



Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Faculty of International and Political Studies  
Institute of European Studies

**Margarita Klygina**

student ID number: 1180251

Field of study: European Studies

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The Case of Poland.

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Prof. dr. hab. Paweł Kubicki (Jagiellonian University),  
Prof. David Smith (University of Glasgow)

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Klygina', with a stylized, cursive script.

## Acknowledgements

*This thesis is dedicated to my mother Svetlana, who always stands by my side no matter what and where I do. I wouldn't be here without you (both literally and figuratively speaking). Thank you for sharing my values and being strong and brave in Russia every day.*

*Я люблю тебя, мама.*

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## Abstract

The dissertation is based on interviews with Russian anti-war activists, residing in Poland and extensive desk research, and aimed at enhancing comprehension of Russian diaspora involvement in anti-war activism in Poland. The thesis attempted to examine whether Russian activism in exile possesses the potential to serve as catalyst for positive change in the context of ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine and addressed the ways of cooperation between Russian civil society groups with other actors in the Polish and transnational context, and their perceptions of their role in laying the grounds for creating democracy for future Russia. Theoretically, the dissertation stems from social movements scholarship, civil resistance research, social psychology of contention and diaspora studies.

**Key words:** Russian anti-war movement, Russian civil society, activism, civil society in Poland, transnational diaspora activism, civil resistance

## Streszczenie

Praca magisterska oparta jest na wywiadach z rosyjskimi działaczami antywojennymi, zamieszkującymi w Polsce oraz szeroko zakrojonych badaniach open-source, a także ma na celu pogłębienie zrozumienia zaangażowania diaspory Rosyjskiej w antywojenny aktywizm w Polsce. W pracy podjęto próbę zbadania, czy rosyjski aktywizm na uchodźstwie ma potencjał, by służyć jako katalizator pozytywnych zmian w kontekście trwającej wojny na Ukrainie. Praca dotyczy sposobów współpracy rosyjskich grup społeczeństwa obywatelskiego z innymi aktorami w kontekście polskim i ponadnarodowym oraz ich postrzegania ich roli w tworzeniu podstaw do tworzenia demokracji dla przyszłej Rosji. Teoretycznie praca wywodzi się ze stypendium ruchów społecznych, badań oporu obywatelskiego, społecznej psychologii protestu i studiów diaspory.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosyjski ruch antywojenny, rosyjskie społeczeństwo obywatelskie, aktywizm, społeczeństwo obywatelskie w Polsce, aktywizm diaspory transnarodowej, opór obywatelski



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine has caused the largest movement of refugees in the European Union since World War II (OECD, 2022). Since the beginning of its acute phase in February 2022, civilians from Ukraine have been fleeing their homes, seeking safety, and at the same time Russians have been doing so too in fear of repressions and prosecution, forced conscription, and as a protest against the Kremlin's actions. While the exodus of Russians is significantly less than the flow of those fleeing the actual war zone, it nevertheless causes various socio-political challenges for all the receiving countries, including those in the European Union.

Even though Poland officially closed its borders for Russians in September 2022, people under the threat of repressions are still allowed to come to the country as political migrants opposing the war and try to settle. Alongside political migrants, there has been a substantial increase in economic migration to Poland in recent years, with Russian citizens among those relocating for job opportunities. Furthermore, Poland shares a border with the Russian exclave Kaliningrad region, where Schengen visas to locals were issued using the simplified procedure for years (before COVID and the war). Some residents of the Kaliningrad region have Polish ancestry and the right to relocate to Poland, contributing to the influx of Russian citizens. Moreover, according to the Polish law, Russians are officially recognized as one of nine national minorities in the country (*Ustawa o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym*, 2005). These factors have led to the growth of Russian community in Poland and, later, the establishment of Russian civil society groups and organizations opposing the war in Ukraine.

Theory-wise, my dissertation lies at the intersection of social movements scholarship, civil resistance research and diaspora studies, more precisely literature on transnational diasporic civic and political participation, since it is drawn from the experience of Russian activists residing in Poland involved in collective action related to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and perceived as antiwar, whether it is humanitarian, resistance-related, lobbying and advocacy, or other types of activities. Thus, theoretical concepts and debates for the thesis are taken from those fields.

This thesis, based on interviews with activists and desk research, aims to enhance comprehension of the involvement of the Russian diaspora in grassroots activism in Poland, focusing on civic initiatives' activities and role in the anti-war movement. The thesis delves into the question of whether Russian activism in exile possesses the potential to serve as catalyst for change in a transnational context, and addresses the ways of cooperation between Russian civil society groups, as well as with other actors in the Polish context, their positioning in the geography of Russian activism beyond Poland, and their perceptions of their role in laying the grounds for creating democracy in future Russia.

To uncover these questions, the research involved conducting 8 in-depth interviews (plus analysing a secondary-data interview from one more respondent) with key workers and activists from Russian CSOs and initiatives in Poland (representing 7 groups, see Annex) as well as extensive desk research and work with open sources.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Positioning the study: social movements and civil resistance

#### Defining social movement, activism, and collective action

In social sciences, anti-war movements, like all other types of movements, are studied in civil society scholarship, more precisely under social movement and civil resistance scholarship traditions.

A social movement can be generally described as collective and organized effort and activities performed by a group of individuals or a group of organizations to bring about social, political, or cultural change. It is important to note that social movements theory is a diverse interdisciplinary field and different scholars emphasize various aspects while defining social movements. As Tilly (2004) pointed out, no one owns this term and researchers are free to use it as they want.

Gillan (2019), while discussing the issue of the definition and its conceptualization in numerous theoretical traditions, highlights *'movement-as-demand'*, *'movement-as-actor'* and *'movement-as-network'* approaches. Sociologists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, who developed *'resource mobilization theory'*, defined a movement as a "set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward

distribution of a society” (1977, pp. 1217-1218), focusing on the importance of claims made. Charles Tilly (2004) uses the same approach, seeing a movement as a complex of three elements, these being collective campaigns presenting demands to target authorities, a variety of “claim-making performances”, and repeated public expressions of the cause’s importance, scale, and commitment to it. As can be seen, the approach prioritizing demands might be too broad and, hence, controversial, despite MaCarthy and Zald calling it ‘inclusive’ (1977, p. 1218). This way of looking at movements may include people who share opinions and desire for changes but choose not to act on them. Moreover, demands in a movement may transform and multiply over time, leading to conflicts within. Lastly, the existence of certain demands does not necessarily lead to any collective action.

Speaking of collective action, it is impossible not to mention Melucci and his vision. He emphasises the significance of collective identity and collective action, as well as the role of information in modern society for social movements. He conceptualizes activism as a collaborative process of collective identity construction, through which individuals or groups determine the significance of their actions and identify the scope of possibilities and limitations for those actions (Melucci, 1995). Collective identity plays a major role in his understanding of collective action and is embedded in the definition: “Collective action as a set of social practices (i) involving simultaneously a number of individuals or groups, (ii) exhibiting similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space, (iii) implying a social field of relationships and (iv) the capacity of the people involved of making sense of what they are doing” (Melucci, 1996, p.20).

Coming back to the three approaches to conceptualizing social movements, mentioned earlier, the ‘movement-as-actor’ approach is more robust than the ‘movement-as-demand’ one, since it takes an actor-centric stance. Touraine (1985) claims that a movement is characterized by the relationship between conflicting actors and the implications of their conflict. According to him, the three components making a movement are “the definition of the identity (i) of the actor, the definition of the opponent (o), and the stakes, that is, the cultural totality (t) which defines the field of conflict” (Touraine, 1985, p. 760). Melucci, Keane and Mier (1989) focused on the actions of a movement and also derived a three-component definition, consisting of solidarity, engagement in conflict, and breakage of a system’s compatibility limits.

Thus, in this approach social movements are seen as actors ontologically, and the vital role of solidarity and shared identity within a movement is highlighted.

The perspective derived from network theories is the newest approach. It views a social movement as “a particular form of social organization that emerges out of repeated and patterned interactions between multiple actors” (Diani & Mische, 2015, p. 307). While some researchers choose to limit their network angle and solely focus on personal networks as enablers of individual-level participation (Passy, 2003), Diani and Mische claim that they refrain from reducing collective phenomena to the mere sum of characteristics exhibited by its individual participants. It allows to progress towards an analytical framework that embraces relational and interactive practices concerning processes of collective action. Rucht also adopts the same angle, claiming that structurally, a movement is “a network of individuals, groups and organizations that, based on a sense of collective identity, seek to bring about social change (or resist social change) primarily by means of collective public protest” (Rucht, 2017, p.45).

While looking at the network theories, it is impossible not to mention Manuel Castells and his works as a major theorist in the field. In his trilogy from the late 1990s “The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture”, Castells accounted his views on how information and technologies reshaped contemporary society. Three volumes, “The Rise of Network Society”, “The Power of Identity” and “End of Millenium” follow the rise of informational technology and the structural changes it brought to global economy and capitalism, explore how the information society disrupted the regular approaches to identity construction and examine the relationship between communal resistance and the rise of new social movements, then analysing the social and political outcomes of aforementioned processes.

Castells (1996; 1997; 1998) argues that the technological revolution has reshaped society into what he calls the ‘network society’. This transformation emphasises the decentralisation and flexibility enabled by new information technologies. These technologies have facilitated new forms of social organisation and activism, often bypassing traditional state and institutional mechanisms. Castells (1998) points that in the network society era social movements originate more from communal resistance than from traditional civil society structures as, for instance, unions. In contrast, contemporary movements often arise from localised or identity-based communities resisting the impacts of globalisation. Those new social movements of the informational society often employ digital technologies to mobilise and organise. These

ideas found development in Castells' later work "Networks of Outrage and Hope. Social Movements in the Internet Age", where he analyses social movements in the network society, exemplified by the cases from Arab Spring, Iceland, Spain, as well as Occupy Wall Street movement. Following his argument, social movements generate new values and objectives that drive the transformation of societal institutions, leading to the creation of norms that reshape social life (Castells, 2012, p. 9). These movements exert counterpower by forming their identities through what he terms 'autonomous communication', a process that establishes a new public space — a networked realm between the digital and urban environments. The concept of the network, employed by Castells, emphasises the dual interconnectedness of social networks among humans and the Internet as a global network of computer systems.

For this thesis, I am employing the "movement-as-network" analytical framework since the Russian anti-war movement is not limited by the case of Polish organisations and initiatives that I am examining but has been developing across the European Union member states and beyond. My assumption is that local and international networks are crucial for developing a functioning and active movement that can influence both people left in the country and various actors in transnational space. Thus I will be closely looking at cooperation routes and habits of Russian civil society groups in Poland.

### Defining civil resistance in comparison with social movements

Civil resistance can be conceptualised as "the use of methods of non-violent action by civil society actors engaged in asymmetric conflicts with authorities not averse to using violence to defend their interests" (Schock, 2015. p. 29). It is 'civil' since it is implemented by members of a society, where their goals are widely shared and involves non-violent, or non-military action as opposed to violent (uncivil) action, and it is 'resistance' since it involves various widespread activities, that challenge a particular regime or power (Roberts, 2009, p. 2). Asymmetric conflict refers to a significant power discrepancy between opponents (Arreguin-Toft, 2005), in the context of civil resistance usually having the authorities and all their resources opposed to civil society actors.

For civil resistance scholarship, the core element is non-violent collective struggle, while social movements tradition does not limit it in terms of violence.

Following this and social movements conceptualisation discussion from the previous paragraph, social movement research tends to be broader and focus on a bigger range of actions, and civil resistance may be one of various approaches and activities used by social movements. Social movements literature assumes that political action depends on political context, thus can be located within a range from conventional political action to violent resistance, and violent and non-violent protests can be mutually supportive. In contrast, civil resistance research rejects both assumptions, since violent and non-violent struggles in their essence are fundamentally opposed to each other, consequently, escalation from non-violence to violence cannot be natural, and nor can their combination.

Theoretical roots of these two research traditions also differ. For theories of social movements, structural perspectives have been central, with an emphasis on class conflict and inequalities, rapid changes in social structure, shift from industrial to post-industrial society, as well as resource mobilization, mobilizing structures and political opportunity structures in case of the political process approach. Scholars of civil resistance, instead of state structures and political institutions, have traditionally drawn from Gandhian and anarchist assumptions that prioritize the social roots of power, focusing on methods of non-violent action and algorithms through which it leads to change. Additionally, according to Schock (2015), social movements literature traditionally concentrates on challenges within developed democratic societies, whereas civil resistance scholarship tends to center on struggles in authoritarian and less developed contexts.

## 2.2. Why do they keep protesting? Social psychological approaches to movement participation

While interviewing my informants and working with the transcriptions later, I kept feeling tension related to level of the analysis that I was doing. I have been examining the movement, represented by different groups within the movement, regionally limiting it by one country, however, I collected data at the individual level by talking with the groups' representatives. Our conversations were filled with individual opinions, beliefs, motives and attitudes of informants, which emerged naturally, despite the questions being pre-designed to be focused on the groups and the movement's dynamic. Personal stories of my informants appeared valuable to me,

however, I was not certain how relevant they were in the context of group analysis and did not know how to correctly embed them in the thesis. While seeking explanation and answers within experience of other researchers, I found myself delving into the social psychology of contention. In this sub-chapter I will outline the arguments that helped me navigating my analysis.

Social psychology of contention employs fundamental social psychological elements – social identity construction, emotions, social cognition and motivation in the context of social movement participation and seeks to understand why some people participate in movements and others do not, as well as why some stay committed while others drop out. Social psychological perspective brings added value to social movement research, since, according to van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2017), it bridges the gap between individual-level motivations and broader social structures, providing a more comprehensive understanding of social movements by explaining how personal experiences and emotions interact with structural factors to produce collective action. This perspective emphasises the role of individual agency in social movements, showing how personal decisions, emotions, and identities contribute to the dynamics of contention. This focus on agency contrasts with structural approaches that often downplay the role of individual actors.

One of the core contributions of social psychology to the study of contention is its focus on identity processes, discussing how the formation of a collective identity is crucial for mobilising individuals, as it links personal grievances to a broader group struggle. As per Melucci (1995), collective identity is not just a result of shared grievances but also a process of constructing a shared understanding of these grievances within a group. Castells (1997) argues, that collective identity in a movement is a source of power, serving as a unifying force that mobilises individuals to challenge existing power structures and create new ones. This makes collective identity both a tool for resistance and a foundation for new societal projects. Similarly, Simon and Klandermans (2001), as well as Stürmor and Simon (2004a; 2004b) emphasize that movements are more likely to succeed when they can effectively connect personal grievances to a broader politicised group identity, thereby fostering a sense of shared purpose among members. As per van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2017), without the sense of shared identity, personal grievances may remain isolated and fail to translate into collective action.

As Castells does in his works, social psychological research also emphasises the importance of social networks in facilitating mobilization. McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1988) who argue that social networks are critical for the recruitment and retention of movement participants. They explain that individuals are more likely to join movements when they have strong social ties to existing members. As per earlier Granovetter's (1973) theory of the strength of weak ties, which posits that even loose connections can be powerful in spreading information and mobilising individuals. This idea is extended by Diani (2003), who discusses how social networks serve as the backbone of social movements, facilitating communication, coordination, and support among participants.

When it comes to emotions, social psychology sees them as a crucial element in motivating individuals to engage in social movements and collective action, moving beyond the purely rational or strategic considerations (Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2017). Gamson (1992) discusses the concept of 'injustice frames — how movements tap into feelings of moral outrage to mobilise support. Emotions, according to Gamson, can create a shared sense of urgency and a moral imperative to act. Jasper (1998) highlights the role of emotions in the formation and sustenance of social movements. Jasper's work demonstrates that emotions such as anger, fear, and hope can act as powerful motivators for participation. Castells (2012) makes a similar point, claiming that emotions like outrage at injustice and hope for change are central to the formation of collective identities in contemporary movements. These emotions are amplified through social networks, creating a shared sense of purpose that drives collective action. Emotions not only spur participation but also sustain long-term involvement by creating strong emotional bonds among participants (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2001).

The theory of framing, developed by Goffman (1974), as well as Snow and Benford (1988), is also utilized in social psychology of contention. Goffman introduced the idea that social movements must construct compelling narratives to resonate with potential participants' values and beliefs. Snow and Benford developed the concept of collective action frames, which are strategic efforts by movements to align their goals with the interests and identities of potential supporters. These frames help to transform personal grievances into collective issues, motivating individuals to take part in collective action. In addition, the later work of Benford and Snow (2000) on the different types of framing processes — diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing — provides a framework for understanding how movements craft their

messages to inspire action. They argue that effective framing not only identifies the problem and its causes but also provides a vision for change and a call to action, all of which are crucial for mobilizing participants.

The belief that one's actions can contribute to meaningful change, or perceived efficacy, is essential for mobilizing individuals, according to Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2017). Klandermans' earlier work (1984) emphasises the role of perceived political efficacy in determining whether individuals would engage in protest activities. This is supported by McAdam (1996) and further reinforced by the work of van Zomeren, Postmes and Spears (2008), who developed the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), arguing that collective efficacy beliefs are crucial for mobilising individuals within a social identity framework.

### 2.3. Anti-war movements and peace and conflict studies

Peace and conflict studies as a discipline emerged during the Cold War and has been developing since then as an interdisciplinary field, that investigates reasons for and outcomes of conflicts, as well as preconditions for peace. Its scope permits for comprehensive research including not only war but diverse manifestations of structural violence, such as social oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. Simultaneously, it delves into the repercussions of political, cultural, and physical violence. Through a thorough examination of peace and conflict dynamics, it is well-suited for evaluating and advocating various peacemaking strategies (Barash, & Webel, 2022).

Anti-war or peace movements, like other movements, involve a diverse range of individuals and organisations engaged in various forms of collective action, but they specifically aim to protest against (or prevent) the outbreak of wars, advocate for finding peaceful diplomatic solutions to conflicts, or oppose specific military interventions.

The body of research on peace movements is often set in historical context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and focused on the events of two World Wars, Cold War and campaign for nuclear disarmament, Vietnam War and Arab-Israeli conflict. In the 21st century so far, the biggest peace movement mobilization around the world was caused by the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite the fact that throughout past few decades Europe has been way more peaceful, compared to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century filled with destruction, as Clinton (2023, p. 329) writes, “European soldiers fought colonial conflicts in Africa and Asia, foreign military forces invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, sectarian violence persisted for decades in Northern Ireland, the Balkans erupted in war and genocide during the 1990s, and in 2014 an undeclared war broke out between Russia and Ukraine.” Struggle for peace has always been a continuous process but never a final accomplishment, thus examining international peace movements or local anti-war movements and measuring their outcomes is not an easy task.

#### 2.4. Diaspora activism, transnational mobilization and its potential

Significant debate surrounds the definition and boundaries of the term 'diaspora.' The broad application of the concept has been stretched to the extent that the term was deprived of its ability to grasp phenomena and distinguish it from other ones, and lost its prominence within academic discourse, which was described by Brubaker as “if everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so” (2005, p. 3). In the context of this thesis I will be using Brubaker’s three core elements inherent to any diaspora as analytical lenses – dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary-maintenance (2005; 2017). Thus by diaspora I mean a transnational community of people who migrated (or were born to families that migrated) from their native land but continue to maintain a connection to it and preserve a distinctive identity different from an identity prevailing in their host country.

An activist diaspora emerges when activists depart from their local authoritarian environments for transnational settings, giving rise to transnational networks of exiled activists (Simpson, 2012). Diaspora movements, formed by individuals who have left their home countries, play a pivotal role in transnational civic engagement (Adamson, 2002; Wald, 2009; Fadlalla, 2019). They hold the potential to challenge their home-country authoritarian regimes indirectly through internationalizing conflict by engaging international bodies and global audience, exposing brutal practices through media, financially supporting freedom movements, advocating for intervention, and disrupting the government's control over information. They also collaborate directly with allies in their home countries, directing their claims outward and resources inward, including both financial assistance and ‘social remittances’, meaning information and values

sharing (Levitt, 1998). Additionally, diaspora activists articulate loyalties to their homeland that challenge the image of loyalty presented in the government's narrative.

When operating in democratic host countries, diasporas can wield significant influence, establishing partnerships across transnational civil society and governments, impacting conflicts in their home countries both by prolonging them or contributing to their resolutions (Chalk, 2008; Cochrane et al., 2009; Van Hear and Cohen, 2017). Both despite and because of their displacement, members of diasporas can reshape the political landscape at home and influence how conflicts are addressed internationally. However, the question how a diaspora can develop enough efficacy for sustaining these activities and keep fighting remains open.

For this thesis I use the argument developed by Moss (2022) in her research on diaspora engagement during the Arab Spring protests. She claims that two intertwined conditions are required to make a diaspora's efforts meaningful and efficient:

1. their ability to mobilise and reallocate resources for a shared politicised cause;
2. the degree to which they manage to gain geopolitical support from external powerful stakeholders.

When resource reconfiguration and geopolitical assistance persist over time, diaspora activists acquire the capability to act as reinforcement against authoritarianism by channeling their influence across diverse fields of action. In the absence of these two conditions combined and sustained, diaspora activists will lack structural conditions and alliances necessary to direct resources effectively back home, therefore their influence will be limited to expressing solidarity from a distance (Moss, 2022, p. 40). Thus, I use aforementioned conditions as analytical categories for my thesis.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research design

This thesis utilizes interpretivist research paradigm, that makes studying reality highly contextual. This paradigm is used not for testing the causal relationship between variables, as opposed to positivist research, but for producing a thick description of a chosen phenomenon. The ontological base of interpretivist research approach lies in the assumption that objective and subjective understandings of social reality are inextricably connected, since the process of getting to know reality cannot be separated

from human subjectivity. Thus, social reality is not an objective reality, but a combination of subjective interpretations that people as actors in society constantly create.

Epistemologically, according to Della Porta and Keeting (2008), interpretivist paradigm highlights that the possibility of explaining reality by mechanical laws is limited due to humans being purposeful actors. Consequently, human volition is significant, and social scientists working under this paradigm should strive to uncover the underlying meanings that drive humans' actions, instead of trying to apply universal laws.

Summing up, the task of a researcher in this paradigm is to interpret people's subjective interpretations of the world around them, which will bring us to the topic of limitations of interpretivist approach later.

### 3.2. Methods

This study uses qualitative research methods in order to try comprehending phenomena based on the meanings individuals attribute to them. According to Brady, Collier & Seawright (2004), qualitative methods are better suitable for investigating crucial turning points that influence long-term processes of change and process tracing, and this study looks at the processes connected to the ongoing war.

The empirical data for this thesis was derived from 8 interviews with Russian anti-war activists, collected in Poland, and secondary data interview analysis for one more participant, representing 7 different civic groups / organisations in total. One of the potential respondents refused to participate in an interview, explaining it by having no time, general tiredness, and many interviews they already participated in. They, however, encouraged me to make use of all the existing statements and interviews published, thus I used secondary data available, combining their three interviews published in various media in 2023. I will not be indicating the sources or attaching the links in order to follow the ethical guidelines and keep the anonymity of the respondent.

I utilised two non-probability sampling methods, namely purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The list of potential participants was first compiled based on extensive desk research and online observation of media presence and communication carried out by Russian activist groups in social media, mostly in Telegram and

Facebook. Later I asked the participants to advise people from their network who could potentially become the respondents too and to share their contacts.

The criteria applied while hand-picking the first respondents were:

- self-identify as Russians,
- reside in Poland,
- with experience of emigration both before and after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine (24 of February 2022),
- have been involved in civic and/or political anti-war activism or officially work in an anti-war NGO in Poland.

I used the method of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The questions included into the preliminary interview guide touched upon socio-demographics, context, and situation of their migration – motivations and reasons to leave, Poland as a hosting country and society, civic and political activism in Poland – their and of Russians in general, issues within the movement and Russia's future.

All the interviews with activists were conducted between June 2023 and January 2024 in the Russian language, in Poland and via online platform Teams. The voice recordings of the interviews were transcribed automatically using the function built into Microsoft Word first and then raw versions were proofread and edited. The final transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo 14 for further coding using the thematic analysis six-step guideline laid out by Braun and Clarke (2008): after thoroughly reading the data, initial codes were generated, then they were split into groups according to topics. These grouped codes were reviewed several times until the final big themes emerged and were then properly defined and worded before writing up the results. The themes are recurring points and narratives that respondents kept making and paying attention to throughout all the interviews. Initial codes in their raw wording, generated after the first round of coding included:

- Activities;
- Belarus;
- We DO NOT work with;
- Future Russia;
- Goals;
- Immigration;
- Legal status in Poland;

- More than anti-war movement;
- Perception of the role in creating democracy;
- Personal issues;
- Poles cooperation;
- Polish government;
- Polish people;
- Problems in the movement;
- Registration process;
- Russians cooperation;
- Solutions;
- Threats and dangers;
- Ukrainians cooperation.

The coding was done manually. NVivo was only used as a platform to conveniently store the data in the process of coding, mark up and annotate the transcriptions, add commentaries and notes, and apply various display combinations of texts, sorted by the codes and the topics. None of the automatic analytical tools of the software were used.

### 3.3. Limitations

Interpretations that a researcher produces in the process are often dependent on their personal experience and values. Thus, I understand and acknowledge the fact that the way I conducted the interviews, the questions I asked, and the general tone of voice might have been affected by personal circumstances, namely me being a Russian (both ethnically and as a citizen) with a clear anti-war stance and an experience of living in Poland and being involved into activism during the first year of the Russian war in Ukraine. I assume that aforementioned circumstances also might have affected the way I coded and analysed my data, and the meanings that I derived from that data as a result.

Nevertheless, I believe that my study makes an important contribution into the body of knowledge on regional CEE and Russian studies and civil resistance and social movements fields by capturing real-time experiences of activists while the war has been still ongoing. I suggest that those limitations are possible to mitigate by taking my

biases into account both by me while working with the data and the text and by those who will be reading and re-interpreting it in the future.

Another thick limitation of the study is the size of the sample. The number of 8 (+1 secondary data) interviews does not represent all the Russian anti-war groups, initiatives and NGOs currently existing and being active in Poland, which is explained by several factors. First to consider are the methods of sampling used. Both applied techniques, purposive sampling and snowball sampling, have their own constraints. Purposive sampling is considered unlikely to result in a representative sample due to its subjective nature in choosing the subjects to study (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Since I was choosing participants based on desk research and my pre-existent knowledge of the 'ground', I simply missed some organisations and initiatives, or got to know about their existence too late, since new collective actors keep constantly appearing in the field. As for the snowball method, the most common problem is that new participants cannot be recruited due to a lack of recommendations and a lack of people willing to participate in a study. This happens for various reasons, the most common are researchers being perceived as outsiders and meddlers or when the topic is sensitive and participation might be considered risky (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). I am aware that in the case of my research both reasons were combined, as I was informed by acquaintances and participants themselves that information concerning my trustworthiness was gathered around the network before some participants agreed to participate due to the possibility of Russian special forces' infiltration into the circles of anti-war activists. Another reason was that some participants agreed to provide contacts but never came back to me and followed up on that, despite my repetitive requests and reminders after.

Another factor that played into the issue of the sample's non-representativeness was very specific life circumstances of my study target group. As it was well-put by one of the participants:

*“One of the two main activities that I have been pursuing in Poland is survival” (Sergei)*

Numerous representatives of my study's interest group fled Russia within the last two years (after the full-scale war broke out), hence they are new immigrants that are still adapting to the host society and trying to solve issues of legalisation and finances among many others. For many representatives of the Russian anti-war

movement in Poland (excluding those who are officially hired in organisations possessing special budgets to pay wages) their activism is a matter of moral choice, thus pursued voluntarily and combined with full-time work, studies or taking care of a family. That explains situations when I reached out but never received a reply or was asked to contact later, but never got a follow up after later reminders and received rejections reasoned by participants being extremely busy and tired.

The last limitation to mention is a language barrier. All interviews were conducted in Russian which is a native language for all the respondents and me, then original Russian transcripts were analysed to be summarised and described in English in the text of the thesis. The pieces chosen for quoting were translated to English by me. English has been the language of my studies, work and daily life throughout the last 4 years and my skills were rated as C1 level through IELTS academic exam framework, thus I consider it to be enough to mitigate potential meanings distortion.

### 3.4. Ethics

To mitigate the ethical issues that might have arisen throughout this research, the application for research ethics approval was submitted to the College Research Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences. The critical issue that was highlighted by reviewers was the safety of participants connected to the sensitive topic of the research and the conversations to be held with respondents touching upon the ongoing war in Ukraine and their anti-war efforts. To alleviate potential risks to the respondents' safety and psychological well-being, it was strongly advised by the committee to use pseudonyms in the research text to ensure the anonymity of all the participants. Furthermore, I decided not to name the organisations and initiatives that my informants represent as an additional measure of ensuring anonymity. For a person with certain contextual knowledge the initiatives and organisations represented, as well as personalities of their representative still could appear recognisable, judging by the description and facts provided in the thesis. However, all of my participants highlighted at pre-contact before the interviews that they have no fears or hesitation and can be presented by their real names and surnames and re-stated this during their interviews. Thus, anonymity was only ensured in order to follow the official requirements of the University of Glasgow. Moreover, initially only people experienced in exposing their opinions about the ongoing war and their

activism to the public outside of their private circles were selected for the interviews. All the respondents legally reside abroad (in Poland, the EU), some of them under the status of international protection, therefore their risk of being persecuted by the Russian government for expressing their opinions and acting on them is lower.

To ensure that respondents were fully informed about the details and process, a plain language statement describing the research project was prepared together with a privacy notice discussing the usage of collected responses and personal data protection protocols. Both documents were prepared in English and Russian and sent to respondents in advance in the language of their choice, so they could have time to raise their questions and concerns and make an informed decision about their participation. Before interviews, each participant signed a consent form, highlighting their right to withdraw from the process at any time.

## 4. CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

### 4.1. Russian civil society tradition: historical roots

Russian tradition of civic activities is viewed to be rooted in various historic periods by different scholars. The main three periods highlighted as the potential starting points of Russian civil society history are the Soviet Union dissolution in the 1990s, the rise of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union in the 1960-1970s and the late 18<sup>th</sup> century tsarist Russia (Buxton & Konovalova, 2013).

For this thesis, I will follow the classification published by the group of scholars of the Civil Society Centre of the Higher School of Economics in 2011. They divide the history of development and institutionalisation of the Russian civil society into four main phases: (1) the beginnings of Russian civil society during Imperial Russia period in 1760–1860, (2) the active growth and development in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Reforms period, (3) the Soviet Union period and (4) the transition period from the late 1980s until present (Jacobson et al., 2011).

The emergence of a nascent civil society in imperial Russia became evident by the late 18th century during the rule of Catherine the Great. This stage grew out of creation of public organisations and societies related to charitable activities, science, arts and literature, for instance, the Russian Geographical Society, the Russian Technical Society and the Free Economics Society. As per Buxton & Konovalova (2013), such societies were established with the aim of fostering a cooperative

relationship with the Tsarist authorities, and later in the 19th century their members became instrumental in advocating for social and legal reforms.

The second stage is attributed to growth and professionalisation of civil society, triggered by the reforms of Tsar Alexander II. With abolishment of serfdom, establishment of basic civil rights in the legal system and the base for local governments being set up, in the context of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, civil society started expanding around the country (Jacobson et al., 2011). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, civil society acted as a complementary system since the state lacked systematical social security. This lack was partly covered by civil society groups, providing social care and material support for vulnerable groups like homeless people, orphans, widows, people injured at work, and engaging in public health issues and education services (Buxton & Konovalova, 2013).

The third stage is the Soviet Period, that lasted from 1917 to the mid-1980s, and is described by Jacobson and his co-authors as “nationalization of civil society institutions”, that happened due to the government being in need of ideologically-aligned civil society organisations to lay the groundwork for socialism. Throughout early 1920s, the voluntarily activities in the sectors where state-actors were absent, for instance environmental protection, radio and sports, got resources allocated by the state. Unions for professionals were established, and their social diversity grew with working class becoming involved in scientific societies and intellectuals joining trade unions (Jacobson et al., 2011). Civil society organisations kept highlighting critical social challenges like literacy or alcohol abuse and proposing alternative solutions, however, Soviet authorities questioned the usefulness and trustworthiness of voluntarily initiatives, thus many did not receive support. In the 1930s the number of independent organisations fell dramatically due to the beginning of repressions. They were shut down and replaced with new politicised associations as part of the government machine. Only in the 1960s social initiatives started re-emerging again, encouraged by Khrushchev’s thaw policies and relative liberalisation. Dissident movement became prominent part of civil society at the time, developing multiple forms of resistance to the communist regime. Despite facing severe persecution, Soviet dissidents engaged in writing and publishing critique of the regime, forming informal networks and political and human rights defending groups. The dissident movement was diverse, uniting individuals with different views and experiences, creating substantial impact on the political climate within the country and its perception abroad.

Lastly, the current phase of civil society in Russia, beginning in late 1980s and continuing today, marks the fourth stage of its evolution. Initiated by Gorbachev, perestroika and glasnost policies aimed to address the USSR's economic crisis and reinforce one-party rule but ultimately contributed to the collapse of the communist system. According to Buxton & Konovalova (2013), in the beginning of political transition in the 1990s, the financial support of foreign donors was crucial for civil society, facilitating the transfer of western practices and model to the country. Yeltsin's government initiated the scheme of budgetary financing of the third sector, mainly through social services outsourcing, but that support was not significant. The state, in did not interfere the process of civil society development but did not encourage it either (Henderson, 2011).

With Putin coming to power, the situation changed: society has become the focus of state attention, which has led to increased state regulation. Putin accelerated the processes started by Yeltsin, however, the conditions for civil society changed dramatically, following the regime gradually evolving into an authoritarian state. The tightening of regulation of the sector has led to the creation of unequal conditions for the development of civil society organisations (CSOs). Putin's favored organisations that supported his ideas of building a strong state, commitment to nationalist ideology and 'traditional Russian values' and personally oversaw the creation of laws and financing schemes that would meet his vision of civil society (Evans, 2006). Resulting from attempts to integrate CSOs into the power vertical, new government institutions, such as the Civic Chamber, were created, and many organisations were turned into official providers of social services. At the same time, organisations working with human rights protection and advocacy fell under the punitive laws, which made it challenging for them to access sources of financing, disseminate information and interact with society. It led to the division of civil society into camps, where the state supports some of its participants, and artificially marginalises others that do not align with its ideology (Institute of Modern Russia, 2020).

#### 4.2. Newest political emigration from Russia: timeline and main features

Putin's rise to the presidency marked a shift towards authoritarian rule in Russia with the regime having had liberal traits during Putin's earlier terms. In 2011-2012 rigged parliamentary and presidential elections with so-called "Putin-Medvedev

castling” (Herbst & Erofeev, 2019) resulted in Putin’s return to full power and widespread protests among the population (known as Bolotnaya Square protests). This, in turn, led to a continuous expansion of repressive legislation, referred to as the “conservative turn” or “tightening the screws” (Skiba, 2021) that Russia has been experiencing for more than a decade by now.

The new laws have provided authorities with increased grounds to target and persecute citizens and organizations, restricting freedom of various activities, particularly those related to public, educational, scientific, or human rights issues. The introduction of laws like “foreign agents”, “undesirable organizations”, “gay propaganda” or more recent law on educational activities from 2021 has not only created barriers for conducting certain activities in the country and suppressed its yet weak civil society, but also put a threat on freedom and safety of people with views not matching the ‘party line’. The legal mechanisms have been constantly evolving and being “upgraded” with new articles and provisions added to the country’s legal framework.<sup>1</sup> The tightening of rally and protest regulations and increased scrutiny of independent media activities have resulted in a shrinking space for expressing public discontent and alternative opinions. This situation has led to a rise in the number of people facing prosecution or potential political persecution, creating a larger pool of actual and potential emigrants. Thus, between 2012 and 2013, a notable emigration trend emerged in Russia, affecting not only economically independent individuals but also those with average incomes (Skiba, 2021, p. 47; Tinchurin, A., Berlina, T., Yaznevich, E., Rogatskina, D, 2021).

The annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 acted as significant political catalysts, prompting more people to leave the country, so the trend continued to grow in 2014-2015. As pointed out by Gulina (2020), 2014 marked the beginning of the new forced migration wave from Russia, characterised as a very diverse one, including people fleeing for political reasons, LGBTQ community, environmental and social activists, and other various actors.

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<sup>1</sup> For the detailed list of repressive laws passed between 2012 and 2018 refer to the Table Illustrating Legislative Crackdown on Rights and Freedoms of the Civil Society in Russia since 2012 and its Addendum by *FIDH* (*International Federation for Human Rights*) at [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/loisrussie\\_web\\_finalv4.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/loisrussie_web_finalv4.pdf) and [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/loisrussie\\_web\\_oct18\\_v2.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/loisrussie_web_oct18_v2.pdf). For the laws, adopted between 2018 and 2022 refer to the interactive online tool, prepared by FIDH and the independent Russian media outlet Mediazona at [https://en.zona.media/article/2023/06/07/50rep\\_en](https://en.zona.media/article/2023/06/07/50rep_en). For detailed analysis please refer to the fresh 2024 report ‘Russia’s Legislative Minefield: Tripwires for Civil Society since 2020’ by Human Rights Watch at [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2024/08/russia0824web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/08/russia0824web.pdf)

Analysts and data-journalists from the platform ‘To Be Precise’, collecting open data and producing research on social issues in the regions of Russia, conducted a survey encompassing 900 individuals who emigrated from Russia at various points between 2000 and 2021. Respondents were presented with a list of reasons for their decision to leave the country, with multiple options to choose from. The results revealed that the main factor driving emigration was ‘safety’, which was selected by a significant 64% of the participants. Additionally, the ‘political situation’ emerged as the third prominent reason, with 54% of respondents citing it as a key factor influencing their decision to leave Russia (Tinchurin et al., 2021).

According to Herbst & Erofeev (2019), for people in the post-Bolotnaya new emigration wave, which they refer to as “the Putin Exodus”, economic, professional and educational drivers play a big part, however, they have been surpassed by political push factors like dissatisfaction of living in a country that restricts political activities, human rights and personal freedoms. The European Human Rights Dialogue Project, Memorial Human Rights Center, Belarusian Helsinki Committee and Association "Za wolną Rosję" (2021) conducted an analysis of the legal system and law enforcement practices’ degradation in Russia and identified the fundamental areas where power misuse and repressions are manifested, namely freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and the media, unlawful anti-extremism and counter-terrorism, freedom of association, torture, cruel and inhuman treatment and fair elections. The authors emphasize that these issues are not merely in the domain of Russian internal affairs since they pose a threat to collective security beyond its borders, thus, the main force for change should be developed at the interstate level with interposition of the European Union in collaboration with business corporations. Back in 2019, the Atlantic Council gave a similar policy recommendation among others, claiming that the West should welcome Russian political immigrants, recognizing them as an essential resource for discussions on future of the country and spreading democratic discourse. The authors highlighted that it would be crucial to listen and amplify immigrants’ voices, focusing on both their experiences of settling in hosting countries and their opinions on influencing Western and Kremlin politics.

#### 4.3. Poland as the main host for Ukrainian and Belarusian diasporas

Even before the full-scale invasion in 2022, 1.3 million Ukrainians had already settled in Poland as economic migrants, primarily holding temporary resident permits, based on work (Pędziwiatr, Stonawski & Brzozowski, 2022). In the early 2010s, the presence of foreigners in Poland was notably low, ranking it among the EU Member States with the smallest proportion relative to the total population. However, after 2013, following the first Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, a shift occurred. There was a substantial emigration potential among Ukrainian citizens, both those running from the war in the East and those from the other parts of the country seeking better economic opportunities abroad. On the other hand, Poland was experiencing a robust demand for foreign labor driven by the rapid growth of the economy, which contributed to creating lenient admission rules for Ukrainians and fostered their significant influx and seamless integration into the Polish labor market and society, along with similar languages and familiar cultural norms (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2018).

The substantial pre-existing presence of Ukrainians in Poland contributed significantly to the country's role as a key destination for war-displaced individuals. After the war broke out, more than 1.5 million other Ukrainian citizens applied for Asylum and Temporary Protection procedures in the country (UNHCR, 2023). According to Czerska-Shaw and Jacoby (2023), Ukrainians currently constitute over 80% of the foreign population living in Poland, making the Ukrainian diaspora in Poland the largest globally.

Citizens of Belarus are the second most represented group of foreigners in Poland after Ukrainians. According to Novoborskiy (2023), more than 300 thousand Belarusians might be residing in Poland by now. The exact number of Belarusians in the country is unknown since the Polish authorities collect statistics on certain migratory aspects but do not count how many Belarusians reside in the country in total. For instance, currently, over 100,000 Belarusians possess valid residence permits in Poland, the majority of which were granted based on economic reasons (63 thousand) and another significant number (38 thousand) – on the grounds of Polish ethnical origin (Urząd do spraw codzoiemców, 2023).

Polish official statistics recorded two peaks of migration from Belarus to Poland: after the 2020 Lukashenka's falsified elections that triggered mass protests followed by repressions and civil society crackdown, and then after the full-scale war in Ukraine broke out. After the political crisis, that started in August 2020, Polish

authorities reassessed their policies towards Belarus and decided to launch solutions package to assist Belarusians facing repressions and forced migration, including help to protests' victims and their families, facilitation of border crossing and documents handling, visa fees exemption, support for independent media outlets and journalists, young people, students and scientists, NGOs, CSOs and Polish minority in Belarus (Fedorowicz, 2020). Thus, the country has been granting humanitarian visas to Belarusians with immediate labor market access and the possibility of applying for a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. Belarusian citizens are also allowed to apply for a Polish Travel Document if they are not able to obtain a new one in their consulate (Fomina et al., 2023). This could be soon useful considering new ban on exchanging, renewing or issuing new Belarusian passports for Belarussian diplomatic missions abroad, introduced by Lukashenka in autumn 2023, and, assumingly targeting those citizens who escaped to avoid tortures and prison sentences (Ilyash, 2023).

Starting from the assumption, that a movement is a network of networks, I am curious to explore the dynamics of interaction and cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian activists, as well as between Russian and Belarusian ones in the specific Polish context, where the Ukrainian population, helping to protect their country from aggression, is large, Belarusian population is substantial, and simultaneously seen as victims of the Russian regime and being associated with the Russian regime, and the Russian population is, oppositely, very small and is generally labeled as aggressors.

## 5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 5.1. Cooperation, partnerships and ties

#### Russian civic groups in Poland: background

A network of Russian activists is spread around Poland. The country is divided into 16 voivodeships or provinces. The study participants reside and pursue their activities in 6 regions, and the geography of the study is presented at the Figure 1. I am aware that Russian activists also reside and carry their initiatives in at least two more voivodeships, Wielkopolskie and Łódzkie, with administrative centers in Poznań and Łódź. however, my thesis does not cover these areas. This makes Russian activist groups being currently present in at least 8 of 16 provinces, or half of the country.

Most of the respondents (7 out of 9) had immigrated to Poland prior to full-scale war in Ukraine on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. These 7 respondents can be defined as part of the political emigration wave from modern Russia, described in paragraph 4.2, – none of them had emigrated earlier than in 2012.

*“We protested police violence, tortures, human rights violations. Our circles in Moscow were very enthusiastic and engaged, but then the disappointment came.*

*We were very upset by Bolotka [Bolotnaya square protests of 2011-2012], when people were not ready for more significant resistance. We missed the crucial moment, which led to the start of extensive and brutal repressions. Many of our friends were arrested. Gradually, life started resembling an Orwell’s book. It was clear the situation would only deteriorate.” (Liza and Anton)*



Figure 1. Geography of the Study

Since this thesis is focused on the case of Russian anti-war activism in Poland, one of the core topics discussed in all conversations was the bridging between Russian civil society groups across the country: the ways they communicate, cooperate, and coordinate their efforts.

Experience of my respondents differs, depending on when and in under what personal circumstances they migrated to Poland. Pavel, residing in Katowice and representing unregistered community there, arrived in Poland in 2021 and requested international protection status right away. At home, in a small regional town, he was an

organizer of ecological protests, then later in Moscow worked in teams of various opposition municipal election candidates. He left Russia the day undercover police came to the office where he worked searching for him, but he was not there. As soon as Pavel arrived in Poland, he contacted a politician he had worked with in Russia, and got a few contacts of activists, residing in Warsaw.

*“We started talking with the local coordinators, they were the first people I met in Poland. They have been living in the country for a long time and helped me to get settled in the very beginning, thanks to them I decided to get into a university”.*

Anton and Liza, representing unregistered initiative based in Wrocław, received Pole’s Cards as people with Polish ancestry, and moved to Wrocław in 2021. They had never met any Russians there and were socialising with Polish and Ukrainian people. When the war broke out, they visited old friends from their Moscow opposition and protest circles in Kraków. There they went to an anti-war protest, organized by their friends:

*“Since our arrival, looking for Russians in Wrocław felt like looking for a needle in a haystack, so we were very surprised by existing of an organised group of Russian activists in Kraków, even though that protest was attended only by about 20 people. Our friend gave us a link to a telegram chat of Russians in Wrocław and encouraged to reach out to them and organise activities”.*

Nina from Kraków got a job offer and was relocated by her employer with her family in 2015. In 2017 she started participating in organizing ‘Returning the Names’ – an international annual commemorative event dedicated to Soviet repressions’ victims – in Kraków, then helped organizing exhibition of Russian satirical drawings ‘20 years of Putin on the edge of a pencil’ and was actively involved in protests when Alexey Navalny was arrested in 2021. Later he became a part of recently registered NGO and a big surrounding community of activists.

Oleg, residing in Warsaw and working for a registered branch of a Russian NGO operating internationally in various locations, moved to Poland with humanitarian visa in June 2023. Before starting to work on site in Warsaw, he had been working with the same organization, since his responsibilities pertain not only to the Polish office activities, but to administering online resources of the organisation, that include a network of more than 65 online-chats with coverage of more than 180000 participants.

Galina, a politician, first left Russia temporarily in 2020 due to the persecution risk, then came back, however, kept receiving threats and had an investigation initiated

against her, which led to her deciding to leave again. She received a scholarship at the University of Warsaw and came to Poland in 2021 and faced the start of the war while working on her research. With the start of the war, Galina started pulling up her contacts and networks in Ukraine to understand how she could help effectively. This led to a big initiative and a registered NGO emerging. Galina's friend and co-founder of the NGO, Sergei, a regional politician, had to flee in May 2022 with his wife and children under the legend of a family seaside vacation. Within two months prior to their escape, Sergei kept receiving threats, pressure and administrative penalties from authorities due to vocalising his anti-war stance, and the criminal investigation against him was launched several days after he left. Sergei with the family stayed in a third country after requesting humanitarian visas simultaneously from Germany, Poland and the Baltic States, and Poland was the first country to approve their entry in July 2022.

Denis, political activist and founder of an NGO in Przemyśl area, bordering Ukraine, came to Poland with his family in 2012 after Bolotnaya Square protests emerged as a reaction to 're-election' of Putin as a president. In Warsaw he was running a business and in 2016 became one of the founders of an association implementing projects aimed at supporting the Russian democratic movement. When the war started, Denis went to the border and organised a group of Russians helping there, that later was registered.

Vadim, residing in Gdańsk, moved from a regional town to Poland for work in 2020. While living in Russia he was following the activities of Navalny and opposition in general, which led him to the decision to leave the country. He started actively engaging into volunteering and civic activities of Russians in Gdańsk a couple of months after February 2022, when he could manage his initial psychological distress.

Drawing from those parts of the interviews, two points stand out. Firstly, Russian activism, aimed at supporting Russians in Poland and attracting attention to repressions, had been existing in Poland before the beginning of the full-scale war, however, it has never been extensively covered by research or media. The activist initiatives were set up by earlier immigrants at minimum as early as 2014-2015.

Secondly, upon arrival, activists mostly find Russian communities in their new host-cities in Poland by pulling their pre-existent contact networks, formed through their civic and political engagement in Russia. Figure 2 illustrates civic and political experience of my respondents in Russia prior to their migration journey, – most of them had been involved in opposition activism before. The difference between civic and

political engagement was not pre-defined by me, but participants themselves, therefore it was important for me to convey their views.

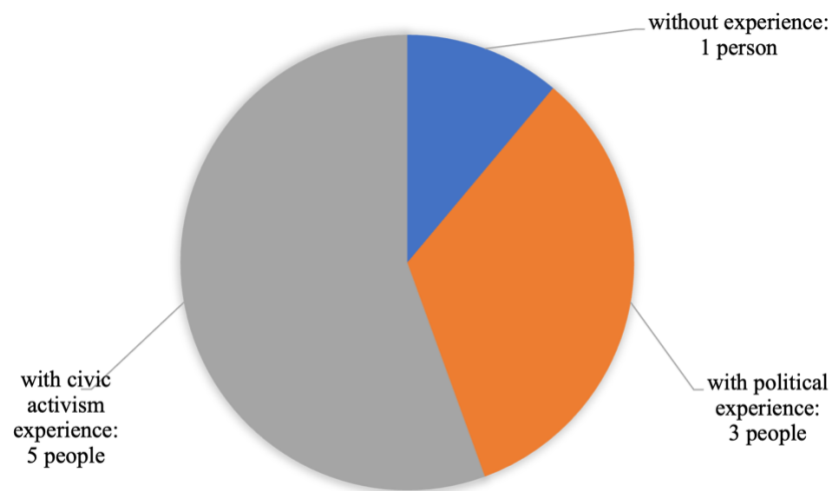


Figure 2. Civic and political experience prior to migration

Three participants kept highlighting the difference throughout the conversations, referring to participation in electoral process or party affiliation as conventional understanding of political engagement utilized by political science. However, the theoretical debate on (non) existence of boundaries between civic and political engagement has been developing over time, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of both concepts, thus, conceptualisation usually depends on particular context and a chosen typology (Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

#### In Poland and beyond: how Russian groups network between each other and connect with Russian transnational diaspora

By the time the war broke out, the Russian activist communities in Poland had been already formed and somewhat active, depending on the location, with most activities concentrated in Warsaw. The bigger ones had connections with each other, and the groups immediately started actively clustering together, welcoming and uniting newcomers, who were seeking for like-minded people. Facebook and Telegram have been used as main communicative channels to spread information. Currently, communication of activists throughout Poland is structured through the interconnected network of public and private Telegram chats and channels, representing main cities.

Public chats are open for everyone, while the most engaged core activists have private group chats to coordinate and harmonize resistance throughout the country and beyond.

According to five respondents, representing four registered organisations in Warsaw, Kraków and Przemyśl, such organisations tend to cooperate with each other more structurally, helping each other with particular tasks as finding storage and event facilities, means of transportation and literal manpower. They indicated that they all know each other well and work together, mentioned each other's names and each other's organisations' names when speaking of their cooperation with groups of Russians around Poland. The Russian NGO, operating internationally, that Oleg represents, serves as a capacity-building coordinating point for the community in Poland:

*“When the war broke out many small civic initiatives emerged. They were created by activists who often had no previous experience in activism and even less experience in political engagement. Such initiatives often have a horizontal structure.*

*We provide them with structural support. We explain how to raise funds, how to organise internal work, and, in certain cases, provide support to migrants. We conduct field trainings, introduce people to each other, and develop networking in this environment. In the countries where the organisation's branches are present, we try to serve as a centralising core for the local Russian diasporas”.*

All my informants in more or less detailed way described the ramified network of Telegram chats, that the global Russian movement has developed since the beginning of the full-scale war. It is structured according to geographical positions, as well as levels of engagement of activists or themes and types of events and interventions and other criteria. Polish corner of the global movement employs similar classification of chats on the local scale to cooperate. The four informants, representing three grassroots communities in Katowice, Gdańsk and Wrocław, point out that the pattern of their communication with their activist colleagues in Poland and all over the world resembles weak ties, that are neatly kept and highly digitalised. In Poland through digital networks the groups keep track of each other updates, synchronise activities in different cities for thicker media coverage and coordinate targeted aid if some assistance is needed in the area that is out of their local reach. Despite that, the informants mentioned, that with many colleagues in Poland they never met face-to-face. Overall, the activities of unregistered communities are more limited by their cities of residence, comparing to the registered organisations.

When it comes to transnational connections, all the respondents feel well-embedded into the transnational context of Russian anti-war movement and constantly aware of what is going on in Russian diaspora communities across the globe due to simplicity of digital communication:

*“We keep track of each other’s activities in groups and chats. At this stage communication mostly pertains to conducting joint events and mutual information coverage of those events. In my Telegram channel I always write a piece of news if something is organised by Russian diaspora activists somewhere” (Sergei).*

The case of the NGO, run by Sergei and Galina in Warsaw stands out, when it comes to transnational diaspora engagement, as well as the case of Denis and his NGO in Przemyśl. The project of Sergei and Galina grew out from their urge to help their friends and acquaintances in Ukraine. They opened a fundraising campaign for electricity generators purchase in their personal social media accounts, and the campaign eventually got so widely spread that it transformed the personal project into an international one and led to the official NGO registration. Due to their activities, the demand for electricity generators in Poland in December 2022-January 2023 became so high, that the prices tripled, and the generators almost disappeared from the market. This was the time when the diaspora communities stepped in and, in addition to raising funds and spreading the information, started buying the generators in bulk in their host countries and shipping them into the organisation’s hub in Poland. Sergei and Galina said that their NGO is connected to more than 20 direct diaspora group partners “everywhere from Norway to Australia”.

As for the organisation operating in Przemyśl, that Denis represents, it got wide international media coverage as a ‘controversial phenomenon’, since they started operating at the busiest Polish-Ukrainian border crossing several days after the war broke out, openly positioning themselves as anti-war Russian citizens. The news about the group quickly went through diaspora initiatives in Europe and beyond, and Russian activists from all over the globe started coming to volunteer at the border with Denis’s group and sending humanitarian aid.

All my informants listed various countries on different continents, where they have direct contacts with local diaspora representatives. They do not only coordinate and synchronize activities online, but also see each other from time to time on face-to-face events for Russian opposition, organised in Poland and other countries. The

activists from Poland, if they can, visit events in nearby countries, for instance in Germany, Czechia or Lithuania.

*“We have a colleague who is interested in this, thus, she monitors all these events happening around, where you can go. If she or someone else from the group wants to go there, they apply and go as our representatives. When they come back, they tell us everything important and we discuss it”. (Nina, Kraków)*

Strong and active transnational group diaspora connections are a characteristic that stands out in the landscape of the Russian anti-war movement, and is clearly visible in my thesis, that examines experience of activists residing only in one country. My assumption, that might serve as an explanation for that is the regional specifics of Poland as a country bordering Ukraine. Since the very first days of the war, the activists in Poland have been on the forefront of humanitarian interventions and assistance, as Poland has been the main European country for Ukrainian refugees to cross the border and escape the war zone. Thus, Russian activists residing in Poland became the point of contact and the first providers of relevant information about events on site for the Russian diaspora activists from all over the globe, as well as the object of media coverage and scrutiny. This might have amplified the number and strength of transnational diaspora ties emerged, but to test this assumption similar research in other countries of Russian civil society presence is needed.

### Relations with Belarusian and Ukrainian diaspora

The question about cooperation of a group with civil society initiatives representing Ukrainian and Belarusian diasporas in Poland was pre-defined in the preliminary questions set, therefore was discussed with all the informants. As it was highlighted in paragraph 4.3, Polish context is specific since the country hosts major Ukrainian and Belarusian populations, that are both viewed to be the victims of the Russian regime, while Belarussians at the same time are perceived as associated with the Russian regime too. Thus, it was interesting to look at the dynamics of interaction and cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian activists, as well as between Russian and Belarusian ones.

While discussing this question, we often slid from the topic of intergroup interaction towards the experience of interaction of my participants with Belarussians and Ukrainians on the personal level, and the divisive line was hard to maintain. The

topic produced more detailed accounts, coming from representatives of the registered organisations, since they have clear guidelines and algorithms developed for their operations and activities, while representatives of informal communities tended to refer to their personal experiences more. Therefore, I will go through the accounts of four respondents, representing three registered organisations: two in Warsaw and one in Kraków. Another registered organisation from Przemyśl is excluded, since by the reasons described in methodology chapter, I could not have a conversation with them, but used interviews from secondary sources, and could not find enough information on the topic there.

Oleg, representing the branch of an international Russian NGO in Warsaw, explained that Ukrainian and Belarusian diasporas are not included into the organisation's target audience, therefore they do not structurally cooperate with their civil society groups:

*“Our policy is simple: if there is a group that needs assistance, we first need to make sure that there is no other actor that regularly works with this group and meets their needs. If someone is already there, then most likely their help is already effective enough, way more effective than if we interfered and started doing it from scratch. There are dozens of organisations in Poland, working with Belarusians and Ukrainians, thus we do not aim at active support of those groups and do not cooperate with civil society organisations, representing them”.*

He highlights, however, that when Russian-speaking people of various nationalities and citizenships come with questions or requests, or want to participate in their open events, they are always welcome to and are treated with no difference.

As Nina from Kraków explains, that they do not cooperate with Ukrainian civil society groups, and at the early stages of the war was a painful question for their organisation:

*“At the very beginning we really wanted to do something together with them and offered it. However, it was clear that they were not fond of the idea, had their own agenda and wanted to be left alone. Now I understand that it was more of an obsessive idea, most likely stemming from psychological distress and some natural human feelings”.*

She says, that despite not being able to cooperate on the intergroup level, they interact on personal level, meeting at different thematic events in town. She describes

similar dynamics with Belarussian diaspora, with more active mutual participation of the protest activities and events organised by both Russians and Belarussians.

Organisation in Warsaw, mostly collecting and sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine, run by Galina and Sergei, does not cooperate with Ukrainian groups in Poland, but works with local civil society initiatives and NGOs on the other side of the border – in Ukraine directly. They have partner organisations in Kyiv, Odesa, Western Ukraine, that make sure that the aid coming from Galina's and Sergei's organisation is distributed among those in need in various regions all over the country. When it comes to Belarussian civil society in Poland, Galina says that the organisation had offered cooperation to some initiatives, and they stay in regular work-related contact:

*“With Belarussian civil society communication goes easier, even though at the earlier stages of the war they noticeably tried to distance themselves from interaction with Russian civil society representatives and keep ‘let's mind our own business’ attitude”.*

The accounts of informal groups' representatives Vadim (Gdańsk) and Pavel (Katowice) did not provide information relevant for the analysis, since they were drawing from personal interactions during local events or interactions with passersby during protests. Lisa and Anton from Wrocław provided a detailed explanation of how the intergroup relationships between their group and Ukrainian civil society groups, as well as their group and Belarussian groups in the city have been changing and evolving overtime. Summing it up, they have quite warm relations, filled with mutual support of activities with one Ukrainian group and rather neutral 'non-interaction' with the other Ukrainian groups, while Belarussians groups have been openly hostile from the beginning, taking any attempts at communication quite aggressively and rejecting any effort in building bridges on the group level, coming from the Russian representatives. The participants do not have any ideas why such dynamics formed in Wrocław, and still find it surprising and upsetting. As a researcher I also currently do not have any assumptions since I do not have enough contextual and regional knowledge.

## 5.2. Poland as a host country for Russian political migrants and a host society for their activism

### Cooperation with Polish authorities

The topic touching upon relations and interactions of civil society groups with Polish authorities was pre-defined in preliminary questions list, however, the sub-topic that emerged in all the conversations was how deeply intertwined are the relations with authorities on the group level and interactions of activists with authorities on the personal level. In the context of political migration, the one is simply not possible without the other, since until activists manage to solve their own formal administrative issues and meet their daily needs, they are too tired, stressed and frustrated to be able to contribute to the movement's needs and effectively and regularly engage into group initiatives and projects.

Poland has been providing support to Russians encountering political repressions by issuing humanitarian visas for a decade. The visa program for Russians at risk stems from collaboration between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Polish non-governmental organizations, incorporating lessons learnt in assisting Belarusian community facing repressions under the Lukashenka regime (Fomina et al., 2023). Even though Poland officially closed its borders for Russians in September 2022 as part of a regional coordinated approach along with Baltic countries, there is a commitment to supporting Russian dissidents, therefore individuals under threat of repressions are allowed to come to Poland as political migrants opposing the war and try to settle.

The pivotal conclusion, that came out from the interviews with Polish civil society representatives and that might prove to be useful in countering Russian propaganda narratives, as well as internal prejudice formed towards Poland within the Russian anti-war movement in exile, is that Polish authorities are ready to facilitate the development of the Russian anti-war movement and open towards the dialogue and cooperation with its representatives.

Oleg, based in Warsaw and working in an international Russian NGO, comments:

*“Polish politicians and diplomats are very welcoming towards us. We have good communication with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the person in charge of Eastern Europe and Russia. The diplomats working there are very skilled and are interested in making sure that the community here is doing well. They provide much needed support. In Poland the words of politicians match their actions. Some nearby countries at first invited us and promised that everything would be fine, but then they began to chase people away. Here, regardless of which forces are in power, they*

*declare the same consistent policy towards Russians based not on populism, but on strategic and pragmatic grounds beneficial for both Russians and the state”.*

Pavel from Katowice and Vadim from Gdańsk both highlighted, that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been from time to time organising conferences and capacity-building events for Russian activists from all over the country. Sergei and Galina, who run an organisation in Warsaw, both noted that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has neither provided great support, nor interfered or hindered their activities in any way.

When it comes to the regional and municipal governments, most of the respondents did not indicate any issues. The case of activists in Przemyśl falls off the pattern. Since the autumn of 2018 the town’s government has been led by Wojciech Bakun, a member of the Polish right-wing political movement Kukiz'15, known before the war for its clearly anti-Ukrainian stance (Shapiro, Wood, De La Cruz & Ozug, 2022). In 2016, the movement proposed building a wall on the Polish-Ukrainian border to limit the influx of illegal migrants (Polskie Radio dla Zagranicy, 2016) and in 2018 Polish Sejm, the lower house of the parliament, adopted the bill proposed by the Kukiz'15 and imposed punishment for denying the "crimes of Bandera" in the forms of a fine or imprisonment for up to three years (Do Rzeczy, 2018).

Denis explained the organisation’s negative experience with the local government by the area specifics and general chaos at the early stages of the war:

*“At the very beginning it was difficult to get along with the local government. They were staring at us, saying: Russians? Seriously? What are you doing here? They were agitated from just hearing the word ‘Russians’ every time, set the police and the security services against us, set against everyone they could to hinder our activities.*

*In the first weeks of the war, I was detained by the local police several times on suspicion of pimping and enriching by transporting refugees, however, each time I was released without charges. This was just a local specificity of our bear’s den here near the border”.*

Overall, the group’s interactions with local governments have been very limited or non-existent so far, but those, who have experience organising protests and performances in Kraków, Gdańsk, Wrocław and Katowice emphasised their positive experience: the procedures of submitting notifications about events and discussing details have been smooth, and police officers deployed to events has been welcoming and friendly:

*“We've never had any problems even with the police. On the contrary, there were situations when local policemen even hugged us and said that they were fans of our performances and resistance.” (Liza and Anton, Wrocław)*

Legalisation of stay and interaction of activists with regional migration authorities, however, has been problematic. Oleg from the international Russian NGO branch in Warsaw stresses out that the problems at the level of local migration offices persist, and negative decisions for residence permits with farfetched reasons behind keep getting issued regularly all over the country. Such decisions usually successfully pass through appeal process and get reverted, however the initial issue stays.

In late 2022, migration authorities in Poland started often rejecting residence permit applications of Russian citizens with “the national security threat” reasoning, which became a well-known issue among activists. Russian activists, who found themselves in such situation usually did not know for what specific reasons they placed in this category, since Polish migration authorities did not comment on such rejections, referring to classified information. (Vasyukovich, 2022). Oleg highlights that this issue was especially common in Gdańsk and its surrounding areas due to the close proximity of the region to the Russian border:

*“They issued such rejections en masse, however, now [late autumn 2023] this is not relevant anymore. We recently discussed it with our colleagues from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and they confirmed that ‘the national security threat issue’ has been resolved internally’.*

Liza and Anton from Wrocław shared, that they both waited for their residency cards for two years, and by the time they were issued, they had been almost expired already, bringing the whole process with the documents’ renewal back to its starting point again:

*“Wrocław has the worst reputation among migrants in Poland as the city with the longest documents waiting time. From our community almost no one has their documents in order since the average waiting time for a temporary residence permit approval is two years. There are cases where people have been waiting for about five years! Because of this issue one of the activities within our community is helping to navigate the documents process here, since people do not know where to seek help and how to advocate for their rights in the migration office. We have an inside joke within the group that it is about time for us to open a migration consultancy business – that’s how experienced we are with the topic”.*

There are positive examples, too. Pavel from Katowice applied for the international protection status when he moved to Poland in 2021 and received it in 7 months, which, as per his words, is very quick by the local standards. However, for a few months he felt lost and confused, since he could not call through to the Warsaw office, that was handling his case, and was never contacted back. He found an opportunity to travel from Katowice to Warsaw and visit the office only after 10 months of waiting and found out that his status had been approved for three months already. Pavel shared that in general, the community members in Katowice experience less problems with documents here, it mainly consists of those who have been residing in Poland for a long time, or IT specialists, who could legalise through their jobs by receiving EU Blue Cards. Sergei, who came to Warsaw with his family in summer 2022, draws attention to the way how their documents were handled:

*“We got our humanitarian visas quickly. Yes, not in a week, it took a couple of months, but we got them. My adult son moved here this summer [2023] with a humanitarian visa. Yes, it was connected to my political case to some extent, but nevertheless. As far as I understand, humanitarian visas are issued without problems if there are proper grounds, so there is nothing to complain about. My family recently received international protection status. We didn't have other options since our Russian passports expired, and we would have been left without any documents. I could not get a new passport as I am on the interstate people's wanted list, as Russia now calls it, plus I was convicted in absentia, so we made a decision to apply for protection, and got it approved this summer. We received it in 5 months, which is very quick. We asked to speed up our case since we have children with special needs, and everything was accelerated for us”.*

#### Cooperation with Polish civil society

Cooperation with Polish civil society representatives goes for Russian activists in a more productive way, than with Ukrainian and Belarusian diaspora civic initiatives. The variations of cooperation differ across registered organisations, informal groups, and locations, but all my interviewees assessed their experience as rather positive:

*“We set Poles and Polish speakers as our target audience right away since Russians and Russian speakers know what is going on anyways. Journalists from local and national media have been contacting us regularly, along with local*

*politicians. One of them regularly pushes Gazeta Wyborcza [Polish nationwide daily newspaper] to come and cover our events when we organize something important. Lately, we started setting contacts with foundation Za Wolność Waszą i Naszą [For Yours and Our Freedom]. We are on good terms with people from Strajk Kobiet [Women's Strike] movement. Wrocław's art community also treats us well. Our cooperation with Polish civil society has been great. They warmly welcomed us, drawing parallels with Soviet times dissidents and their struggles.” (Liza and Anton, Wrocław)*

The international NGO where Oleg works, closely cooperates with Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights:

*“They are our main partner. They established complex logistics for facilitating help with humanitarian visas for those who work in the human rights field. We often redirect people who need quick help with obtaining visas to them. I also received a visa with their assistance. When we launched in Warsaw, they helped us quite a lot on both structural and personal level. We often invite them as speakers. When I need to find someone's contacts, especially from Polish human rights field, I can always contact them”.*

The organization, run by Galina and Sergei, started as an initiative, but they quickly realized that they needed a legal entity to be able to receive huge transfers from all over the world and maintain transparency, thus they first were pursuing their activities on the basis of a friendly Russian foundation, that was registered, but when the money circulation grew bigger, big Polish foundation BiRM (Institute of security and International Development) took them under its wing, providing bank account, as well as legal and structural support. When I conducted the interviews in autumn 2023, Galina and Sergei were in the process of registering their own foundation, which by now (August 2024) has been officially registered.

Pavel from Katowice shared that he had connected with the regional office of the organisation Komitet Obrony Demokracji (Committee for the Defence of Democracy), and started organizing a big event, involving local civil society representatives and some Polish speakers from academia:

*“I study political science at the University of Silesia in Katowice, and I have professors with practical political experience, who speak very positively of the Russian community in exile, so I would like to invite them as speakers”.*

Nina from Kraków, however, shares, that the Kraków group that she represents (that also got registered as an NGO in late 2023) lacks connections:

*“We do not have enough connections among Polish civil society circles, we lack attention and visibility. We have an acquaintance who knows Polish journalists, and once he invited them for our event, where we were interviewed, and an article was published as a result. But we can’t ask him every time, right? When we conducted ‘Returning the Names’ event last time, we wrote a press-release and sent it out to at least a dozen media outlets, but nobody showed up or spread the information. It is upsetting but it also means that it is a focal point for us to work on”.*

### Perceptions of Polish society’s attitudes

The interviewees' perceptions of Polish society's attitude towards the Russian anti-war movement are shaped by a range of personal and activist experiences. These include interactions during events and protests, discussions with Polish landlords, exchanges with Polish colleagues and classmates, and encounters in public spaces. Similarly to Polish authorities and Polish civil society, Polish broader host society, perceived through my respondent’s eyes, is open and curious towards them and their activities, as well as empathetic towards the stories of their personal struggles and struggles of Russians as a society at large. The accounts, summarised further in the text below, suggest a keen interest among Polish society in understanding the complexities of Russian political life and challenges of those in exile. They also reinforce my conclusion, brought in the sub-chapter about Polish authorities, and might as well be useful in counteracting Kremlin propaganda narrative, painting Poland as one of the most hostile countries towards Russians in Europe, or tackling the inner prejudice in the Russian opposition and anti-war circles. Pavel from Katowice says that the stereotypes about Poland, persistent in the anti-war groups in exile annoy him:

*“The common impression that Russians are hated in Poland drives me crazy. From my personal communication with managers of Navalny’s team [The Anti-Corruption Foundation] I noticed that they avoid organising anything in Poland. As an example – the campaign of installing a full-size replica of Navalny’s prison cell in European capitals. The display visited all main cities in Western Europe, and the easternmost point, if I am not mistaken, was Prague. After Prague the project went to*

*Lithuania, so they literally jumped over Poland. They organise meetings and events everywhere but Poland, and I think it is silly.”*

Pavel’s Polish classmates at the university never showed any hostility or disrespect towards his activities and have only been asking many questions to understand the situation better. Several Poles have been members of the community chat in Katowice, communicating with its members in Polish, regularly visiting the community meetings and events, and cheering everybody on. As per Nina’s account of Kraków organisation and community around it, some Poles regularly visit their events, especially Polish students, that focus on Russia in their studies or learn Russian language. Polish public during the city protests in Kraków have always been reacting positively by engaging in conversations and asking questions, thanking activists for not being silent and expressing their support and respect. The common opinion among Nina’s personal acquaintances and Polish colleagues at work is that “Putin stays Putin, government stays the government, and we understand that people do not equal the state in this situation”. Lisa and Anton from Wrocław referred to their conversations with several real estate agents, that happened while they were looking for a flat in Poland in 2021. They listened to descriptions of the situation in Russia and the ongoing repressions with interest expressing disbelief as they heard the details. They remarked that they found it hard to believe because they had visited Moscow, seen its cleanliness, beauty, and modernity, and had also watched Russian films and read online articles. It was surprising to my informants, in their expression: “it’s one thing when Russians still believe in Russia, but quite another for Poles to hold such views”.

Galina from Warsaw says that her contact sample is shifted, since Poles in her circles are engaged in various economic activities and local initiatives, and politically are liberal or left leaning, thus are sympathetic towards anti-war Russians and knowledgeable of the situation in the country. Galina’s colleague in the organisation, Sergei, adds that they have Polish volunteers that help regularly by driving around and even delivering the aid to Ukraine with their personal cars. Galina shares a memorable story from the organisation’s experience:

*‘Suppliers [of goods collected as humanitarian aid] always get surprised when we as Russians contact them. Once we came to the electricity generators factory near Łódź to buy the generators from them in bulk. They were truly overwhelmed and amazed and kept asking if we were really Russians without any jokes. I felt like when*

*we were leaving the whole village was buzzing about the group of Russians that came to buy generators for Ukraine. They surely treated us with sincere interest”.*

As per observations of Oleg, working at an NGO in Warsaw, Poles show a strong interest in engaging with Russians and are particularly curious about the internal situation in Russia, since they do not quite understand what is happening there. He noted that events featuring discussions on political persecution, human rights, and censorship issues in Russia with first-person accounts from relevant actors attract significant attention from the Polish public, often drawing large audiences.

All informants highlighted that the Russian population in Poland is relatively small, especially compared to the Ukrainian and Belarusian communities. As a result, Russians are still seen as something of a curiosity, which the informants identified as the reason for the strong interest from the broader Polish society towards the Russian anti-war movement groups in the country and Russians affairs in general.

### 5.3. What are we and what do we want? Collective identity, issues within the movement and future prospects

This chapter emerged from the parts of conversations, initially raw coded as ‘we DO NOT work with’, ‘future Russia’, ‘goals’, ‘more than antiwar movement’, ‘perceptions of the role in creating democracy’, ‘problems in the movement’, ‘solutions’ and ‘threats and dangers’. Several reviews of the codes led to the broader theme of collective identity emerging.

#### Identity and power dynamics struggles

According to the study participants, the attempts to recognise and define shared identity markers within their groups, as well as on the intergroup level, have been constantly ongoing. Such attempts manifest through developing inclusion-exclusion factors, or us-them binary oppositions for a group, as well as limiting the circle of actors a group is open to cooperate and be associated with. Nina from Kraków explains this on the example of their online community chat:

*“We had a discussion regarding what grounds we invite people to the chat on. Do we invite them only if their values and beliefs align with our vision? Do we limit invitations according to the nationality? Do we limit invitations, relying on the language factor, so invite only Russian-speaking people? Or do we combine those*

*factors? We concluded that the democratic values play the most important role for us, as well as the language, therefore the chat is run in Russian, and we welcome those who are ready to communicate in this language. We tried to represent our criteria through mindfully crafting the public name for the community and the chat”.*

Similar discussions were carried out to different extent in each group, represented in the study. The main difference is that, logically, for the officially registered organisations they became the base for developing a clear operational policy, while for the informal groups they resulted in non-written rules, setting the boundaries for respectful communication within their community.

The actors, that are considered controversial, are avoided by the groups represented in the study. Those actors are parts of the broader Russian anti-war movement and can be split into two groups. First group includes actors (organisations, informal initiatives and individuals) that are engaged in raising funds for military equipment and weapons, training and recruiting armed forces and formations, and coordinating terrorist actions. The second group will be discussed later in the text. Oleg (NGO in Warsaw) and Nina (NGO in Kraków), who brought this up, employ similar arguments, highlighting that their organisations advocate for nonviolent ways of protest, with the goal of not inciting the war further, but of helping its victims. In the Kraków organisation, however, the discussion went further, trying to figure out if the members should be allowed to act on their personal beliefs and engage with such actors and activities on the personal level. They couldn't yet find a middle ground, and they keep in mind that potential conflict of interests might arise in the organisation later. Wrocław group, oppositely, managed to agree on respecting each other's personal stances, preferences and sympathies towards various forces, even if they do not align.

None of the groups within the scope of this thesis carry activities, connected to military, weaponry and armed formations, and neither they cooperate with such actors, therefore can be classified as part of civil resistance forces. However, it doesn't mean that this pertains to all the Russian anti-war groups in Poland. This can be exemplified by the organisation called 'Civic Council'<sup>2</sup> and based in Warsaw. 'Civic Council' was created by Russian citizens, and it helps to recruit Russians to fight in various units within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as supports those Russian fighters further by raising funds for ammunition, medical support, basic training and other needs.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the organisation please refer to its website at <https://civiccouncil.info/en/main/>

The second group, that sparks discussions and questions, and therefore being avoided by my informants' organisations and initiatives, is the structures, tied to Russian oligarchs in exile, such as Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, Mikhail Fridman and Roman Abramovich, named by the study participants. The groups, connected to bigger names stemming from Russian political scene, for instance, Vladimir Milov, the team running former Navalny's projects, Garry Kasparov, Ilya Ponomarev and others in various constellations were also mentioned by my participants as controversial, "dishonest about their intentions of gaining cheap popularity and pursuing own agenda", "populistic", "ineffective". This debate is long known among Russian opposition and civil society circles, and had become a source of memes, jokes, countless conflicts, and criticism way before the start of the full-scale war, repressions and mass exodus of dissenting forces from Russia. The opposition's inability to come to any agreement and find common grounds has persisted, and various forces, possessing social capital and high-level connections, media attention and financial resources often hold public meetings and conferences to discuss the fate of future Russia.

In Galina's (Warsaw humanitarian aid NGO), the problem with the influential controversial actors resembles official Russian power structures:

*"The issue is generational. The same process is going on in the Russian government, where 70-year-olds do not free up the way for younger specialists. In the movement now attention is tilted towards inefficient people who are well aware of their inefficiency. It is important for us not to rely on such people and not to perceive them as our bosses due to being intimidated by their high social and financial status".*

Vadim, representing Gdańsk informal group, shares his opinion on struggles, stemming from power and attention tilt towards bigger groups:

*"In the early stages of the war, we often heard from the 'top' that the concerns of small activist groups like ours weren't relevant to the movement. It was disheartening. We were working on the ground, but our efforts were dismissed. Sometimes, it felt like our voices were too weak, but we persisted and became more vocal. Initially, it was unclear who to approach for dialogue, so we formed groups and built crucial connections through each other. Now, the situation is clearer—it's easier to reach the top and have our opinions heard, and I believe they rely on our input more than ever".*

Overall, more than half of respondents articulated that on personal level they are not against actors, sitting in different places of current civil society spectrum and their strategies. Moreover, they argued that such approach would be a great baseline for the movement as a whole. The argument was well summarised by Sergei:

*“It doesn’t matter what others do; there’s no need to label them. The key is to take action. If someone finds a conference necessary – great, let them do it. Writing a new Russian law project? Fine, that’s their choice. Navalny’s team investigates corruption? Okay, it contributes to the fight against the war. Someone hosting a YouTube show about war crimes? Let them continue. We need to stop the endless hating and accusations of wrongdoing. Activists usually choose causes close to their hearts – whether it is animal protection, corruption, indigenous rights, political prisoners or historical preservation. You can’t impose your sense of importance on them, nor should you try. Instead, we should seek common ground, respecting that everyone contributes in their own way, and make that our guiding principle.”*

This, however, creates a vicious circle. According to the informants, conflicts in the movement stem from the diversity of positions and groups of interest, however, as a solution for conflicts they offer to just let this diversity of positions thrive. The claims, set out by social psychology of contention research, are a core point of reference here. The formation of a collective identity is crucial for mobilising individuals, as it links personal grievances to a broader group struggle, however, not only shared grievances must be created, but also a shared understanding of those grievances within a group. Without the sense of shared identity, personal grievances may remain isolated and fail to translate into collective action, which has apparently been happening with the broader Russian anti-war movement.

## Into the future

This sub-chapter summarises the perceptions of the movement’s in exile role in establishing grounds for healthier Russian society in the future, expressed by the participants.

According to Simpson (2012), who studied activist diasporas efforts in tackling authoritarianism, despite the challenges activists in any diaspora may face, such as precariousness, uncertain legal status, cultural and language barriers, this brings a lot of opportunities. The interviewees provided concise, cohesive and structured answers,

reinforcing each other's arguments, as well as conclusions of previous scholars from the field.

As per Sergei's (Warsaw) and Nina's (Kraków) words, democracy begins to take shape at the grassroots level. It's not something that can simply be imposed from above. The very essence of diaspora work is rooted in the principles of democracy, where individuals make their choices, actively participate, and support these efforts. Since all the initiatives are carried out voluntarily, they inherently represent a democratic movement. The respondents view their role (not personally, but as Russian anti-war movement members in general) as crucial in laying the groundwork for the future transformation of their home country through the possibility of formally and informally educating themselves, enhancing their theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

The activists, including Pavel from Katowice, have been learning not only English but also the local languages of their host countries while pursuing formal education. As he says, with these skills, they can transition from being mere activists to becoming experts in various fields. Moreover, they get exposed to various electoral and administrative systems, mechanisms of self-governance and grassroots strategies, practiced in their host countries. According to Lisa and Anton (Wrocław), all these processes allow for new habits to be formed here and now – the habit of speaking out, the habit of defending one's opinions and rights. When the political opportunity arises, they plan to apply this knowledge, skills and tools effectively.

Another reason to perceive their activism in exile as important for the Russia's future, brought up by all aforementioned respondents, is knowledge and information diffusion. As all the respondents stay in touch with their relatives, friends and acquaintances, and Sergei also runs a public Telegram channel, they have the opportunity to share their newly acquired experience and trustworthy information. Sergei highlights, that in the contrary to people in Russia, squeezed by the censorships and repressions, activist from abroad can speak out and must use this opportunity to keep the information flowing into the country. Due to their connections with Russians inside the country, activists in exile also serve as a significant connector and source of information about current state of affairs on the ground for decision-making actors abroad. Lisa and Anton note, that because of this information diffusion is crucial for the host societies too, since it allows for raising awareness of locals and shift the image and perceptions of modern Russia in European and other societies. Galina adds, that

when it comes to policy making in the long run, everything could turn out interestingly for Europe as well. The more Russian activists will become fully integrated and legalised, by becoming citizens overtime, the more opportunities for direct political lobbying through electoral processes will open for the Russian opposition:

*“As a political strategist, I keep asking everyone why do you seat still if you have local citizenship? There are elections to the European Parliament, go get elected to the European Parliament! If you can't get into the European Parliament at this stage, get elected to your city council! You do keep visiting all those officials with your requests if you can become one of them yourself?”.*

The final valuable asset of the civil society in exile for the future, noted by all the respondents, is all the connections, ties and contacts they keep establishing and the bridges they keep building – international and transnational civic networks, as well communication with Foreign Ministries and other government institutions all over the world, and, of course, cooperation channels with Ukrainian civil society. When current current apparatus will leave the office, or in any other scenario where political opportunity for negotiations and big transformation emerges, the networks will play a major role.

## 6. Conclusions

Before summing up the results of this thesis, there are some important notes to be made. The data collection process for this research had been finished before several major events for Russia and its civil society in exile occurred. In February 2024 Alexey Navalny was killed in Arctic Circle prison. In March 2024, Vladimir Putin was “re-elected” for the new presidency term. In August 2024, the biggest prisoners exchange in modern Russian history between Russia and the West (represented by several EU states and the US) happened, freeing up Russian and foreign political prisoners. I know that these six months became an emotional rollercoaster for the Russian anti-war community. I believe that the experiences they have undergone throughout these months, their personal stories, newly gained fears and hopes will generate fruitful and insightful research in the future, however, my research does not touch upon them.

This dissertation, based on interviews with Russian anti-war activists, residing in Poland, extensive desk research and work with open sources, aimed at enhancing comprehension of Russian diaspora involvement in grassroots activism in Poland, including civic initiatives and registered organisations, and focusing in their role in the anti-war movement. The thesis attempted to examine whether Russian activism in exile possesses the potential to serve as catalyst for positive change in the context of ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine and addressed the ways of cooperation between Russian civil society groups with other actors in the Polish context, their positioning in the geography of Russian activism beyond Poland, and their perceptions of their role in laying the grounds for creating democracy for future Russia.

Theoretically, my dissertation lies at the intersection of social movements scholarship, civil resistance research, social psychology of contention and diaspora studies, more precisely literature on transnational diasporic civic and political participation. Therefore, theoretical concepts and debates for the thesis were taken from those fields.

Since the beginning of the acute phase of Russian war in Ukraine in February 2022, civilians from Ukraine were forced to flee and seek safety. At the same time Russians were forced to flee too, squeezed out from the country by mass repressions and prosecution, as well as forced conscription. While the exodus of Russians is significantly less than the flow of Ukrainians leaving the actual war zone, it nevertheless has already caused various socio-political challenges and changes for all the receiving countries, including those in the European Union. My analysis was limited by case of Poland, where the Russian community started to grow due to new political migrants, as well as economic migrants and migrants with the Polish ancestry, coming mainly from the territory of Kaliningrad exclave.

The analysis of data, derived from the interviews, revealed three major themes: networks and ties, formed by the Russian civil society groups in Poland and beyond; specifics of Poland as the host society for Russian anti-war groups; conflicts within the movement and future prospects for consolidation under shared identity and over shared goals. The themes were further sub-divided into smaller topics. The main findings and conclusions are listed below.

1. The transnational Russian movement managed to establish ramified network of Telegram chats, that is structured according to geographical positions, levels of engagement of activists or themes and types of events. Polish corner of the

global movement employs similar classification of chats on the local scale to cooperate. Social media and Telegram specifically facilitate digital communication across the movement in Poland and beyond and plays a vital role in strengthening transnational connections. Activists in Poland feel embedded into the transnational context of Russian anti-war movement and well aware of what is going on in the communities across the globe due to simplicity of digital communication. Strong and active transnational diaspora connections of Polish groups have been most likely reinforced by the regional specifics of Poland as a country bordering Ukraine. Russian civil society in Poland have been on the forefront of humanitarian interventions and assistance since the very beginning of the war, and on its earlier stages, Russian groups in Poland served as main providers of relevant information about events on site for the Russian diaspora activists from all over the globe and media. This might have amplified the number and strength of transnational diaspora ties emerged.

2. The cooperation of Russian civil society groups in Poland with representatives of Ukrainian and Belarusian civil society has not been very fruitful. The cooperative group ties with both diasporas are rather non-existent, but one organisations have strong partnerships with several civil society organisations inside Ukraine. The personal connections of activists with Belarussians and Ukrainians are persistent and appear to be much stronger, than the intergroup ones. In contrast, the cooperation of Russian groups with Polish civil society proven to be efficient and continues to deepen. Each organisation, covered by the research scope, has established connections with Polish civil society organisations and informal groups without any issues standing out.
3. Poland has been a great host society in terms of creating conditions for supporting Russian political diaspora and its civic activism. The pivotal conclusion, that might prove to be useful in countering Russian propaganda narratives, as well as internal prejudice formed towards Poland within the Russian anti-war movement in exile, is that Polish authorities are ready to facilitate the development of the Russian anti-war movement and open towards the dialogue and cooperation with its representatives and act pro-actively. Their policy towards Russian groups is consistent and based on strategic and pragmatic grounds beneficial for both sides. Similarly, Polish broader host society, perceived by Russian activists as open and curious towards them and

their activities, as well as empathetic towards the stories of their personal struggles and struggles of Russians as a society at large. Polish society is interested in understanding the complexities of Russian political life and challenges of those in exile. This might as well be useful in counteracting Kremlin propaganda narrative, painting Poland as one of the most hostile countries towards Russians in Europe or tackling the inner prejudice in the Russian opposition and anti-war circles.

4. Global Russian anti-war movement lacks sense of shared collective identity and links between personal grievances a broader group struggle, or shared grievances. Without is personal grievances in the movement remain isolated and fail to translate into cohesive collective action, which leads to constant conflicts across various layers of the movement. The conflicts in the movement stem from the diversity of positions (personal grievances) and groups of interest, however, the solution suggested by members of the movement is to let the diversity of positions thrive, which leads to a vicious circle. There is a noticeable discrepancy between values, approaches, and positions of small bottom-up groups of activists and strong groups political groups, possessing substantial media and financial resources. However, this discrepancy has been slowly shrinking over time.
5. The activists in Poland perceive their work and efforts, as well as efforts of Russian anti-war movement members in exile in general, to be extremely valuable in laying the groundwork for the future transformation of their home country through the possibility of formally and informally educating themselves, enhancing their theoretical knowledge and practical skills. They perceive crucial opportunities of the movement in exile to be the supply of trustworthy information into Russia, as well as the opportunity to serve as a significant connectors and source of information about current state of affairs on the ground in Russia for their host societies and foreign decision-making actors. The other asset, gained by Russian civil society in exile for the future is all the connections, ties and contacts they keep establishing with international and transnational civic networks, as well government institutions all over the world.
6. The choice to frame phenomenon and the topic as a Russian anti-war movement happened to be too narrow and misleading. Is not an anti-war movement, but a

transnational diaspora movement for democratization. The anti-war element is only one of the components of it. The movement also cannot be examined in terms of civil resistance, since there organisations, informal initiatives and individuals that are engaged in raising funds for military equipment and weapons, training and recruiting armed forces and formations, and coordinating terrorist actions. The scope if the thesis, however, does not include such actors.

7. New Russian civic initiatives and groups continued appearing in Poland while this research was ongoing, which proves the landscape to be dynamic and fruitful, bringing potential for future research on the topic.

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## Annex: Index of Respondents

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Based in</b>	<b>Represents</b>
1.	Pavel	Katowice	Unregistered initiative
2.	Oleg	Warsaw	Registered NGO
3.	Sergei	Warsaw	Registered NGO (was in the process of registration as of interviews taken in November 2023)
4.	Galina		
5.	Nina	Kraków	Registered NGO at the core + bigger community around it
6.	Denis	Przemyśl	Registered NGO
7.	Vadim	Gdańsk	Unregistered initiative
8.	Liza	Wrocław	Unregistered initiative
9.	Anton		

**Total initiatives/organisations represented: 7**

**Total locations represented: 6**