

## Russia's "Opposition at a Distance"

THE LIBERAL, ANTI-PUTIN, AND PRO-WESTERN CONSORTIA OUTSIDE RUSSIAN BORDERS

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Various Russian opposition groups operate outside of Russia articulating and promoting a normative type of political discourse grounded in values of freedom, democracy, and rule of law. These are entities established by Russian oppositional figures and organizations such as the Open Russia Foundation, Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom, and the Free Russia Forum. They form patchworks and networks of individual strategies and collective engagements that link critically and independently thinking people within Russia to each other and to Western policymakers.

My analysis of these organizations is based on studying their discourses and the confabs and policies that their international activities generate. I single out three major issues pertaining to their operations. First, I discuss how those outside of Russia who are against the Putin regime understand and cater to both general and extreme politics. Second, I dwell upon their strategies of fostering political change in Russia. Third, I review their views about the alternative, non-Kremlin-defined "Russian world" that forms the major element of their public diplomacy outreach. I find that they have supporters, particularly in the EU and among NATO member states, who became convinced especially after 2014, that the aspirations and actions stemming from the Kremlin are problematic for Russians at home and Western societies abroad. I also find that part of their program involves concrete governance reform proposals for Moscow as well as leadership plans for the post-Putin era.

### Radical Politics Beyond Russia

The mindset of the bulk of the "opposition at a distance" is conceptually grounded in a vision of Putin's Russia as a politically sterile space where politics is repressed and

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extinguished, and therefore political activities are impossible. In the [words](#) of former Menatap/Yukos businessman and current Israeli philanthropist Leonid Nevzlin:

“In Russia all political institutions are destroyed, including electoral and legal. What is needed is a total reestablishment of the state... All political activity within Russia nowadays exists only by permission from the top. Any political action can be stopped by the authorities.”

While Ivan Tyutrin, organizer of the Free Russia Forum, [says](#):

“There are only a few people in Russia who are capable of being effective in a future Russian democratic transition. Fresh cucumbers, when added to a jar with pickles, gradually become pickles themselves; people who are within Putin’s system for 10-15 years, inevitably end up perceiving the world in its terms.”

Conceptually, politics in this worldview is understood in the traditions of Western leftist political philosophy (in particular, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek) as a radical contestation of the existing premises upon which the whole system of power and governance is based. Garry Kasparov, head of the New York-based Human Rights Foundation, has stated that the functioning of the Free Russia Forum shows the difference between those who are doing real politics and those who play by Putin’s rules. He [says](#): “Ours is not a struggle for the right to paint benches in one color or another, but a practical fight for cutting off the resource base of Putin’s regime and its ultimate demise.”

If politics inside Russia is unfeasible, the locus of political activity moves out beyond the national jurisdiction to those external milieus where freedom of expression and assembly is inherent. Therefore, their strategic political goal is to help people escape *unfreedom* and settle in free societies as a precondition for their political existence. For this purpose, the Association of Russian Civil Society Development and Support for Emigrants was created in Latvia by local participants of the Free Russia Forum. Similarly, the Free Russia Houses located in Warsaw and Kyiv and set up by the Free Russia Foundation function as platforms for Russian émigré communities there. They explicitly seek to help Russians critical of Putin’s regime leave Russia, find new homes in other countries, and adapt to non-politically-repressive environments.

However, stimulation of out-migration from Russia is not universally shared by the community of escapees from the Kremlin. For instance, environmental activist Yevgeniya Chirikova, based on her experience in campaigns to protect the Khimki forest, runs an Internet project that is mostly aimed at helping Russians domestically publicize and replicate (from one region to another) their various civil society (protest) causes. In the same vein, the Boris Nemstov Fund for Freedom organized several conferences in Berlin that gave liberal- and independent-minded public figures from Russia access to European audiences, thereby securing their legitimacy in the eyes of European policy leaders.

Russian columnist Marat Gelman has [suggested](#) that the Free Russia Forum is a tool to facilitate the growth of anti-Putin sentiments within Russia, while Mark Feigin, a former Russian parliamentarian, former vice mayor of Samara, and current contributor to the Free Russia Forum, does not exclude that in the distant future the Forum, as a political organization, [might transform](#) into a party and become part of the new post-Putin political landscape in Russia.

### **Scenarios for Change**

Most of the Russian opposition leaders abroad are in agreement that a post-Putin Russia will require a long democratic transition whose foundations should be laid already now. In this context, the key issue at stake is how political changes are possible within the forcibly depoliticized and totalized community governed by an authoritarian elite that represses all traces and manifestations of politics as challenges to its power positions. According to this view, any substantial changes in the governing regime – the key *finalité politique* of any earnest opposition group – can be operationalized only through a drastic repoliticization of Russian public life.

For a significant part of the non-Russia-based opposition, the repoliticizing momentum should overwhelmingly come from overseas in the form of measures aimed at maintaining Russia's isolation in the world and the subsequent shrinkage of Putin's resource base. For that, measures of symbolic politics – such as the renaming of public spaces in Washington, Vilnius, and Kyiv after Boris Nemtsov to commemorate him as a symbol of freedom – might create fertile ground.

Russian opposition politician and Open Russia coordinator Vladimir Kara-Murza's widely [promoted](#) documentary about Nemtsov became a trigger for important policy discussions involving influential policymakers and political lobbyists in the West. Two aspects of such lobbying are of particular political salience. One is related to introducing and extending restrictive measures against individuals in Russia involved in illicit activities. With the personal involvement of Kara-Murza, the OSCE passed a resolution [calling for](#) international supervision of the Russian investigation of Nemtsov's murder. Kara-Murza was equally instrumental in lobbying for new legislation in the UK that placed visa restrictions and financial sanctions on individuals involved in human rights violations. Similar legislation is under discussion in Denmark, and the U.S. government has been investigating cases of Russian persons who are not on sanctions lists but who may be involved in unlawful activities.

As a part of this global campaign, Lithuania became the first EU country to ban the entrance of individuals accused of political murders in Russia, and Latvia introduced restrictions on visitations by corrupt officials and human rights violators. Another policy-relevant example was the campaign for preventing Russian General Alexandr

Prokopchuk from being elected as the head of Interpol—a successful movement [characterized](#) by Kasparov as “Putin’s major defeat.”

Russian opposition leaders abroad keep an eye on international issues that might become illustrative of the Kremlin’s malicious interference. Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his former partner Nevzlin created the Justice for Journalists ” foundation with a \$5 million budget for protecting investigative journalism. The initiative began by sponsoring a journalist investigation of the murder of three Russian reporters—Orkhan Dzhemal, Alexandr Rastorguev, and Kirill Radchenko—in the Central African Republic in 2018, a story [directly related](#) to the operation of the Wagner Group sponsored by controversial Russian insider Yevgeny Prigozhin.

There are other policy tools practiced by the opposition outside of Russia, including, for example, public shaming of individuals in Russia complicit in human rights violations (which certainly includes political murders), corruption, and criminal business activities. Shaming creates an operational background for more far-reaching projects such as the “Baza” database by the Free Russia Forum on public servants, judges, and security officers involved in oppressing the freedoms and rights of Russian citizens. Similarly, the “Dossier” project by Khodorkovsky’s Open Russia Foundation has the [aim](#) of tracking and reporting the illegal activities of people directly connected to Putin’s regime. The information from these resources is expected to be used for pursuing criminal cases in both Russian and international courts. Another project of the Free Russia Forum, “Putin’s List,” aggregates data on the closest members of Putin’s inner circle. Its categorizations can also serve as support in criminal investigations.

Foreign pressure, which very much includes that stemming from or led by Russians, might create preconditions for the much-awaited regime crack. In the eyes of many of the leading figures in the external opposition, this burst will hardly remain bloodless. In Tyutrin’s [prediction](#), the:

“...revolutionary scenario is one of the possible options, along with a global foreign policy defeat of the regime, or Putin’s step-down. At any rate, it is absolutely clear that electoral procedures give no chances for regime change in Russia at all.”

As for practically implementing projects that seek Russia’s long-run transformation, the opposition abroad counts mainly on the global Russian diaspora, which has been growing year-on-year for a while. According to [proekt.media](#) estimates, in 2017, 337,000 Russians left the country, which is triple the 2012 numbers. One [report](#) reported that in 2018 one third of Russians aged 18 to 24 sought to move away from Russia. For Tyutrin, the basic strategy of a segment of their activities [boils down](#) to the creation of:

“...a community of Russian professionals who under the condition of the fall of the regime might come back and implement the transition to democracy... We need a few thousand professionals from all over the world with a certain set of values.”

He added that the Steering Committee of the Free Russia Forum might be seen as a prototype for a new government in Russia.

### **A Different “Russian World”**

One of the arguments most frequently resonating in public pronouncements of the émigré opposition is their investments in and contribution to the maturing of an alternative “Russian world” across Europe, which would be the most convincing illustration of the European status/identity of Russia. As Kasparov [claimed](#),

“...riddance of the most awful model of Putin’s ‘Russian world’ is part of the struggle for a healthy humankind, since the virus mockingly named ‘Russian world’ prevents us from developing. The real ‘Russian world’ is the Russian intellectual contribution to literature, art, and science over the last two centuries.”

Due to largely conflictual Russian relations with the West, institutions like the Boris Nemtsov Fund or Free Russia Houses in Poland and Ukraine not only aggregate different community initiatives, but also play an important role in representing a [differently minded](#) Russia for whom Europe is a source of inspiration, and whereby Ukraine might serve as an example of political activism from below. Dissidents’ voices might also be important [contributions](#) to debunking the narratives by the so-called “Putin understanders” in Europe, translated, in particular, through European Kremlin-friendly media (for example, through the Russian service of *Deutsche Welle*).

The idea of another “Russian world” is articulated more in cultural than in political terms, and the gap between the two interpretations seems to be quite significant. A good case in point is Gelman’s slogan “Russia without shores” that popped up at the SlovoNovo festival he organized as a part of the Free Russia Forum in Montenegro (where he currently resides). Music critic Artyemy Troitsky [lambasted](#) the slogan as inappropriate due to its potentially highly negative connotations in many countries bordering on Russia. This controversy might have more than one reading: it might be interpreted as either Gelman’s intentional resignification of Putin’s infamous [reference](#) to “Russia having no borders” made some time ago, or as his insensitivity to the political associations this slogan might evoke among Russia’s direct neighbors with their painful experiences of being objects of Russia’s territorial expansion and disregard of extant borders. Apparently, the metaphor of a “shoreless Russia” is an attempt to adapt Russian cultural discourses and imageries to the global lexicon. However, one should not forget that the concept of the “Russian world” in its initial version was a similar attempt to inscribe the

traumatized Russian national identity into the trans-national and cross-border paradigm, yet it eventually transformed into an ostensibly imperial concept, with the corresponding reverberations in Ukraine.

Gelman's appeal could make sense only as a cosmopolitan and depoliticized philosophy of promoting "Russian world" as a purely cultural construct, since its political connotations might become troublesome. With all duly recognized liberal reverberations, the alternative "Russian world" emanating from anti-Putin activists can still share some traits and features with the Russian mainstream discourse. A good case in point would be Chirikova's open letter to the president of Estonia [complaining](#) about Estonia's language and citizenship policies. She had moved to Estonia with her family and found that the Estonian education system and other immigration/residence policies did not help ethnic Russians integrate enough into Estonian society—a type of narrative similar to the Kremlin's invectives.

## Conclusions

Two structural contexts might explain some of the peculiarities and paradoxes of the phenomenon of "opposition at a distance." The first controversy is grounded in the exteriorization of the political and its deployment beyond the boundaries of Russia, on the one hand, and an intention of radically transforming the Russian state, on the other. Against this backdrop, perspectives of transforming the symbolic capital of opposing the oppressive regime into political tools for change still remain a matter of debate. With its limited political resources within Russia, the anti-Putin "opposition at a distance" will most likely remain for Western countries and some of Russia's neighbors, including Ukraine, an embodiment of their belief in a "good" (comprehensible, cooperative, peaceful, and predictable) Russia that actually needs help and assistance. A second structural feature of the external opposition is its leftist, liberal character. Indeed, the deep-seated liberal values of all the protagonists in this analysis are quite reconcilable with implicit or explicit sympathies to the left-wing emancipatory agenda, from minority protections to revolutionary regime change, to be stimulated—perhaps with some historical analogies—from the outside.

The "opposition at a distance" is an interesting political phenomenon that agglomerates different policies and strategies. It fosters emigration from Russia to the West, assists people within Russia in a fight for their rights, and exceptionalizes Putin's regime as the main danger for liberal democracy in the world through its "normalization" of illiberal and dictatorial regimes. Exiled politicians trying to challenge Putin's regime from abroad undoubtedly possess strong intellectual and creative capital and good connections in many corridors of power. Their strongest supporters come from political forces in the EU and NATO member states that became convinced, particularly after 2014, that Putin's regime poses a security threat in Europe, Eurasia, and beyond.

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