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Russian migrant activists try to mobilise diasporas in Georgia and Germany

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Russian migrants in Georgia and Germany, a new ZOiS report examines a variety of initiatives in anti-war activism and related fields. Besides providing independent information to audiences in Russia and supporting regime opponents, activists try to build new socially and politically engaged diasporic communities.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and after the announcement of a partial mobilisation in September 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens left their home country. A vocal minority of them has longstanding experience of civic or political activism; others have been politicised in the context of the war; and parts of established Russian migrant communities have also engaged in humanitarian and anti-war activities. To find out how they (re-)organise themselves at a critical time, ZOiS researchers Tsypylma Darieva, Tatiana Golova and Daria Skibo have conducted 45 interviews with experts as well as politically and socially engaged migrants from Russia in Germany and Georgia – two prominent host countries for this migration. Their analysis shows that political and civic engagement is not directed solely at Russia, but targets diverse audiences, which sometimes creates tensions.

Civil society and the general population in Russia

Homeland-oriented engagement covers a wide spectrum of activities ranging from disseminating independent information to the Russian population, monetary support, and solidarity with civil society actors who remain in Russia. Activism also entails providing help with legal issues, psychological support, and practical tools to leave Russia, especially for those who face persecution.

The host society and its institutions

The relationship of Russian migrant activists with potential audiences in the two host societies differs significantly. Politically engaged Russian migrants in Georgia have little contact with Georgian society and its civil society organisations. They are conscious that their presence in Georgia can be associated with the Russian state and imperial attitudes. As Tsypylma Darieva explains, 'The current Georgian debate on visa restrictions for Russian citizens and a generally cautious attitude towards newcomers may limit the scope of migrant engagement in the future and confirm migrants' doubts about their long-term prospects in Georgia.' Compared to their counterparts in Georgia, Russian migrant initiatives in Germany engage more with their target audiences, and their interactions with local civil society and political actors are more diverse. At the same time, the periodic pro-war activities of some other Russian-speaking migrants in Germany is a source of conflict.

Russian migrants and their networks abroad

By supporting newcomers and building migrant communities, activists aim to position themselves more visibly against the Kremlin regime. Overcoming political isolation and encouraging political engagement has proven difficult. The idea that political and civic activities should be continued after leaving Russia from a place of (relative) safety is expressed in several interviews. 'Activist migrants often see a political obligation to act and a moral obligation to express solidarity with activists and dissenters who have stayed in Russia,' Tatiana Golova observes.

Ukrainians

Providing humanitarian relief for Ukrainians has become an important field of engagement among Russian migrants. Here, direct interaction with Ukrainians remains possible to some degree, while cooperation in the area of politics is far more problematic. Tatiana Golova describes the dilemma faced by Russian activists here: ‘On the one hand, it is important for anti-war activists to position themselves as people who are from Russia, who are against the current regime. On the other hand, this can be a barrier to cooperation with some Ukrainian diaspora initiatives which, in view of the brutal war and Russia’s wider imperial tradition, refuse to deal with actors who position themselves as Russians.’

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