



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

THE NEW RUSSIAN DIASPORA

21 February 2023

Highlights

- The new Russian diaspora is fractured geographically, politically, economically, and aspirationally, although mostly middle class and professional in mind set. Few of them know how long they will be abroad and that makes a difference to personal and institutional strategies.
- The total number of the new Russian diaspora is very unclear: estimates range from 100,000 to one million people, spread across the Caucasus, Central Asia, Eastern and Western Europe.
- Unlike Belarusians abroad, who are united around an opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the Russian diaspora is divided into politically passive and active groups.
- There are multiple levels and lines of communication between the diaspora and Russians at home. There are over 1000 Russian journalists now abroad, and competing institutional channels.
- Many in the new diaspora will feel alienated not only from those at home but from the West. Whether or not the diaspora could play a role in ending the new cold war, as in the 20th century, there are many reasons why Western countries should want to support Russians in the diaspora.

Summary

The Contact Group convened in February to discuss the new Russian diaspora following the substantial emigration from Russia over the past twelve months. The group attempted to answer difficult questions about the diaspora, including its locations, numbers, and attitudes. Not all members of the diaspora can be seen as part of the opposition: some have moved for economic reasons or to avoid military mobilisation. It was argued that at least some of the Russian diaspora has an important role in the anti-war resistance, and many of its representatives are active in political and media-related

projects. However, unlike the Belarusian opposition, which is united around an opposition leader (Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya), the Russian opposition is divided. Among other aspects, the need to support the new Russian diaspora in the West was highlighted.

Defining Russian diaspora

A Russian expert defined the new Russian diaspora as including all Russian nationals who left the country after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Another drew the sociological and political distinctions between those who were abroad before the war, those who left because of the war, and those who fled because of mobilisation. The total number of the new diaspora is highly contested: different estimates suggest it could range from 100,000 to 1 million people. It is evident that as the threat from the mobilisation in Russia decreases, some people are beginning to return to Russia. There are also other reasons why some Russians return, such as visa and employment issues.

The speaker categorised the new Russian diaspora into two groups. One group consists of IT specialists and entrepreneurs who are not politically active, based predominantly in Georgia and Armenia. However, many of them donate to local and national initiatives. The other group is active politically and consists of Russian independent journalists and political activists, who now gather in Berlin, Vilnius, and other European capitals. This group is particularly active in launching media-related projects, supporting Ukrainian refugees and so on.

There is also a separate group of hardline anti-war activists, physically located in Georgia and Armenia, such as the anti-war communist movement, an understudied group, which is still represented in Russia.

It was noted that the abovementioned groups do not have a formal structure. They compete for survival. But according to the speaker, the key question is how long they will remain outside Russia. The answer largely depends on the result of the war in Ukraine. This will define the strategy for their work.

It was asked whether there is any organisation that is tracking trends in the new Russian diaspora. One relevant initiative would be the 'True Russia' project, a database of social, cultural and scientific initiatives of Russian-speaking communities around the world. However, there is no single organisation that can comprehensively track or analyse trends in the new Russian diaspora.

Lessons from Belarusian diaspora

According to a Belarusian expert, the Belarus diaspora is much better studied than the Russian one. Before the protests in Belarus in 2020, the Belarus diaspora was passive and 'nationally minded'. However, after 2020, the Belarus diaspora has quantitatively grown. For political and security reasons, the exact numbers of the current Belarus diaspora are uncertain.

Similar to the new Russian diaspora, the Belarusian diaspora mostly consists of journalists, IT specialists, private sector employees. But that is the only big similarity. Meanwhile, the key differences

are that most of the diaspora Belarusians are active politically, and tend to be based in Baltic states and Poland, usually retaining close family or professional ties to Belarus. They support independent media and political prisoners in Belarus. Most importantly, it was said that the Belarusian opposition , feels like one large community, united around Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, President of the Coordination Council of Belarus, a non-governmental body in exile created to facilitate a democratic transfer of power in Belarus. An expert argued that the Russian opposition abroad will need to build a similar sense of unity in order to avoid being underestimated by the West and Russian communities themselves. This would be no small task.

Compared to the Russian diaspora, it was said that Belarusians abroad have a strong intention to return to their home country once there is a democratic transition of power.

‘Layers’ of the Russian diaspora

Returning to the Russian diaspora, a speaker argued it can be divided into at least three layers. One is a political layer, based on the moral belief that Russians ‘do not want to live in a country that is waging a war with its neighbour’. If they stay at home, politically active Russians face constant repression – one example that was mentioned was a municipal councillor from Moscow who was sentenced to seven years in jail for calling the war a war.

Secondly, there is an “economic layer” of the diaspora. Many young Russian citizens have come to see no future at home after the start of the invasion – and therefore have been leaving the country in search of opportunities. ‘

The third layer is simply those that feel generally alienated. Even if they are not politically active Russians who believe the war is wrong feel that they are small minority in Russia, and are alienated and shamed by the majority.

The new Russian diaspora & sanctions against Russia

It was said that there is ‘another Russia’ being built by ‘new Russians’ (Russian opposition opinion leaders in exile). A Russian expert argued that the hot war in Ukraine will turn into a cold war at some point, and that it will end in the same way as the twentieth century’s Cold War – not thanks to NATO, but thanks to Russian opinion leaders. That is why it is of utmost importance to let Russians opposing the war enter the Western countries, they argued. Elements of the past experience, e.g. Nansen passports [developed for stateless refugees from the Soviet Union], could be applied to the current situation. The detrimental role of sanctions affecting Russians opposing the war in Ukraine was also noted. It was agreed that if the West would want to see different Russia in the future, it should not close its doors to ordinary Russians.

Feedback? Questions? Please reach out to Jane Kinninmont –
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