

A study of *anti-war* initiatives  
in Russia: How Russians  
are resisting their state's war  
in Ukraine and dealing with its  
repercussions

*(as of the end of 2022)*

The study was carried out by the non-profit organisation Austausch e.V. for the international platform CivilM+ with the financial support of the Federal Foreign Office of Germany.

*Austausch e.V.* is a registered non-profit organisation working to promote European civil society with a focus on exchange and cooperation between Germany and Eastern Europe.

*CivilMPlus* is an independent international platform that empowers civil society to tackle Russia's war against Ukraine – restoring international norms and advocating for accountability for war crimes and violations of international norms, protecting human rights and strong international support for Ukraine.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of the CivilMPlus platform and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Federal Foreign Office



**Austausch e.V.**  
FOR A EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY



**CIVILM+**

# CONTENTS

Research Description	4
“Anti-war initiatives” in the Russian Federation: what are we researching?	4
Research participants	7
Participant safety	9
Range of initiatives	10
Organisational structure of initiatives	10
Size and scope of initiatives	13
Working from Russia and abroad	15
Humanitarian and campaigning initiatives	17
Project-based and spontaneous/reactive initiatives	20
“Single-issue” or “all-hands” initiatives	22
Politicisation and the anti-war agenda	24
Resources and interaction between initiatives	26
Media activities of anti-war initiatives	26
Resources of anti-war initiatives	29
Safety of activist activity	32
Cooperation between anti-war initiatives	35
The future of Russia and Russian-Ukrainian relations.	
Strategies and tactics of reconciliation work	39
Conclusions and recommendations	45
How do anti-war initiatives work?	
Key conclusions and recommendations	45
Study Participants	50
Team	50
Interviewees	50

# Research Description

## “Anti-war initiatives” in the Russian Federation: what are we researching?

This study is designed as an attempt to record the diversity of anti-war initiatives founded in Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The development of civic activism in the Russian Federation aimed at stopping a bloody war is taking place in an extremely repressive context. According to current legislation, virtually any anti-war activity or demonstration of disagreement with the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine can be considered as “discrediting the Russian Armed Forces” (Article 20.3.3 of the Administrative Offences Code of the Russian Federation) and lead to administrative or criminal liability. Numerous human rights, academic, and even socially-oriented NGOs have been designated “foreign agents,” which makes the funding of the organisation impossible and essentially restricts its activities. In Russia, “foreign agents” are forbidden from carrying out awareness-raising or educational activities for children and from producing informational materials for them, they are not allowed to organise public events, nor transfer money to their organisers. According to the law, “foreign agents” are required to submit quarterly reports on all of their income and expenditure and to mark every communication in the media or on social networks with a special “label”. Errors in reporting

or labelling can lead to administrative cases, and in case of repeated violations – to criminal proceedings. In addition, more than 70 foreign and international organisations have been recognised as “undesirable” in Russia, and cooperation with them brings with it the threat of criminal prosecution.

However, despite repressive legislation and law enforcement, Russia's military aggression against Ukraine sparked a surge in civic activity among Russians in 2022: numerous grassroots initiatives were set up, and existing non-profit organisations repurposed or expanded their activities to include an anti-war agenda. Some civil initiatives relocated to outside the Russian Federation, while others stayed in the country and either operate illegally or are forced to restructure their activities in accordance with the new political and legal realities.

In this text, we do not refer to only those initiatives aimed at directly ending the war and establishing peace as “anti-war”. We speak of “anti-war” as a broad concept that connects different kinds of civic initiatives that work with the humanitarian or political consequences of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, individual participants in some initiatives (for example, those working with Ukrainian citizens who were forced into Russian territory) may not express a clear anti-war stance or may even implicitly support the Russian state. However, we do not consider the attitudes of individual participants, but rather the general orientation of initiatives that emerged or changed in response to the outbreak of military aggression. The public image of such anti-war initiatives may not correspond to Western or Ukrainian conceptions of the anti-war position, however, it should be taken into account that the target audience of these initiatives is Russian, and therefore the founders of such initiatives are focused on them and on political change specifically within Russia.

The initiatives whose work we have studied have different goals and set up their working processes in different ways, seeking to stop the military operations initiated by Russia and to protect others from the consequences of these actions. Anti-war initiatives campaign for Russians to fight to put an end to the war and expand their number of supporters, creating materials and instructions for how to protest safely and expressing their view. They sabotage military and transportation facilities and not only disable or damage infrastructure directly supporting the war effort, but also seek to neutralise the propaganda deployed by the state. Projects for Ukrainian refugees and deportees provide financial support to people stranded on Russian territory, as well as gathering all possible kinds of resources they need. One of the key areas of their work is helping them leave Russia for European countries, including preparing the necessary

documents for crossing the border. Human rights initiatives provide legal assistance to Russians subjected to political repression for expressing an anti-war stance. They help people to avoid conscription and protect members of minorities against whom Russia is toughening legislation in the wake of the military aggression. Media outlets – both long-established and new ones that emerged since February 2022 – produce analyses, defy censorship, expose fakes, make repressive crackdowns and the consequences of the war visible, and report on ways to take an anti-war stance. Initiatives aimed at countering Russian propaganda are expanding the number of supporters of stopping the war through personal messages, phone calls and comments on social media. Some initiatives bring together professional psychotherapists to counsel people seeking help, regardless of their location or political stance, while others bring together artistic groups and create platforms for anti-war statements in the language of art. Many initiatives combine different areas of work and provide comprehensive support for Ukrainian refugees and deportees, as well as for different groups of Russians – professional, ethnic and geographical – without neglecting advocacy work aimed at increasing the number of people supporting an end to the war.

We set ourselves the aim of describing initiatives of varying scale and focus in order to understand what they do, how they are structured, what challenges they face, and what kind of support they need. In this text, we present answers to the following questions:

- How are anti-war initiatives organised? Who sets them up, how and for whom do they work, what resources do they use?
- What barriers do these initiatives face?
- How do the initiatives interact with each other? Do they show solidarity with each other?
- What opportunities for the development of initiatives do their founders/participants see?
- How do the founders/participants of the initiatives see the future of relations between Russia and Ukraine and what role do they see their initiatives as playing in building these relations?

# Research participants

Data collection took place from November 1 to December 25, 2022. The project research team conducted a total of 28 interviews with the founders/participants of anti-war initiatives focused on working in Russia. As a result, 28 anti-war initiatives fell within the scope of our research. The total duration of the interviews was just over 30 hours.

Initiatives were selected for interviews in accordance with our assessments and understanding of the initiatives' topics, their scale and target audience, and based on information about these initiatives in open sources and from interviews with the activists. We tried to cover both large media projects and small local initiatives, both successful cases of sustainable work and nascent projects, as well as those that had already ceased operation for various reasons. Most initiatives exist informally, with only five being officially registered. Among the anti-war initiatives examined, eight were founded before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. After the outbreak of the war, they changed the focus of their work to be in line with the anti-war movement.

**“I would say everything changed dramatically,”<sup>(1)</sup>**

is how a member of a political movement characterised his ac-

tivities after February 24, 2022, when instead of creating political performances, his team began to develop new kinds of activities, from organising rallies to engaging supporters in campaigning. Other associations have also put anti-war topics at the centre of their agenda: art groups that reflect on the war in their creative works, media outlets that changed their agenda after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, and human rights organisations that are changing their focus to assist those caught up in new repressive laws or mobilisations. All other cases presented are initiatives that emerged after February 24, 2022, as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its repercussions.

It is important to note that the selection of respondents was made from initiatives that state their existence publicly. Some of their founders/participants appear “with an uncovered face,” but most are anonymous, but activity itself is necessarily represented on social networks (primarily

on Telegram). In fact, all of the initiatives studied are active on media platforms, even those for which this is not their main focus. Accordingly, our sample does not include initiatives that exist outside of the online realm and the results of our analysis do not represent the full diversi-

ty of anti-war initiatives in Russia, namely, they do not cover loosely structured or individual grassroots campaigns or sabotage that do not have an online presence, nor anti-war statements and actions outside of the public sphere.

The initiatives examined cover the following topics:

1. Aid projects for Ukrainian citizens who are forced to be in the territory of Russia;
2. Media projects with an anti-war agenda, projects against propaganda and censorship;
3. Projects organised in the national republics of Russia that promote a decolonial agenda;
4. Projects founded by professional groups to provide humanitarian (e.g., psychological) support to Russians experiencing repression or the threat of repression, including specific groups of Russians (e.g., the LGBT+ community or journalists);
5. Human rights-related projects;
6. Advocacy projects, including street art and unorganised street campaigning or sabotage.

In this formulation, we see the solidarity of the national republic of the Russian Federation with Ukraine and the refusal to interact with "Russians" who are responsible for the imperial policy of Russia with respect to both the former Soviet countries and the national republics within the federation. In this formulation, we see the solidarity of the national republic of the Russian Federation with Ukraine and the refusal to interact with "Russians" who are responsible for the imperial policy of Russia with respect to both the former Soviet countries and the national republics within the federation.

For each area, a list of initiatives differing in scale, audience, principles, experience and other parameters was compiled. Contacting many proved to be difficult. Twelve requests went unanswered. We also received seven direct refusals, one of which was probably related to the Russian background of our study: we received a refusal from an initiative working in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation with the wording "Russian warship, go fuck yourself!"<sup>2</sup> The final sample consisted of 3-5 interviews from each area of work. After transcribing and anonymising the interviews, we coded the texts of the interviews according to topic and analysed them.



# Participant safety

The work of anti-war initiatives in Russia is connected with a multitude of real and perceived risks, arising both from law enforcement agencies and from aggressive “patriotic” pro-militarist groups and individuals. Given this, we have paid special attention to the safety of the research participants, both interviewees and researchers. We securely stored the anonymised data we collected. In the results presented below, we do not mention the names of participants or the names of anti-war initiatives, even when their work is relatively public. In cases where it is important for interpreting the data, we only provide anonymised information about the initiative (area of work, length of time active, territorial affiliation etc.)

It is likely that potential safety issues associated with participating in the study due to the possible accidental or intentional de-anonymisation of the founders of anti-war initiatives or their participants was a significant reason for the refusals we received during the recruiting process. Many who agreed to be interviewed did not indicate serious security concerns, while other interviewees spoke rather reservedly, refusing to answer some of the questions posed, expressing concern about how we would use the data and how likely their data would accidentally be made publicly available. As one participant said when asked about his emotional state and concerns:

**“Well, of course, I’m afraid that you’re going to interview me, then hand me over to the Russian security services and I’ll be arrested.”**

At the request of the participants, one interview was conducted in a written format (correspondence via the project’s Telegram bot). On several occasions, we provided references from reliable mutual acquaintances in order to gain better access and prove that our interest in gathering information was purely for research purposes.

# RANGE OF INITIATIVES

In selecting initiatives for the interviews, we assumed that the topics they were focused on would significantly influence the nature of their work. This hypothesis proved only to be partially true; the analysis showed that

the most striking differences appear along other lines. In this section, we will present anti-war initiatives working in Russia in terms of their scale, background, and participant location, as well as different aspects of the format of their work.

## Organisational structure of initiatives

The initiatives in our sample can be classified into one of five types of organisational structure or as a combination of these structures.

### 1. Single activist

Two of the initiatives in our sample function thanks to the efforts of one person. In one case, it is a theatre project in which an artist involves non-professionals to create their own works on anti-war themes. In the other case, it is an initiative providing financial assistance to Ukrainian citizens who were forced into Russia.

2.  
Core and volunteers

At the centre of the initiative is a stable, slowly rotating group whose members assign tasks.

In some cases, they devote their working time to anti-war activities, receiving a salary or holding a formal position, in the cases of NGOs or media outlets. More often, members of the “core” devote a few hours a week to the initiative’s work, in rare cases *“all their free time.”* The core may have a prominent leader, the public face of the project, but most initiatives in the sample are organised more horizontally, as a collective of relatively equal participants. Around the “core,” there is a group of volunteers or participants who devote significantly less time to the initiative and do so sporadically, they may “appear” and “disappear,” they perform individual tasks or take on shifts (if we are talking about the work of Telegram bots or processing requests from the project’s target audience). The importance of the volunteers’ work varies: in some projects, they take on only a small share of the load, while in others they are the central resource for the work. As one participant in a large, well-organised media project that helps people to avoid mobilisation points out, *“in fact, the main work is done by volunteers”* (3). The division into “volunteers” and “activists” in many initiatives is provisional and defined by the boundaries of an online chat that not everyone has access to or who is more or less actively involved in the initiative. For example, one participant in an initiative in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation (4) talks about a “backbone [CB1] chat” and uses the words “volunteers” and “activists” almost synonymously:

*“Once a week we have a call with each other, and we have a chat that is constantly, well there are different chats, [...] we have volunteers working on different topics, [...] we communicate with them about different topics, with different activists. There is a core/backbone chat where we only discuss our posts, our events and news and how to respond to them.”*

3.  
Organisers and experts

This structure is characteristic of initiatives that provide professional support (for example, psychological or legal aid). The organisers deal with the infrastructure of the project, providing access to the target audience, recruiting participants, maintaining visibility through media, managing all processes

and gathering the necessary resources. Experts provide direct services to the project's target group. In the case of legal aid, it is a case of paying the experts for their work. In the case of media projects, experts offer analysis, which becomes a central resource for the media outlet.

#### 4. Horizontally distributed structure

Some projects are characterised by a horizontal structure, where there is no clear hierarchy and often not even a defined number of participants. For example, anarchist and feminist initiatives present themselves as a network of "cells" that interact and coordinate with each other but operate independently, sharing the general principles of the network. Decision-making in such collectives is by consensus or by vote, and roles are divided up "*by committees that are set up for certain tasks, but they are not fixed entities*" (5). Artistic group initiatives in our sample also have a horizontal structure, within which ideas are (collectively) developed and projects are implemented. The most unusual example of this structure was one of the initiatives to help Ukrainian citizens who had been forced into Russia to then leave Russia: the process involves a whole assortment of tasks from recovering documents, putting together a route and finding volunteer drivers to providing clothing, lodging and food. The interviewee described this crowdsourcing structure as an "ecosystem":

**“There’s a group of people who are called admins, but they don’t actually decide anything. At some point, a lot of individual things started to appear there. It’s an ecosystem. [...] There’s no structure really, it’s just some kind of interconnected environment. [...] We just all work together, we feel like members of the same community, but [...] it’s totally decentralised and [...] horizontal.” (6)**

#### 5. Other complex structures

In some cases, we encountered complexly organised structures founded on the basis of NGOs. They have elected positions, executive bodies, supervisory boards and other elements typical of political and public organisations. They can also use volunteers and experts, with them remaining outside their own structure.

The evidence does not allow us to conclude whether some organisational forms are more or less sustainable than others. Initiatives with a single organiser, horizontal collectives and projects with a clear division of roles and responsibilities are all at risk of falling apart. The volume of assistance and the number of projects implemented also do not correlate with the types of organisational structures. However, as we will show below, these structures may face different challenges and require different types of resources.

## Size and scope of initiatives

Determining the scale of the initiatives is not an easy task. Which initiatives are considered major or large-scale, and which are small, local initiatives? We propose several different, including contradictory, parameters for this assessment that relate to the different types of organisational structures of anti-war initiatives.

### TEAM SIZE

"Core and volunteer" initiatives have up to 40 participants (usually around 10-15 people) and a pool of volunteers, the size of which only some initiatives can accurately give. The largest number of volunteers mentioned in interviews is 300 in a new project created in the summer of 2022 (3) and "*several thousand*" in a project that has existed since 2011 (7). Team size in horizontally distributed structures is far less easily assessed. Such a division into team, volunteers, participants and non-participants is not at all relevant for many initiatives. For example, a decentralised "ecosystem" of work with refugees and deportees does not depend upon a division of roles of "volunteer" or "activist": the division occurs according to functionality (who does what). Such a structure does not know itself how big it is, because separate chats in messengers are constantly appearing, sub-initiatives, "sub-divisions" that nevertheless work on the same task even though they are not connected in any clear structure with a division of roles. Finally, in several initiatives, as noted above, the team consists of a single person, and the scope of activities in such initiatives is the same as is others.

## LOCALITY

Scale can be viewed in terms of the initiative's territorial or group affiliation. Some work within broad parameters and say that their target audience is *“mostly Russians from big cities who stayed in Russia, who did not emigrate for some reason”* (8) or *“all people in the country, we do it for all of them”* (5). At the same time, the real reach may differ from the perceptions of the potential target audience: for example, one initiative does not yet cover *“most of the country because the initiative is small”* (9), although the initiative is constantly expanding, establishing divisions in new cities. Another initiative type limits its activities and aims to work with specific groups of people, including in a certain territory. For example, there are initiatives that work *“with groups of ambivalent women”* (10) or the consequences of the war for LGBT people, who *“have become one of the authorities’ targets”* (11). Another research participant summarised the focus of their work in territorial categories: *“we attract, gather and...direct, unite supporters from [name of the federal subject of the Russian Federation]”* (12). In the national republics, the initiatives are more focused on the ethnic group and are founded to protect *“the rights and interests of the people [of the republic]”* (13), for example, by stopping mobilisation, which is perceived as *“a genocide against the people [of the republic]”* (14).

## ONLINE AUDIENCE

Since all of the initiatives in our sample have a public online presence, their size can be measured by audience reach, that is by the number of followers. For media projects, this is the most important indicator of their impact and effectiveness. They set goals for themselves to increase followers, and they take steps that lead to such growth. For projects that recruit participants through social networks, it is also an important indicator of relevance of their work and a resource that can be mobilised, for example, when needing to fundraise for an activity. One participant talked about a project she knew, which at a certain point was searching for a source of new subscribers, and it was this that motivated its founders to open up a completely new area of work: *“They said, yes, [...] here we are now thinking about how to attract new subscribers. [...] We came up with the idea that we would do our own psychological aid. [...] Because we think that’s what can attract people at the moment”* (15).

## SCALE OF AID

The scale of the initiative can be assessed by the volume of aid provided, the number of events, projects or cases. This is a suitable parameter for organisations that are engaged in solving the same type of problems and keep records. Thus, one initiative provides 30-40 legal consultations a month, another helped 3,500 people to avoid mobilisation, a third one transported more than 10,000 Ukrainian families from Russia to Europe, and a fourth one provided

psychological assistance to more than 1000 people. Initiatives that have a different kind of format, that are flexible and adapt to the tasks at hand, launching activities straight away in a variety of different areas, including advocacy and educational work, cannot quantify the results on their own. For example, an offer of legal assistance to contracted soldiers who have decided to refuse to serve in one of the national republics was passed on by "word-of-mouth" from one person to the next, and therefore it was difficult to count the number of people who received support: *"People said – well, those who we helped, said that not only they, but also their friends were listening to and doing what we said, and accordingly, there are probably more people. By some accounts it was almost 600 people"* (4).

Size and scale are fluid concepts and can be defined in different ways. It is difficult to estimate the number of people involved, whether those involved with the helping and sharing information side, or those receiving help, reading or engaging with content. Importantly, anti-war initiatives cannot be compared on the basis of one universal parameter designed to reflect their size and scope of work.

## Working from Russia and abroad

When selecting the initiatives, we did not know where their participants were located. The interviews showed that the location of the participants was only partly related to the focus of the initiative's work; most initiatives work from abroad, but in many cases the initiative is developed by teams located on both sides of the border.

It is logical that participants in those initiatives solving problems that require being physically present

are located in Russia. For example, an initiative that helps Ukrainian citizens leave the Russian Federation requires its participants to collect and deliver belongings to Ukrainians, transport them from one place to another, help with paperwork, accompany them to administrative authorities, provide overnight accommodation in their own apartments and so on. All of this is impossible to accomplish without being in Russia. At the same

time, the initiative depends in part on contact with those abroad, since the routes run through European territory as well. It is also possible to coordinate the work remotely and buy things online. "Direct action" initiatives carry out sabotage related to the disruption of Russian military supply chains, which means that their work is directly aimed at infrastructure located on Russian territory. Street art requires direct work with the urban environment in Russia. Human rights organisations cannot do without a presence in Russia: they engage legal experts who visit political prisoners or represent their interests in courts. At the same time, the coordinators of the initiative may be based abroad.

Working from Russia has its advantages, despite the risks this entails for the participants of anti-war initiatives. In a number of cases, we saw a desire for part of the team to be in Russia: *"you asked what is lacking. I say there are not enough people, money, resources, people in Russia, in fact, I just thought of this, but this is quite unusual: a person from Russia who is willing to work"* (12). Such people can do very important work "on the ground" which cannot be replaced by online tools.

In other cases, being in Russia is also connected to the ideological position and beliefs of the activists.

One of the human rights initiatives emphasised the importance not just of having participants in Russia, but also having a public office: *"It gives you some credibility, it gives us a gathering place. Since we are constantly attracting new legal counsels, defence lawyers, we need to gather these groups somewhere"* (11). As the representative of this initiative points out, other anti-war activists think he is crazy and foundations are not too keen on supporting such work.

Most of the initiatives in our sample consist entirely of Russians who have moved abroad. These are media projects, psychological aid services, political advocacy initiatives, overseas shelters for those who have left, as well as initiatives advising on a wide range of issues. Some of them are officially registered as NGOs in Georgia, Lithuania and Poland and have offices, but most of them exist only online, requiring only messengers and a video connection.

Most of the Russians who left and who are participating in initiatives, left the country after February 24, 2022, and only a few initiatives in our sample were created by those who ended up abroad as part of other emigration waves. The geographical locations of the participants included Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, the USA and other coun-



tries. The focus of some initiatives is such that they only benefit from the range of location of their participants and experts with whom they work, for example, an initiative pro-

viding psychological support is able to provide a crisis line 24/7 precisely because its participants are spread around the world:

**“Anyone can come and get [support] at any time, because we have therapists in different parts of the world” (15).**

Our data does not suggest which areas of work strictly require participants to be present or not in Russia. For example, some participants do not perceive their public media or human rights activities to be so dangerous that they need to relocate. Similarly, when the initiatives are humanitarian and charitable in nature it does not necessarily mean that their participants feel safe in Russia – some of these collectives have moved and are successfully working from abroad.

## Humanitarian and campaigning initiatives

This provisional distinction stems from the differences in the goals of the initiatives.

*Humanitarian* initiatives aim to help a certain group of people. One initiative describes the aim as to “*help teachers survive without struggling with their conscience in the current conditions*” (16), another – “*so that they [Ukrainian refugees/deportees] get help. Any help they can get. Whatever we can give them and whatever they need*” (17). Such initiatives are designed to “*mitigate the catastrophe of the war*” (17), “*working with the consequences of the outbreak of the war*” (11). Aid includes legal advice, providing shelter, securing cross-border travel, distributing goods and food, material and psychological support and help in avoiding military services. A representative of one such initiative pointed out that such activities, while important, are not “anti-war” in the strict sense, because they do not directly lead to stopping the war.

“Guys, let’s be real. We’re really contributing. It’s great. What we’re doing is important. But it’s not stopping the war, it’s not regime change what we’re doing...” (18).

*Campaigning* initiatives are precisely aimed at directly stopping the war. This can be direct action, for example, some anarchist organisations are engaged in “*direct attacks on the state and the military machinery of the Russian Federation,*” (5) disabling cell phone towers and preventing the movement of trains. More often however, the initiatives are engaged in advocacy, seeking to change the political attitudes of Russians and to show that there is a community of like-minded people around anti-war activists. The audience of such initiatives does not receive help, but information, analysis and tools to participate in advocacy work. On the one hand, their task is to prepare people for collective action:

“to gather people, to give them hope, to let them know that they are not alone, to let them into a kind of community ready for some action, by the way, some unified action” (12).

On the other hand, such initiatives seek to create tools for individual action, turning their followers into active supporters:

“We devote our social network presence to people who are looking for answers to what to do. We offer people answers to those questions. [...] In doing so, we offer them actions that are directed outside of this circle. [...] It’s very important that people get involved in the campaigning, that they put up flyers in a way that gets people who we don’t catch directly through social media” (1).

Participants in such initiatives tell inspiring stories of resistance from various cities in Russia, convince doubters, develop and distribute templates for campaign materials, propose various forms of “silent” protest and teach supporters how to minimise risks by turning state demands into protest – for example, in the case of having to hold patriotic lessons, “*formally conduct them, but without violating your own ideological position*”(16).

For *campaigning* initiatives, the political position of participants is very important. They work with existing supporters – “*these are people who are already interested, who are already on our side*” (1) – and engage them to attract new supporters. *Humanitarian initiatives*, on the other hand, are more inclined to demonstrate political neutrality, since they help people in need rather than political actors. In some cases, they even have to keep their anti-war stance quiet and moderate political statements, such as the initiative to help Ukrainians forced into Russia, in which even people who support the Russian government take part:

**“This is a unifying platform, a very clear goal. And, I repeat, it is not political. It is not a future platform for a future political party. We have a very strict moderation policy for any political statements.” (6)**

There is also a tension between the anti-war stance of the founders of initiatives and the requirement of professional ethics – for example, in the initiative providing psychological support, most of the therapists supported the idea of “*telling people, guys so that they wouldn’t take their military summons, that they should just go away to a safe place for a while*”, while others believed that this was unprofessional, because “*we are imposing our point of view and that perhaps, maybe you can stay and a person should make the decision for themselves*” (15).

Of particular interest are initiatives that set “campaigning” goals and implement them through “humanitarian” means. One participant in the study described how the public image of her initiative does not correspond to the ideas held by its founders, because the goal of the initiative is to “*engage women, who don’t think of themselves as having any political influence or voice*” (10). The team developed a “façade” that allows them to influence the target audience more effectively without scaring them away with unfamiliar terminology or politicisation: “*We are well aware that our rhetoric is not for the democratic community, not for those who have already been involved in some protests or understand everything about the war. We talk [...] in very simple language that is sometimes ridiculed by all sorts of initiatives [working with similar groups]. We don’t care, we have another objective*” (10).

## Project-based and spontaneous/reactive initiatives

*Project-based* initiatives can be described as those that are founded and led by experienced managers, who shape them along the lines of social entrepreneurship or online media. Often these are public figures, social entrepreneurs or media managers who have left Russia and started new projects abroad. In interviews with participants from such initiatives, there is a structured, clear, well-prepared narrative about their goals and objectives, their tools, the ways of project organisation, the division of roles within the initiative, the amount of aid provided, their plans and prospects. The founders and participants of such initiatives speak the language of project work, they know how to organise fundraising campaigns, they understand the logic of media work and they know how to promote their projects. Their work, while it comes up against difficulties, is still well organised and they launch a new project in the shortest possible time, like the well-known St. Petersburg social entrepreneur who, according to his colleague,

**“launched this project and assembled a team in literally a few days” (3).**

Participants in such initiatives understand where they need to develop and reflect on their limitations and problems. Using the word “service” to describe their work, they follow the logic of the social entrepreneurship market, where they need to compete with others for followers, donations and grants.

Another type of initiative are ones we are provisionally calling *spontaneous*, or *reactive*. Their founding was a reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the start, their founders had no clear idea of what they were going to do, like the initiative that emerged in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation, which was inspired by similar activities in a neighbouring republic:

**“So we decided that we also needed to organise something like this [...] Well, I just didn't have the strength to keep quiet anymore. And to do something together, joint efforts are always kind of more productive” (14).**

The driver of such initiatives is the emotions of participants who are lost and are trying to engage in some kind of useful activity, these people

then begin to come together and gradually determine the direction of their work:

**“Emotions prevailed, most likely, during these gatherings, during our coming together. But in the end, when... emotions kind of stop after a while [...] People came and went, and that’s how the main backbone was formed” (4).**

Spontaneous/reactive initiatives seem to go with the flow, changing as they go, with no clear plan, allowing them to expand their work indefinitely and to reach to most remote places and the most inaccessible audiences. They adjust to the situations they find themselves in. A striking example of this is the response to a message from a refugee from Mariupol that the creator of a news channel about anti-war initiatives gave. He *“could not simply answer ‘sorry, we help with information. We can’t do anything,’”*(3) and instead repurposed his work and got involved with financial assistance to refugees and deportees.

The founders of such initiatives mostly (but not all) had no previous experience in managing activist or social projects; unlike “professional” project managers, they do not speak the language of goals, objectives, and performance indicators. It was not always easy to understand from the interviews what the specific goals of their work were: one participant succinctly articulated this in the phrase *“Now our goal is, first of all, to find a goal of some kind”* (12). In a conversation lasting an hour and a half, some named three-five different goals or, when asked by the interviewer about goals, immediately switched to a story about the wide variety of work they were doing. Participants in spontaneous initiatives have cited many options for their development, but these reflections sounded more like descriptions of opportunities and interests rather than specific plans, projects and strategies.

## “Single-issue” or “all-hands” initiatives

Regarding the range of tasks carried out, the cases in our sample can be roughly divided into “single-issue” initiatives, which are focused on the same type of issues, and “all hands” initiatives, whose variety of activities is much broader. This division may seem similar to the distinction between “project-based” and “spontaneous” initiatives, which is true to a certain extent, since “spontaneity” often goes together with a diversity of activities. However, even among experienced, long-established and quite project-oriented initiatives, there are also those with a wide range of activities.

“*All-hands*” initiatives are characterised by an ironic statement one of the research participants made:

**“Most of the NGOs here, especially those without grants, work like this: today we feed homeless people, tomorrow we conduct research, the day after we’ll do something else, we’ll shoot a film” (11).**

He contrasts them with his own initiative which deals with the same kind of human rights issues and is professionalised in solving them. Other initiatives, although they provide multifaceted assistance, focus on the same well-defined space of “one issue.” For example, some organisations, referred to above as “project-based”, gather requests and inquiries from their target audiences via Telegram bots and then solve specific problems according to these requests. “Reactive” organisations may also remain in a narrowly specialised field of tasks. For example, although each instance of Ukrainian citizens leaving Russia for Europe is unique and brings with it non-standard tasks, an initiative that deals with this issue all the time works with the same target audience and deals with the same type of tasks. Taking part in this initiative does not require a professional background; its participants professionalise themselves gradually through solving specific issues in working with refugees and deportees.

In contrast, “*all-hands*” initiatives work with diverse tasks and are more flexible, regardless of whether they are “spontaneous” or “project-based”.

For example, one of the major initiatives, organised horizontally, works in an “*all-hands*” way within a project-based setting. The diversity of its activities is associated with a large number of departments, each of which implements a separate small project: it may be a project to assist citizens of Ukraine in temporary accommodation facilities in Russia, a psychological services organisation, an advocacy project, a human rights project and much more. The diversity is supported by a network of separate but communicating teams, among which, in the words of one participant, “*there are no main ones, they are all the same, **equally important**, just different teams of people working on them. Nevertheless, all these areas of work are constantly synchronising with each other.*” (19)

Among the situational initiatives, there is a small regional media organisation, organised on the basis of a former Navalny office, which may, among other things, collect donations to pay fines for those arrested, organise rallies, shoot video footage of pickets and protests, provide human rights assistance to individual activists and collect lists of military casualties in the region. Another typical example is an initiative created in a national republic that, among other things, independently seeks out those who may need help, provides legal support to enlisted men who wish to terminate their military service, creates and supports local anti-war groups in messengers, conducts campaigns in pro-war chats, helps journalists, mobilised and contract servicemen travel abroad (including illegally), collects money to pay fines for those arrested, and at the same time maintains its page on social networks, informing readers about events in the republic and ways of resisting. Since the diversity of activities conflicts with the professionalisation of individual tasks, in order to provide better assistance such organisations may cooperate with others who are more qualified in certain issues.

# Politicisation and the anti-war agenda

The initiatives in our sample do not engage in “pure” anti-war activity, but almost always embed it in different political and value contexts. As a result, anti-war work, on the one hand, functions as a goal and the tools used to achieve it are politicised and linked to the background of the initiative participants, and, on the other hand, it also acts as a tool that can lead to the realisation of collective political goals.

In the first case, the political attitudes of the founders and participants of anti-war initiatives influence the methods they use to operate. Initiatives that emerged from political associations (such as Navalny's former regional offices) used familiar tools from street politics, organising rallies and pickets in the first weeks after the start of the war. On the left-wing of the spectrum, initiatives with trade union experience aimed to organise strikes and sabotage work processes, anarchist groups staged acts of sabotage, while feminist groups mobilised their target groups through their familiar rhetoric of women's empowerment.

In the second case, anti-war activity becomes a tool for achieving broader political goals. For some, the goal is

**“the reorganisation of public life in the Russian Federation according to the ideals of anarcho-communism. Opposing the war is both a method of this reorganisation and a part of it, since in an anarcho-society, wars will become a thing of the past and stopping the war means bringing this moment closer” (5).**

For others, stopping the war brings a very different future closer when

**“a great nation unites and builds a beautiful new libertarian country” (12).**

Others frame anti-war work in relation to the decolonial agenda:

**“our tactical [goal] now is [stopping] the war and mobilisation. And the strategic goal is a strong, democratic, independent [name of the national republic]” (14).**



It is not only those initiatives that we have categorised above as “campaigning” that present themselves as political actors. One human rights initiative, while not stating its political position and not aimed at only helping political supporters, still positions itself as a political organisation: *“Our mission is different from the missions of regular human rights organisations. This is due to the fact that we don’t see ourselves as a humanitarian organisation that simply provides services, nor as a provider that provides services for money. First of all, I guess, we are a human rights organisation, partly even a political one”* (11). The mission of this organisation is to “create a culture of standing up for one’s rights,” and it aims to create a safer space for vulnerable groups who remain in Russia and to change the level of cooperation between people and institutions.

# Resources and interaction between initiatives

This section is devoted to an overview and analysis of the problems of interaction anti-war initiatives experience with their audiences, with the state and among themselves, as well as issues surrounding securing the necessary resources for their work. The section concludes with a chapter devoted to issues of cooperation between Russian anti-war initiatives and representatives of Ukrainian civil society and the prospects for reconciliation work between Ukrainian and Russian societies.

## Media activities of anti-war initiatives

For almost all of the anti-war initiatives that took part in the study, media – the channels for interacting with their audience – are of utmost importance. **Only a few initiatives have pages on Telegram or Instagram as their main civic engagement focus**, but these channels are extremely important for supporting the work of all the activist groups in our sample.

Above all, their media presence is the calling card of a civic initiative, through which activists talk about their activities. Through these media channels, the initiatives become visible in the public space and thereby gain symbolic power within the anti-war movement, as they can shape agendas and influence people's opinions. Their activism acquires the status of a political statement. A media presence as a “calling card” exists even for initiatives that operate covertly, outside of the Russian legal

framework, such as collectives engaged in subversive work (5).

Through media channels, initiatives also conduct organisational tasks: they recruit volunteers and organise their activities, accumulate requests for assistance, collect donations for the solving of specific problems and so on (8,6). In this case, the media channels are both the infrastructure and a kind of "assembly point" for the civic initiative.

For a number of initiatives whose mission is to inform and campaign, media channels become the main form of their anti-war activities. For example, one interviewee recounts the changes in the initiative's work since the outbreak of military operations:

**“[we were organised as] a media outlet that could provide the whole palette of opinions and do quality journalistic content about the regional agenda related to the protection of human rights, protection of environmental rights, environmental initiatives, municipal initiatives and so on [...] And after the war started we saw a huge interest in anti-war topics, because when there were all these protests, which were either silenced in the media or presented in a purely nationalistic way as negative, we saw a huge interest in this information” (20).**

Other major initiatives combine aims, emphasising the importance of media presence as part of general civic engagement: *“Well, we are not exactly a human rights organisation. We are a human rights media project. And one of our most important aspects is our work as a media outlet [...] It is clear that we are not exactly a media outlet in the full sense of the word, simply because we have slightly different aims. Our aim is not just to report something, our aim is also to help, to protect, to inform. That is, our goals are slightly bigger than those of the normal media, but the principle is the same.” (7)*

Russia's war against Ukraine has largely become an information war. Participants in the study talked about the so-called information blockade imposed by the Russian authorities on its citizens, and therefore one of the most important aims of anti-war activities, in their opinion, is thus providing information and presenting alternative points of view. Many initiatives are involved in this area of activity, forming a large anti-war

media sphere (2, 20, 8, 1, 19 and others). At the same time, all of these initiatives have different objectives, find their own niches, work with different audiences and so on. Some initiatives position themselves as *“an analytical channel about the war with an emphasis on expertise”* (2) and see people who disagree with the war as their audience. Others see their mission as working for a wider audience than the educated middle class in order to change public opinion and “try to win over the doubters”: *“It was very important for us to go beyond this kind of activist bubble so that the content we make online would go viral and thus reach some other audience that maybe we ourselves could not reach in the usual way”* (19).

To this end, the initiative has expanded the formats of its work and uses various platforms. In particular, the initiative uses not only Telegram channels (the most popular service that almost all participants in the study use), but also other online platforms (VKontakte, YouTube etc.) For older audiences, the initiative produces a hard copy of its media too:

**“We also created content on social media that masqueraded as some kind of entertaining content, for instance. So we made a series of WhatsApp messages, which, for example, also contained various anti-war messages and useful information. [...] Next, we launched a guerrilla newspaper which also exists online and offline [...] which visually, in terms of design and the style of writing, masquerades as a regular local paper, like a free city or district newspaper. We intentionally make it in such a way that it does not immediately scream of an anti-war activism project”** (19).

The broader media landscape of Russian anti-war initiatives is currently quite fluid. In the study, we observed not only work to bring people together and build coalitions (for example, the idea of producing news digests that collect publications from different sources), but also latent conflicts and struggles for an audience. Either way, the production of alternative news and the creation of anti-war media content is a crucial part of anti-war civic activism.

The production of civic media requires a lot of resources and particular expertise, in particular, initiatives need to be able to create high-quality and professional content, organise technical support and attractive design, have copywriting knowledge etc. Such work, according to the research participants, requires large financial and time investments. Small

initiatives that focus on other types of activity, as well as those recently founded and with no experience in this area usually do not have sufficient resources for this type of activity.

## Resources of anti-war initiatives

Human resources and financial support are the main resources needed to implement the projects of anti-war initiatives.

### HUMAN RESOURCES

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has caused a surge of civic activity among Russians, which is occurring against the backdrop of the increasing repression of civil society and even in spite of it. Virtually all of the participants in the study spoke of the importance and need for the continued involvement and support of human resources for the initiatives' activities. Not only activists who took part in civic initiatives before the war, but also those who were not previously active are involved in anti-war actions. Often people who were forced to leave Russia because of the war become activists and volunteers (3); a huge number of volunteers with no experience of activism are involved in helping refugees and deportees from Ukraine (6).

One of the main problems of volunteer work, according to the interviewees, is the so-called exhaustibility of human resources. Interviewees told us that volunteers' activity decreases over time, fatigue accumulates and burnout occurs. No one knows how long the war will last. In such a situation, it is very difficult and sometimes impossible to plan one's life and participation in civic engagement; it is difficult for non-professionals to sustain the practice of helping victims of war, which is built on empathy and so on. Participants in the study spoke of the need to attract more volunteers, as well as the need to support them, in particular, with psychological assistance.

According to the study, there is a special demand in anti-war associations not only and not so much for volunteers (although they are also often

in short supply), but above all for organisers and coordinators, whose activities require special competencies and a certain professionalisation, which, in turn, is connected with the allocation of time and financial support. Besides this, the most important competencies in activism today are fundraising knowledge and media and PR competencies, which, under the current conditions, initiatives can gain by cooperation with each other (see the section of this report on cooperation). The education of activists as well as mutual support between initiatives, exchange of experience, and peer-to-peer consulting are a necessary resource for sustaining civic activism.

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

New initiatives that emerged on the wave of anti-war protests are still weakly institutionalised and professionalised. They exist primarily on donations and unpaid volunteer labour. Despite the fact that the number of volunteers in the Russian Federation and abroad has grown several times over since the beginning of the war, this resource is also limited.

The donations collected are not spent on supporting activists, but primarily on carrying out specific tasks, such as material aid to Ukrainian citizens who were forced to stay in Russia (17, 6). Most commonly, financial payments go to experts, namely legal counsels, defence lawyers and psychologists. Small initiatives understand the limitations of their resources and capabilities and build their activities around them:

**“As for resources, in general, the question is of course interesting because here it very much depends on the goals. So far, the aims we follow, in principle, are fulfilled by the activist commitment of the group. Our energy is enough for that. When there was an active period, it was difficult, of course, but at that time, in general, resources were difficult to find in any case. Now, to be honest, I don’t know whether we need to bring in something additional again, because we don’t have regular, consistent daily work” (16).**

Here, it is important to note that donations are mostly collected from Russians who are in Russia and abroad. According to one research participant, collecting money from Russian citizens is a fundamental position, because financial support for civil society today is one of the few possible and accessible ways to fight the Russian political regime:

“We don’t look for support and approval from the outside particularly actively because, well, even though our values and views are quite mainstream in Europe, nevertheless our agenda may just not be understood out of context [...] If we were to focus our fundraising on people outside of that context, we wouldn’t be successful at it because we would be promoting the wrong agenda, and then that would have a negative impact on what we do. We are, after all, first and foremost a Russian organisation that wants political change in Russia through democratic means” (1).

Initiatives that have a long track record and have relocated or been founded abroad have the opportunity not only to collect donations, but also to receive grants from various foundations. As a rule, such initiatives are already well institutionalised and partly professionalised, and they have experience with fundraising (20, 3). However, activist activities that can be carried out on the basis of grants are currently facing problems with financial transactions, primarily caused by EU sanctions, which have hit not only the subjects of the restrictions, but also members of the educated middle class who are involved in activism. In addition to restrictions on financial transactions, the sanctions also greatly restrict people’s movement across borders and their ability to pay for goods and services abroad, which also hampers civic activism (20, 4).

The demand for financial resources is also related to external circumstances that influence the format of the initiative’s work. The activities of anti-war initiatives are currently carried out according to two logics, as one interviewee says: “*We now have a kind of project-based activity or a reaction to individual events that are happening*” (16). The first logic is project-based, which in a sense is traditional for activist activity. Within this logic, an organisation or initiative formulates a goal, develops an action plan, calculates a budget and acquires resources. However, in times of war, when the situation changes quite rapidly and dramatically (for example, laws are passed or rewritten, mobilisation is announced etc.) civic activists are forced to react quickly. This is a kind of reactive situational activity, as mentioned by the interviewee above, and it requires urgent resources and/or unplanned expenditures. One interviewee talks about the financial policy of his initiative: “... *the planning horizon for money is, at best, two or three months*” (20). This mode of operation and funding is practically impossible within the understanding of a project required by foundations that support civic initiative projects.

# Safety of activist activity

The activities of anti-war activists are linked to a threat to life and a danger of political repression, as was mentioned by virtually all the participants in this study. At the same time, different kinds of threats emerge for activists operating in Russia and for those who have left for other countries and participate in anti-war activity from there.

Civic activism in the Russian Federation is connected primarily with the possible ban on activities and closure of organisations, as well as with real threats of criminal prosecution. The interviewees told numerous stories of this kind. There are several strategies in response to these threats, the most obvious and widespread of which is to leave Russia:

**“...this probably all kicked off since they actually came to some of our guys’ homes, they even came to those in rented flats, banged the door, there was surveillance – they could see that they were being followed, then they said that their relatives got visited. Extreme, shall we say, attention was paid to some guys, that’s why...some folks went abroad straight away” (4).**

Both whole organisations and individual activists who had been subject to reprisals have relocated (3, 12 and others). Leaving is often a pre-emptive measure and activists see their mission as continuing their work away from Russia while remaining active participants in Russian civil society.

The second strategy is an attempt to exist openly in the legal sphere. Legal professionals are active participants in anti-war initiatives in Rus-

sia, trying to defend citizens who are persecuted because of their anti-war stance within the existing framework of Russian law (7, 11). On the one hand, activists from these organisations are public and more visible (and thus, at risk of reprisals), but on the other hand, they have the professional competence to defend themselves and their colleagues.

Finally, the third strategy is related to illegal subversive activities. Such



initiatives operate underground, preferring not to advertise their radical activity, only occasionally publicly reporting the results (5).

At the same time, the majority of anti-war initiatives active in Russia occupy an in-between position, falling into a so-called grey zone. Their activity is not criminalised, but some of their actions could be interpreted by the authorities as a violation of the law. This applies, on the one hand, to silent anti-war agitation (for example, 16) and, on the other hand, to humanitarian initiatives aimed at helping refugees and deportees from Ukraine, persecuted activists, people who are badly suffering from the events and so on. Such initiatives are not yet subject to persecution, but in this regard the research participants do have fears that they will be.

In addition, the "grey" strategy can include covert resistance, the so-called "weapon of the weak": silent sabotage, visualised anti-war statements in the city and so on. Partici-

pants in such initiatives also need legal protection, since they may come to the attention of law enforcement agencies and be subject to criminal prosecution. However, it is necessary to emphasise here the significance and power of such spontaneous and often invisible anti-war initiatives, which are nevertheless very important. First, they demonstrate the existence of a diverse and heterogeneous Russian society. Second, in a situation where virtually any form of dissent is harshly repressed, covert resistance is the only, albeit not without its risks, way to make one's position known.

Civic activists active in the Russian Federation are for the most part aware of the dangers and take measures to protect not only the core of their initiatives, but also their volunteers and even their audiences. However, security work requires specific knowledge, in particular legal and technological knowledge (e.g., about data storage etc.):

**“We have been doing this for thirty years – producing non-governmental reports on rights violations during enlistment into the Russian army. Now it is impossible because this activity can be criminally prosecuted. But we are still collecting these materials. And there is a big problem with the archives of documents and with their safe electronic storage, and with their further use, including in the International Criminal Court” (21).**

In this light, measures to support anti-war initiatives can be aimed at improving the security of their activities (training, material support etc.)

The fears of those activists who conduct their activities in other states (mainly the countries of the EU, the Caucasus and Central Asia) are related not so much to possible persecution by the Russian state, as to the instability of the situation in their new place of residence. Activists spoke about fear due to problems with visas or the possible denial

of residence permits (22) and about difficulties in moving activist affairs abroad (4). The instability and insecurity make the legalisation of both activists and their organisations in the new country of residence significantly more difficult.

The difference in the situation of activists within Russia and those abroad requires careful and tactful communication between both sides. Some of the interviewees understand this problem:

**“...we will somehow completely revise our security policy due to the fact that after all the majority of people are in Russia. We are trying to observe different security measures for correspondence on the internet and in general to make their lives safer. But the influx of new people will make it all the more difficult” (23).**

At the same time, such disparities and differences in vulnerability between activists acting in and outside of the Russian Federation can become a cause for mutual misunderstanding, difficulties in showing solidarity, and even potential conflicts. This can be resolved through dialogue in which both sides are engaged.

The fears and experiences of the research participants are connected not only with real threats of repression and precarity, but also with

existential challenges and fears.

The interviewees, when describing their emotional state, associated fear not only with external dangers but also with personal worries: *“Actually, I’m afraid for my parents who are still in Russia. [...] And I’m afraid, in fact, of never returning to Russia. That’s it, that’s what’s scary. [...] And, of course, I understand this very well, but... but it’s scary not to go back to my country. I hope that I will come back” (17)*. Obviously, regular psychological help for participants

of anti-war initiatives, which supports them in crisis situations and protects them from burnout, is a necessary

focus for the work of foundations supporting the initiatives.

## Cooperation between anti-war initiatives

At present, Russian civil society is scattered – some civil initiatives have relocated outside of the Russian Federation, while others have remained in the country and either operate there illegally or are forced to reshape their activities in accordance with the new political and legal context. Organisations and informal associations that have existed for a long time, have changed their agendas and are developing new areas of activism. Many new civic initiatives with a relevant anti-war agenda have also emerged. A reconfiguration of Russian civil society is thus taking place, in which new alliances and coalitions are being sought and opponents are being identified.

One of the tasks of the study is to understand the opportunities and barriers to the solidarization of anti-war initiatives. The activists interviewed were generally aware of each other's initiatives. The largest civic associations "with a history" (for example, the Feminist Anti-War Resistance, the political movement Vesna, the Free Buryatia Foundation, etc.) were mentioned most frequently in the interviews. For small initiatives, these associations serve as a kind of frame of reference - they compare themselves with them in terms of the scale of their activities, organisational principles, and so forth. For example, one of the local regional initiatives (12) describes its activities by comparing it with the work of FAR and Vesna, which become a kind of reference point for the initiative, an example of how work can be organised and what you can strive for. Often, however, with regards to building alliances with large, well-institutionalised organisations, newly created and small initiatives see the danger of being taken over, of a "zero-sum game," in particular the danger of their audience or resources being swallowed up.

Interviewees most often see opportunities for alliances in horizontal cooperations, for instance, such as exchanging information about each other's activities:

**“We need a connection with the media now so that projects become more widespread, and we connect with all kinds of possible magazines and publications. We’re still trying to do collabs with the same [name of initiative], just in a different setting. We still keep writing to all possible friends, friends who have at least a certain amount of subscribers. We’re looking for new anti-war initiatives to spread the word about us” (15)**

Another example of successful cooperation is related to mutual training and exchange of experience:

**“At first, we tried to launch such a project on our own. Without sufficient media resources, without sufficient skills in fundraising and without involving workplace lawyers, it was not very promising. Our first attempt failed. And then we began to cooperate with initiatives that made it possible to do it better” (9).**

Participants in different initiatives can train each other and, as experts in a particular niche, share knowledge:

**We had a collaboration with one anti-war initiative. We held a, I don’t know, I wouldn’t call it a master class, that’s strange. Basically, we told them how to look for people in prisons when you have no information about them. I mean, well, it was more of an activist thing than a personal thing” (23).**

An example of cooperation, mutual interest and building a dialogue is demonstrated by the anti-war initiatives from the national republics

of the Russian Federation (12, 13), which organise their civic activity according to the principles of national self-determination and the struggle against colonialism. This consolidation of initiatives is understandable and to be expected. It is connected, on the one hand, to shared experiences and identical goals, and on the other, with working for different (national) audiences. However, other initiatives working in the same field often enter into a competitive relationship with each other, competing for resources and attention from overlapping audiences:

«For example, there was a proposal from [name of organisation] to provide our therapists for a chatbot. They suggested we give them 16 people to sit and help people somehow through the chatbot. Unfortunately, that doesn't work. You can't help by being a quality therapist and we understood that yes, we may give them the people, they would spread the word about us and so we would get new people and we could develop further, but all that said, we knew that if we gave them 16 therapists, the quality of our specific campaign would decrease, so we didn't take that step" (15).

In this case, despite the opportunity to expand their audience, the initiative preferred to remain autonomous and not lower the standard of its own activities.

The struggle for (symbolic) power, which can be observed in large associations, is a serious barrier to solidarity between initiatives:

“I think that we would not cooperate with people like Ilya Ponomarev or similar. Who use other people's actions and use the war in Ukraine to assert their own power. So, with such people just on principle" (4).

The fault lines are also ideological rifts. In particular, national initiatives are very sensitive to the imperial rhetoric of other civic associations, and feminists are sensitive to manifestations of any kind of xenophobia:

“I can say that I’m definitely not ready to work with right-wing people, with those who advocate gender inequality, who promote xenophobia, who promote migrantophobia, who approve of domestic violence, are against LGBT rights, in general, any xenophobic views that are directed against different vulnerable groups. [...] Another thing is that when you cooperate with a democratic or anti-war organisation, you don’t always know 100% what their views are on LGBT issues, for example, or on people with disabilities, or on migrants. So it is not always possible to understand this, but at least we can always understand what a right-wing, right-liberal or right-conservative organisation is” (19).

Nevertheless, almost all of the participants in the study demonstrate a readiness for situational cooperation and solidarity. They believe that coalition building in the current situation should take into account past mistakes, it should happen voluntarily and according to the situation:

“We decided not to repeat the mistakes of the past and not to try to put everyone into a single organisation, there were attempts to fight it. We realised that voluntary, democratic cooperation between organisations is more productive because it does not require everyone to follow a single agenda.” (1)

# The future of Russia and Russian-Ukrainian relations. Strategies and tactics of reconciliation work

Conceptions of the future of the Russian Federation are important for understanding activism and strategies for the development of anti-war initiatives and solidarity. Virtually all of the participants spoke of two possible scenarios that are in one way or another perceived as "hard/difficult times" for Russian society. The first scenario is associated with Russia's defeat in the war, its further (self-) isolation, the strengthening of totalitarianism/authoritarianism and harsh repression of civil society. The second scenario is related to hopes for an end to the military operations caused by a split in the elites and a change in power, with interviewees speculating about both a political crisis in the country and a severe economic crisis caused by war and reparations. This prognosis is more favourable for the development of civil society in the Russian Federation, although it requires a great deal of work by various civil institutions. Here, it should be noted that these scenarios are usually based on belief ("*I believe that...*") and optimism rather than on analytical forecasts, which is evident in the rhetoric of the narratives about the future, with the metaphors of "purification", "recovery", "liberation" and so on frequently used.

Anti-war initiatives are focused not only on overt or covert opposition to the regime and solutions to current problems, such as assistance to war victims, but also toward the construction of the future. Civic activists primarily associate constructing the future with informing, educating and persuading "doubters". According to the participants in anti-war initiatives, alternative information to the official version of what is happening will not only help to change the attitude of Russians towards the war, but will also prepare them for the "building of another Russia" and help them to survive the times of the impending crisis:

**"We've even had people come sometimes who doubted which side they were on. Maybe they have relatives who are against it, and they have doubts, they come to us [...] We hope that we will help keep these people. Maybe some we won't be able to keep, and we don't just impose our opinion on someone, just try and show that you can think differently, that you can actually**

separate yourself from the state, and this will be instrumental that in the future, whatever the situation may be, whatever it is, it will be bad in our country anyway, it will help them [...] There is a separate direction that we want to develop now with people who are staying in Russia, this is about that” (15).

The rapidly and dramatically changing situation and at the same time an uncertain future presents activists with challenges. They are forced to reactively change their tactics and strategies to meet the new challenges:

“[The working strategy] very much depends on the external situation. What we keep talking about for other initiatives and activists, strategic thinking should be: you need to understand what you are going to do in the future as to why you need what you are doing now. Another thing is that for thinking through a strategy for every possible scenario – and the changing of circumstances is often unpredictable or unexpected things get determined – for every possible scenario, some kind of response has to be thought through and the impact of this on your strategy. But this requires constant work, a kind of strategy department, it takes a lot of resources” (9).

The repressive nature of Russian law, combined with the uncertainty and volatility of the overall situation, are the main conditions within which anti-war initiatives unfold. Such conditions present a challenge for any civic engagement and force its working strategy to change, to look for new formats, expand or redefine the scope of activities etc., which is essentially the specific work of the anti-war initiatives.

**Reconciliation work** with Ukrainians is seen by the research participants as one of the most important strategic objectives of their activities, but such work in the context of the war has its own specifics. One way or another, links with Ukrainians remain. Many interviewees talked about close personal contacts, which were not cut off during the war. The activities of several initiatives focused on individual assistance to Ukrainians who were refugees and deportees from the zone of armed combat (22, 6, 17). Such civic activism probably cannot be interpreted as cooperation between civic initiatives on both sides, yet humanitarian work on an individual level promotes mutual understanding and the establishing of lateral



ties, which can be a prerequisite for reconciliation work.

According to the interviewees' accounts, most of the instances of cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian civil initiatives that existed before the war have now been suspended, due to a change in the overall agenda:

“We stopped our regular, routine calls with our Ukrainian colleagues [...] Because I know that Ukrainian human rights defenders are so busy now. I mean they don't have a free second, they work very hard. And I understand that even discussing an initiative or an idea will also require their time and physical resources, but their priorities are a bit different. That's why I respect that, but I have not given up hope that we may be able to discuss something” (21).

Furthermore, the continuation of cooperation often becomes impossible due to the morally motivated refusal by Ukrainian colleagues to continue working together.

“It was also psychologically hard for me to take part, but still I tried to, at least something either in small circles or in general one-to-one conversations with people, with activists from Ukraine. I understand that not all of them are receptive to this communication. Not everyone has the desire to communicate and communicate constructively without any kind of accusations. I also understand that there are still points of contact with human rights groups or human rights activists with whom we can and are willing to work and exchange information, at least in some capacity. I think this is very valuable. Another thing is that you really have to be ready to communicate on a mental, physical and moral level. To have a desire and to see, maybe, some kind of point” (21)

Most of the organisations and informal associations that participated in the study do not currently cooperate with their Ukrainian counterparts. Some of the interviewed activists talked about their attempts to establish a cooperation, but these attempts failed (for instance, 15). At the same time, all the interviewees viewed the lack of cooperation with under-

standing.

Nevertheless, individual initiatives managed to maintain/establish links and cooperation, in particular one Russian LGBT organisation was able to establish communication with a Ukrainian LGBT organisation during a conference on the basis of shared experiences of discrimination against minorities:

“Now because of the war, their delegation was very low-key. They did come from Ukraine, but they were either trans men or women. That is, people who don’t fall under the draft. We had a very nice, good conversation. In other words, there were no serious disagreements. People treated our activities with understanding. Generally, in principle, it was not possible to single out Ukraine or Russia at this conference, because next to us there was Turkey, where the problems are the same, where homophobia and the police are the same, where state persecution also exists, it’s just maybe not as rampant as in Russia. Or Poland, for example. Therefore, on the contrary, our colleagues felt themselves to be among different LGBT organisations, they felt like they were in an environment where the kind of problem: this is a good Russian, this is a bad Russian and so on... it was absent, it just wasn’t heard there” (11).

According to the research participants, cooperation with Ukrainian counterparts is absolutely necessary, but it is only possible under certain conditions. Firstly, cooperation would only be possible after the war, or at least after the acute phase of the armed conflict, is over and when the Russian Federation acknowledges reparations for Ukraine: “*Of course, we would like to see a normal dialogue and relations established, but this requires first of all stopping the war and overthrowing the regime*” (9). Secondly, according to interviewees, it is the Ukrainian side that could then initiate relations and contact. This is not due to a principled refusal, but to moral notions about the right of the affected side to take the first steps towards reconciliation and to engage in dialogue when it sees fit. Some interviewees believe that building a new cooperative relationship with Ukraine would only be possible in the presence of a “third party” or even as part of a larger group. Research participants emphasised that new cooperation with Ukrainian activists will be possible “*only*

*in the form of an equal [...] mutually beneficial partnership, without any patronising attitudes in either direction” (5). In order to build a dialogue of equals, it is important to overcome the imperial and colonial rhetoric that is embedded in the Russian language, often without reflection. In this case, the anti-colonial national anti-war initiatives see a kind of advantage in building a dialogue with Ukraine because of the shared experience of existing as an “imperial periphery” and under occupation: “The [republic’s] national political centre has already appealed to President Zelenskyy to have the republic [name] recognised as occupied territory. That is, we are now already establishing contacts with them. We know that they have seen this statement and reacted positively, shall we say” (13). Furthermore, according to the study, cooperation and reconciliation work is now possible and will be more successful in the work of grassroots initiatives on both sides that are united by other shared experiences, such as experiences of xenophobia:*

**“So there is still a situation where LGBT organisations in Ukraine and Russia may not be included in dialogue with the authorities, may not be civil society actors to the full extent. Consequently, as long as they are ignored [...] It is easier with LGBT people because we have a common background, a common history. Therefore, it seems to me that with all the grassroots structures, that we will find dialogue much easier than these politicians, this government-in-exile and similar self-appointed leaders” (11).**

There are attempts to start a dialogue about reconciliation through bringing together people who have faced the experience of emotional loss. Their initiators suggest that this can help build a rapport and facilitate reconciliation:

**“We have a community of mothers who self-organised, who started looking for their sons [...] They now want to come together with Ukrainian mothers, they want to talk on platforms with mothers of Ukrainian servicemen. I think that’s also a great achievement. And I don’t think it’s a myth or some kind of unimaginable future. I think it will be possible to achieve, to approach and sit at the same table with mothers from both sides” (21).**

In order to prepare reconciliation work, research participants believe it is important to maintain personal networks and contacts with Ukrainian citizens. According to the interviewees, informational and educational activities aimed at a wider Russian audience are now absolutely necessary. In particular, they stressed the need to broadcast information to a broad Russian audience about what is actually happening in Ukraine, to give “real voices” and people’s testimonies:

**“In principle, the genre of living testimony, generally speaking, human testimony, is important for many things. For example, for advocacy, when people don’t want to believe in war crimes by Russian soldiers, you can make a selection of some real voices, VKontakte posts by people from, I don’t know, Bucha. And show it to people. Just, I don’t know, a phone call with someone who was under occupation creates some trust. But this is how you were asking – this is a dialogue between Russia and Ukraine” (2).**

As one of the areas of anti-war activity and as preparation for reconciliation work with Ukrainian society, the study participants considered the creation of archives, databases recording war crimes and human rights violations, which could later be used to try war criminals (21, 8). According to the respondents, further reconciliation work could be facilitated by joint activities in different spheres, including educational (16), artistic and theatrical projects (24, 25).

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## How do anti-war initiatives work? Key conclusions and recommendations

Based on the results of our research, we propose several theses that we believe can contribute to more productive work by Russian anti-war initiatives. Since anti-war activity – and any support for it – within Russia is inherently risky, we focus these recommendations on international organisations and foundations.

1.

Anti-war initiatives are not only those collectives and activists who direct their activities towards

stopping the armed conflict or directly campaign for an end to the war. In the current legal and political situation in Russia, such anti-war initiatives are few in number, since such activities are not safe for the participants in the initiatives. The term anti-war initiatives should also include those engaged in humanitarian work aimed at minimising the negative consequences of the war for different groups of people in Russia: these include displaced Ukrainian citizens, Russian citizens subject to political persecution, members of the LGBT community who have become as “internal enemy” against the backdrop of the military operations, among many other groups. The humanitarian aspect of the work of many initia-

tives is combined with advocacy tasks in which they increase the number of supporters for the end to the armed conflict.

## 2.

One of the dilemmas of anti-war initiatives is how to carry out tasks that require a presence in Russia without jeopardising the security of the participants. Only in a few cases have distributed collectives emerged, with some participants in Russia and others abroad. The majority of participants in anti-war initiatives are abroad. At the same time, the demand for participation by those in Russia is quite high. We believe that if this demand remains unmet and anti-war initiatives remain largely based abroad, away from the place and audience at which they are aimed, the gap between those “who have left” and those “who have stayed” may widen, with potentially negative consequences in the future. While abroad, Russians may lose a sense of the context in which those for whom they do the anti-war work live. Maintaining such links requires attention and focused work that can be facilitated and supported by various organisations and foundations.

## 3.

Because initiatives vary not only in terms of the topics they work on, but also in their organisational form, scale, approach to the work, background and location of the participants, it is very difficult to create a uniform system for evaluating their effectiveness. In most cases, it is not possible to assess and compare the effectiveness of their advocacy work, nor the amount of assistance provided, nor even the number of people involved in the initiative and the time spent on their work. Therefore, the tools for evaluating the work of each initiative must be developed individually, taking into account the specifics of their work and possible risks.

## 4.

Initiatives work with different target audiences and seek specific approaches to them. This means that in some cases the “façade” of an initiative open to followers and supporters may be distant from the values shared by international organisations and foundations. Initiatives may use rhetoric that is familiar and understandable to the target audience, thus finding supporters among

groups who are not yet engaged in the anti-war movement and who are put off by "oppositional," "politicised," "feminist" or other rhetoric. This does not mean that the collective leading the initiative itself does not share the values of democracy, justice, equality, freedom etc. We recommend that international organisations pay attention to this when deciding whether or not to support certain initiatives.

## 5.

The approaches to work practised by the initiatives are not universal. Some are inclined towards a project-based logic, speaking the language of "goals", "effects" and "resources"; others, due to specific aims or the background of the participants, are not familiar with this language and organise their work on different principles, acting situationally and flexibly, which is extremely important in the context of unpredictable changes in the political sphere. We suggest that such initiatives should be taken just as seriously and that we should look for engagement mechanisms that would allow support even for those who do not use the language of projects and have no experience of engaging with international organisations and fundraising. A possible solution could be not only to teach the language of project writing and building one's work according to project-based thinking, but instead to revise the principles by which international organisations select those they support and assess their effectiveness.

## 6.

Almost all anti-war initiatives have to structure their work according to the rationale of the media space: presenting themselves and competing with others for the attention of subscribers, since this is how most get the resources to work. Media work and the (not always pronounced, but background) competition takes up a considerable amount of volunteers' and initiative participants' work. The winners are initiatives built by media specialists, social entrepreneurs and journalists who have a lot of experience and know how this field works. Since it is almost impossible to change this logic, we propose, firstly, to think about possible support measures that would allow initiatives to be more visible in the media realm with less time and work for the participants. For example, support educational projects for activists on media promotion and self-presentation. Secondly, for initiatives that do not use the media to campaign and to implement their mission,

but rather to seek resources and funding, external support could save resources that the initiative spends on media work.

7.

Although the initiatives engage in short-term and ad hoc collaboration with others and generally demonstrate a positive attitude towards cooperation, we are inclined to see their work more in terms of a desire to maintain autonomy and form their own unique activist niches. They share the common goal of stopping the war, but do not yet appear to be a unified anti-war movement, with the different parts of it showing solidarity with one another. We do not see the need for a consolidated and unified coordination of all anti-war initiatives, they can co-exist in a single field, cooperating and helping each other on individual issues. What would be important is an auxiliary infrastructure for the communication and coordination of activists that does not pretend to be a universal representative organisation.

Although the initiatives engage in short-term and ad hoc collaboration with others and generally demonstrate a positive attitude towards cooperation, we are inclined to see their work more in terms of a desire to maintain autonomy and form their own unique activist niches. They share the common goal of stopping the war, but do not yet appear to be a unified anti-war movement, with the different parts of it showing solidarity with one another. We do not see the need for a consolidated and unified coordination of all anti-war initiatives, they can co-exist in a single field, cooperating and helping each other on individual issues. What would be important is an auxiliary infrastructure for the communication and coordination of activists that does not pretend to be a universal representative organisation.

8.

We observed the expected demand for “people” and “money” from the initiatives – virtually all

anti-war initiatives are in need of expertise, working hours and financial resources in order to maintain sustainable functioning collectives and to increase the volume and quality of advocacy and humanitarian work. It is noteworthy however that this demand is not constant and depends on external political circumstances. For example, during “crunch times,” during mobilisation or when new laws are passed, initiatives have more followers (and therefore more donations and resources to work with) and the involvement of activists and volunteers is high. In “quieter” times, there is war and volunteer fatigue, which leads to the loss of a crucial resource – enthusiasm – and the burnout of participants. This means that donors need to be aware of the political context and be prepared to react quickly and offer help in an emergency.

9.

The initiatives have little interaction with Ukrainian activists and initiatives, but see their role

in a future dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. The future in which they see themselves begins, firstly, with the cessation of the armed conflict, and secondly, with a request from their Ukrainian counterparts



to build a dialogue. Thus, from the perspective of Russian anti-war initiatives, only representatives of Ukrainian civil society have the right to take the first step in building new peaceful relations, not people from Russian civil society. The exception to this are initiatives which have emerged in the national republics and which, apart from the anti-war struggle, aim to strengthen the agency of national groups within the Russian Federation (up to and including the secession of the republics). For them, their national identity and the colonial history of Russia are the basis for solidarity and interaction with Ukraine even now. Dialogue can also be facilitated by finding a language and forms of dialogue that take into account the needs of both sides. Work on this should start now. Western NGOs and partners could mediate a future dialogue between Russians and Ukrainians.

# Study Participants

## Team

The report was authored by sociologists and PhD candidates in sociology, working on researching activism, grassroots solidarity and initiatives, and migrant rights.

## Interviewees

The text includes quotes from interviews with representatives of the following anti-war initiatives:

1. A political youth organisation that originated before February 24, 2022.
2. Media outlet with a left-wing political stance, appeared after February 24, 2022.
3. Project to help mobilised people avoid military service, founded in the summer of 2022.
4. An initiative that emerged in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation after February 24, 2022.

5. Guerrilla project sabotaging military infrastructure, established by anarchists before February 24, 2022.
6. Network of assistance to Ukrainian refugees and deportees leaving Russia for Europe.
7. A human rights project against political persecution. Originated before February 24, 2022.
8. A project to help Russians in a variety of ways, founded on the basis of media after February 24, 2022.
9. Initiative campaigning for corporate sabotage and protecting the labour rights of Russians. Created after February 24, 2022.
10. Feminist initiative campaigning for women to join the anti-war movement. Established before February 24th, 2022.
11. Human rights organisation working with the LGBT+ community. Founded after February 24, 2022.
12. A local media organisation created in a national republic of the Russian Federation a few days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
13. An initiative related to national self-determination that emerged in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation before February 24, 2022.
14. An initiative that arose in one of the national republics of the Russian Federation after February 24, 2022.
15. A project of psychological assistance to Russians, originated after February 24, 2022.
16. An initiative that brings together a professional group to protect labour rights and campaign in the workplace, created after February 24, 2022.
17. Project to help Ukrainian citizens forced into Russia, ceased operation in autumn 2022.
18. A project helping LGBT+ people, established jointly by Ukrainians and Russians prior to the outbreak of the war in February 2022.

19. Initiative promoting a feminist and anti-colonial agenda. Founded after February 24, 2022.

20. Media outlet established before February 24, 2022.

21. An organisation dedicated to the legal defence of people subject to military service, established before February 24, 2022.

22. Initiative to help persecuted Russians travel abroad. Founded after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began.

23. Human rights initiative supporting persecuted anti-war activists. Founded after February 24, 2022.

24. Art project supporting individual anti-war statements performances. Founded after February 24, 2022.

25. Initiative bringing together anti-war statements by artists in Russia. Created after February 24, 2022.

26. Art group creating performance projects. Established before February 24, 2022.

27. Initiative providing comprehensive support to a select professional group of Russians, founded after February 24, 2022.

28. Initiative providing legal protection and psychological support for military conscripts established before February 24, 2022.

