

Conference

AFR (Association Française des Russisants) / CESC (Centre d'Études Slaves contemporaines),
ILCEA4
Université Grenoble Alpes

Making Culture Beyond Borders: Russian Exile in the 21st Century

Grenoble, 20 March 2027

More than four years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russian citizens who left their country in large numbers now appear to have settled abroad. Although their exact number remains difficult to estimate, nearly one million people are believed to have left Russia and moved to different countries of the former Soviet Union (Georgia, Kazakhstan, Armenia...), the Middle East (Israel, Turkey), Europe (Germany, France, Spain), and the United States.

The reasons for this emigration are diverse. Some people, especially journalists and cultural actors, left because they could no longer pursue their professional activities ("foreign agents", "undesirable organisations"). Others emigrated to avoid mobilisation, while others sought better living conditions. Sociologically, this migration often consists of young, educated urban dwellers with significant cultural and economic capital, knowledge of foreign languages, international experience, and generally democratic values, giving them a strong capacity for adaptation. Many work in digital technologies and can work remotely. Contrary to common media representations in Western countries, exiled Russians are not necessarily politically active and do not systematically belong to the political opposition (IFRI report, 2023). Even when they are not professional cultural actors, these emigrants participate in the renewal of a Russian culture "abroad" through their exile experiences and practices within new social and cultural environments.

This raises the question of how these emigrants continue to produce cultural content and consume cultural goods outside Russia. UNESCO defines culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society" (Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, 1982). Culture, therefore, encompasses not just the arts but also lifestyles, value systems, and intangible heritage. Together, these dimensions shape communities. As Catherine Gousseff demonstrated regarding twentieth-century Russian emigration (2008), the formation of an exile community requires a shared narrative. Yet this recently emigrated Russian population remains highly heterogeneous in cultural, political, and economic terms. Is such a shared narrative possible today? If so, in what forms? What role does the war play in it?

Another important issue concerns contacts (and possibly solidarity) between recent emigrants and earlier waves of Russian emigration. Since the nineteenth century, Russian history has been deeply

shaped by exile experiences linked to political upheavals. Between 1917 and 1991, three major waves of emigration from Bolshevik Russia and later the Soviet Union spread across the world. The first wave (after the 1917 Revolution) and the third wave (following the Soviet decision allowing Jewish emigration) included many intellectuals and writers who contributed to the creation of Russian-speaking cultural spaces outside Russia and the former USSR. These communities developed dynamic intellectual, literary, and artistic environments, some of which remain active today. However, these earlier communities differ significantly from recent migrants in their relationship to Russian language and identity. While earlier migrants prioritised preserving language, religion, and traditions, recent arrivals often seem less connected to “traditional Russian culture” and are more focused on integrating into their host societies. How do these different waves interact? To what extent do their understandings of “Russian identity” conflict? Is it still relevant to speak of a single Russian diaspora today?

Recent emigration is also partly professional. At least 1,500 journalists working for nearly seventy media outlets left Russia because of the war. Russian media organisations established abroad (*Dojd’* in Amsterdam, *Meduza* in Riga) contribute to the emergence of a new Russian exile culture. On what resources do they rely to reinvent themselves abroad? How do they overcome the difficulties of exile, especially financial ones? Expatriate bloggers’ channels (Maksim Katz, Yuri Dud’) and Russian-language media created after the war (Masha on Russia, The Breakfast Show), together with social media platforms, contribute to the creation of transnational Russian-speaking communities united around democratic values and opposition to the regime and/or the war.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that host countries also influence this “Russian culture abroad”. They do not simply receive it but influence it through access (or lack of access) to institutional and cultural structures. For example, Russian artists whose positions regarding the war remain politically neutral, ambiguous, or unclear may be excluded from cultural programming. Thus, in France, the Russian DJ Nina Kraviz was removed from the line-up of the “Vieilles Charrues festival” because she had not publicly expressed her opposition to Vladimir Putin. Host societies often expect explicit anti-war or oppositional discourse consistent with their own political agendas.

Exile generates new forms of expression and new ways of transmitting cultural heritage. We would therefore like to highlight contemporary questions related to cultural transmission. What educational issues emerge from recent exile? What role do local institutions (Russian schools, Russian-speaking associations, etc.) play in transmitting language and heritage? More broadly, how can the war in Ukraine be explained to children?

We particularly welcome contributions from the humanities and social sciences, including sociology, anthropology, geography, history, media studies, linguistics, and cultural studies, as well as research on artistic practices (literature, visual arts, music, theatre).

Possible topics include (non-exhaustive list) :

1. Cultural productions

- Representations of exile in contemporary artistic works
- Identity issues in art
- What does “Russian cinema in exile” mean? Reception by host countries and changes in filmmakers’ trajectories
- Theatre practices beyond borders: performances, festivals

2. Cultural industries abroad

- Reconfiguration of publishing markets: the “new tamizdat”, Russian-language publishers founded abroad after 2022; publishing strategies, specialisations, and transnational circulation of books; literary events organised by exile communities
- Visibility of Russian opposition artists abroad; is an exile film industry possible?

3. Culture and socio-digital media

- Reinvention of journalistic culture
- Financial challenges and adaptation strategies
- Changes in audiences and working methods
- The role of social media and digital platforms in building Russian-speaking communities and collective identities (for instance, through lexical creations or *memes*)

4. Contemporary Russian exile and twentieth-century emigration waves

- Relations between contemporary cultural actors and previous emigrant waves
- Redefinition of cultural references and canons
- Memory and reinterpretations of the past

5. Perceptions and self-perceptions of recently emigrated Russians

- Construction of collective and individual identities
- Institutional reception and support mechanisms
- Adaptation processes

6. Children and transmission

- Transmission (or non-transmission) of Russian and bilingualism
- Practical and sociological difficulties
- Educational institutions
- Contemporary Russian-language children’s literature

Contributions addressing broader questions of territorial belonging, new economic models, identity, and language are especially encouraged.

Working languages: French and Russian

Please send an abstract (maximum 500 words), a provisional title, and a short biographical note (200 words) by **15 September 2026** to: colloqueAFR.CESC.2027@gmail.com

This conference will lead to the publication of a special issue of *Revue russe*. By agreeing to participate, speakers undertake to submit an article for evaluation by the conference's scientific committee and, subsequently, by the journal's peer-review committee.

Funding: The organisers will cover accommodation costs, but not travel expenses. Participants are therefore encouraged to seek funding from their home institutions.

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« La littérature russe face à la guerre en Ukraine – ARTATWAR » (2024-2028), coordinatrice : Victoire Feuillebois, GEO UR1340, Université de Strasbourg.