

**Marcus Kolga**

# *Free* **Russia**

**How Canada and the West can counter  
Russia's authoritarian regime  
and help democracy flourish**

November 2024



## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

---

### CHAIR

**Vaughn MacLellan**  
DLA Piper (Canada) LLP, Toronto

### VICE-CHAIR

**Jacquelyn Thayer Scott**  
COO, Airesun Global Ltd;  
President Emerita, Cape Breton University,  
Sydney

### MANAGING DIRECTOR

**Brian Lee Crowley**, Ottawa

### SECRETARY

**Gerry Protti**  
Chairman, BlackSquare Inc, Calgary

### TREASURER

**Martin MacKinnon**  
Co-Founder, B4checkin, Halifax

### DIRECTORS

**Richard Boudreault**, CEO,  
AWN Nanotech, Montreal

**Wayne Critchley**  
Senior Associate,  
Global Public Affairs, Ottawa

**Colleen Mahoney**  
Sole Principal,  
Committee Digest, Toronto

**Jayson Myers**  
CEO, Jayson Myers Public Affairs Inc.,  
Aberfoyle

**Dan Nowlan**  
Vice Chair, Investment Banking, National  
Bank Financial, Toronto

**Hon. Christian Paradis**  
Co-founder and Senior advisor, Global  
Development Solutions, Montréal

**Vijay Sappani**  
CEO, Ela Capital Inc, Toronto

**Veso Sobot**  
Former Director of Corporate Affairs, IPEX  
Group of Companies, Toronto

## ADVISORY COUNCIL

---

**John Beck**  
President and CEO,  
Aecon Enterprises Inc, Toronto

**Aurel Braun**,  
Professor of International Relations and  
Political Science, University of Toronto,  
Toronto

**Erin Chutter**  
Executive Chair, Global Energy  
Metals Corporation, Vancouver

**Navjeet (Bob) Dhillon**  
President and CEO,  
Mainstreet Equity Corp, Calgary

**Jim Dinning**  
Former Treasurer of Alberta, Calgary

**Richard Fadden**  
Former National Security Advisor to the  
Prime Minister, Ottawa

**Brian Flemming**  
International lawyer, writer, and policy  
advisor, Halifax

**Wayne Gudbranson**  
CEO, Branham Group Inc., Ottawa

**Calvin Helin**  
Aboriginal author and entrepreneur,  
Vancouver

**David Mulrone**  
Former Canadian Ambassador to China,  
Toronto

**Peter John Nicholson**  
Inaugural President, Council of Canadian  
Academies, Annapolis Royal

**Barry Sookman**  
Senior Partner,  
McCarthy Tétrault, Toronto

**Rob Wildeboer**  
Executive Chairman, Martinrea International  
Inc, Vaughan

**Bryon Wilfert**  
Former Parliamentary Secretary to the  
Ministers of Finance and the Environment,  
Toronto

## RESEARCH ADVISORY BOARD

---

**Janet Ajzenstat**  
Professor Emeritus of Politics,  
McMaster University

**Brian Ferguson**  
Professor, Health Care Economics,  
University of Guelph

**Jack Granatstein**  
Historian and former head of the Canadian  
War Museum

**Patrick James**  
Dornsife Dean's Professor,  
University of Southern California

**Rainer Knopff**  
Professor Emeritus of Politics,  
University of Calgary

**Larry Martin**  
Principal, Dr. Larry Martin and Associates  
and Partner, Agri-Food Management  
Excellence, Inc

**Alexander Moens**  
Professor and Chair of Political Science,  
Simon Fraser University, Greater Vancouver

**Christopher Sands**  
Senior Research Professor,  
Johns Hopkins University

**Elliot Tepper**  
Senior Fellow, Norman Paterson School of  
International Affairs, Carleton University

**William Watson**  
Associate Professor of Economics,  
McGill University

## Contents

Executive summary   <i>sommaire</i> .....	4
Introduction .....	8
Democracy derailed .....	10
Putin’s assault on human rights and freedom .....	13
The Russian pro-democracy movement today.....	15
Newly exiled Russians .....	19
Future pathways to succession or democracy.....	20
The Western long game: support for civil society and free and independent media.....	24
How Canada and its Western allies can help .....	29
Conclusion .....	30
About the author .....	32
References .....	33

Cover design: Renée Depocas (photo: iStock)

Copyright © 2024 Macdonald-Laurier Institute. May be reproduced freely for non-profit and educational purposes.

---

The author of this document has worked independently and is solely responsible for the views presented here. The opinions are not necessarily those of the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, its directors or supporters.

## Executive summary | *sommaire*

The long-term security of Canada and its allies hinges not only on the outcome of the war in Ukraine but also on the eventual democratization and decentralization of Russia. Vladimir Putin has made no secret of his ambitions for conquest, brazenly seeking to revive a Russian empire through the relentless conflicts he has inflicted upon his own nation. His neo-imperialist aspirations are paralleled by escalating domestic repression, designed to cement his grip on power and enable the kleptocrats who sustain him to plunder the state without restraint. In stark contrast, a post-Putin Russia – a nation that upholds the rights of its citizens, adheres to the rule of law, and respects the sovereignty of its neighbours – is essential for establishing a lasting and durable peace.

This report delves into the current state of Putin's regime and the forces within Russia that could pose a challenge to its rule. It examines his ruthless handling of dissent in the past and explores the prospects of the current opposition overcoming his violent and oppressive apparatus.

The stakes are high: it is in the collective interest of Canada and the democratic world to see the demise of Putin and his kleptocratic regime. Only then can we hope for a stable and peaceful future, free from the shadow of his tyranny.

Since Putin assumed the presidency on January 1, 2000, Russia has devolved into a near-totalitarian state, where democracy is ruthlessly suppressed and free speech is criminalized. The facade of strength and power that Putin projects conceals a regime steeped in corruption, paranoia, and brutal repression.

Those brave enough to challenge the Kremlin face severe repercussions: arbitrary detention, poisoning, or even assassination. The number of political prisoners in Russia now surpasses those held just before the Soviet Union's collapse, exceeding the repressive levels seen under Leonid Brezhnev. Thousands have been detained merely for expressing dissent against the government's policies and its brutal war in Ukraine.

To consolidate his power, Putin has manufactured external threats, waging wars against neighbours like Georgia and Ukraine under the guise of defending Russian interests. He fuels paranoia with baseless claims about Western and NATO plots to encircle and destroy Russia and its culture. Domestically, liberal and pro-democracy groups

– including the entire LGBTQ+ community – are branded as terrorists and suppressed. Recent constitutional amendments could keep Putin in power until 2036, dashing any hope for a peaceful transition to democracy.

The sham presidential elections of March 2024 epitomized the regime’s manipulation. Conducted in a tightly controlled environment dominated by state propaganda, the result was a foregone conclusion: Putin secured a fifth term. Meanwhile, opposition figures like Alexey Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza have been imprisoned or eliminated. These brutal tactics are designed to crush any hope of opposition.

Yet, there are glimmers of resistance. A growing female-led anti-war movement has emerged, with the wives and mothers of mobilized soldiers protesting the war and demanding the demobilization of conscripted men. Earlier this year, thousands in Bashkortostan defied harsh weather and riot police to protest the jailing of an activist who called the war “genocide.” Exiled opposition leaders are strategizing from abroad, while Russian civil society groups outside the country continue to advocate for democracy. Their work is crucial.

Canada and the West must support these efforts. Backing Russian civil society, independent journalists, and pro-democracy activists is imperative. This includes:

- providing sustainable funding
- pressuring tech firms to combat state propaganda
- enforcing sanctions against enablers of the regime
- and standing in solidarity with political prisoners.

By bolstering the efforts of exiled activists and journalists today, we help lay the groundwork for a democratic future.

Despite the Kremlin’s near-total control of Russia, truth remains a powerful weapon. The international community can help break the regime’s stranglehold by supporting those who expose the regime’s lies and challenge its narratives.

While the immediate prospects for change in Russia appear grim, history shows that authoritarian regimes are not invincible. Putin’s rule will not last forever. The courage of dissidents and independent journalists, combined with growing public discontent and sustained international support from Canada and other Western nations could eventually guide Russia away from its autocratic path. A democratic Russia that respects human rights and its neighbours is not just a distant hope – but a future worth fighting for. [MLI](#)

*La sécurité durable du Canada et de ses alliés est intimement liée à l'issue de la guerre en Ukraine, ainsi qu'à la promotion de la démocratie et de la décentralisation en Russie. Vladimir Poutine, sans jamais dissimuler ses ambitions expansionnistes, cherche obstinément à restaurer l'empire russe en infligeant à sa propre nation des conflits constants. En parallèle à ses aspirations néo-impérialistes, la répression interne s'est amplifiée pour consolider son emprise et permettre à ses alliés kleptocrates de piller l'État sans retenue. En contraste marqué, une Russie post-Poutine – qui protège les droits de ses citoyens, soutient l'État de droit et respecte la souveraineté de ses voisins – est essentielle pour assurer une paix durable.*

*Ce document examine la situation actuelle du régime de Poutine et les forces susceptibles de contester son autorité en Russie. Il explore son traitement sans pitié de la dissidence antérieure et les possibilités que présente l'opposition pour détruire sa machine oppressive et violente.*

*Les enjeux sont considérables : il est dans l'intérêt supérieur du Canada et du monde démocratique de mettre fin au régime kleptocratique de Poutine. C'est uniquement dans ces circonstances que nous pourrions aspirer à un avenir de stabilité et de paix, émancipé de l'oppression de ce tyran.*

*Depuis l'élection de Poutine à la présidence, le 1er janvier 2000, la Russie s'est transformée en un État quasi totalitaire où la démocratie est brutalement étouffée et où toute expression libre est passible de poursuites. L'image de pouvoir et d'autorité de Poutine dissimule un régime corrompu, paranoïaque et répressif.*

*Ceux qui osent s'opposer au Kremlin courent de grands risques : incarcération arbitraire, empoisonnement ou meurtre. La Russie compte actuellement plus de détenus politiques qu'avant l'effondrement de l'empire soviétique et signale un degré de répression dépassant même celui de l'époque Brejnev. Des milliers d'individus ont été appréhendés pour avoir manifesté leur désaccord avec les politiques du gouvernement et son conflit sanglant en Ukraine.*

*Pour accroître son influence, Poutine a inventé des dangers externes et précipité des conflits armés contre des pays limitrophes, comme la Géorgie et l'Ukraine, au nom des intérêts nationaux. Il alimente la paranoïa en affirmant faussement que l'Occident et l'OTAN conspirent pour encercler et anéantir la Russie et sa culture. Les groupes libéraux et prodémocratie, y compris la communauté LGBTQ+, sont qualifiés de terroristes et réprimés. Des changements constitutionnels pourraient autoriser Poutine à conserver le pouvoir jusqu'en 2036, éliminant ainsi toute option de passage démocratique.*

*Les élections fictives de mars 2024 ont révélé combien le pouvoir manipule les résultats. Elles ont eu lieu dans un contexte contrôlé et propagandiste, assurant à Poutine un cinquième mandat. Des opposants comme Alexey Navalny et Vladimir Kara-Murza auraient été soit appréhendés, soit tués dans le but de réprimer toute résistance.*

*Toutefois, des filets de résistance existent bien. De plus en plus de femmes, compagnes et mères de soldats conscrits, manifestent leur opposition à la guerre,*

*réclamant le retour des hommes enrôlés. Au début de cette année, des milliers d'habitants du Bashkortostan, bravant les rigueurs de l'hiver et les forces antiémeutes, se sont rassemblés pour manifester leur opposition à l'emprisonnement d'un militant qui a qualifié le conflit armé de « génocide ». De leur côté, des leaders politiques en exil conçoivent activement des stratégies depuis l'étranger. Quant aux organisations de la société civile russes en dehors du pays, elles poursuivent leurs efforts inlassables pour promouvoir la démocratie. Leur œuvre est essentielle.*

*Le Canada et l'Occident doivent soutenir ces efforts. Il est impératif de soutenir la société civile, les journalistes indépendants et les militants prodémocratie russes. Il faut notamment :*

- Assurer un financement durable;*
- Faire pression sur les entreprises technologiques pour qu'elles luttent contre la propagande d'État;*
- appliquer des sanctions à l'encontre de ceux qui soutiennent le régime;*
- soutenir les prisonniers politiques.*

*En appuyant les efforts des militants et des journalistes actuellement en exil, nous contribuons à jeter les bases d'un avenir démocratique.*

*Malgré le contrôle presque total de la Russie par le Kremlin, la vérité reste une force puissante. La communauté internationale peut contribuer à démanteler la domination du régime en soutenant les personnes qui révèlent ses tromperies et remettent en question ses discours.*

*Si les perspectives immédiates de changement en Russie paraissent défavorables, l'histoire démontre que les régimes autoritaires ne sont pas invincibles. Le règne de Poutine ne durera pas éternellement. Le courage des dissidents et des journalistes indépendants, conjugué à l'insatisfaction grandissante de la population et au soutien continu du Canada et d'autres pays occidentaux, pourrait faire évoluer la Russie vers une démocratie respectueuse des droits de la personne et des nations voisines. Cet avenir est envisageable – et mérite d'être défendu. **MLI***

## Introduction

Vladimir Putin's revanchist and repressive regime poses a direct and multi-faceted threat to Canadian and allied national security. Putin's foreign aggression not only threatens to destabilize nations in Europe but has global repercussions that extend to the Arctic, cyberspace, and even the integrity of our democratic institutions. As Russia seeks to expand its influence and undermine NATO unity, Canada's role as a key NATO member and Arctic nation is incrementally moving into Vladimir Putin's crosshairs.

Moscow's hybrid warfare tactics – ranging from information and influence operations campaigns to cyberattacks – aim to undermine Canadian and Western democracies, erode social cohesion and suppress public and political support for Ukraine. Canada is also a significant target of Russian intelligence. For instance, Russian GRU Colonel Mikhail Mikushin was arrested by Norwegian intelligence in 2022 after years of operating in Canada as a student at Carleton University and the University of Calgary. During his time in Canada, Mikushin even contributed to a journal about Canadian military naval issues (Cesso 2022).

Additionally, Russia's Arctic ambitions, fuelled by climate change and resource competition, could challenge Canadian sovereignty in the North.

Domestically, Putin's support for authoritarian regimes emboldens anti-democratic forces globally, threatening Canada's efforts to uphold international human rights and democracy. As long as Russia remains centralized under Putin's regime, the risk of escalated confrontation – whether in Europe, the Arctic, or the cyber domain – remains high, making it essential for Canada to invest in robust defences and engage in coordinated efforts with allies to counter these threats.



On January 1, 2000, Vladimir Putin ascended to the presidency of Russia and set the country on a course of democratic regression and endemic corruption. He has transformed Russia into a nation where democracy is repressed, free expression is outlawed, and the state controls the flow of almost all information.

Those who bravely challenge and expose the regime's corruption, abuses, and failures are met with brutal repression – threats, arbitrary detention, poisoning, and even assassination. Thousands of Russians have been detained over the past few years for voicing dissent against their government and its cruel war against Ukraine. Presently, the number of political prisoners in Russian jails surpasses those held on the eve of the Soviet Union's collapse, with Russia outpacing the repression rates seen under Leonid Brezhnev (Goble 2023).



*Pro-democracy civil society groups  
that challenge and resist  
Putin's corruption and abuses  
have been criminalized and  
branded as terrorists.*

To build and maintain a domestic image of strength and power, and in an effort to reassert neo-Soviet military influence, Putin launched military interventions against Russia's neighbours, Georgia and Ukraine, under the pretext of defending Russian interests – even though they posed no direct threat to Russia's security. Internally, liberal and pro-democracy civil society groups that challenge and resist Putin's corruption and abuses have been criminalized and branded as terrorists – including the entire LGBTQ+ community (Chernova 2023).

The staged March 2024 presidential “elections,” which predictably saw a landslide victory for Putin, were orchestrated in a political environment that has been hermetically sealed off from truth and reality, dominated by lies, conspiracies, and paranoia. As always, the outcome was never in doubt; Putin is currently serving his fifth term as president.

With enemies everywhere and government repression in overdrive, a paranoid neo-Stalinist gloom has enveloped Russia, like a page ripped from an Orwell novel.

This report examines the dark realities faced by those who dare to oppose the regime – from the unjust incarceration of thousands to the branding of civil rights advocates as enemies of the state. It outlines the course of Russia’s democratic backslide into a totalitarian state and explores the resilience and possible futures of the Russian opposition.

Canada and its democratic allies can play a pivotal role in advancing democratic values, human rights, the rule of law, and respect for the sovereignty of neighbouring states by supporting Russian human rights activists, civil society groups, and independent media. These efforts can help illuminate the darkness of Putin’s regime, advancing truth and facts to challenge its Orwellian narrative.

## Democracy derailed

Under Vladimir Putin’s iron rule, Russia’s move towards democracy, which began in the 1990s, has ground to a halt. His regime now controls every facet of Russian life.

The future of democracy in Russia is dim as well. Amendments to Russia’s constitution (Radio Free Europe 2021) – forced through by the regime in 2021 – will now permit Putin to remain leader until at least 2036 or beyond (Roth 2021). All of Putin’s significant challengers, such as opposition leaders or dissidents, are either exiled, imprisoned or murdered. The possibility of overthrowing the regime remains, but it would likely be fraught with turbulence and violence. In June 2023, Yevgeni Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner mercenary group and the Internet Research Agency (known as the St. Petersburg Troll Farm) launched a coup against the Putin regime. While Prigozhin quickly aborted his putsch, it exposed the regime’s weakness. (As for Prigozhin, the man once known as “Putin’s chef” later died in an “accidental” plane crash in August 2023.)

Over the past two decades, Russia has been flooded by regime disinformation, conspiracies, and propaganda, creating an alternative reality for Russians and a nation that is cognitively isolated from the world around them. In Vladimir Putin's parallel universe, Russia is in a perpetual state of conflict and warfare against an array of imaginary adversaries, ranging from Ukraine's "neo-Nazi" (Berger 2022) government to the "imperialist" democratic nations of NATO (RT 2020). Putin and his kleptocrats are portrayed as Russian heroes, in the repressive visage of Joseph Stalin (Elliott 2023), safeguarding the nation against all threats, both foreign and domestic. The diminutive former KGB agent is depicted as the sole defender of Russia's borders and its people, standing resolutely against what Putin characterizes as the "pure Satanism" of the Western world (RT 2023).

Most recently, the Kremlin exploited a March 2024 terror attack at Moscow's Crocus City Hall to fit into the regime's alternate reality. Despite clear evidence of ISIS's involvement, including the Islamist terror group's own public admission of responsibility, the Kremlin and Russian state media persist in attributing the attack to Ukrainian and Western forces. In the wake of the attack, baseless theories have surfaced, including claims that the United States has control (YouTube 2024) over ISIS. Echoing these unfounded allegations, former US weapons inspector and pro-Kremlin commentator Scott Ritter told Sputnik News that the incident was "a political act tied to an American policy objective, executed by Ukrainian intelligence services" (Sputnik News 2024). Setting aside the disinformation and conspiracy theories, the Kremlin will continue to manipulate and exploit the incident to fuel further fear within Russian society and animosity towards Central Asian minorities, Ukraine, and the democracies of the West.

Critics are assassinated and arbitrarily detained to silence them. The list of arrest warrants the Kremlin has issued for journalists continues to grow; as does the list of "foreign agents," "undesirable" organizations, and those banned from Russia in the Western world – this author and Canada's Macdonald-Laurier Institute among them.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought with it an immediate intensification of censorship and full authoritarian repression in the days that followed. Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen, who was in central Moscow during the invasion, reported seeing "three policemen in full combat gear dragging a young woman into a police bus. And then behind them, another three

policemen dragging another young woman” (Klein 2022) while life around them was going on as usual.

In the weeks following the invasion, the Kremlin blocked almost all remaining independent media outlets in Russia – including those operating online. Authorities arrested more than 15,000 Russians for protesting the war. Some were detained for simply holding up a white sheet of paper. Authorities arrested an elderly woman within three seconds after she held up a sheet that had written on it “*two words*” (a coded Russian reference to the slogan “no war”) (*The Economist* 2022). Many others have been arrested for posting statements on social media criticizing the war.



*In the weeks following  
Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,  
the Kremlin blocked almost all  
remaining independent media  
outlets in the country.*

The journalists, civil society activists, and democratic opposition leaders who over the past decades have investigated and protested the expanding authoritarian nature of the Putin regime have been imprisoned, forced into exile, or assassinated, sending a chill through Russia’s civil society and journalist communities.

Dissident opposition leaders like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who once exclusively promoted non-violent resistance, have now resigned themselves to the reality that change in leadership and a democratic future for Russia is only possible through the use of force. In a December 2023 article, entitled “Democracy in Russia is Possible” (Khodorkovsky 2023), Khodorkovsky wrote that Russians “must face up to the hard reality that peaceful demonstrations alone cannot succeed against Putin’s brutal regime. This means that he [Putin] will not be replaced through the ballot box or peaceful protest.” He continues, “We must therefore depose the regime and then be ready to defend our democratic interests.... Toppling Putin is a prerequisite for a democratic change, but we also need a vision of what comes next.”

## Putin's assault on human rights and freedom

In August 1999, Russian President Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin as prime minister – a decision that set into motion Russia's tragic slide from a vibrant burgeoning democracy into a neo-totalitarian kleptocracy.

At the time, the former head of Russia's Federal Security Services had just a 2 per cent approval rating among Russian voters.

Putin's prominence skyrocketed after a series of terrorist bombings rocked several Russian cities in the weeks that followed his appointment. Russia authorities officially blamed the bombings, which killed 300 people and injured 1,500 more, on Chechen separatists. The bombings and subsequent war in Chechnya dramatically improved Putin's popularity ratings and his political future.

At the time, Russia's then-free and independent media began to question who was truly responsible for the attacks. Their suspicions grew after FSB agents were seen loading sugar sacks containing an explosive chemical, hexogen, into an apartment complex in Ryazan, a city 200 kilometres southeast of Moscow on September 22, 1999. Local police arrested three of the agents on suspicion of planting the sacks, prompting Putin's successor as head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev to declare that the Ryazan incident had simply been a training exercise (Eckel 1999). Using the bombings as a pretext to mass Russia's armed forces on Russia's border with Chechnya, Putin then ordered his troops to "take out the terrorists in their shithouses" (Litvenenko and Goldfarb 2007) cementing his strong-man image and further boosting his popularity among Russians.

Politically, the Chechen crisis was a major success. Putin's growing popularity allowed him to tighten his grip on power: a strategy that would be deployed repeatedly over the coming 24 years to further consolidate the regime's control over Russia.

He also launched an earnest assault on Russian free media. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists 2023), 7 journalists were killed in 2000. Since then, at least 36 more have been killed – many in retaliation for their reporting. Hundreds of journalists have been arrested.

Major Russian independent media outlets that openly questioned the Ryazan bombing case and criticized the new regime, such as NTV, swiftly

fell under government scrutiny. Kremlin tax agents raided the offices of NTV and detained its owner, Vladimir Gusinsky, leading to the subsequent seizure, dismantling, and discounted sale of NTV and its parent corporation to government-controlled entities (Glasser and Baker 2001). A similar fate awaited Russian media magnate Boris Berezovsky and his company ORT, as they too faced repercussions for their criticism of the new Russian president (Birchenough 2000).

Activists and journalists who criticized Putin's war in Chechnya or other sensitive issues were silenced – often violently— to send a message to anyone else who questioned Russia's new ruler.

Journalist Anna Politkovskaya was shot twice in the chest, once in the shoulder, and once in the head at close range down in the elevator of her apartment building in 2006 after she exposed Russian abuses and crimes in Chechnya.

The Kremlin also targeted former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko, an associate of Boris Berezovsky, after he exposed an FSB plot to assassinate the former media mogul and the FSB's involvement in the 1999 apartment bombings. His former FSB colleagues poisoned him in a London hotel with radioactive polonium in 2006.

Former Yukos Oil owner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who refused to follow Putin's orders to cease his activism and support for Russian civil society groups, was stripped of his company and jailed for his resistance.

Anti-corruption whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky, who exposed massive tax fraud committed by Russian officials, was arrested, abused, and killed to cover up the crime committed by Russian tax agents.

The regime's growing authoritarian repression provoked public protests and the rise of opposition politicians, led by pro-democracy reformer Boris Nemtsov and chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov. Among them were anti-corruption activist, Alexey Navalny, journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza, Ilya Yashin and opposition Duma member, Ilya Ponomarev. Ahead of Russia's 2012 elections, the opposition leaders organized a series of protests – many of which attracted as many as 50,000 protestors (France24 2011). Despite the arrests of organizers and protestors, the protests continued through 2013 but fell off due to an intensification of regime repression and persecution of opposition leaders following the start of Putin's third Presidential term.

In February 2015, the assassination of Boris Nemtsov just steps away from the Kremlin sent a permanent chill through the opposition movement, provoking many to seek refuge in exile. Those who bravely fought on, like Vladimir Kara-Murza, also became targets for assassination. In 2015 and again in 2017, Kara-Murza barely survived two attempted poisonings. Alexey Navalny survived a similar attempt on his life in August 2020. An investigation conducted by the renowned open-source intelligence investigation teams at Bellingcat and The Insider later revealed that both Vladimir Kara-Murza and Alexey Navalny were followed by the same FSB team that had tailed Boris Nemtsov before being assassinated in Moscow.

## The Russian pro-democracy movement today

After receiving treatment in Germany to recover from an attempted poisoning in August 2020, Russian opposition activist, Alexey Navalny returned to Moscow, briefly rekindling the flame of democracy and the appetite for change in Russia. Following his arrest at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport, 100,000 people took to the streets in cities across Russia in protest. Authorities violently detained nearly 4,000 protestors (Human Rights Watch 2021) – among them, at least 300 children.

Vladimir Putin, shaken by the protests and alarmed by popular uprisings in Belarus, intensified the Kremlin's repressive grip on Russian society. In response to these threats, the regime introduced a series of new laws designed to silence civil society groups, suppress independent media, and curb public protests. The new legislation triggered a "witch hunt" that according to Human Rights Watch decimated Russian civil society and forced activists, journalists, and human rights lawyers into exile (Human Rights Watch 2022). The most recent phase of Russia's war against Ukraine has further intensified Russian state repression. Since February 24, 2022, over 20,000 Russians have been detained for criticizing the war (Amnesty International 2023). Authorities have criminally charged more than 500, including children and pensioners (Ebel 2023).



In April 2022, officials arrested Russian opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza outside of his Moscow apartment after giving an interview about the war to CNN. In April 2023, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for treason. At his sentencing, he said “I do not ask this court for anything. I know the verdict. I knew it a year ago when I saw people in black uniforms and black masks running after my car in the rearview mirror. Such is the price for speaking up in Russia today.” He continued, “I know that the day will come when the darkness over our country will be gone. And then our people will open their eyes and shudder at the sight of the horrific crimes committed in their names.”

Held in isolation, Kara-Murza has little interaction with any other prisoners. But in July 2023, he was, to his great surprise, called as a witness by Navalny to his trial via video link. “Only in a Russian court can an extremist call a traitor as his defence witness,” quipped Navalny during his exchange with Kara-Murza (Kara-Murza 2023). Navalny’s official questions to Kara-Murza regarding his indictment were, as Kara-Murza explains, Kafkaesque:

“Does public opposition to the government constitute extremist activity? Is the freedom of public demonstrations conditional on permission by the authorities? Was his [Navalny’s] 2013 campaign for mayor of Moscow (where he came in second with 27 per cent of the vote (*Washington Post* 2013)) just a cover for his underground illegal activities? Were his anti-corruption investigations detailing the riches of Vladimir Putin (Navalny 2021) and his close entourage (Navalny 2017) slanderous fabrications?’ And so on. A few times, I had to ask whether the question was serious. ‘Unfortunately, yes – that is my indictment,’ Alexei would respond each time.”

In April 2023, Kara-Murza was moved to a maximum-security prison in Omsk where he was held in solitary detention until his release in August 2024. His wife, Evgenia, who has travelled the world advocating for the release of her husband over the past two years (Kintzler 2024), told me that her husband was confined to a concrete 1.5-metre-by-3-metre cell equipped with a metal stool and a bed. Vladimir suffers from severe polyneuropathy, affecting the nerves in his legs, from his 2015 poisoning – and had not received medical attention since October 2023. The condition requires regular physical exercise and special medical treatment, which he did not receive. In solitary confinement, authorities allowed him to read and write for just 90 minutes every day before removing his pen and paper from the cell.



Kara-Murza's opposition colleague, Ilya Yashin, was sentenced to 8 and a half years for his social media posts that denounced the atrocities committed by Russian troops in Bucha, Ukraine.

On August 1, 2024, Kara-Murza, Yashin, and 16 other political prisoners and hostages, including fellow activists Andrei Pivovarov, Oleg Orlov, journalists Evan Gershkovich, Alsu Kurmasheva, and Canadian Paul Whelan, were released in a major prisoner swap. Returning to Russia were Russian intelligence officers, including an FSB assassin, Vadim Krasikov, and GRU Colonel, Mikhail Mikushin, who had been spying for the Kremlin in Canada for years while studying at Carleton University and the University of Calgary under an assumed name.

As for Navalny, who had been sentenced to over 30 years in prison, authorities transferred him in late December 2023 to one of the most remote and notoriously brutal prisons in Russia, known as "Polar Wolf," 1,900 kilometres northeast of Moscow (Faulconbridge 2023). He was killed there in February 2024.

While most public dissent in Russia has been suppressed by the regime, the impact of the war on communities living in impoverished rural regions and the families of Russian soldiers has provoked a growing backlash.

In cities across Russia, women in white head scarfs gather with flowers as part of a new and growing anti-war resistance movement (*Moscow Times* 2024). They are the mothers and wives of Russian men who have been mobilized to fight in the Kremlin's war against Ukraine and they're demanding the total demobilization of Russian men conscripted into Putin's army. Despite the criminalization of any criticism of the war, these women have been able to protest without too much negative attention from the authorities. Their Telegram channel, where they coordinate their protests, "Put Domoy (The Way Home)" has attracted more than 40,000 subscribers since it launched in September 2023 (Saur 2023).

Many women who recently joined the movement had not previously taken part in anti-Kremlin protests, and a considerable number had previously expressed support for Putin. The regime's tolerance of the movement may be out of concern that a violent crackdown on female protesters may cause a broader backlash against the war and the Putin regime.

In January 2024, thousands of protestors braved -20C weather and Russian riot police to protest the sentencing of a Bashkir activist to four years

in prison in the remote town of Baimak in Russia's Bashkortostan region. The activist, Fail Alsynov, had publicly criticized Russia's war against Ukraine and called the Kremlin's mobilization in the region a "genocide" (Greenall 2024). The protestors clashed with heavily armed Russian riot police, who shot tear gas into the crowds and beat protestors with truncheons. According to reports, the Kremlin sent Russia's National Guard to support the police crackdown in the remote town, underlining the regime's paranoid sensitivity towards protests (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2024a).

Both the feminist anti-war movement and the recent uprising in Bashkortostan, demonstrate the growing domestic opposition towards Russia's war against Ukraine and the threat it could potentially pose to Vladimir Putin's authority.

However, it's unlikely that disparate movements like these will bring about fundamental political change in Russia on their own. Any serious challenge to the regime's authority requires coordination and a unified effort among those who seek it.

Those Russian civil society activists who for the past two decades have bravely stood up for democratic values, human rights and free expression, and who worked to unite Russian activists, have mostly fled into exile abroad. Today they're largely concentrated in the Baltic States, Germany, Czechia, Georgia, and the United Kingdom, where they face the challenges of distance and regime censorship in their efforts to maintain their fight for a free Russia.

The Lithuanian government has long hosted exiled opposition activists and groups from both Belarus and Russia and, along with Latvia, has become a regional hub for Russian independent media, CSOs and activists. Conferences, like the Vilnius Russia Forum and the Free Russia Forum, bring together exiled Russian opposition leaders, civil society activists, and independent Russian journalists, allowing them to discuss the political situation inside Russia and foster a network of activists in hopes of uniting them in common cause for human rights, freedom, and democracy in Russia. Differences in strategy, tactics, and goals have made the road towards the unification of opposition groups and leaders challenging and divisions remain about Russia's war against Ukraine. Some support the complete restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty while others seek an immediate ceasefire and a freezing of the conflict.

## Newly exiled Russians

Russia's war against Ukraine has caused a mass exodus of Russians to Europe and the South Caucasus – primarily Georgia, Armenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Germany. Russian journalist and diaspora expert Andrei Soldatov estimates that up to one million Russians have fled over the past two years. Most Russians have emigrated to Central Asia and the Caucasus, while journalists and civil society activists have escaped to Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Czechia, and Germany.

The flight of Russian political exiles began in the early 2000s in response to Putin's escalating repression against independent journalists and pro-democracy opposition groups and their leaders. While Canada hasn't been a significant destination for this group, the Russian-speaking diaspora has grown during this time, thanks mostly to economic emigres. According to recent census data, there are approximately 500,000 people living in Canada who identify as Russian.

The Russian government, through its diplomatic missions, including those in Canada, seeks to influence this community through various diaspora programs, like Russotrudnichestvo (Propastop 2023) (Montreal MID 2023), Russkiy Mir (Russkiy Mir 2023) and the Russian Orthodox Church (Soldatov and Borogan 2023). In the past, Kremlin sympathizers have formed astroturf groups (a fake group created to give the false impression of grassroots community engagement) with the appearance of representing the Russian community in Canada in order to influence policy debates and affect their outcomes. When international media exposed the groups' overtly aggressive pro-Kremlin campaigns, they halted their efforts (Levin and Becker 2017). Despite this, the Russian government persists in its efforts to manufacture community groups to advocate in Canada on its behalf. As recently as November 2023, the Russian embassy in Ottawa hosted a diaspora coordinating conference. Russian independent media outlet Meduza has also warned that the Russian government actively monitors the social media accounts of Russian diaspora members in Canada (Meduza 2023a).

The Canadian government should be aware of these efforts and work with emerging pro-democracy Russian community groups to counter them. Viable partners in this effort include the Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance

(Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance 2023) and independent media, including those publishing newspapers in Toronto and those broadcasting on television, including the Rogers' OMNI network.

Beyond Canada, Western governments can support exiled civil society, media, and opposition activists by helping them to learn, organize, and politically advance their cause. Ensuring that these exiled communities remain aligned with democratic values and principles and that they promote those values and principles in Russia, should be a priority for all Western governments.

## Future pathways to succession or democracy

In Spring 2014, over a breakfast in Tallinn, the late Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov told me that he believed that Putin's last opportunity to make a peaceful and quiet exit from the presidency was in 2012. Putin's corruption and repression made such an exit impossible after the rigged 2012 presidential elections. Nemtsov told me that from then on, the only way Putin would exit was "feet first." That was the last time I would meet with Nemtsov; 9 months later he was brutally gunned down just steps from the Kremlin.

Nemtsov's prediction is even more likely today than in 2014. Recent changes to the Russian constitution will allow Putin to serve until 2036. Should Putin be in good health in the final years of that final term, nothing would prevent him from making further amendments to the constitution to extend his rule, making him dictator-for-life. While polling in Russia is highly unreliable due to regime repression of public criticism, the Russian public seems to be fine with that. Russia's Levada Center reports that Putin has an 87 per cent post-election approval rating among Russians.

Young Russians who have braved violent repression and arrest to protest the arrest and killing of Alexey Navalny, the war, and Putin's rigged election have provided a glimmer of hope. Professor Ian Garner, author of *Generation Z* notes (Garner 2024) that the "occasional and eye-catching public protests have seen youths covering themselves in blood, holding anti-war signs in public places, and plastering Moscow with anti-war QR codes." However, according

to a recent survey (Global Affairs 2023), most Russian youth are unlikely to vote or participate in politics. In fact, many are quite pleased with Putin's ultranationalist government and its war against Ukraine. At a recent World Youth Congress in Krasnodar, youth wore t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Russia, Putin, Forever." Over 1.5 million Russian youth have joined the Russian state-run Youth Army (Yunarmiya) paramilitary group and millions more have joined a less militarized organization, ominously named The Movement of the First (Dvizheniye pervykh).

With the opposition exiled, free media censored, and major social media and internet platforms like YouTube and Facebook banned from the Russian internet, Russian citizens have been cast into a state of cognitive inertia and political apathy by state propaganda – pushing the horizon for democratic change decades into the future. However, the opportunistic kleptocrats who believe that they, or their offspring, have a chance to succeed Putin may not wish to wait that long.

“ *Should a fundamental political change occur in Russia ... the likelihood that it will be achieved peacefully is very low.* ”

Should a fundamental political change occur in Russia in the coming months or years, the likelihood that it will be achieved peacefully is very low. Moreover, there is no certainty that a liberal democratic opposition leader will succeed Putin after such a change.

Western sanctions have placed significant pressure on the Putin-linked kleptocrats targeted by these measures. (The Magnitsky sanctions are an example of these penalties. American financier and political activist Bill Browder championed the sanctions following the murder of his lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, who uncovered a \$230 million tax fraud committed by Russian officials in 2007 and was subsequently imprisoned by Russian authorities for reporting it.)

While sanctions have placed stress on parts of the Russian economy and the personal wealth of Russia's oligarchs, countries like China and India continue to fill the Putin regime's coffers with energy revenues (Murtaugh and Chakraborty 2023). Certainly, the oligarchs resent restrictions on their travel or access to Western funds. But the pain they're feeling hasn't yet prompted them to turn against the regime. Should they choose to abandon Putin and leave Russia, the Kremlin will simply seize and redistribute those assets to the regime insiders or oligarchs who remain loyal. However, if Putin stays for yet another term after the current one expires, the oligarchs and Siloviki (Putin's loyalist strongmen) or their offspring who are lining up to succeed the Russian leader, may become impatient and challenge the status quo.

Whoever takes over after Putin, it is highly unlikely that they will usher in democracy or reinstate the rights of the Russian people. Indeed, in the summer of 2023, Russians and the world saw a foreshadowing of how the Putin regime may ultimately fall.

In late June of that year, Yevgeni Prigozhin once a close ally of Putin and leader of the notorious Wagner private militia, ordered his soldiers to advance towards the headquarters of Russia's Southern Military District in Rostov, with the eventual aim of marching to Moscow and the Kremlin (Steele 2023) Prigozhin's actions were driven not by a quest for democratic reforms or ethical principles, but rather by a mix of jealousy, personal vendettas, and a demand for increased autonomy and support for his forces engaged in Putin's war in Ukraine.

Prigozhin ultimately aborted his coup after striking a deal with Belarus dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who offered to host Prigozhin's soldiers. At its bare minimum, the episode demonstrated a weakness within the regime that might be exploited by exiled pro-democracy opposition groups, or perhaps hardline groups more aligned with Prigozhin or worse yet, nationalist extremists like the late Vladimir Zhrinovsky (Sloane 2022). Just two months after Prigozhin's cancelled uprising, he was killed when a plane he was travelling in exploded and crashed shortly after taking off from Moscow. US intelligence officials stated that the explosion that destroyed the aircraft was "intentional" (Burrows and Madhani 2023).

An exiled former member of the Russian Duma, Ilya Ponomarev, monitored Prigozhin's uprising and was inspired by it. Ponomarev, distinguished as the only lawmaker who opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, is

actively mobilizing opposition-minded Russians to join the Freedom of Russia Legion. This legion aims to defend Ukraine and eventually mirror Prigozhin's audacious approach in advancing towards Moscow.

Ponomarev has also been instrumental in forming a Russian shadow parliament in exile, the Congress of People's Deputies, based in Poland. This assembly comprises approximately 100 Russian former and current elected officials.

In a late 2023 interview at a Vilnius restaurant, Ponomarev shared his plans to adopt Prigozhin's strategy as a blueprint for his eventual march on Moscow. Despite the wildly ambitious nature of his plan, Ponomarev notes that Prigozhin's success proves that it's not unattainable. Ponomarev aims to recruit 5,000 volunteers in the coming months and claims to already have 1,000 troops in training or fighting alongside Ukrainian forces. He has promised the Freedom of Russia Legion recruits a complimentary tour of the Kremlin upon achieving their goal.

Ponomarev believes that his plan will succeed because "Russians respect power and strength." He points to the positive reception Wagner troops received in Rostov during their temporary occupation as evidence of Russians' desire to rid their country of Putin – provided they see the strength and power that would back and sustain such a shift. The Legion he is assembling would be crucial both for instigating and maintaining this political change.

Ponomarev claims that his groups have been in many operations inside Russia, including drone attacks, sabotage of railway lines (Meduza 2023b), and high-profile assassinations (Ignatius 2023).

Beyond plotting Putin's downfall, Ponomarev is also trying to unite the Russian opposition in exile – and he's making progress. His shadow parliament is functioning as a shadow government ready to assume control if Putin's regime collapses. His group includes former federal and regional Duma members, and Ponomarev claims that current deputies are also participating, albeit anonymously for their safety. He also says he is in regular contact with certain Russian officials, who are standing ready to help when political change occurs.

The Kremlin appears to be taking these developments seriously. Ponomarev revealed that Ukrainian intelligence has thwarted at least two assassination attempts against him. He employs a team of bodyguards and limits his travel. In February the FSB announced that the Kremlin had "opened several criminal cases, including treason in the form of defection to the side



of the enemy [and] participation in calls for terror, all combined into one proceeding” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023). Mocking the charges, Ponomarev shot back on social media, telling Russian authorities that “By the way, I have also combined all forms of struggle against Putinism in one proceeding. And something tells me that my efficiency will be higher.”

It’s possible that Putin will intensify his targeting of Russian opposition leaders in exile in the coming months. In an address to his former FSB colleagues just days after the conclusion of Russia’s staged presidential election, Putin publicly ordered the FSB to hunt down “traitors,” vowing ominously to “punish them without time limitation, wherever they may be.”

While Ponomarev’s plan may seem far-fetched, imprisoned Russian opposition leader Vladimir Kara-Murza reminds us that political change in Russia often occurs unexpectedly, suddenly, and sometimes violently.

## **The Western long game: support for civil society and free and independent media**

The first step towards overthrowing Russia’s kleptocratic authoritarianism is to provide the Russian public access to truth and facts. This requires a robust independent media that can challenge the regime’s toxic propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. We must also find ways for Russians to circumvent Putin’s virtual iron curtain of internet censorship. For instance, Google and other search engine companies could adjust their algorithms within Russia to promote content produced by respected independent media outlets such as Mediazona, Novaya Gazeta, and Projekt, as well as civil society organizations like the Free Russia Forum, Activatica, and the Free Russia Foundation. Fact and truth are anathema to autocrats – and a direct threat to Putin’s rule.

The Kremlin’s war on facts, truth and Russian independent journalism has steeply accelerated since the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine in 2014. According to independent outlet Project Media, in 2021 alone, “23 media outlets and 40 journalists were declared to be foreign agents, while ... Project



[Media], was named an “undesirable organisation” (Balakhonova et al. 2023) (The Kremlin declared the Macdonald-Laurier Institute an “undesirable organization” in 2022). The work of the federal Russian agency tasked with policing the Russian internet and enforcing state censorship, Roskomnadzor, went into overdrive when Russian forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Editors and journalists who remained in Russia knew that they would soon face a massive wave of censorship and repression.

Tikhon Dzyadko, editor-in-chief of Russia’s largest independent television news network, Dozhd (TV Rain), received a call from Roskomnadzor the day after the invasion, ordering his team “to only present verified information” on their network – meaning information approved by Russian authorities. The same authorities shut down the network a few days later – forcing the editorial team to escape and set up operations in the West. In July 2023, the regime declared the network “undesirable,” putting staff members at risk of jail and criminalizing audience engagement, including social media sharing of content produced by Dozhd.

One of the oldest and most listened-to radio stations in Russia, Echo of Moscow, was shut down just days after the war, while the legendary *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper was shut down a month later – along with almost all other Russian independent media, cutting Russians off from truth and facts about Russia’s war. Journalists and platforms operating in more remote and rural regions of Russia were not spared. Journalists at the small Siberian website “People of Baikal” were detained by the FSB when they attended soldier funerals and the founder of another online site, Taiga.info fled abroad.

According to Project Media, at least 504 journalists fled Russia during the first year of the war. During the same period, Roskomandzor blocked at least 92 independent media platforms.

Many of these censored and outlawed media platforms have re-established themselves abroad. Nobel Peace Prize-winning *Novaya Gazeta*, which Russia declared an “undesirable” organization and outlawed in June 2023 (Committee to Protect Journalists 2023a), has relocated to Riga where it continues to publish both print and online editions (*Novaya Gazeta* 2023). It joins dozens of other media outlets and civil society groups now operating freely in the Baltic States and other European nations.

Russia has also almost entirely outlawed independent civil society organizations. Activists like Oleg Orlov, a prominent member of Memorial – a

human rights organization dedicated to documenting the crimes of the Soviet regime – has faced imprisonment for criticizing the Kremlin and opposing the war against Ukraine (Walker 2024). Despite this repression, Russian civil society organizations such as the Free Russia Foundation and the Free Russia Forum continue to engage with exiled Russians. Western governments, including Lithuania, are supporting their efforts by hosting events like the annual Russia Forum in Vilnius.

These gatherings help build solidarity and cohesion among the Russian diaspora and provide a platform for strategizing ways to support civil society and democratic movements inside Russia.

“ *Journalists and civil society activists continue to face serious challenges to their work, their safety, and their ability to speak to audiences inside Russia.* ”

Despite operating relatively safely in exile, these journalists, media platforms, and civil society activists continue to face serious challenges to their work, their safety, and their ability to speak to audiences inside Russia. Many of them have been personally charged with breaking laws that forbid criticism of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Ilya Krasilshchik, the founder of Meduza and HelpDesk, was charged in absentia in July 2022 with discrediting Russia’s armed forces (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2024b) and is now on the Kremlin’s wanted list. In mid-March 2024, Alexey Navalny’s former chief-of-staff, Leonid Volkov, was brutally attacked in his car just outside his home. Many Russian activists and journalists who I met in April 2024 in Riga and Vilnius told me that the attack sent an immediate chill throughout the Russian pro-democracy exile community – much to the approval of the Russian government and ministry of foreign affairs.

State censorship and repression have made it extremely difficult to transmit any information or truth into Russia on any platform. The Kremlin has blocked or censored most social media platforms. Shortly after the Russian

invasion of Ukraine the Chinese-owned video-sharing app, TikTok “banned live streaming and uploading of new content in Russia after the Kremlin criminalized the spreading of what it deems to be fake news about its invasion of Ukraine” (Milmo 2022). It designated Meta as an “extremist” organization in March 2022, banned both Facebook and Instagram from Russia’s internet, and regularly censors Twitter/X’s feeds. In a glaring contradiction, the Kremlin and Russian government officials make extensive use of the Twitter/X platform to publish and amplify their regime proclamations, disinformation, and the influencers who align with their geopolitical views.

Just as important for Russian independent media platforms is Google’s seeming acquiescence to Kremlin demands to adjust Google news algorithms to boost state media, including disinformation, conspiracies, and propaganda, over the content produced by independent Russian media platforms. Similarly, Russian journalists who produce and publish content on YouTube have had monetization turned off on their accounts, despite attracting millions of viewers. The editor of one leading Russian platform, which discovered and published video of Russian authorities secretly transporting Alexey Navalny’s body from the prison where he was killed to a regional morgue, told me in Vilnius recently that despite receiving over 2 million views on YouTube, the platform received a fraction of the revenue sharing that it would have before the war. This situation is imposing significant financial stress on Russia’s independent media platforms and community.

Digital censorship circumvention tools, such as VPNs, allow motivated audiences inside Russia to continue accessing banned platforms. Innovative organizations, groups, and individuals are also focusing their efforts on publishing their work to the increasingly limited number of platforms that are not yet blocked inside Russia, including Telegram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and podcasts. Some Russian civil society organizations, like Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation, have built their own censorship circumvention tools. Others rely on private technology like that offered by Toronto-based Psiphon.

Canadian-based Samizdat Online (Samizdat Online 2023) allows Russian publishers to circumvent Russian censors by publishing content to a rotating list of URL addresses, thereby bypassing the Roskomnadzor ban lists. Each time the Kremlin bans a URL, the Samizdat Online administrators change the URL of the website. However, most of these tools require users to

explicitly seek out known platforms and the content published on them. Those inside Russia who are simply browsing the internet without VPNs won't be exposed to the content published by independent Russian media.

Supporting the work of Russian independent journalists and their ability to penetrate the Kremlin's censorship firewall should be a priority for Western governments. The Kremlin engages in information warfare against its people with complete impunity. By supporting the work of Russian independent journalists, the Western world can boost the messages of pro-democracy activists.

The recent grassroots protests in Bashkortostan underscore the importance of reporting from Russia's regions, both within that country and to the outside world. Support for platforms that enable and facilitate reporting from the regions is essential to keeping like-minded Russians informed and united in their understanding of the facts. This can galvanize human rights, pro-democracy, and anti-war activists that are otherwise dispersed across Russia. Independent journalism can expose the very real challenges that Russians face living in the regions – the lack of proper infrastructure (Russia Post 2023), running water (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2020), heat (Ruisseau 2024), and education (*Moscow Times* 2023) for example.

A robust and independent Russian-language media in exile also provides a crucial information lifeline for the growing community of exiled Russians in Europe and beyond, including Canada. Indeed, exiled Russian civil society activists who were interviewed for this report all stated that truthful information is critically important to helping Russians abroad maintain their mental health. It also plays an important role in promoting cohesion and unity among exiled Russian civil society activists and opposition leaders by providing platforms to express opinions that might be censored in their home country.

Open and free political discourse is the lifeblood of any healthy democracy; it contributes to the shaping of political and social opinions both within the exiled community and ultimately inside Russia.

## How Canada and its Western allies can help

In September 2024, Vladimir Kara-Murza told the Council of Europe, when accepting his 2022 Vaclav Havel Prize, that “the best promise of long-term security, stability, and democracy on our continent; the best promise for a Europe that would finally be whole, free, and at peace lies with a democratic Russia.” The Russian dissident’s views about a world without Putin can also be applied to peace and stability in the entire Western world and beyond. And a day will come when the current Russian regime will end, and the forces of democracy and freedom must be prepared to seize and maximize on that opportunity when it arises. As Yevgeni Prigozhin’s march on Moscow demonstrated, those windows of opportunity may appear unexpectedly and only for a moment. Here are several ways Canada and the West can help:

1. Canada can become a leader in supporting the ongoing development of exiled Russian civil society and independent journalism to help sustain and grow liberal democratic values within these communities so that they are empowered and equipped with the knowledge and skills to succeed in a future democratic and free Russia.
2. Provide long-term, sustainable funding and support for Russian civil society and independent journalists and media platforms to help ensure their sustainability and to support their efforts to challenge regime narratives wherever they are expressed.
3. Support Russian dissidents, political prisoners, and their families to demonstrate that they are not alone and to help sustain their movements.
4. Apply political pressure and enact policies to ensure that large social media and tech firms adjust algorithms to suppress Russian state media platforms, while boosting and supporting the monetization of content produced by independent media.
5. Hold the Putin regime to account for its abuses by further developing Magnitsky sanctioning legislation and repurposing seized funds to support the victims of regime repression. This includes travel bans for oligarchs and targeted officials as well as their families. Most importantly, existing sanctions must be enforced.

6. Expose regime enablers, proxies, and collaborators in Canada and allied democracies who assist the Kremlin in deflecting attention away from its criminal war and domestic repression, while helping to justify and legitimize its propaganda and disinformation. This includes the rigorous application and enforcement of sanctions that prevent Canadians from providing services to Russian state entities, such as think-tanks like the Valdai Club and the Russian International Affairs Council, and media platforms like RT, which have been explicitly identified by the US and Canadian governments as key components of Russia's intelligence apparatus.

## Conclusion

With most of Russia's opposition leaders exiled, jailed, or murdered, there is currently little optimism for positive political change in Russia, and even less so for a shift towards democracy. However, one thing is certain: Vladimir Putin will not remain in power forever.

In the unlikely event that Putin exits the Russian political stage – through resignation or death – the current levels of censorship and repression will likely persist and may even intensify as his chosen successor seeks to consolidate power.

If the West supplies Ukraine with the weapons it needs to win this war, Putin's political future would become uncertain. His power depends on his ability to project strength and instill fear. Prigozhin's march on Moscow demonstrated how quickly Russians can embrace a strong alternative to Putin. Losing the war against Ukraine would likely provoke anger, dissent, and serious challenges to his authority. A victory for Ukraine could also translate into a victory for democrats in Russia.

As it stands, dissatisfaction with the war is already growing among many Russians. The emerging female-led anti-war resistance movement and recent protests in remote Russian regions are clear indicators of growing public opposition. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union's disastrous invasion of Afghanistan

contributed to the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire; similarly, Putin's strategically ambiguous and disastrous invasion of Ukraine could lead to political change in Russia.

The hope for a Russia that is free, democratic, and upholds human rights, the rule of law, and respects the sovereignty of its neighbors will only manifest when Russian activists who share this vision are given the opportunity to reshape their country. We currently have an opportunity to support those dissidents, civil society activists, and independent journalists who will play crucial roles in realizing it. By aiding their development, bolstering their resilience against repression, and fostering their success, we enhance their capacity to steer their nation away from a dark, autocratic past toward democracy, peace, and freedom. [MLI](#)

## About the author



**Marcus Kolga** is the founder and director of DisinfoWatch and a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier and CDA institutes. A journalist, filmmaker, digital communications developer, and human rights activist, he led the Canadian civil society campaign for Magnitsky legislation and continues to advocate for global human rights and democracy activists. Kolga is a regular commentator on international affairs and human rights in Canadian broadcast media and his articles are published by the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *National Post*, the *New York Daily Mail*, *Macleans*, the *EU Observer* and other international publications. He was named to the Kremlin's sanctions blacklist in March 2022. **MLI**



## References

Amnesty International. 2023. “Russia: 20,000 activists subject to heavy reprisals as Russia continues to crack down on anti-war movement at home,” Amnesty International, July 2023. Available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/russia-20000-activists-subject-to-heavy-reprisals-as-russia-continues-to-crack-down-on-anti-war-movement-at-home/>.

Balakhonova, Yulia, Mikhail Rubin, Roman Badanin, Katya Arenina et al. 2023. “Novy Mir A Guide to Russian Media in the Times of Total Censorship.” Project Media, accessed June 2023. Available at <https://www.proekt.media/en/guide-en/russian-media-after-war-en/>.

Berger, Miriam. 2022. “Putin says he will ‘denazify’ Ukraine. Here’s the history behind that claim.” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2022. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/putin-denazify-ukraine/>.

Birchough, Tom. 2000. “ORT shareholder vows not to sell to Kremlin,” *Variety*, August 28, 2000. Available at <https://variety.com/2000/tv/news/ort-shareholder-vows-not-to-sell-to-kremlin-1117786105/>.

Burrows, Emma, and Aamer Madhani. “US Intelligence Says an Intentional Explosion Brought Down Wagner Chief Prigozhin’s Plane.” Associated Press, August 24, 2023. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-wagner-prigozhin-jet-crash-382515214f691e47daa2e3635d64e612>.

Cesso, Leyland. 2022. “Suspected Russian spy arrested in Norway spent years studying in Canada.” *The Guardian*, October 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/28/russian-spy-norway-canada-brazil-academic>.

Chernova, Anna, and Lindsay Isaac. "Russia's top court bans 'international LGBTQ movement.'" CNN, November 30, 2023. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/30/europe/russian-supreme-court-outlaws-the-lgbtq-community-as-extremist/index.html>.

Committee to Protect Journalists. 2023. "43 Journalists and Media Workers Killed in Russia." Accessed June 15, 2023. Available at [https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker&cc\\_fips%5B%5D=RS&start\\_year=2000&end\\_year=2023&group\\_by=year](https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motiveUnconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker&cc_fips%5B%5D=RS&start_year=2000&end_year=2023&group_by=year).

Committee to Protect Journalists. 2023a. "Russia Bans Independent Outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe Adds to Undesirable List." June 2023. Available at <https://cpj.org/2023/06/russia-bans-independent-outlet-novaya-gazeta-europe-adds-to-undesirable-list/>.

Ebel, Francesca. "Meet the people caught up in Russia's crackdown on dissent." *Washington Post*, May 13, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/13/russia-political-prisoners/>.

Eckel, Mike. 1999. "Two Decades On, Smoldering Questions About The Russian President's Vault To Power." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 5, 1999. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-russia-president-1999-chechnya-apartment-bombings/30097551.html>.

Elliott, Philip. 2023. "A Russian Human Rights Champion on Why Putin's Soviet Propaganda Is So Dangerous." *Time*, accessed September 20, 2023. Available at <https://time.com/6299212/a-russian-human-rights-champion-on-why-putins-soviet-propaganda-is-so-dangerous/>.

Faulconbridge, Guy, and Andrius Sytus. 2023. "Russia's Navalny tracked down to 'Polar Wolf' prison in the Arctic." Reuters, December 25, 2023. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-navalny-is-prison-colony-yamal-nenets-region-spokeswoman-2023-12-25/>.

France24. 2011. "Tens of thousands gather for biggest protests of Putin era." France 24, December 10, 2011. Available at <https://www.france24.com/en/20111210-protest-movement-russia-elections-moscow-vladimir-putin-medvedev>.

Garner, Ian. "Putinism Is Set to Live On in Russia's Youth." *Moscow Times*, April 8, 2024. Available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/04/08/putinism-is-set-to-live-on-in-russias-youth-a84675>.

Glasser, Susan B., and Peter Baker. 2001. "Russian Network Seized in Raid," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2001. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/04/15/russian-network-seized-in-raid/e9679fb0-31cb-4b9c-b07f-204b488f40ad/>.

Global Affairs. 2023. "Generation Putin: Proud Russians Disengaged," Global Affairs, accessed June 2023. Available at <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/generation-putin-proud-russians-disengaged>.

Goble, Paul. "Putin's Russia Now More Repressive Than Brezhnev's Soviet Union Was – OpEd." *Eurasia Review*, February 14, 2023. Available at <https://www.eurasiareview.com/14022023-putins-russia-now-more-repressive-than-brezhnevs-soviet-union-was-oped/>.

Greenall, Robert. 2024. "Russia protest: Crowds clash with riot police as activist jailed." BBC, accessed June 1, 2024, Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68006123>.

Human Rights Watch. 2021. "Russia: Police Detain Thousands in Pro-Navalny Protests," Human Rights Watch, January 25, 2021. Available at [https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/25/russia-police-detain-thousands-pro-navalny-protests#:~:text=\(Moscow\)%20%E2%80%93%20On%20January%2023,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/25/russia-police-detain-thousands-pro-navalny-protests#:~:text=(Moscow)%20%E2%80%93%20On%20January%2023,Human%20Rights%20Watch%20said%20today).

Human Rights Watch. 2022. "Russia: Repression Escalates," Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2022. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/13/russia-repression-escalates>.

Ignatius, David. "Could this man bring down Putin?" *Washington Post*, November 7, 2023. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/11/07/russian-ponomarev-putin-coup-ilya-ponomarev/>.

Kara-Murza, Vladimir. 2023. "Vladimir Kara-Murza from jail: What happened when I saw Alexei Navalny." *Washington Post*, August 30, 2023, Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/30/kara-murza-navalny-russia-prison/>.

Khodorkovsky, Mikhail. 2023. "Democracy in Russia Is Possible." Koerber-Stiftung, accessed December 2023. Available at <https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/the-berlin-pulse/democracy-in-russia-is-possible/>.

Kintsler, Linda. 2024. "The Woman Fighting Russia's Carceral State." *The Atlantic*, January 2024. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2024/01/russian-opposition-political-prisoners-vladimir-karamurza/677083/>.

Klein, Ezra. 2022. "Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Masha Gessen." *New York Times*, March 11, 2022. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/11/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-masha-gessen.html>.

Levin, Dan, and Jo Becker. "Canadian Lawmakers Say Pro-Russia Group Tried to Derail Sanctions Law." *New York Times*, October 4, 2017. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/04/world/canada/russia-magnitsky.html>.

Litvinenko, Marina, and Alex Goldfarb. 2007. *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB*. Toronto: Free Press, 2007, 189.

Meduza. 2023a. "Russian Embassy in Canada Refused to Admit a Russian National Because She Follows a Pro-Navalny Facebook Page." *Meduza*, January 27, 2023. Available at <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/01/27/russian-embassy-in-canada-refused-to-admit-a-russian-national-because-she-follows-a-pro-navalny-facebook-page>.

Meduza. 2023b. "Chaos in Shebekino." *Meduza*, June 1, 2023. Available at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/06/01/chaos-in-shebekino>.

Milmo, Dan. 2022. "TikTok Users in Russia Can See Only Old Russian-Made Content." *The Guardian*, March 10, 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/10/tiktok-users-in-russia-can-see-only-old-russian-made-content#:~:text=The%20Chinese%2DDowned%20photo%20sharing,about%20its%20invasion%20of%20Ukraine>.

Montreal MID. 2023. "Predstavitelstva v Kanade." Accessed June 2023. Available at [https://montreal.mid.ru/en/predstavitelstva\\_v\\_kanade/](https://montreal.mid.ru/en/predstavitelstva_v_kanade/).

*Moscow Times*. 2023. "The Russian Propaganda Gap: Why Rural Areas Support the War." *Moscow Times*, October 4, 2023. Available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/10/04/the-russian-propaganda-gap-why-rural-areas-support-the-war-a82664>.

*Moscow Times*. 2024. “White Scarves and Flowers: Wives and Mothers of Mobilized Soldiers Take Resentment to the Kremlin.” *Moscow Times*, January 16, 2024. Available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/16/white-scarves-and-flowers-wives-and-mothers-of-mobilized-soldiers-take-resentment-to-the-kremlin-a83720>.

Murtaugh, Danl, and Debjit Chakraborty. “Russia Pockets \$24B from Selling Energy to China, India,” Al Jazeera, July 6, 2022. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/6/russia-pockets-24b-from-selling-energy-to-china-india>.

Navalny, Alexei. 2017. “Don’t call him “Dimon.” YouTube, March 2, 2017. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7\\_GF9g&t=8s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwlk7_GF9g&t=8s)

Navalny, Alexei. 2021. “Putin’s palace. The story of the world’s biggest bribe.” YouTube, February 4, 2021. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_tFSWZXXKN0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_tFSWZXXKN0).

*Novaya Gazeta*. 2023. Accessed June 2023. Available at <https://novayagazeta.eu/en>.

Propastop. 2023. “Narrative X-Ray Who Are Russia’s Compatriots.” Propastop, November 30, 2023. Available at <https://www.propastop.org/eng/2023/11/30/narrative-x-ray-who-are-russias-compatriots/>.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2020. “Russia’s Chief Auditor Says One in Three Hospitals Lack Running Water.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 27, 2020. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-s-chief-auditor-says-one-in-three-hospitals-lack-running-water/30458571.html>.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2021. “Putin Signs Constitutional Changes That Allow Him To Rule Until 2036.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 5, 2021. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-signs-law-to-rule-until-2036/31187934.html>.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2023. “Russia Ponomaryov Ukraine Opposition Treason Charges.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, accessed October 2023. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/amp/russia-ponomaryov-ukraine-opposition-treason-charges/32804943.html>.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2024a. “Police Violently Disperse Thousands Protesting Russian Bashkir Activist’s Jailing.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 3, 2024. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/bashkortostan-activist-sentenced-protest-russia/32778008.html>.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2024b. "Russia Arrest Warrant Media Manager Krasilshchik." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, accessed March 2024. Available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-arrest-warrant-media-manager-krasilshchik/32320885.html>.

Roth, Andrew. 2021. "Vladimir Putin Passes Law That May Keep Him in Office Until 2036." *The Guardian*, April 5, 2021. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/05/vladimir-putin-passes-law-that-may-keep-him-in-office-until-2036>.

RT. 2020. "Cuban Missile Crisis 2.0: 'Russia's surrounded by NATO bases and US missile systems.'" Accessed December 24, 2020. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20201224184740/https://www.rt.com/op-ed/390500-cuban-missile-crisis-russia-nato/>.

RT. 2023. "US treats 'masochist' allies like enemies – Putin." RT, accessed October 13, 2023. Available at <https://www.rt.com/russia/563842-putin-us-enemies-masochist-allies/>.

Ruisseau, Nicolas. 2024. "Russians Are Fed Up with Heating Blackouts and Local Authorities' Inaction." *Le Monde*, January 18, 2024. Available at [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/18/russians-are-fed-up-with-heating-blackouts-and-local-authorities-inaction\\_6444010\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/18/russians-are-fed-up-with-heating-blackouts-and-local-authorities-inaction_6444010_4.html)

Russia Post. 2023. "Utilities Infrastructure." Accessed June 2023. Available at [http://web.archive.org/web/20240330160157/russiapost.info/digest/utilities\\_infrastructure](http://web.archive.org/web/20240330160157/russiapost.info/digest/utilities_infrastructure).

Russian Canadian Democratic Alliance. 2023. Accessed June 2023. Available at <https://rcda.ca/>.

Russkiy Mir. 2023. "COMPATRIOTS IN CANADA RECEIVE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS." Accessed June 2023. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150611155207/https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/186481/>.

Samizdat Online. 2023. Accessed June 2023. Available at <https://samizdatonline.org/>.

Saur, Pjotr. 2023. "'We're tired of being good girls': Russia's military wives and mothers protest against Putin." *The Guardian*, December 25, 2023. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/25/russia-military-wives-mothers-protest-against-putin-war-ukraine-troops-female>.



Sloane, Wendy. "The Life and Death of Mad Vlad." London Metropolitan University, April 2022. Available at <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/news/expert-commentary/2022/april/the-life-and-death-of-mad-vlad/>.

Soldatov, Andrei, and Irina Borogan. 2023. "Putin's Useful Priests." *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2023. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-useful-priests-russia-church-influence-campaign>.

Sputnik News. 2024. "These Aren't Real Muslims: Moscow Terrorists Were Mercenaries Engaged in Political Act." Sputnik News, March 27, 2024. Available at <https://sputnikglobe.com/20240327/these-arent-real-muslims-moscow-terrorists-were-mercenaries-engaged-in-political-act---analyst-1117571222.html>.

Steele, Jonathan. 2023. "Yevgeny Prigozhin Obituary," *The Guardian*, August 25, 2023. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/25/yevgeny-prigozhin-obituary>.

*The Economist*. 2022. "More Than 15,000 Russians Have Been Arrested in Anti-War Protests," *The Economist*, March 22, 2022. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/03/22/more-than-15000-russians-have-been-arrested-in-anti-war-protests>.

YouTube. 2024. "ISIS Involvement in the March 2024 Terrorist Attack on the Crocus Theater in Moscow." Accessed March 27, 2024. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5jsDgqZPik>.

Walker, Shaun. 2024. "Oleg Orlov: The Veteran Dissident Who Accepted Jail to 'Show There Is Resistance Inside Russia.'" *The Guardian*, August 11, 2024. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/aug/11/oleg-orlov-veteran-dissident-accepted-jail-to-show-there-is-resistance-inside-russia>.

*Washington Post*. 2013. "Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny has strong showing in Moscow mayoral race, despite loss." September 9, 2013. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kremlin-critic-alexei-navalny-has-strong-showing-in-moscow-mayoral-race-despite-loss/2013/09/09/dc9504e4-1924-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kremlin-critic-alexei-navalny-has-strong-showing-in-moscow-mayoral-race-despite-loss/2013/09/09/dc9504e4-1924-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html).

constructive *important* forward-thinking  
excellent *high-quality* insightful  
timely *active*

# GOOD POLICY

is worth fighting for.

---

## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT **MLI**

**MLI** has been active in the field of indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with indigenous organizations, promoting indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21st century Canada.

– The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

I commend Brian Crowley and the team at **MLI** for your laudable work as one of the leading policy think tanks in our nation's capital. The Institute has distinguished itself as a thoughtful, empirically based and non-partisan contributor to our national public discourse.

– The Right Honourable Stephen Harper

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

– The Honourable Irwin Cotler

M A C D O N A L D - L A U R I E R I N S T I T U T E



323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,  
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2  
613-482-8327  
info@macdonaldlaurier.ca

[macdonaldlaurier.ca](http://macdonaldlaurier.ca)

