases in Crimea and Sevastopol. This number is higher only in Moscow, where the population is five times that of Crimea. Many of those targeted by Russian authorities are Crimean Tatars." Source: "11 Years of Occupation: Establishment of the Repressive Regime in Crimea," OVD-Info, April 4, 2025, https://ovd.info/en/11-years-occupation-crimea.

Conclusions

Overall, this paper illustrates that Russian civil society has become a new and important player in the geopolitical clash between the EU and the Kremlin. In times of increasing uncertainty about the future of EU Eastern policy, offering support to these groups presents itself as a relatively inexpensive means to reach its objectives. Accordingly, the paper argues that Europe has much to gain from intensifying this cooperation, offering an alternative path to erode support for the Putin regime from the inside and eventually allowing Russia to steer away from autocracy. Despite this, in the current state of affairs, this potential mostly remains untapped. As the Czech and Polish cases exemplify, this is often due to constraints in national politics, as well as major historical grievances. The situation is even more complicated on the EU level as a whole, combining the disunited Russia policies of all 27 member states, and depending on unanimous agreement for decisive action.

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