Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 16247
11 September 2025

Russian democratic forces

Report[1]
Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
Rapporteur: Mr Eerik-Niiles KROSS, Estonia, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

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1. Reference to committee: Doc.16054, Reference 4835 of 4 October 2024

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. On 16 March 2022, the Russian Federation was expelled from membership of the Council of Europe, as a result of its war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated into a large-scale invasion. In its Opinion 300 (2022) adopted on the previous day, while calling on the Committee of Ministers to request the Russian Federation to immediately withdraw from the Council of Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly added that "the Council of Europe should envisage initiatives to be able to continue to support and engage with human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media and independent civil society in the Russian Federation". Subsequently, in its Resolution 2433 (2022) "Consequences of the Russian Federation's continued aggression against Ukraine: role and response of the Council of Europe", the Assembly resolved "to intensify its engagement with Belarusian and Russian civil society, human rights defenders, independent journalists, academia and democratic forces respecting the values and principles of the Organisation, including the territorial integrity of sovereign member States". Similarly, meeting in Reykjavik in May 2023, Council of Europe Heads of State and Government agreed to "find ways to strengthen co-operation with Russian and Belarusian human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media and independent civil society".

2. On the strength of these texts, and as the outcome of a long-standing process of dialogue and engagement, the Assembly decided to set up a representative delegation of Belarusian democratic forces. As far as Russian democratic forces are concerned, some of them were invited to participate in hearings organised by Assembly committees. Furthermore, an informal platform for dialogue bringing together members of the Assembly holding specific functions and members of Russian democratic forces was set up, to discuss topics of common concern. Amongst them were the role of Russian democratic forces in bringing the Russian Federation's aggression to an end, ways to strengthen sanctions against the Russian regime, ensure that Russians can have access to free and independent media, and ways to counter Russian disinformation, and the situation of Russian democratic forces in exile. The situation of Russian political prisoners was also addressed. Over this period, the Assembly condemned the murder of Alexei Navalny and repeatedly demanded the release of Vladimir Kara-Murza, winner of the 2022 Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, and called for sanctions against the Russian officials involved in his illegal detention.

3. The Assembly reiterates its strong condemnation of the systematic repression of Russians opposing the regime and attempts to silence them, inside and outside the Russian Federation. It honours the commitment of those Russian human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media, and independent civil society who oppose the Russian regime and support Ukraine, like the Anti-War Committee and the Free Russia Foundation, sometimes at the cost of their lives and freedom. The Assembly notes that unlike Belarusian democratic forces, Russian democratic forces do not have a single, unified political structure. The Assembly encourages Russian groups and initiatives in exile to join forces with the aim of countering disinformation by the Russian regime, advocating for a democratic change in the Russian Federation, exposing all international crimes committed by Russian actors in the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, and supporting Ukrainians in their struggle against the aggressor State, in a variety of ways.

4. The Assembly recalls that, in 2024, a General Rapporteur on Russian democratic forces was appointed, with the mandate to promote the coherence of the Assembly's action aimed at building dialogue with Russian democratic forces who respect the values and principles of the Council of Europe, including the territorial integrity of sovereign member States. Also as a result of the work of the General Rapporteur, the Assembly believes that time has come for ad hoc and informal initiatives to give way to a more structured engagement with Russian democratic forces. This would help strengthen the capacity of Russian democratic forces to bring about a sustainable democratic change in Russia and help achieve a lasting and just peace in Ukraine, alongside ensuring the responsibility of Russian actors for the international crimes committed, while providing to the Assembly an insight into developments in the Russian Federation and amongst Russian democratic forces.

5. In light of these considerations, the Assembly decides to establish a Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces ("the Platform"), as a forum for a two-way engagement between the Assembly and Russian democratic forces to address issues of common concern through exchanges in the context of the Platform, to be chaired by the President of the Assembly or a member of the Assembly delegated by the President. Participation in the Platform would also enable Russian democratic forces to attend meetings of the Assembly's committees, sub-committees and networks during part-sessions, and to take the floor when authorised by the respective Chairpersons.

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2. Draft resolution adopted by the committee on 10 September 2025.

6. The list of the "Participants of the Russian Democratic Forces" in the Platform shall be approved by the Bureau of the Assembly upon the proposal made by the President of the Assembly and shall be valid for the ordinary session. The specific modalities for the implementation of this resolution, in particular the composition and functioning of the Platform and the participation of Russian democratic forces therein, shall be approved by the Bureau on the basis of a memorandum to be prepared by the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly together with the General Rapporteur on the Russian democratic forces. One year after the establishment of the Platform, the Bureau shall review the implementation of this resolution and consider possible amendments or other measures to be taken. The Bureau's decisions require ratification by the Assembly through its progress report.

7. The "Participants of the Russian Democratic Forces" should be persons of the highest moral standing who are currently in exile and who meet the following requirements, to be verified by the Bureau of the Assembly at the time of the approval of the list, or at any other time following a decision to that effect by the Bureau:

7.1. be Russian political leaders, civil society representatives, human rights defenders, independent journalists, scholars and/or other members of the Russian resistance to Vladimir Putin's regime;

7.2. share the values of the Council of Europe and be willing to promote them;

7.3. unconditionally recognise and respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol City, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions;

7.4. have a record of publicly opposing the Putin's regime and work towards a regime change with the goal of establishing of a democratic political system in the Russian Federation that adheres to international law, and principles of peaceful and good-neighbourly relations;

7.5. respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and other States;

7.6. have not advocated non-democratic policies in the Russian Federation or neo-imperialistic policies towards the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, or other sovereign States; or have denounced previous statements in a credible and convincing manner; have not justified international crimes committed by Russian actors either abroad or within the Russian Federation, nor encouraged others to commit violations of international law;

7.7. clearly denounce all international crimes committed by Russian actors and support international mechanisms for accountability and justice;

7.8. have signed the Berlin Declaration of the Russian Democratic Forces and continue to uphold the principles it sets forth.

8. The question of the rights of the peoples of Russia and the preparedness to engage into a meaningful dialogue with the representatives of Russia's national and ethnic groups will play a critical role in shaping a democratic political system that adheres to international law and the principles of peaceful and good-neighbourly relations. The issue of overcoming the colonial legacy of the Russian Federation would have to be addressed, including the concerns and interests of indigenous and colonised peoples residing in the territories of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. The Assembly is committed to facilitating a relevant format of dialogue between its members, the participants of the Platform and the representatives of Russian national groups.

9. The Assembly refers particularly to its Resolution 2605 (2025) and reiterates that, in violation of international humanitarian law, the Russian Federation continues the colonisation of the occupied territories by encouraging hundreds of thousands of its own citizens to settle there, including through federal programmes. These initiatives form part of the aggressor State's policy aimed at the forcible alteration of the demographic composition of the population, thereby significantly complicating the processes of de-occupation and the restoration of peace. Such actions constitute a violation of the Russian Federation's international obligations and amount to crimes under international law, and should entail appropriate legal consequences.

10. The Assembly welcomes other parliamentary initiatives supporting Russian democratic forces and encourages synergies between its Platform and other initiatives, in particular those undertaken by the European Parliament.

11. The Assembly calls on the Council of Europe member States to:

11.1. provide administrative, legal and logistical support to facilitate the functioning of the Platform, including assistance with travel, visas, residence issues and digital engagement;

11.2. support the functioning of the Platform, notably through voluntary contributions, by developing training programmes and workshops aimed at enhancing the organisational and political capacity of the Russian democratic forces;

11.3. strengthen the visibility and impact of the Platform and encourage partnerships with other international organisations and democratic institutions.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Eerik-Niiles Kross, rapporteur[3]

1. Introduction

1. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of various democratic movements in the Russian Federation. Boris Yeltsin's presidency saw initial political liberalisation, but the challenges of economic transition of the late 1990s weakened public support for democratic reforms.

2. Since 2000, Vladimir Putin's government has systematically dismantled democratic opposition through election manipulation, restrictions on civil society, and political repression. Opposition figures have been arrested, exiled, or assassinated.

3. The gradual dismantling of democratic institutions was mirrored in increasingly aggressive, revanchist and expansionist foreign policy, culminating in the Russian Federation's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

4. As a consequence of Russia's armed attack and full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Committee of Ministers, on 16 March 2022, taking into account the unanimous Opinion of the Parliamentary Assembly, decided to expel the Russian Federation from the Council of Europe.

5. While terminating all co-operation with Russian official institutions, the Assembly, in its Opinion 300 (2022) "Consequences of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine", underlined that "the Council of Europe should envisage initiatives to be able to continue to support and engage with human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media and independent civil society in the Russian Federation".

6. In line with this decision, the Assembly decided first to set up an informal platform for dialogue bringing together members of the Assembly with members of Russian democratic forces, and then to create the function of General Rapporteur on Russian democratic forces, with the mandate of promoting the coherence of the Assembly's action aimed at building dialogue with them.

7. The dialogue with Russian democratic forces should amplify their outreach and visibility; strengthen their capacity to bring about a regime change in Russia; and help to achieve a lasting and just peace in Ukraine, while providing to the Assembly an insight into developments in the Russian Federation and amongst Russian democratic forces.

2. Scope of the report

8. This report defines which Russian individuals and groups can be considered as "democratic forces". Furthermore, it aims at outlining the approach towards a more a structured engagement with Russian democratic forces, through the establishment of a Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces ("the Platform") of the Assembly, and ensuring that the Council of Europe remains a key partner in supporting regime change and post-authoritarian processes towards democracy in Russia.

9. The report also presents other supporting initiatives. In that respect, collaboration and synergies will have to be encouraged, in particular with the European Parliament.

10. The report contains recommendations for Council of Europe member States and their national assemblies to adopt measures in support of Russian democratic forces and to strengthen dialogue with them at the national level.

3. The supporting work of the Parliamentary Assembly

11. The Assembly has repeatedly shown its support to Russian democratic forces and civil society in the last years. Based on the above-mentioned Opinion 300 (2022), in its Resolution 2433 (2022) "Consequences of the Russian Federation's continued aggression against Ukraine: role and response of the Council of Europe" the Assembly resolved "to intensify its engagement with Belarusian and Russian civil society, human rights defenders, independent journalists, academia and democratic forces respecting the values and principles of the Organisation, including the territorial integrity of sovereign member States".

3. The explanatory memorandum is drawn up under the responsibility of the rapporteur.

12. Subsequently, in its Resolution 2473 (2022) "Strengthening the role of the Council of Europe as a cornerstone of the European political architecture", the Assembly called on Council of Europe member States to "consider new initiatives to support Russian human rights defenders, democratic forces, free media and independent civil society that respect the values and principles of the Council of Europe, including the territorial integrity of sovereign member States".

13. Following up on these resolutions, a process of reflection started in Paris on 20 March 2023, when the Presidential Committee of the Assembly held a meeting with members of Russian democratic forces.[4]

14. In addition, during the June 2023 part-session, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy and the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons held a joint hearing on "Issues confronting Russians in exile" with the participation of members of Russian democratic forces and civil society.

15. During the October 2023 part-session, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights and the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons held another joint hearing, chaired by the President of the Assembly, on "Dialogue with the members of the Russian democratic forces sharing Council of Europe values".[5]

16. Concluding this meeting, the President of the Assembly announced its intention to set up an informal platform for dialogue with members of Russian democratic forces. During the same part-session, the decision was endorsed by the Presidential Committee and taken note of by the Bureau of the Assembly.[6]

17. In line with this decision, in April 2024 the Assembly decided, with Resolution 2540 (2024) "Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Vladimir Putin's totalitarian regime and its war on democracy", to create a function of a general rapporteur on Russian democratic forces.

18. I was appointed to this new role on 26 June 2024, with the mandate of promoting "the coherence of the Assembly's action aimed at building dialogue with Russian democratic forces who share the Council of Europe's values and recognise the territorial integrity of Ukraine in its internationally recognised border, supporting their efforts to bring about a democratic change in Russia".[7]

19. Furthermore, as provided in the Information document AS/Pol/Inf (2024) 12, the general rapporteurship seeks to establish and pursue a "structured and regular dialogue" between the Assembly and the Russian democratic forces.

20. In June 2024, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held a joint meeting with the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, on "Examining the legitimacy and legality of the ad hominem term-limit waiver for the incumbent President of the Russian Federation".

21. Under the aegis of the informal platform, the President of the Assembly convened a round table in Berlin, on 12 June 2024, to discuss the effectiveness of sanctions against the Russian Federation, and ways to counter the official propaganda and support free media in Russia, with a view to ensuring that the Russian public can have access to unbiased information on the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine.

22. A second round table was held in Paris, on 9 September 2024, to discuss the content of the Roadmap I drafted in my capacity of General Rapporteur.

23. On 9-10 November 2024, I participated in the 4th Conference of the Russian Anti-War Committee, held in Berlin. In addition, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held hearings in December 2024 (with Mr Garry Kasparov) and in March 2025 (with Mr Dmitry Gudkov and Mr Dmitry Nekrasov), exploring different matters of relevance.

24. On 11 December 2024, I was also appointed rapporteur on "Russian democratic forces" by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy. This report was prepared under this capacity.

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4. www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-leadership-meets-representatives-of-russian-democratic-forces.
5. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9222/pace-to-hold-a-public-hearing-with-representatives-of-russian-democratic-opposition-forces.
6. www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/pace-to-create-a-contact-platform-for-dialogue-with-representatives-of-russian-democratic-opposition-forces.
7. General Rapporteur on Russian democratic forces: Terms of reference.

25. Finally, it is worth to mention that in addition to the texts indicated above, the Assembly has adopted other relevant resolutions, which this report also takes into account. These are:

– Resolution 2436 (2022) and Recommendation 2231 (2022) "The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine: ensuring accountability for serious violations of international humanitarian law and other international crimes";

– Resolution 2448 (2022) "Humanitarian consequences and internal and external displacement in connection with the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine";

– Resolution 2463 (2022) "Further escalation in the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine";

– Resolution 2482 (2023) "Legal and human rights aspects of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine";

– Resolution 2509 (2023) "Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights";

– Resolution 2519 (2023) "Examining the legitimacy and legality of the ad hominem term-limit waiver for the incumbent President of the Russian Federation";

– Resolution 2541 (2024) "The arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the systematic persecution of anti-war protesters in the Russian Federation and Belarus";

– Resolution 2542 (2024) "Sanctions against persons on the "Kara-Murza list"".

4. Other supporting initiatives: the European Parliament

26. The European Parliament (EP) has also long advocated for a free and democratic Russia, expressing concerns for the human rights violations and the state of democracy in the country.[8] In particular, the EP has a dedicated Delegation to the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (D-RU), which focuses on the Russian democratic forces, and has appointed a main rapporteur on Russia (Ms Sandra Kalniete, Latvia, EPP), as well as different shadow rapporteurs.

27. In September 2021, it adopted a recommendation on the direction of EU-Russia political relations requiring the EU to "ensure that any further engagement with the Kremlin will depend on the latter's promise to end its domestic aggression against its own people... to repeal or amend all laws that are incompatible with international standards, such as the ones on 'foreign agents' and so-called extremist or undesirable organisations, to stop the repression of civil society organisations, in particular the ones fighting corruption and defending human rights in Russia, and to end its external aggression against neighbouring countries".[9]

28. Furthermore, in its Resolution adopted in October 2022 on Russia's escalation of its war of aggression against Ukraine, the EP called on the EU and its member States to "start reflecting on how to engage with Russia in the future and how to assist it with a successful transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic country that renounces revisionist and imperialistic policies", considering "that a first step would be for the EU institutions to engage with Russian democratic leaders and civil society and mobilise support for their agenda for a democratic Russia", and supporting "the creation of a democracy hub for Russia, hosted by the European Parliament".[10]

29. The EP repeatedly condemned Vladimir Kara-Murza's and Alexei Navalny's detentions, along with those of other political prisoners, and expressed solidarity with people in Russia protesting against the war of aggression against Ukraine. The EP adopted a resolution on the murder of Alexei Navalny and the need for EU action in support of political prisoners and oppressed civil society in Russia.[11]

30. Thus, the EP has also engaged directly in a dialogue with members of Russian democratic forces and civil society. Under the patronage of the EP, on 5-6 June 2023, its major political groups[12] organised a conference titled "The day after – Brussels dialogue – Roundtable of EU and Democratic Russia Representatives". While calls have been made to institutionalise the Brussels dialogue, this has not yet happened.

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8. www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/177/russia.
9. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021IP0383.
10. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022IP0353.
11. www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0118_EN.html.
12. The European People's Party (Christian Democrats), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, the Renew Europe and the Greens/European Free Alliance.

31. On the other hand, the EP has also engaged members of Russian democratic forces in its meetings, such as the one held by the D-RU in association with the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) in February 2024 on "Why Russia's 2024 presidential 'election' matters?",[13] or the meeting organised in February 2025 by the D-RU in association with the Delegation to the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee on "Russia's economic capacity to wage war under sanctions – what's next for EU policies?".

5. Russian democratic forces

5.1. Russian democratic forces inside and outside of the Russian Federation

32. From the outset, Vladimir Putin's rule has been characterised by attempts to silence critical voices. The magnitude of threats, intimidation, and repression has progressively escalated over the span of over two decades under his governance.

33. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, any criticism of the regime has been cracked down with the most brutal means. Draconian punishments, such as extended prison sentences for calling a war a war, make it extremely difficult for the democratic opposition in Russia to organise itself in a visible manner.

34. In this regard, there are notable parallels with the repressive regime in Belarus (see also Resolution 2530 (2024) "A democratic future for Belarus"). In contrast to Belarus, however, the Russian democratic forces in exile lack one prominent leading figure as well as a unified, representative political structure. Instead, they consist of a large number of individuals and organisations that work together in a selective way but do not systematically pursue a common agenda.

35. Many of these structures were founded to support Russian citizens who have left their country, helping them to organise their everyday lives in exile. Others, however, are more focused on a political agenda centred on Russia and are explicitly committed to the goal of working towards a post-Putin democratic Russia.

36. Among the latter, key actors and organisations are:

– Mikhail Khodorkovsky / Russian Action Committee; Russian Anti-War Committee: A former political prisoner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky established numerous organisations, media outlets and projects, and contributed to the foundation of initiatives like the "Russian Action Committee" and the "Russian Anti-War Committee",[14] with the aim of unifying opposition forces. Together with opposition figures such as Garry Kasparov and Dmitry Gudkov, he is one of the most prominent critics of Putin's regime and supporters of Ukraine. Their Berlin Declaration of 30 April 2023,[15] in which the Putin regime was labelled "illegitimate and criminal" for its aggression against Ukraine, was signed by more than 50 members of the Russian democratic forces. Despite internal differences of opinion on the best approach to achieving change, the Committee plays a crucial role in unifying and coordinating the Russian democratic forces in exile, developing projects to support Ukraine politically and financially, providing support to Russian activists facing persecution for opposing the war, advocating for increased sanctions against Putin's regime and the future reintegration of Russia into European political structures.

– Garry Kasparov / Free Russia Forum: Garry Kasparov, the former world chess champion, became a vocal critic of Putin's regime, co-founding the Free Russia Forum[16] to consolidate opposition efforts. In broader terms, it serves as a platform uniting Russians committed to democracy, freedom, and human rights. In light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Forum has actively supported Ukraine through advocacy for military support, co-organising anti-war conferences and supporting Russian volunteers in Ukraine.

– Natalia Arno, Vladimir Kara-Murza / Free Russia Foundation: The US-based Free Russia Foundation (FRF)[17] operates as an advocacy organisation, engaging in practical policy making and legislative lobbying. In this capacity, the FRF maintains a database detailing Russian individuals and entities sanctioned by the United States government. Natalia Arno, the FRF's president, joined the International

13. www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/d-ru-meeting-in-association-with-deg-14-/product-details/20240213DPU38421.
14. https://antiwarcommittee.info/en/committee/.
15. https://antiwarcommittee.info/en/berlin-declaration-en/.
16. www.forumfreerussia.org/en/.
17. www.4freerussia.org/.

Republican Institute in 2004,[18] leading its Russia programs until she was forced into exile in 2012. Vladimir Kara-Murza, a journalist and opposition politician, is one of the FRF's Vice-Presidents. In April 2022, he was arrested in Moscow for his public denunciation of the invasion of Ukraine, sentenced to 25 years for "high treason", and kept in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison in Siberia. In October 2022, the Assembly honoured him with the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize, acknowledging his steadfast commitment to democratic values and human rights in Russia. He was released in August 2024 as part of the largest East-West prisoners' exchange since the Cold War. Vladimir Milov, an economist and vocal critic of Putin's regime, is also a Vice-President of the FRF. The FRF is the patron for the "Free Russia House" in Kyiv, which declares itself an alternative cultural and political embassy for Russian civil society in Ukraine.[19]

– Alexei Navalny / Anti-Corruption Foundation: The Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK)[20] became known for its anti-corruption investigations and built a Russia-wide network of political activists mobilising against the supremacy of the ruling United Russia party. With Navalny's death in a penal colony on 16 February 2024, the FBK lost its prominent leader. It continues its work, partly under the leadership of Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya. However, the FBK also attracted attention through actions that triggered criticism and controversy within the Russian opposition. Notably, the FBK abstained from signing the Berlin Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces. The attempts made so far to engage them in the Assembly's initiatives mentioned above have not been successful and as of now they do not qualify as Russian Democratic Forces as defined by the Assembly.

– Representatives of peoples of Russia: Being stripped of the possibility to stand up for their rights in Russia, national minorities were forced to carry out their activities from abroad. Their involvement encompasses advocacy for self-determination and decolonisation; critique of Russian imperialism; promotion of cultural and political rights. There are several independence movements and numerous autonomy movements.

37. Other exiled opposition activists, journalists and academics have also formed networks, for instance supporting independent journalism; contributing to the documentation of war crimes; or providing information to Ukraine or international organisations about Ukrainian prisoners of war and detained civilians in support of their exchange and in order to hold Russia accountable for the unlawful aggression.

5.2. Criteria

38. For the purposes of this report, and for the establishment of a more structured engagement with the Assembly, a clear distinction must be made between genuine democratic actors, and those who are opposing the current Russian regime without however a clear and public commitment to the Council of Europe values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

39. The Assembly should consider as Russian democratic forces those persons of the highest moral standing who are currently in exile and who meet the following requirements:

– be Russian political leaders, civil society representatives, human rights defenders, independent journalists, scholars and/or other members of the Russian resistance to the Putin regime;

– share the values of the Council of Europe and be willing to promote them;

– respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine;

– have a record of publicly opposing Putin's regime and work towards a regime change with the goal of the establishing of a democratic political system in the Russian Federation;

– have signed the Berlin Declaration of the Russian Democratic Forces and continue to uphold the principles it sets forth.

40. Key indicators to be considered should be the position they have taken regarding the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, and concrete initiatives in support of Ukraine. An indispensable condition is a clear, public condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, e.g. through the subscription of the Berlin Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces of 30 April 2023.[21]

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18. A US-based non-profit organisation and think-tank.
19. www.4freerussia.org/press-center/the-free-russia-house-is-now-opened-in-kyiv/.
20. https://acf.international/.
21. https://antiwarcommittee.info/en/berlin-declaration-en/.

41. Among Russian democratic forces, priority should be given to those individuals and groups who have actively worked to expose war crimes, counter Kremlin propaganda, provide direct support to Ukrainian refugees (including humanitarian aid and legal assistance), organise protests, mobilise international pressure against the Russian regime, and fight Putin's regime on the battlefield.

42. Thus, the Russian democratic forces' support for Ukraine underscores their commitment to European democratic values and highlights their role as a legitimate alternative to Putin's regime. By aligning with Ukraine, Russian democratic forces strengthen their case for international recognition.

5.3. Possible initiatives in support of Russian democratic forces

43. The Russian democratic forces, both inside and outside the country, operate under challenging conditions, facing repression and extremely limited political freedoms. They are heterogeneous and consist of different groups with different strategies, goals and needs.

44. Support from governments and international organisations should therefore be targeted, and focused on political, legal and administrative measures that help creating a framework within which the opposition can structure its activities, strengthen its co-operation and articulate its position with greater unity.

45. Financial support is important, especially in light of the US government's shift in priorities. On the other hand, the democratic opposition has been successful in securing financial resources from Russians both inside and outside Russia and who oppose Putin's regime. These sources should remain the financial basis for the Russian democratic forces' activities. In addition, European governments could consider how to provide appropriate incentives to facilitate these sources of funding.

46. Possible support measures for members of Russian democratic forces in exile and political structures abroad include:

– visibility and acknowledgment: governments and organisations should create platforms which can raise awareness of the role and work of Russian democratic forces;

– institutional support: this entails the establishment of exile structures with support from governments, for example through administrative and legal support to help Russians with a clear anti-war stance in emergency situations (such as the risk of extradition to Russia). The support should also include the development of a legal basis for replacing expired Russian documents for those who cannot approach Russian consular missions (e. g. persons on the Russian "terrorist list" and/or considered as "foreign agents"; or in case Russia replicates the Belarusian decree on the impossibility of renewal of passports abroad), for example through a "democracy passport" or special visa arrangements;

– protection from repression by Russian authorities: actions range from granting asylum to the provision of protection from Russian secret service persecution and improved security measures. The Council of Europe should also support access to digital security tools and encrypted communication platforms to ensure that Russian democratic forces – especially those operating inside Russia – can safely co-ordinate activities and avoid surveillance or persecution. Training in digital hygiene and information on warfare resilience should be integrated into support programmes;

– financial and organisational support: in particular, by providing help in setting up media platforms, think tanks and organisational structures abroad, especially those aimed at countering transnational repression, disinformation, discreditation and infiltration campaigns of Putin's regime, and at providing accurate and factual information to Russian citizens living in Russia.

47. For what concerns democratic forces members and organisations remaining in Russia, including structures (informally) operating in Russia, as well as individuals such as independent journalists and activists, their needs are particularly sensitive as they are subject to direct repression. Possible support measures include:

– protection under international law: this includes putting continuous international pressure on Russia to respect human rights, including targeted sanctions against authorities and individuals that repress opposition activists;

– visibility and diplomatic protection: European governments should recognise arbitrarily detained persons as political prisoners and demand their release. Their diplomatic missions to Russia should observe court proceedings whenever possible;

– promotion of legal support: this can be done by providing funding and legal support to human rights lawyers in Russia, and when it is applicable, helping them with access to international courts such as the European Court of Human Rights;

– protection from repression: in particular, support should be provided to those needing to flee the Russian Federation at short notice, by requesting host countries – to which Russians have visa-free access – to accept them as refugees, eventually on a temporary basis, and facilitating onward travel to EU countries or the US, if so desired.

6. The Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces of the Assembly

48. The primary objective of the dialogue with the Russian democratic forces is to facilitate the participation of a group composed of members of the Russian democratic forces in Assembly activities.

49. This could be achieved by establishing a Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces ("the Platform"), to be chaired by the President of the Assembly or a member of the Assembly delegated by the President.

50. Firstly, the Platform would grant a forum for engagement between members of the Assembly and members of the Russian democratic forces, to address issues of common concern, through exchanges in the context of the Platform itself.

51. In addition, participation in the Platform would enable Russian democratic forces to attend meetings of the Assembly's committees, sub-committees and networks during part-sessions, and to take the floor when authorised by the respective Chairpersons.

52. The participation of a group of members of Russian democratic forces in some of the Assembly's activities would be beneficial for both the Russian democratic forces and the Assembly.

53. For the Russian democratic forces, it would provide an international platform to advocate for democratic change, counter the Kremlin's narrative, and provide input for European policies on Russia; it would also provide them access to the national assemblies of member States of the Council of Europe.

54. For the Assembly, welcoming a group of members of Russian democratic forces would reflect the Council of Europe's support to democratic values, human rights and rule of law, against authoritarian and hostile stances. This step would strengthen international efforts to hold the Russian regime accountable, amplify democratic voices from within Russia, uniting forces to support Ukraine, and enhance Europe's role in supporting the country's turn to a democratic path.

6.1. "Participants of the Russian Democratic Forces" in the Platform

55. In light of the aforementioned context, preliminary discussions were held with members of Russian democratic forces; for example, the Russian Anti-War Committee, the Free Russia Foundation, journalists and academics.

56. Once the present report is approved, the Secretary General of the Assembly will prepare a memorandum on the modalities for the functioning of the Platform, including the participation of members of Russian democratic forces. The memorandum will subsequently have to be approved by the Bureau of the Assembly.

57. The members of the Russian democratic forces shall first prepare a proposed list of "Participants of the Russian Democratic Forces" in the Platform.

58. The President of the Assembly, after consulting the General Rapporteur on Russian democratic forces on the proposed list submitted by the Russian democratic forces, will make a proposal to the Bureau of the Assembly for approval.

59. The respect of the requirements for Russian democratic forces described above should be a *conditio sine qua non* for being included in the list, and considered a priority. This means that not all Russian opposition forces will be represented in the Platform, as sharing the Council of Europe's values and showing a public stance against the war of aggression against Ukraine, as done by those who signed the Berlin Declaration, will be a non-negotiable condition. The Bureau of the Assembly will verify the respect of the requirements at the time of the approval of the list, or at any other time following its decision to that effect.

60. The Bureau's decision will be subject to ratification by the Assembly through its progress report. The approved list of Participants in the Platform shall be valid for the ordinary session.

61. One year after the establishment of the Platform, the Bureau shall review its functioning and consider possible amendments or other measures to be taken.

6.2. Other activities

62. Other different formats of participation can be proposed, including regular hearings, consultations, working groups, advocacy campaigns, capacity building, side events and ad hoc events within the Assembly and Council of Europe's activities.

63. The Platform and the related activities should be co-ordinated with relevant Assembly rapporteurs working on Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and on other relevant matters, including sanctions' policy. Cross-collaboration will be encouraged to align efforts in strengthening democratic forces in and from Russia, ensuring that findings and recommendations are integrated into broader Assembly initiatives.

64. The question of rights of Russia's national minorities and preparedness to engage into a meaningful dialogue with the representatives of Russia's national and ethnic groups will play a critical role in shaping post-Putin Russia. The Platform could also address this issue.

65. Reports from various Assembly committees will be used to monitor and assess the effectiveness of the Platform and its impact on policy recommendations. It is recommended that the Platform adopts measurable performance indicators – such as number of participating organisations, visibility in European institutions, policy proposals submitted, and feedback from Ukrainian civil society – so that the initiative's progress and credibility can be objectively assessed. Joint initiatives with other international parliamentary bodies and human rights organisations will be explored to strengthen synergies, advocacy efforts and increase political pressure on the Russian government.

66. In particular, the activities organised within the framework of the Platform should take into account similar initiatives also undertaken by the European Parliament. Considering that the interlocutors will be the same in most cases, this will allow for a better use of the resources of both institutions, ensuring at the same time a broader outreach and a larger visibility.

67. Synergies with the European Parliament should also be sought at the level of the respective rapporteurs and general rapporteurs, in terms of exchanging relevant information, documents and contacts, organising joint meetings with members of the Russian democratic forces, and organising joint public activities and ad hoc hearings.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

68. The aim of this report is to ensure that the Assembly and the Council of Europe remain a key partner in supporting democratic change in Russia.

69. A number of actions can be implemented in order to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of the support provided to the Russian democratic forces, ultimately contributing to the long-term goal of democratisation in Russia.

70. First, the Assembly should establish a Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces.

71. There are still questions to be addressed however, such as issues related to legal protection of and administrative support to members of the Russian democratic forces in exile in Council of Europe member States (e.g. refugee / residence status; naturalisation issues).

72. The Council of Europe should also explore stronger mechanisms to hold the Russian regime accountable for the suppression of democratic forces, including political repression, electoral fraud and human rights violations.

73. At the same time, the member States of the Council of Europe should be encouraged to facilitate the functioning of the Platform, to amplify the voices of Russian democratic forces' leaders in exile, ensuring their perspectives are heard at the European level.

74. This should include the provision of administrative, legal and logistical support, including assistance with travel, visas, residence issues and digital engagement, as well as financial contributions and capacity building activities. This should also entail the organisation of advocacy campaigns that focus on countering

Russian State propaganda and informing European citizens about the democratic aspirations of the Russian democratic forces. This support will be particularly important to ensure that the voices of the Russian democratic forces are heard.

75. The Council of Europe should also facilitate networking and capacity building. Such formats could include training programs, workshops, and strategic planning sessions for Russian opposition members to enhance their political and organisational capacities and encourage their collaboration with other democratic movements in exile.

76. Ultimately, the dialogue should outline a pathway to future engagement with a democratic Russia: the instatement of a group of members of Russian democratic forces in the work of the Assembly is not an end in itself. It should be part of an array of instruments to counter Russian aggression against Ukraine. This should prepare for the scenario in which, once the regime change in Russia takes place, democratic forces will be ready to engage in governance and institution building that reflect the values of the Council of Europe, and the Assembly will also be ready to do its part in supporting them.