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Russia

In Search of Russia’s Lost Opposition

- Features -

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The Russian state has forced many antiwar leftists into exile, cutting them off from ordinary Russians. But activists are well aware that change in Russia must come from within, mobilizing ordinary people around their own interests. [1]

"Please check with each participant whether it's okay to take their photo."

After I take a picture of a slide during one of the presentations, a man approaches me. It's Mikhail Lobanov, a Russian socialist, who kindly reminds me that this is one of the panels where the speakers aren't to be made public. I reassure him that I'd never publish anything without consent. Mikhail accepts with a smile and returns to his seat.

I have been invited to "The Fight against Russia's war and the authoritarian regime," a conference organized by Radical Democracy Network, a broad coalition of Russian dissidents and antiwar activists. The organizers make it clear that this is no ordinary gathering. Flyers inform attendees that we are not allowed to publicize anything about today's event for security reasons. A five-day blackout is imposed on all media articles. It's about preventing Russian intelligence from tracking and mapping the guests' activity — but also to stay under the radar of the Danish police. The guests are often treated with suspicion by Western security services.

This understandable concern also reminds the other participants of the duress under which the Russian activists live. Two of today's featured speakers are introduced with a reminder not to film or mention any names, as it might jeopardize their networks in Russia. Many Russians present already appear on their government's list of "extremists who are a threat to national security."

"This event is not a public seminar, but an attempt to get the right people in the same room. I think we have accomplished this," says Bjarke Friborg from the Danish Association of Masters and PhDs. Friborg's labor union has helped organize the event through the newly established Eastern Europe Network, while their colleagues from the IT labor union (PROSA) have agreed to host the event. The largest labor union in Denmark, 3F, and the Danish Journalists' Association have cosponsored travel expenses.

The Russians have reached Copenhagen from across Europe, where they have been living since 2022. Marina Simakova lives in a former Soviet republic, and Mikhail Lobanov in France, while Denis Leven has come from Berlin. Most haven't seen their country in at least four years, and live a life of uncertainty and exile.

Radical Democracy organizer Felix kicks things off by presenting a vision meant to appeal to both conationals and the Western public.

"The Russian opposition to war is often made invisible or viewed with suspicion. To strengthen our work, we need to unite Russian activists, feminists, and labor activists and bridge our gaps."

To the young academic, it's all about creating a new, or perhaps more nuanced narrative about the Russian antiwar movement.

"People in the West generally support the Ukrainian struggle against oppression. My hope is that we can channel some of that into supporting our struggle against Vladimir Putin."

Fighting for Something Different

Following an introductory lecture about Radical Democracy and the Russian left, questions about the war in Ukraine start seeping through. During the question-and-answer portion about contemporary feminism in Russia, a Danish man in the crowd changes the subject. He wants to know whether Radical Democracy has put out a statement condemning the war in Ukraine, which he can point people toward. The question is well meant, but must feel slightly offensive to the Putin critics gathered in Copenhagen, who've sacrificed much of their existence fighting his administration. Labor activist Denis Leven replies:

> We unequivocally condemn our country's imperialist invasion of Ukraine and do everything in our power to make that clear. In Berlin where I reside, we work with the Ukrainian community to organize antiwar demonstrations. But our focus is on practical work to ensure the defeat of our regime, not just bandying empty words about the war.

The last remark is also a jab at the more liberal-conservative part of the Russian opposition, which receives most attention from Western media. This includes people like Garry Kasparov, Vladimir Kara-Murza, and the murdered Alexei Navalny and his widow, Yulia Navalnaya. Although they can all agree on opposing Putin's war, many of the activists feel that the liberal opposition's ultimate goal is shallow.

"They are fighting for the same Russia with a new head of state. We're fighting for something different," Leven says.

As is often the case, fighting comes with financial constraints. Compared to the bourgeois opposition, which is partly funded through opposition oligarchs like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, money is tight for the activist network, and the coffers are shrinking every month, especially for people still operating within Russia. But how can you fundraise efficiently while keeping out of the government's crosshairs? Today's meeting is also about solving that puzzle.

"Our work within Russia is most efficient if we fly under the radar," Anna says.

Rooting for the Home Team

Later in the afternoon, we turn to another question on everyone's mind: What do ordinary Russians really think about the war and the direction the country is headed? It's complicated, explains sociologist Oleg Zhuravlev.

> Official polls show high levels of support for the war; however, independent surveys and more in-depth studies — such as the research conducted by the Public Sociology Laboratory — suggest a different picture. The war is not popular or genuinely supported by the public. Moreover, the government is doing everything possible to allow most Russians to live without noticing the war. At the same time, the war economy helps sustain stability or even creates new opportunities for many people. As a result, many individuals feel a sense of involvement in wartime Russia, even if they oppose the war and are indifferent to Putin. That said, one should not forget those who suffer from the war economically, psychologically, and physically — and their number continues to grow.

Zhuravlev compares the sentiment among some Russians to people in the United States being critical of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but still "supporting the troops." A lot of people feel obliged to root for the home team, even though they might disagree with the captain's decisions. Zhuravlev's presentation also features today's only non-Russian presenter, the British ethnographer and political anthropologist Jeremy Morris, via Zoom. Morris examines Russia through a post-Soviet lens and publishes many of his findings on the aptly named blog Postsocialism. His research gives him a unique glimpse into ordinary Russians' true sentiments.

A member of the audience wants to know who the most fervent supporters of the war are. The poorest are often framed as most susceptible to the state's revanchist, heavily Soviet-nostalgic justifications. Professor Morris disagrees.

> While Putin does rely on a nationalist right-wing base, you can find those anywhere in the world – including here in Denmark. What ordinary Russians care about is the same as everyone else, education for their kids, house affordability, and car prices. On those parameters, the regime is currently failing.

While polls still show high levels of support for Putin within Russian society, this can also be deceptive, Morris explains.

"Most Russians initially say what they think is expected of them, but it doesn't take long before you can uncover some harsh criticisms of the state."

"Opinion polls from Russia aren't useless, but you have to take them with a grain of salt," Oleg Zhuravlev adds.

Ideological Purity

The Radical Democracy activists hope to exploit dissatisfaction lurking beneath the surface. But building a strong opposition that can challenge the all-encompassing United Russia party's grip on politics requires unity. The groups thus try to avoid "ideological purity testing," as Denis Leven calls it, focusing on uniting a broad set of opinions and various social movements under the same banner. Broad coalition building is essential if the movement wants to develop real power in Russian politics, Lobanov explains — pointing to previous interviews in Jacobin and Meduza, which is the largest independent Russian-language media outlet.

For many of the activists, this means pushing their political ideology into the background in favor of a more practical approach. Denis Leven mentions a worker hotline, which he has helped create, as an example of how they try to reach ordinary Russians and provide them with advice on labor rights or professional sparring.

Still, some basic principles are necessary.

"Although we represent a variety of opinions, we agree on some fundamental things. We are not going to reintroduce gulags on day one, and probably not on day two either," Denis says.

"Radical Democracy has the potential to unite and disseminate views that are already massively popular within Russia," Lobanov says.

A former mathematics professor at Moscow State University, Lobanov is among the veterans of the Russian left-wing opposition, and his words carry weight among the attendees. He helped organize educators and scientists during the huge protests against the government in 2011–13 colloquially known as the "snow revolution."

Lobanov, who describes himself as a democratic socialist in the vein of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, exemplifies the movement's breadth. When he ran in the 2021 parliamentary elections, he was endorsed by both independent trade unions and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) despite being an independent candidate. His convincing electoral win in Kuntsevo was overruled by the United Russia–controlled electoral commission, however, who declared his opponent, the high-profile government propagandist Yevgeny Popov, as winner. Following multiple arrests, threats, and a foreign agent label, Lobanov left Russia in 2023.

The conference is also attended by former Moscow councilman Yevgeny Stupin, whose criticism of the war quickly earned him the foreign agent label. Like most dissidents, he was also expelled by the CPRF due to his antiwar stance and left Russia in 2023. He currently resides in Germany, where he runs a YouTube channel with over nine hundred thousand subscribers.

The Collapse

A presentation about the Russian economy provides Denis Leven and "Anna" with the opportunity to dive further into the dire economic outlook touched upon by Morris and Zhuravlev.

"The invasion of Ukraine has accelerated a neoliberal hollowing-out of the labor market that has been ongoing for decades," Anna says. As a human rights lawyer representing several Russians currently subject to prosecution, her real name can't be disclosed.

Unemployment is low, even though the official figure, 1 percent, is probably a lie, Denis Leven says. But this is just half the story.

"Following the war, labor conditions have sharply deteriorated in Russia. Coupled with the high inflation rate, most people have less money in their hands, despite increased wages," Anna explains.

The activists paint a bleak picture. Still fewer Russian jobs live up to the International Labor Organization's criteria for decent work. Overtime pay is gone for many workers, while new software is used to surveil employees. The threshold for child labor has been lowered to age fourteen, and forced labor, especially within the Russian penal system, is gaining ground as a way to find cheap workers for the largest companies.

While many of these issues may strike a familiar tone to a Western audience, the situation in Russia feels exacerbated. While hollowing out workers' rights, a growing number are also employed in precarious jobs with no guaranteed hours. In the face of steep sales declines, companies like AvtoVAZ and Kamaz, the largest car manufacturers in Russia, have also started reducing their employees' hours as a masked cost-cutting exercise, Denis Leven explains. The context is a steep decline in car sales, leaving some of Russia's largest manufacturers on the verge of bankruptcy.

"In the West, a four-day workweek is a topic of huge discussion. Well, in Russia that has already become the reality for many — although the context is a bit different," he adds jokingly.

I ask the panel about a recent story revealing plans of importing up to one million workers from India. How does this apparently desperate need for more workers play into the equation?

"The Russian state has always relied on importing cheap labor. Following the war in Ukraine, fewer people from central Asian countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are inclined to migrate for work, opting for other countries like Kazakhstan. So, they are trying to plug that gap with workers from India. This puts even more pressure on labor rights," Denis Leven says.

"This also applies to the occupied territories and the Russian periphery. The Russian state cynically exploits colonized and oppressed people for cheap labor," feminist scholar Alexandra Talaver adds. "Here we also see Russian citizenship being used as leverage against workers, with the threat of removal hanging over people's heads, even for people born into citizenship."

Talaver mentions opposition politician Ilya Yashin as a recent example. The former protégé of the murdered opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was declared stateless last September, having been sentenced to eight and a half years in prison in December 2022 for speaking out against the war (Yashin was freed in August 2024 as part of the prisoner exchange that also included American journalists Alsu Kurmasheva and Evan Gershkovich).

Scattered to the Winds

The official program is concluded. For the Russian dissidents, even having been able to meet in person is a small victory.

"We are scattered to the winds. The best thing we can do in that situation is to continue the work from our new homes," Katya Shuvalova tells me over pizza in the kitchen. She has lived in Germany since 2019 and hasn't been back in Russia since 2021. In her new country she works with civic education and media literacy — which also involves countering Russian disinformation.

"It's bad in Germany. A lot of people buy into the Kremlin's false narratives there," she says.

Like many in the room, historian Marina Simakova hasn't set foot in her home country in nearly four years. She draws on her work to explain how Russian aggression took shape. She shares those insights with the fellow antiwar activists to clarify what's happening back home and what can be done about it.

For journalist Maria Menshikova (or "Masha"), the choice to stay away from Russia is just as easy. She last set foot in Russia in November 2021, and was convicted in absentia to seven years in prison in September 2024 for justifying "terrorism."

"I hadn't actually done anything. The magazine I was part of, Doxa, had made two posts on [social network] VKontakte in support of political prisoners. But they needed a scapegoat, and since I was listed as an administrator, I was an easy target," Masha says with a resigned smile.

Vitaly Bovar tells the same story. As a former St Petersburg councilman for the liberal Yabloko party, he was suspended in May 2021 after attending a conference declared illegal due to COVID-19 lockdown violations. Bovar faces three years in prison if he returns to Russia.

"I escaped Russia on the day of the verdict. I just hailed a taxi and left. The authorities were probably happy to see me go, so it was surprisingly easy to get out," he says.

Marina, Masha, and Vitaly's stories highlight the duress under which oppositionists operate. This is made even worse by the pressure facing them from their new lives in Europe, where many antiwar activists are treated with suspicion and find it difficult to establish a safe existence.

Felix says that he's currently in danger of being expelled from Denmark, where he has resided with his wife for the last two and a half years. He is currently seeking an extension of his residence permit but fears that his application may be rejected, given Danish migration authorities' restrictive stance toward Russian nationals. They also demand that he find a job that pays sufficiently to warrant a further stay, which is easier said than done.

"If my EU residence permit is not extended, next stop for me is probably Armenia. That would create great uncertainty for me and my family. Russian security casts a wide net in the former Soviet republics," he says.

The Crack in the Armor

Today, the question on everyone's lips is whether Putin's rule might collapse under the weight of its imperialist ambitions. For the dissidents gathered in Copenhagen, this question has implications for their entire life outlook. Denis Leven and Alexandra Talaver both see signs that 2026 could be a turning point.

Is it a sober assessment or a wishful dream of a better tomorrow?

Leven once again returns to Russia's bleak economic outlook. While the government has proven resilient in the face of sanctions, oppositionists believe cracks are beginning to show in its apparently solid armor. The national wealth fund, Putin's war chest, is running dry, with liquid assets such as gold being sold off at a record pace. Oversupply caused oil prices to slump by almost 20 percent in 2025, putting a huge dent in one of the state's main sources of income. Even the Kremlin's own growth projections of about 1 percent indicate trouble on the horizon, while tax hikes such as those recently applied to electronics, smartphones, and lighting products would be unwelcome for any population.

While such problems are clearly mounting, the activists agree that collapse will not come from external pressure or as the result of strategic developments in Ukraine. For Russia to change, its working class needs to rise again and rid itself of the despot.

"We are on the right side of history. All good students of Marxism know that a regime like the Russian one is bound to collapse — once again," Leven says, concluding his presentation on a belligerent note.

"When that happens, we need to be ready."

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Source: Jacobin.

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[1] Photo: Opposition candidate Mikhail Lobanov (L) speaks during a protest in Moscow on September 20, 2021. (Alexander Nemenov / AFP via Getty Images).