ANALYSIS

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Living under Transnational Authoritarianism:

Why Anti-War Russians Continue to Fear the Regime Abroad

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered the largest wave of emigration from Russia in the last 25 years. Up to 1 million Russians left in 2022-2023, driven by fears of escalating repression, military mobilization, and other political pressures.[1] For many, it was not an emigration by choice but rather an emergency, "shock" exodus.[2] New Russian diasporic communities have formed worldwide, building diverse relationships with host societies, undergoing the challenges of adaptation, and organizing new networks of anti-war activism abroad.[3] Our study focuses on the darker side of this emigration: the lingering fear of the Russian state. This fear prompted many Russians to leave, but it continues to affect their everyday lives and political engagement abroad, even at a seemingly safe distance. In our study, we aim to better understand why this fear of the repressive state is so pervasive.

Authoritarian regimes often use fear as a tool of political control over citizens. The Russian authorities started to implement the so-called **"politics of fear"** back in 2012 – intimidating and selectively persecuting opposition-minded citizens.[4] After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, repression intensified dramatically: opposition groups were dismantled, anti-war politicians arrested or killed, independent media suppressed, and new repressive laws enacted. The Russian regime has finally transformed from an "informational autocracy" based on sporadic repression, deception of citizens, and sophisticated propaganda into a "dictatorship of fear" with brutal mechanisms of repression and near-total censorship.[5] As we show further on, the authoritarian grip is so strong that even leaving Russia does not end the fear of the state – the regime has learnt to operate on the transnational scene.

In political science, the efforts by autocratic states to extend control over populations abroad and suppress dissent beyond national borders are often summarized under the notion of **transnational authoritarianism**.[6] While not new, such practices have intensified in recent decades, fuelled by the rise of digital technologies that enable novel forms of surveillance and intimidation.[7] Although public attention often gravitates toward the most dramatic manifestations of transnational authoritarianism – cross-border assassinations, kidnappings, and poisonings – it actually operates through a much broader repertoire of coercive measures.

In the post-2022 Russian context, media coverage has highlighted conspicuous instances of criminal prosecution in absentia for anti-war statements,[8] threats of property confiscation for anti-war migrants,[9] and suspected poisonings of prominent activists and journalists abroad.[10] At the same time, the Russian state has increasingly relied on more covert tactics, including harassment, surveillance, and bureaucratic pressure on anti-war migrants.[11] These less visible measures are no less effective. Understanding their force, however, requires shifting the focus from top-down mechanisms of transnational control to the experiences of people living under it.

Although still scarce, existing research demonstrates how transnational authoritarianism transforms migrants'

1 There are different estimates of the scale of Russian emigration after 2022. The International Centre for Migration Policy Development mentions a number of over 584,000 persons, both Russian and longer-term foreign residents, leaving the country in January-October 2022 – ICMPD (2023). Migration Outlook Eastern Europe and Central Asia. A study by The Bell estimates emigration at 649,956 people – The Bell (2023). How Many Russians Left the Country in 2022 and Did Not Return. The project 'Esli byt' toch-nym' counts 800,000 – Shirmanova, I (2023). "800 tysiach rossiian mogli pokinut' stranu v 2022 godu." Esli byt' toch-nym. The OutRush project in several reports estimates up to 1 million Russians leaving the country.

2 Rapoport, E. (2024). Shock Wave of Russian Emigration and Self-Reflection of Its Representatives. Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research, 33-45.

3 There are several research projects examining the new wave of Russian emigration. It is worth mentioning the Emerging Russian Diasporas and Anti-war Movements (ERDAM) project, supported by the German Foundation for Peace Research, the project "Crossing borders, building walls" supported by the Polish Academy of Sciences, as well as special issues of the journals Sociodigger (2023) and Laboratorium (2023).

4 Gel'man, V. (2015). The politics of fear: how the Russian regime confronts its opponents. Russian Politics & Law, 53(5-6), 6-26.

5 Treisman, D., & Guriev, S. (2023). Spin dictators: The changing face of tyranny in the 21st century.

6 Tsourapas, G. (2021). Global autocracies: Strategies of transnational repression, legitimation, and co-optation in world politics. International Studies Review, 23(3), 616-644.

7 Dukalskis, A., Furstenberg, S., Gorokhovskaia, Y., Heathershaw, J., Lemon, E., & Schenkkan, N. (2022). Transnational repression: data advances, comparisons, and challenges. Political Research Exchange, 4(1), 2104651.

8 Keane, D. (2025, September 16). Russia sentences Pussy Riot members in absentia to jail for anti-war messages. The Independent. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pussy-riot-russia-prison-ukraine-war-putin-b2828059.html.

9 Troianovski, A. (2024, February 1). Russia's New Threats to Exiles: Seized Assets and Forced Returns. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/01/world/europe/russia-antiwar-exiles.html.

10 No longer "Novichok": what is known about the new wave of poisonings of journalists and activists in Europe (2023, August 15) [In Russian]. The Insider. https://theins.ru/politika/264260.

11 Research Center «Collective Action Brussels Think Tank» (2025). Transnational Repression by the Russian Federation: Threats, Tendencies, Solutions (Interim Report). https://reports.ovd.info/en/transnational-repression-russian-federation-threats-tendencies-solutions.

lives. [12,13] For instance, recent findings suggest that even the anticipation of repression significantly undermines the well-being of Russians abroad, keeping them emotionally and politically bound to their homeland. In the study by Sergeeva and Kamalov,[14] only 9% of 2,567 participants reported feeling free from such fear, underscoring the pervasiveness of Russian transnational reach. Building on these insights, we examine how the fear of the state is triggered among recent Russian emigrants and what it reveals about the mechanisms of transnational authoritarianism.

About the Study

OOur project grew out of a large-scale study of post-2022 Russian emigration initiated by Indiana University.[15] As part of this effort, in 2023, we interviewed 82 Russians who had relocated to Georgia (25), Armenia (15), Serbia (16), Kazakhstan (14), Turkey (8), and Kyrgyzstan (4) – destinations popular at the time due to visa-free entry and simplified residence regime. We discussed a wide range of issues, yet one theme ran through nearly every conversation like a common thread: fear of the Russian state, persisting among our interlocutors even abroad.

Most of them had left shortly after February 24, 2022, or following the September 21 mobilization. By the time of our interviews, some had already changed several countries, briefly returned to Russia before leaving again, or were planning their next relocation. It was clear that for them migration was not a single move, but a continuous process, often without a clear destination.

Like many others who left,[16] our interviewees – 43 women and 39 men – were predominantly young, educated urban professionals in IT, education, research, journalism, art, and creative industries. Not all, however, managed to keep their jobs or find new ones in emigration – some were between positions or getting by with temporary work. Many left with partners, supporting each other emotionally and financially; about a quarter had children.

Although all our interlocutors opposed the Russian invasion, their involvement in politics prior to emigration ranged from little interest to being oppositional activists persecuted for political reasons. Most, however, fell in between – attending demonstrations, following independent media, and donating to human rights groups. Abroad, their political participation transformed, influenced in no small part by their fear of the Russian state.

In what follows, we discuss two emotional experiences of Russian migrants shaped by transnational authoritarianism – fears and anxieties with regard to the state – and examine the mechanisms that drive each of them.

Fearing the Authoritarian Reach

In many migration contexts, ties to home provide resources and support. Under transnational authoritarianism, however, these ties become tainted by the politics of fear and turn into sources of vulnerability. Our interviewees described many ways they still feel bound to the Russian state even after leaving – through family, interactions with Russian institutions abroad, international relations between their new country of stay and the Russian Federation, and even digital space. Below, we highlight how these ties make migrants feel within the reach of their authoritarian homeland and fuel their transnational fear of the state.

Relatives left behind are among the strongest and most intimate ties to Russia for our interviewees. Many Russians continue to care deeply for their families from abroad. In their narratives, family members are frequently feared for and imagined as potential targets of proxy repression. Expressed in many interviews, this fear is sometimes hypothetical and sometimes – rooted in past experiences of repression:

> *I fear that they might somehow go after our relatives who stayed in Russia, because all of us still have parents there. And they have already been to interrogations; they've been summoned. So, I am afraid of persecution against our relatives.*
>
> *(male, Georgia)*

For many Russian migrants, caring for relatives left behind also implies being ready to visit them, occasionally or in urgent cases – if their parents fall ill. Our interlocutors often expressed a fear of losing this access to their loved ones – a constant concern, leading some to self-censor and refrain from political activity abroad:

> *I am not ready to do anything that would cut my ties with Russia, that would prevent me from going there, because my mother is there.*
>
> *(female, Serbia)*

Another source of fear for anti-war migrants is the Russian institutional presence abroad. Embassies, consulates, cul-

12 Bozzini, D. (2015). The fines and the spies: Fears of state surveillance in Eritrea and in the diaspora. Social Analysis, 59(4), 32-49.

13 Moss, D. M. (2016). Transnational repression, diaspora mobilization, and the case of the Arab Spring. Social Problems, 63(4), 480-498.

14 Sergeeva, I., & Kamalov, E. (2025). Invisible costs of exiting autocracy: subjective well-being and emotional burnout among Russian wartime migrants. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 1-27.

15 Smyth, R., Zavadskaya, R., Semenov, A., Kamalov, E., Kostenko., V., Sergeeva, I., Turchenko, M. (2024). Building Commons in the post-2022 Russian Diaspora. [Data set]. Indiana University. Release January 2026.

16 Kamalov, E., Sergeeva, I., Kostenko, V., & Zavadskaya, M. (2022, March). The great exodus: Portrait of new migrants from Russia [In Russian]. OutRush. Available at: https://outrush.io/report_march_2022.

tural centres, and other **Russian extra-national institutions** act as constant reminders of the state's proximity. Russian migrants often describe encounters with these institutions as intimidating because of their uncertain outcomes, whereby routine procedures – such as applying for a new international passport – could expose them to deportation or other forms of repression.

Beyond that, many Russian migrants value the sense of anonymity they enjoy abroad – the feeling that the Russian state does not know where they are, which makes them feel safe. In this context, visiting a Russian consulate or embassy can be seen as risky, because it threatens to compromise this anonymity:

> *I had this somewhat irrational fear when I wanted to apply for an international passport in Belgrade. I kept putting it off for a long time because I felt like I was invisible to the Russian state here in Serbia. [...] But when I go and officially report where I live, it felt like coming out, like, 'Hello, I live here'.*
>
> *(female, Serbia)*

Broader **geopolitical dynamics** further contribute to the fear of the Russian state among our interlocutors. Most had left hastily, choosing destinations based on the cheapest available flights, visa requirements, or friends' recommendations. Only after arrival did they begin to evaluate how "close" their country of stay was to Russia in terms of international relations – following the news, monitoring extradition agreements, and keeping track of the local political situation. Anti-war migrants fear that if the two countries cooperate too closely, their new country might assist Russia in its repressive practices, such as persecutions or deportations.

> *Turkey is not a safe country. First, the regime here is also authoritarian. Second, Turkey has an extradition agreement [with Russia]. There haven't been any prominent cases so far, no one has actually been extradited, but it is all spelled out in law and remains possible. [...] So, in Turkey, people feel more worried – myself included – than in some other countries.*
>
> *(male, Turkey)*

Our findings show that these perceptions of geopolitical proximity are dynamic. For instance, Georgia – initially seen as being outside of Russia's sphere of influence due to the past war and the continued Russian occupation of 20% of its territory – soon came to be regarded as increasingly aligned with the Russian state. This alignment is evident in the resumption of direct flights between the two countries, the adoption of Russian-style repressive laws in Georgia, and cases of Russian political activists being denied entry. In contrast, our interlocutors described feeling increasingly safer in neighbouring Armenia due to its growing distance from Russia in the aftermath of Azerbaijan's 2023 annexation of Artsakh and the subsequent political shifts.

Finally, a distinct trigger of political fear among Russian migrants lies in the **digital space**, where online activities – posts, donations, and casual interactions – are seen as potentially traceable by the Russian state. Unsurprisingly, Russian platforms and services have become the main source of this threat, with people fearing that their anti-war views and deeds could expose them to repression. As a result, some of our interlocutors came to rationalize the internet as divided into "online jurisdictions" – Russian and foreign ones – with varying levels of risk.

Additionally, many described the internet as a space that "remembers everything," expressing their fear about leaving digital footprints that might later be used against them by the authoritarian state.

Russian migrants have dealt with their digital fears differently. Some have deleted or privatized accounts and stopped donating to politically sensitive causes, while others have practiced selective self-censorship rooted in the idea of digital jurisdictions – abandoning Russian platforms but continuing to voice opinions on Western networks. Similarly, donations were not halted but redirected through foreign cards or cryptocurrency instead of Russian banking systems:

> *After February 24, I realized that I couldn't post anything on VKontakte anymore. [...] But I still express my civic position on Instagram, for example. On other social networks that aren't under Russian jurisdiction.*
>
> *(male, Armenia)*

Overall, the fears expressed by our interlocutors reveal that for many political migrants, leaving Russia did not mean leaving their fear of the state behind. Persistent familial, institutional, geopolitical, and digital ties keep the Russian state close, making migrants feel watched and forcing them to constantly manage risks and vulnerabilities in their everyday lives.

At first glance, it may seem that the transnational fear of the state could be simply avoided by adjusting one's actions: emigrating together with loved ones, acquiring a second citizenship, choosing safer geopolitical contexts, or limiting activity on social media. However, it is not enough. Our findings suggest that fear is only one of the mechanisms through which transnational authoritarianism exerts its affective pressure. In what follows, we discuss another one.

Politics of Anxiety

People may fear a particular threat – a specific object or event – or they may experience a rather amorphous, hard-to-define fear of the unknown. Many of our informants described exactly this condition as "irrational fears" of the Russian state. Researchers often term this as anxiety when the threat is not clearly defined and connected to an uncertain but dangerous future. Following Sara Ahmed's seminal work "The Cultural Politics of Emotion" we suggest considering anxiety separately from fear, and elaborate on three main triggers of this anxious condition among Russian emigrants.[17]

First, while the Russian regime still imposes clear repressive laws and targets specific groups, today it also often relies on vagueness and unpredictability. New laws appear suddenly, existing ones are applied inconsistently, and law enforcement has almost unlimited opportunities to target anyone. Based on how our informants described their emotions, we suggest calling this mechanism of control **the "politics of anxiety"**.

Anti-war emigrants appear to be profoundly affected by these politics. Many describe their emotional response as "irrational" or "subconscious"– difficult to link to any particular law, event, or object, yet constantly present. During our interviews, we often heard phrases such as: "you can expect anything from the state", "random", or "there are no rules."

> *It is so irrational because, well, like, there is no probability that I could go to jail for the comment, but [the fear] is absolutely subconscious.*
>
> *(female, Serbia)*

These anxieties do not affect people as directly as the fears we discussed before – through visible triggers reminding one of the state's reach. Instead, they create a constant emotional distress as there is no clear threat one can run from. As a result, Russian migrants become afraid of violating not only existing but also hypothetical future laws, which promotes self-censorship and discourages political participation abroad.

The second trigger of anxiety is **informational uncertainty**, especially during political turbulence such as the outbreak of war, the announcement of mobilization, or the Wagner Group military rebellion, when the news flow from the media and messages from friends are especially overwhelming and chaotic. Constantly emerging rumours about future repressive policies also conveyed a sense of anxiety to people: news about the potential cessation of issuing foreign passports abroad, following the model of Belarus, electronic recruitment orders, or talks about Russian security agents abroad.

In describing their anxieties, our interlocutors refer to "some" news or "someone else's story", often talking about threats in an uncertain way without directly addressing them:

> *Well, when I was told that I was in some kind of database, I mean, it stressed me out quite a lot.*
>
> *(male, Kazakhstan)*

Anthropologist Allen Feldman calls this informational uncertainty the "regime of rumour" which transforms social connections and generates mistrust and suspicion.[18] Following his work, we want to emphasize the central role of information dissemination in the production of anxiety among Russian migrants. The regime of rumour, we suggest, is an integral part of the politics of anxiety, which produces this condition of intense emotional distress.

Thirdly, the anxiety of most Russian emigrants is deepened by **the general precarity of emigration**, as when things go wrong in a host country, many face only one option: returning home, closer to the source of fear. Hence, the difficulties in securing and maintaining the legal right to stay are the most common sources of anxiety. Other challenges of emigration include building new social networks, coping with everyday problems and navigating bureaucracy in an unfamiliar system.

Many Russians' fears and anxieties about the state reduced their anti-war activism. In addition, the precarious legal status of many of our informants made it impossible to participate fully in local politics, as they feared deportation. For example, they hesitated to join anti-governmental protests in Georgia, Serbia, or Armenia, or to risk conflict with local authorities. Overall, our data shows that Russians' anxieties abroad stem not only from the deliberate Russian repressive efforts but are also reinforced by the precarious conditions they face in host countries.

Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates that even abroad, exiled Russians remain connected to their homeland on interpersonal, institutional, geopolitical, and digital levels. Yet instead of providing resources and support, these connections are often infected with the fear of the state and turn into sources of vulnerability. Moreover, we argue that along

17 Ahmed, S. (2004). The cultural politics of emotion. Edinburgh University Press.

18 Feldman, A. (1995). Ethnographic states of emergency. Fieldwork under fire: Contemporary studies of violence and survival, 224-253.

with the politics of fear, the Russian regime also relies on the politics of anxiety as another instrument of transnational control – unsettling people with uncertainty and the anticipation of threats that may never materialise. Our interlocutors frequently referred to such fears and anxieties as the drivers of their self-censorship and withdrawal from political activity abroad.

And still, despite these pressures, Russian emigrants do openly oppose Putin's regime and build anti-war networks[19] that share oppositional goals.[20] The intensified pressure on Russian oppositional organizations, such as the criminalization of their activities, often even fosters solidarity among anti-war Russians, thereby facilitating collective action in supportive host countries and through secure mechanisms of donations.[21] To strengthen this resistance, we need to recognize the different ways in which transnational authoritarianism operates – including the affective ones.

We hope that this study will help illuminate the challenges Russian exiles face, but also the points where they can be supported to foster continued political participation abroad. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, "turning away from the object of fear also involves turning towards the object of love".[22] The task of resisting transnational authoritarianism is thus to cultivate spaces of care, solidarity, and support in exile – strong enough to counterbalance fear and anxiety.

19 Fabio Lavati (2025, March 27). The activist's toolkit How Russian dissidents in exile are building support networks that transcend borders. Novaya Gazeta Europe.

20 Domańska, M. (2023). Russian civil society actors in exile: an underestimated agent of change. SWP Berlin.

21 Kamalov, E., & Sergeeva, I. (2024). Unintended Consequences of Transnational Repressions: How Exile Organizations Gain Support in Response to Criminalization by Autocratic Homelands.

22 Ahmed, S. (2004). The cultural politics of emotion. Edinburgh University Press, p. 68.

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Why do many anti-war Russians continue to live in fear of their state even after leaving the country? How does the Russian regime use fear and anxiety as tools of political control beyond its borders? And is there any way to truly escape the authoritarian reach when it becomes transnational? In this article, based on over 80 in-depth interviews with recent Russian emigrants, we explore the affective dimensions of exile in the post-2022 Russian diaspora and the machinery of the Russian transnational authoritarianism.

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