

## Russian Civil Society Under Repression: A Strategic Case for EU Support

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Russian civil society has not disappeared under repression — it has transformed. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian state harshly dismantled the legal space for independent civic activity through sweeping legislation on “foreign agents,” “undesirable organizations,” censorship, and criminal liability for dissent. Open political action has become nearly impossible, but civic engagement persists in new, adaptive forms.

The public activities of various NGOs have largely been replaced by non-public network-based formats operating under strict anonymity. Many anti-war and pro-democracy initiatives operate in a “grey zone,” presenting themselves as non-political volunteer, cultural, environmental, or community projects to avoid repression while maintaining social cohesion and mutual support. After the harsh suppression of anti-war public protests, civic engagement has shifted toward support for political prisoners, crowdfunding for legal defence, letter-writing campaigns, and the development of technical tools to circumvent censorship. Digital activism has become especially important. Independent media operating from exile still reach millions inside Russia, demonstrating that the informational link between Russian society and democratic discourse remains intact.

Despite this resilience, the ecosystem is structurally weakening. Sanctions, banking restrictions, and the criminalization of foreign cooperation have cut off most funding channels. Cooperation with international partners may expose activists to prosecution, including for treason. Complex compliance requirements and legal risks further deter new initiatives from engaging with donors. Activists face chronic burnout, instability, and the absence of long-term support.

Existing initiatives that previously received international assistance now function as the main resource spaces for emerging civic actors. Their disappearance would significantly undermine the possibility of rebuilding an independent civil society in the future.

At the same time, a transnational ecosystem of Russian civil society has formed across Europe and neighboring regions. This includes independent media, advocacy organizations, expert groups, legal support networks, and resource hubs. Rather than a conventional diaspora, it often functions as an extension of civic activity inside Russia, providing information, coordination, and technical support.

Therefore, the Russian authorities are actively trying to sever these ties, criminalize any contact with foreign organizations, and control cross-border cooperation. To counter these efforts, it is necessary to support existing resources and create new ones for effective cross-border activities. To achieve this goal, it is critically important to maintain working contacts with independent anti-war activists, journalists, experts, and researchers who remain in Russia. By supporting such contacts, at least two important tasks are accomplished: first, the preservation of democratic-minded actors within Russia itself; second, access to reliable information about developments inside the country. These are essential conditions for future democratic transformation and political opening. Without these two components, the international community risks lacking both trusted partners and situational awareness at a decisive moment.

To achieve maximum effectiveness, it is important to establish a permanent working group to oversee, support, and develop cross-border activities. Such a working group should create a permanent safe space for continuous cross-border dialogue, information exchange, and the sharing of resistance experiences. It is important that this work be as dynamic as possible. The Russian political regime is constantly changing the rules of the game and finding new ways to suppress anti-war and pro-democracy activity. The working group, in turn, must also respond dynamically to these changes and counter them effectively.

Supporting Russian civil society is not merely a humanitarian gesture. It is a strategic investment in Europe's long-term security. The destruction of independent social institutions reinforces authoritarian consolidation in Russia; conversely, the preservation of civic networks keeps open the possibility of democratic transformation. These actors uphold democratic norms, support victims of repression, counter isolation and propaganda, and preserve professional expertise and institutional memory.

However, current EU assistance remains fragmented and constrained by regulatory frameworks not designed for engagement with civic actors operating under severe repression. Financial transfers are difficult or impossible, bureaucratic requirements can create legal risks for recipients, and mobility restrictions hinder cooperation between actors inside Russia and those abroad.

A more effective approach would prioritize enabling conditions rather than project-based interventions. This includes developing safe channels for financial support that do not expose beneficiaries to prosecution, simplifying compliance requirements for high-risk contexts, and allowing trusted intermediaries to act as legal recipients and distributors of funds. Supporting a secure communication infrastructure and opportunities for coordination between actors inside Russia and in exile is equally important.

Mobility policies also play a crucial role. Long-term multi-entry visas for at-risk activists, without requiring permanent relocation, would allow individuals to maintain their work while providing a safety mechanism in case of persecution. Emergency evacuation pathways and protection from politically motivated extradition requests would further reduce risks.

Ultimately, the European Union would benefit from adopting a coherent long-term strategy for engagement with Russian civil society. Such a strategy should include targeted exemptions within sanctions regimes for civic support activities and systematic consultation with organizations operating both inside Russia and in exile. Civil society should be regarded not as a temporary opposition phenomenon but as the principal ally of democratic capacity within Russian society.

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