



nonviolence
international

Opportunities for anti-war messaging through the Russian diaspora

Short conclusions from an assessment mission to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Germany and Poland (March – April 2023)

BACKGROUND

In March – April 2023, Andre Kamenshikov, representative of Nonviolence International in Ukraine, has completed a set of field visits to different countries that provided refuge to large numbers of Russian citizens who left their country due to political views and desire to avoid involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine, which has dramatically escalated in February 2022. The mission included visits to Vilnius, Lithuania; Warsaw, Poland; Berlin, Germany; Almaty, Kazakhstan; Aktau, Kazakhstan; Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Tashkent, Uzbekistan; Tbilisi, Georgia

The purpose of these trips was to assess whether it is theoretically possible to involve large numbers of Russian draft-resisters who fled the country to effectively communicate with their friends, relatives, former co-workers, and loved ones in the heartland with the overall aim of gradually turning Russia's silent majority against Putin's war. The main goal of this approach would be to reach a large portion of ordinary Russian people, not just those 15-20% of the population who already see themselves in opposition to the current political regime.

During the mission meetings were held both with representatives of local civil society organizations and with Russian citizens who left their country due to their political views or their desire to avoid becoming involved in Russia's war against Ukraine. In addition to numerous meetings, 3 group events were organized with representatives of the Russian diaspora in different countries.

It is estimated that at least 700 000 Russian citizens left the country after February 24, 2022. Currently the new wave in the Russian diaspora consists of many groups of people, differing in their level of political engagement, in the way they ended up in other countries, in their capacity to adapt to their new realities, in their ability to cross borders, and so on.

The two most vulnerable groups are who only have an "internal" Russian passport and thus their opportunity to travel is very limited¹ and those who are under criminal investigation in Russia, be it for their political position or for being considered "deserters" from the ranks of the military or other state institutions.

¹ As of today, only 4 countries allow Russians to visit them with an "internal" passport: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, plus the self-proclaimed Abkhazia and South Ossetia

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The assessment confirmed that many, probably – the majority of people in the new Russian diaspora feel a need to improve their communication with those who remained in the country. While each individual case is different, in some cases, the issue of being understood by friends and relatives in the country becomes an important and painful personal concern: *“I feel that my parents traded their children for a TV”; “I am afraid that my father will find out that I am in Kazakhstan.”*

The assessment also confirmed that the vast majority of people in this new Russian diaspora hold a clear anti-war position and negatively assess the actions of their government. These attitudes are strong despite the fact that some people continue to reproduce certain narratives spread by Russian propaganda (for example – about Ukraine’s 8-year war against the “people of the Donbass”) or about the anti-Russian policies of some western states.

There is also a noticeable difference between two groups within the diaspora. First, there are those who had a background of political activism prior to leaving the country. They tend to have more experience in communicating with people on sensitive issues but also often have less hope of influencing the views of others – due to past negative experiences. Second, there are those who left the country primarily because of their personal fear of being mobilized or forced to become involved in the war in some other way. Generally, they tend to be less skeptical about speaking to others.

Taking into account the diversity of views among the Russian diaspora on the war and on the current situation in general, it seems optimal to focus on changes in attitudes of Russian citizens toward the actions of their government, sowing seeds of doubt in government policies, regardless of their general views about Ukraine, the global West, etc. Within such a framework, making the position of those who have chosen to leave Russia better understood and approved by those remaining in the country will be a step toward the desired result.

When speaking in practical terms about organizing an anti-war communication campaign with the representatives of the new Russian diaspora it is important to account for the significant differences that Russian citizens experience in different countries. People who feel safer in terms of their legal status and income in their new location have more capacity to engage in communication with counterparts inside Russia. Also, in theory, if people could be supported to work as “communicators” on a professional basis – this could be another way of expanding channels for anti-war messaging.

In addition, people have very different capacities in effectively communicating their position. Nonetheless, even people without a relevant professional background, due to their personal experiences, were able to formulate many useful ideas about how to better communicate on sensitive themes with their friends and relatives in Russia. Thus, it is possible to assess that among the diaspora there is interest in learning about communication techniques, as well as in exchanging experience on how to best speak with Russian citizens about the war and about other related issues.

In some cases what people perceived as failures in communication were actually a result of unrealistic expectations that people have about possible results of their interaction with others. When this was pointed out – people would often start to remember positive examples, when,

as they perceived, their arguments did have some effect on the views of others: *“After three months of working with my mother-in-law I noticed a positive evolution of her views”*; *“A ‘cotton-minded’ friend felt that I heard his position. After some time, he said: ‘You hypnotized me. I stopped watching Solovyov’*.” Recalibrating” people’s expectations should definitely be an important component in any future efforts to involve them in anti-war messaging campaigns.

NEXT STEPS

Based on the results of the assessment mission it is suggested to launch a number of pilot activities designed to stimulate effective communication of citizens of the Russian Federation who left Russia with those who remained, focusing on the motives for their choice and on their attitudes to current events.

Initially, it is important to create informal "Communication Clubs" in several countries, allowing regular meetings both in offline and online formats. These meetings could include small educational events (lectures, seminars, etc.) conducted by people with relevant knowledge and experiences. Within these clubs, Russians will exchange experience in communicating with relatives, friends and acquaintances on the topic of war, learn methods of communication and persuasion, and provide moral and advisory support to each other.

Following the creation of such clubs, a series of offline training seminars could be conducted for those who are actively involved in this activity and have the capacity to work in the communication field on a more professional level and devote significant time to this task. After these trainings, people will be supported in developing and implementing their individual communication strategies for reaching significant numbers of Russian citizens remaining in the country.

The ultimate goal for such activities should be the creation of effective and easily replicable models for involving Russians who have left the country in the process of widespread dissemination of anti-war messages within Russia