



## Policy Brief

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# Russia's Recent Emigrants: Mobility and Engagement

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ReThink.Democracy

## Summary

The large number of pro-democracy individuals among Russians who have left Russia since 2022 raises the question of whether they can contribute from the outside to eventual political change in the country. For democracy donors to explore how to foster this potential, though, they need a great deal more information about them than is so far available. This brief presents initial data from a survey of these emigrants and highlights findings relevant to supporting these emigrants as current or potential actors working toward democratic development in Russia.

The survey confirms the potential human capital of the post-2022 emigrants, who are younger and better educated than the average Russian citizen. The majority work in sectors that are based on skills that are also important for and transferable to civic and political activity: information technology, science and education, arts and culture, media and journalism, and public relations and marketing. The earlier narrative of relocated employment for Russian companies is no longer applicable. The economic situation of these emigrants is often precarious, which makes their integrating in host countries more challenging and limits their capacity for civic engagement.

The majority of respondents are in EU countries and to a lesser extent in South Caucasus ones. Their residence situation tends to be uncertain, with a sizeable minority living without permanent status in their host country, including by doing visa runs. The latter are particularly in countries of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Western Balkans. The process of concentration of the recent emigrants in EU countries is far from played out. Almost half of respondents say they would like to move from their current host country, with EU countries clearly preferred as a destination. Due to the changing political circumstances in the countries around Russia (such as Georgia), migration flows between countries that grant visa-free entry to Russians are volatile.

The main factors respondents say decided them to leave Russia were a mix of the political and war situations. A minority also cited the economic situation. A clear majority say they would consider returning to live in the country, for a mix of reasons but mostly if the political situation there changes. However, most have a high or very high expectation that things in Russia will get worse in the next five years.

A strong majority say that they participate in civil projects and activities: in protests, in providing information support, financial support, and expertise, and in organizing events. But the picture is mixed with regard to respondents' integration in their host country: only a minority describe themselves as fully integrated.

There remains a considerable lack of knowledge about the details of current pro-democracy actors and activities in the recent Russian emigration, and even more about any further latent democratic potential that could be tapped within it. Donors and assistance implementers are still trying to understand the democratic potential of this community, yet they cannot wait until they do so fully to support actors in it. There is evidence that this emigration is one potential avenue for pursuing the goal of encouraging and assisting Russian actors trying to roll back the country's autocracy; the greater the knowledge democracy donors gain about this community, the better they will be able to assess how best to use this opportunity.

## Introduction

Around 1 million people are estimated to have left Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and a large majority of them have not returned.<sup>1</sup> Some in the West see this entirely in security terms: principally as a source of risk to the host countries for these emigrants but also as something to be encouraged in order to weaken the Russian state and President Vladimir Putin's regime.

The large number of pro-democracy individuals among these recent Russian emigrants raises the question of whether they can contribute from the outside to eventual political change in Russia. For Western policymakers interested in supporting what there is of pro-democracy civil society in Russia after years of increasing repression, the recent emigration offers an opportunity to engage a large number of Russians, free from the regime's obstacles, with a view to exploring and encouraging any of their potential to aid the spread of democratic ideas in Russia from the outside.

### **A great deal more information than is so far available about those who have left Russia since 2022 is needed.**

For democracy donors to explore this potential path, though, a great deal more information than is so far available about those who have left Russia since 2022 is needed. Even after three years, this remains a complex and changing scene. This brief presents initial results of a survey of these emigrants that was conducted through Telegram chats and channels of The Ark (Kovcheg) project in September 2024.<sup>2</sup> The survey data will be more fully used in further research over the coming months. The questionnaire design and results processing were carried out jointly by The Ark, the community of scientists of the Academic Bridges project,<sup>3</sup> and the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The survey covers 414 individuals with 75% of respondents residing outside Russia, 4% having returned to Russia after having left, and 21% not having left it. The analysis here is based on responses from those residing outside Russia, except as noted in cases where the answers of those in Russia—admittedly a small sample—provide insight into the recent emigration.

The data is presented in three parts, covering the demographic details of respondents, their situation regarding mobility and residence status in emigration, and questions regarding political, civic, and social factors. The brief concludes with reflections about the findings' relevance to the possibility of supporting the post-February 2022 emigrants as current or potential actors working toward democratic development in Russia.

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1 Nicolas Bouchet, [Democratic Russian Civil Society Outside Russia? A Window of Opportunity for Support](#), German Marshall Fund of the United States, July 2024.

2 The Ark, [Helping Anti-War Russians Fight for Peace](#).

3 [Academic Bridges](#).

## Demographics

The demographic profile of the respondents matches the one observed in other surveys of Russians emigrants that have been carried out in the last three years. It confirms that the bulk of those who have left Russia since February 2022 are younger and more educated than the country's average citizen, with slightly more women among them. Just over two-thirds are between the ages of 26 and 45, and just over three-quarters have received university-level educational qualifications. By comparison, according to the 2020 census, 20% of women and 25% of men in Russia had undergone higher education.

The survey shows that the economic situation of these emigrants is often precarious with slightly over one out of three respondents employed in their host country while one out of five is unemployed. One out of three respondents say that they live off their savings, which are often mentioned as a secondary source of income. This suggests that people either have irregular sources of employment income, such as through project-based work, or have insufficient levels of income, which they supplement by drawing down their savings.

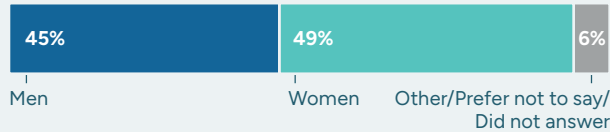
**The survey shows that the economic situation of these emigrants is often precarious with slightly over one out of three respondents employed in their host country while one out of five is unemployed.**

While there was early in the post-February 2022 emigration strong evidence that many of those involved were still employed by Russian companies, this is less the case by now. In the survey, 15% said they were employed by a Russian company (that is, working remotely) and 5% said they were employed by a relocated Russian company. More than one-third have found jobs in the local labor market, a rather high figure given the unstable conditions of emigration and language barriers.

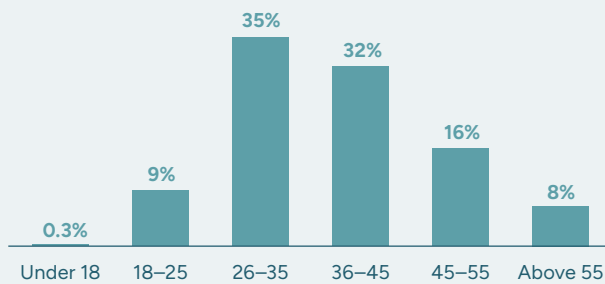
While the earlier narrative of relocated employment is no longer applicable, the employment profile of the recent emigrants identified in the early stages seems to hold. Their main sector of employment is still information technology (one-fifth). The next-largest sector is science and education. A quarter of respondents work—taken together—in arts and culture, media and journalism, and public relations and marketing. A small share of respondents say they have their own business (7%). Slightly more than one out of ten (12%) say they have changed profession since leaving Russia.

## Demographics

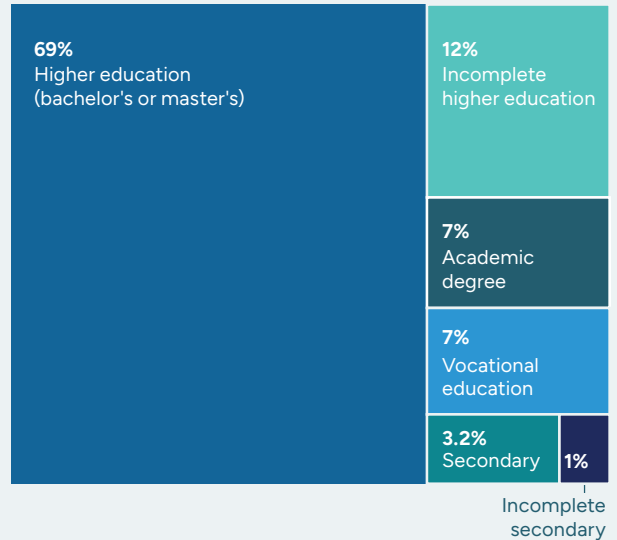
### Gender



### Age

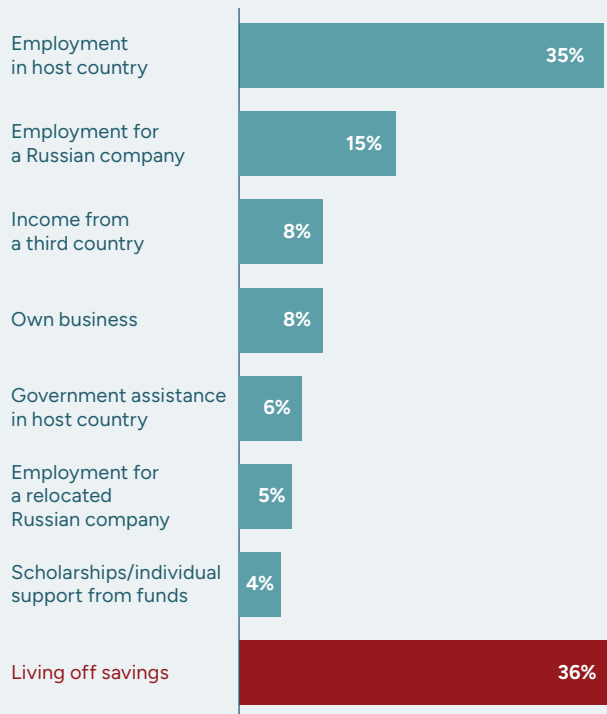


### Education

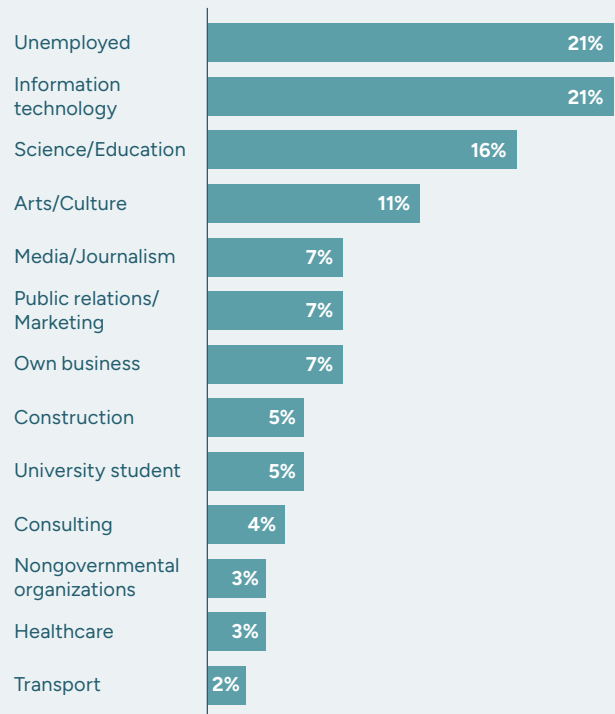


### Income

More than one answer possible.



### Employment



## Residence and Mobility

For many of the post-February 2022 emigrants, once the initial phase of leaving Russia and finding their feet in a host country was over, the question of moving to another one became more prominent.<sup>4</sup> This has been particularly important for those more politically active, who have needed to seek a host country with a safer, more enabling environment than that in their initial host country, which usually was easiest to enter and remain in. This has frequently meant seeking to move to an EU country.

This dynamic seems to be reflected in the distribution of the respondents among host countries, which differs from that in earlier surveys of this emigration. While in the first years of this emigration, the highest concentrations were in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Türkiye, the respondents are principally in EU countries and to a lesser extent in South Caucasus ones, collectively accounting for more than three out of five. Just under one in ten are in the Western Balkans and Central Asian countries each.

The residence situation of respondents tends to be uncertain. One out of four live without permanent status in their host country, including by doing visa runs—leaving briefly after a certain period of stay and then re-entering. The latter are particularly in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Western Balkans. Another one out of four are in their host country through either a work or study visa or through a family reunification scheme. Almost one out of four are under different options, such as digital nomad visas, residence permits, and registration. A clear minority is going through the asylum system where they are (15%).

Almost two-thirds of respondents have not changed host country, while slightly more than one out of five has done so once and 15% more than once. At the same time, almost half of respondents say they would like to move from their current host country, with slightly more than one out of ten saying they plan to do so within a year and one out of ten within six months. Just over one-quarter say they have not made yet made plans to realize their intention to move. Of those saying they want to change host country, almost half included an EU country as desired destination.

Due to the changing political circumstances in the countries around Russia, migration flows between countries that grant visa-free entry to Russians are volatile. For example, the recent elections in Georgia were followed by new “bans” at the border and deportations for supporting protests, and a significant number of emigrants—particularly those politically active—have moved to Serbia.

Almost no respondents say they are currently thinking of returning to live in Russia. However, a clear majority (59%) say they would consider doing so, for a mix of reasons but mostly if the political situation there changes (47%).

Another clear majority have not visited Russia since leaving, of which 59% do not plan to do so and 11% plan to. Just over a quarter have travelled there, either once (14%) or more (13%). Among them, nearly 60% did so for family or personal reasons, and 31% for administrative reasons. Half of those who have visited Russia report not facing any problems in doing so.

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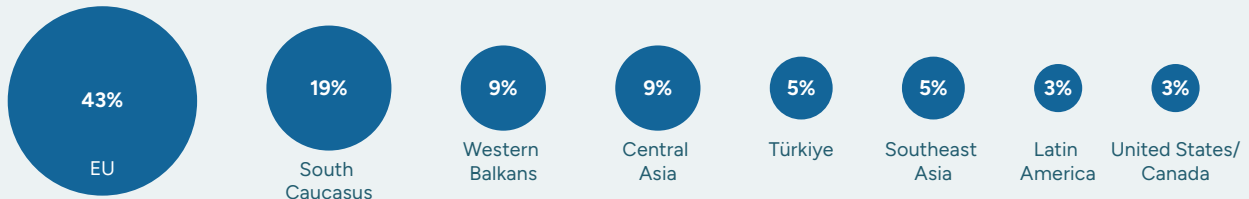
<sup>4</sup> Bouchet, [Democratic Russian Civil Society Outside Russia?](#)



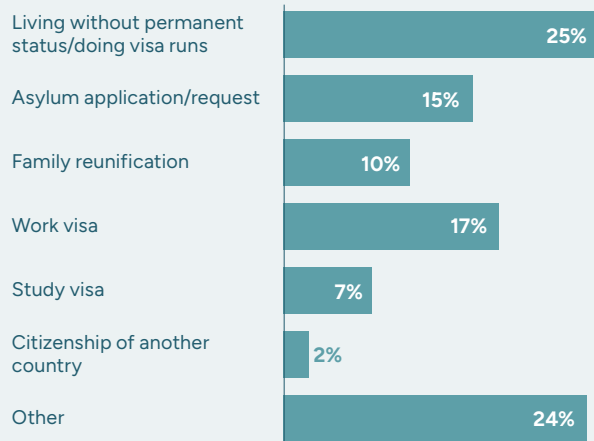
## Residence and Mobility



### Where currently living

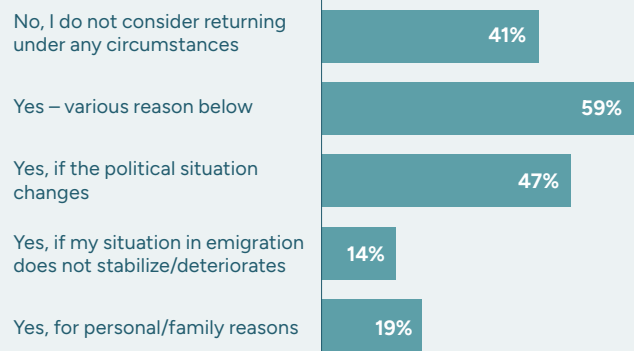


### Legal status

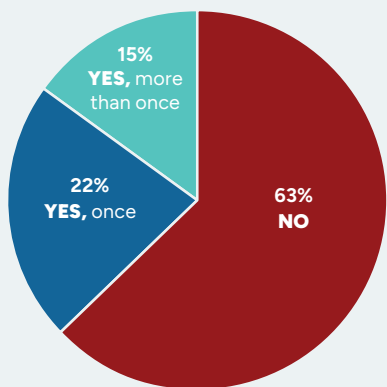


### Are you considering the possibility of returning to Russia for permanent residence?

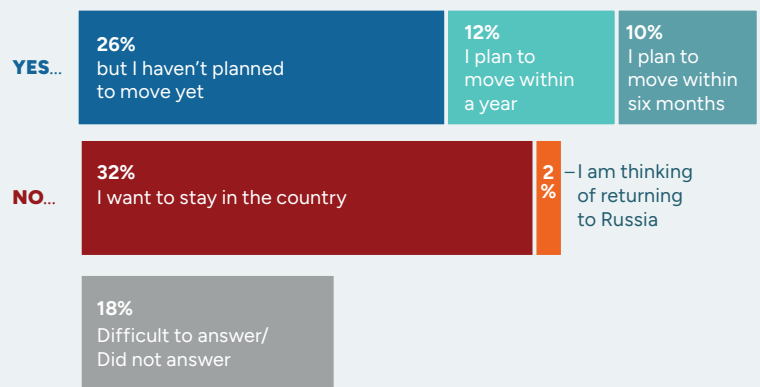
More than one answer possible.



### Did you change your country of residence during emigration?



### Would you like to change your country of residence?



## Politics and Engagement

The responses to the survey broadly confirm earlier ones when it comes to motivations for leaving Russia since February 2022. Surveys consistently found that “For most, the motivations for leaving mixed political, economic, and lifestyle factors, and for many also unwillingness to be drafted into the military.”<sup>5</sup> For the respondents, the main factors they say decided them to leave Russia were a mix of the political and war situations. Allowed to give more than one answer, 70% cited the political situation in Russia and 33% political persecution or the risk of it. The start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was cited by 60% and the later announcement of mobilization and the risk of conscription by 32%. Less than one out of five cited the economic situation in Russia.

Most of the respondents have a high or very high expectation that things in Russia will get worse in the next five years. Only about one in twenty have any expectations that things might get better. These numbers must be set alongside the result noted above that close to half of respondents would consider returning to Russia if the political situation there changes.

### **Just under two-thirds of respondents say that they participate in civil projects and activities.**

Earlier surveys have showed the recent Russian emigrants to be generally more politically interested than the average citizen in Russia, and to include long-standing as well as newly civically and politically active individuals, with many continuing their engagement abroad. The survey responses support this. Just under two-thirds of respondents say that they participate in civil projects and activities—in descending order: in protests, in providing information support, financial support, and expertise, and in organizing events.

This must be considered alongside respondents’ reported level of engagement with other Russians in their host country. One out of ten say they help their compatriots when it comes to job searches, education, and integration. Slightly fewer than one out of ten say they provide them with emergency assistance, such as with housing and money.

By contrast, just under two-thirds of respondents say they have had to reduce communication with friends and relatives in Russia due to ideological disagreements. A quarter say they avoid discussing politics with them and a quarter that they have had to sever some ties as a result.

At the same time, the picture is mixed with regard to emigrants’ integration in their host country’s society. Almost two out of five respondents say they mostly socialize with Russians and the same share say they try to make local friends. When asked to what extent they have been able to integrate, 43% of respondents position themselves toward the barely integrated end of the scale and 36% at the halfway point, while less than one out of twenty describe themselves as fully integrated.

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5 Ibid.



## Politics and Engagement



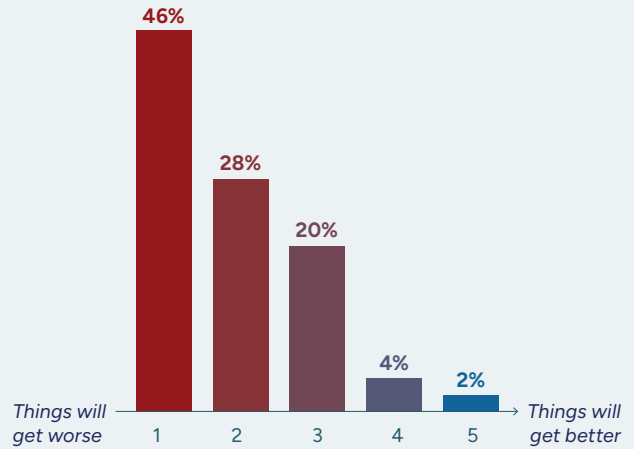
### What was the reason for your departure?

More than one answer possible.



### Do you expect changes in the political situation in Russia in the next five years?

1—5 scale: Things will get worse—Things will get better



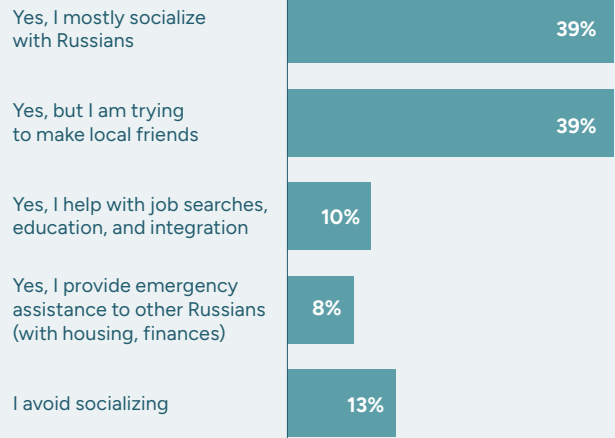
### Participation in civil projects and initiatives

More than one answer possible.



### Do you communicate with other Russians living in your host country?

More than one answer possible.



## Conclusion

Last year, a report by the German Marshall Fund of the United States set out principles and elements for a Western strategy to provide assistance to pro-democracy organizations, initiatives, groups, and individual civic actors within the post-2022 Russian emigration so as to explore and encourage any potential they may have to develop into a “democratic Russian civil society outside Russia”.<sup>6</sup> A lot of these recent emigrants are actively involved in civil projects and collaborate with activists who are still inside the country. Opposition structures, human rights organizations, and independent media operate in a hybrid format: their legal infrastructure, management and public figures are based abroad, but they still have members (and audiences) in Russia.

The report stressed three key principles for assistance to these emigrants: shifting emphasis from the exit phase to the settling phase of emigration, prioritizing connectivity within the emigration, and helping weave a civil society abroad. The elements of an assistance strategy would include mostly small, short-term assistance to the widest possible range of diverse, dispersed actors of different sizes. This would include not only formal organizations but also more bounded initiatives and projects. The assistance should have a strong focus on fostering a mix of physical and virtual connections among emigrant actors across locations (flexible networking), as well as between them and activists in Russia, and it should use varied locations and formats for delivery.

Several key questions remain even three years since the start of this emigration wave from Russia that are determinant in any discussion of how to provide assistance to foster a democratic civil society among and through them. First, donors and assistance implementers are still trying to understand the democratic potential of this community, yet they cannot wait until they do so fully to support actors in it. Second, its geographic spread and “location uncertainty” poses a collective-action challenge for this community—and a support challenge too. Third, this community needs particular forms of support, such as for physical and digital interaction and security, or for creative interaction across locations. Fourth, the various host countries where these emigrants are differ considerably in legal and other conditions for civic and political activities on their part, as well as in the attitudes of the host government and society.

### **The demographic results of the survey confirm what previous ones found in terms of the potential human capital of the recent Russian emigrants.**

The demographic results of the survey confirm what previous ones found in terms of the potential human capital of the recent Russian emigrants, who are younger and better educated than the average Russian citizen, with many working in economic sectors that are based on skills that are also important for and transferable to civic and political activity. However, there is also clearly an issue of economic precarity with high levels of unemployment and living off savings among the emigrants, which make their settling and integrating in host countries more challenging and limit their capacity for civic engagement.

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6 Ibid.

The results of the survey when it comes to residence and mobility appear to show that the process of concentration of the recent Russian emigrants in EU countries has already been under way. At the same time, it is clear that this process is far from played out, or at least that the emigrants now in non-EU countries will seek to keep it going, given the expressed intentions of almost half on them to move from their current host country. In addition, 80% of those who did not leave Russia said they were planning to do so, with 74% indicating the EU as a destination preference. Of those who had left and returned to Russia, 90% said they were considering leaving again. More generally, the enduring potential for the emigrant landscape to be in flux is reinforced by the still relatively high level of residence uncertainty among them, with 25% living in their host country without permanent status or depending on a variety of visas with different conditions or on uncertain visa-free regimes for Russians.

**Despite many of them living in economic precarity, many are also civically engaged and willing to provide various types of support to projects, activities, and other emigrants.**

In terms of the post-February 2022 Russian emigrants' civic and political potential, the survey results offer support to the conclusion of those previous surveys that found this to be present, something that other surveys have challenged. There is a clear and strong expression among the respondents that their leaving Russia was due to a combination of political and war-related factors. And they report at least some level of civic activity outside Russia. Despite many of them living in economic precarity, many are also civically engaged and willing to provide various types of support to projects, activities, and other emigrants. However, these points must be taken alongside consideration that the methodology means the survey audience was likely to reach a segment of the recent emigration that is above-average civically aware or engaged.

The potential for Russian emigrants to contribute to pro-democracy developments in Russia must also be evaluated against their ongoing connections to people in the country, and here the survey produced a mixed picture. When it comes to the emigrants' eventual return to Russia, 41% say they would not under no circumstances. Even if a majority (59%) say they would, especially if the political situation there changes (47%), as noted the expectation among respondents that things will improve in Russia in the next five years is very low.

Another challenging survey result is that fact that a large majority of respondents say they have had to reduce communication with friends and relatives in Russia due to ideological disagreements, while substantial minorities say they avoid discussing politics with them and a quarter that they have had to sever some ties as a result. This shows that the challenges for emigrants to remain productively connected to Russia at the level of civic and political life are not only from administrative restrictions or repression but also at the people-to-people level.

There should be no illusion about the increasingly totalitarian nature of the regime in Russia or about the scale of the challenge when it comes to pushing for democratic change in the country. Neither should there be about the difficult global context today for democracy and the transnational support

for democratic actors. What is more, there remains a considerable lack of knowledge about the details of current pro-democracy actors and activities in the post-February 2022 Russian emigration, and even more about any further latent democratic potential that could be tapped within it.

At the same time, however, the malign actions of Russia in Ukraine and its other neighboring countries, as well as further afield in Europe and elsewhere, show that its autocratic regime will keep posing a threat to democracies. This threat will have to be pushed back against on many levels over the long term. This should include encouraging and assisting Russian actors trying to roll back the country's autocracy, while making sure that support is provided in a way that is realistic and well-informed. This effort can draw on the emerging knowledge for how to help democratic actors that have had to flee repressive regimes, such as the one in Belarus, in large numbers.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that the recent Russian emigration is one potential avenue for pursuing this goal; the greater the knowledge democracy donors gain about this community, the better they will be to assess how best to use this opportunity.

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<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Myers, [The Strategic Potential of Democratic Exiles: Belarusian Experiences](#), German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 2025.

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