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A seat at the table

Russian democratic forces in exile seek representation in the Council of Europe's Assembly — but will they succeed?

When Mikhail Gorbachev addressed the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in 1989 — becoming the first Soviet leader to do so — he spoke of 'furnishing' the 'common European home.' This metaphorical housewarming party seemed well underway when Russia joined the Council of Europe in 1996, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Less than a generation later, in March 2022, Moscow's war in Ukraine rendered its presence at PACE a *res impossibilis*.

Yet the Assembly has never fully closed the door on Russian civil society. In October 2023, it signalled its intention to launch a 'contact platform' to engage with Russian democratic forces (RDF) — a process that now appears to be quietly gaining momentum behind closed doors.

With no European ombudsman for anti-war Russians — and thousands of Russian political migrants having arrived in Europe since 2022 — PACE, with its mission of advancing human rights, is uniquely positioned to fill this critical gap. But the success of these efforts will not depend solely on the political will within the Assembly. It also hinges on the RDF's capacity to overcome internal divisions and create a viable vision for a post-Putin Russia, one that European institutions can support without compromising their democratic principles.

The watchdog of Europe

With 46 states as its full members and a focus on upholding the rule of law, PACE was envisioned as Europe's watchdog. Conceived in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the atrocities of World War II, it fosters sustained dialogue with political actors and civil society.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Assembly has called for greater support for anti-war movements in Russia and Belarus. As Europe finds itself increasingly caught between the rock of surging US

unilateralism under Donald Trump and the hard place of Vladimir Putin's slow but grinding advance in the Donetsk region, the need for a sovereign European anti-war narrative has never felt more urgent. Incorporating a compelling Russian anti-war sentiment into this discourse should serve to strengthen it, not diminish it.

Efforts to set up a mechanism for engaging pro-democracy Russian voices at PACE have been underway for almost three years. More recently, however, the process gained new momentum after Belarusian democratic forces, led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Coordination Council, formed a delegation and opened an office on PACE premises. In January, they participated in the Assembly's winter session in Strasbourg for the first time, taking part in discussions and resolution drafting. That precedent gave fresh impetus to the RDF bid.

If the approval process runs smoothly, there is a chance that the delegation could be up and running by January.

The creation of a Russian democratic representative delegation is expected to be discussed this fall. Dmitry Gudkov, an exiled Russian politician, said a memo on the issue had been drafted by Eerik-Niiles Kross, an Estonian MP and the General Rapporteur on the RDF. Gudkov and political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann believed the paper would be presented at the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy plenary session in Paris on 10 September. Vladimir Kara-Murza, a vocal critic of Putin, anticipated 'several formal procedural stages.'

If greenlit in September, the proposal could progress to the next level — the Assembly's autumn session in Strasbourg, from 19 September to 3 October.

PACE may even decide to adopt a special resolution on the matter, which would mark the Assembly's highest possible level of decision-making. A simple majority would suffice for its passage.

If the approval process runs smoothly, there is a chance that the delegation could be up and running by January. Kara-Murza believed all formalities could be completed by the end of the year, paving the way for the formation to begin in 2026.

But in institutions like PACE, things are rarely straightforward. The consultation process typically engages members of the Assembly's various political groups and committees. It must consider the interests of all

parties involved, including national delegations — such as Ukraine's.

Furthermore, PACE may also still be feeling some of the 'phantom pains' of the backlash it received after allowing the official Russian delegation to return following a five-year suspension in response to Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014. More recently, it has also threatened to expel Georgia due to its democratic backsliding.

Both factors may ultimately have made the Assembly more wary of members from countries with authoritarian leaders. Therefore, the path forward is more likely to resemble a tangled maze than a high-speed highway.

When tensions flare high

Still, the outcome of the efforts won't hang solely on PACE's internal dynamics. Much will depend on whether Russian anti-war voices can articulate a clear, unified agenda that resonates in Europe.

According to the New York Times, following the prisoner swap between Russia and the West in August 2024 — a deal that included Kara-Murza and several other prominent Russian political actors — anti-Putin forces abroad have never been more divided.

Tensions flared again in June when a photo of pro-democracy Russians working to get a green light from PACE was posted on X. Leonid Volkov, a long-standing aide to the late Aleksei Navalny and head of political projects at the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), responded with sharp criticism.

'A gathering of people whom no one has delegated cannot be called a 'delegation,' he wrote, adding that he saw the meetings in Strasbourg as 'meaningless nonsense' and 'idle talk.'

While Volkov's public bickering does little to enhance FBK's own credibility, validating the RDF delegation does indeed pose a significant challenge.

Unlike the team of Tsikhanouskaya, acknowledged by independent observers as the president-elect of Belarus, Russian pro-democracy groups lack comparable recognition.

Schulmann believed that one possible condition for

Under standard procedure, delegates to PACE are appointed by national parliaments from

inclusion could be the signing of the Berlin Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces.

among their members. But this model doesn't readily apply to exiled Russian activists and politicians, who lack the backing of any state institutions.

According to Schulmann, holding elections, whether offline or online, is currently unfeasible. Offline voting with voter registration could expose participants to potential retaliation from the Kremlin, while anonymous online voting would fail to inspire public trust.

One possible way out of this deadlock could be for PACE to select the organisations itself.

The RDF's contact group at the Assembly — led by Gudkov, with Kross as rapporteur — currently features representatives from a number of political organisations, such as the Russian Anti-War Committee and the Free Russia Forum, as well as the Free Russia Foundation, a civil society NGO. Several individuals are also involved, including Schulmann, human rights activist Evgenia Kara-Murza, journalist Anastasia Shevchenko, and others.

Whether PACE will opt for a broad selection, including political organisations, public and human rights NGOs, such as 'Memorial' and 'OVD-Info,' and other civil society groups, as advocated by Kara-Murza and Gudkov — or stick to a leaner approach — remains unclear.

Schulmann believed that one possible condition for inclusion could be the signing of the Berlin Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces. Published in April 2023, the document condemns Russia's war in Ukraine as criminal and declares Putin's regime illegitimate.

Still, bearing all aspects in mind, a delicate balance must be struck between maintaining a participatory character and addressing security concerns.

This became even more evident with the dramatic disappearance of Angelika Melnikova, a prominent figure in the Belarusian democratic delegation, earlier this spring. The occurrence sounded alarm bells within PACE and added a new layer of complexity to the matter.

An 'Apollo mission'

While internal divisions among anti-Putin groups, the validation dilemma, and security concerns are weighing heavily on progress, another

factor may be just as crucial for success: the importance of having a strategic, visionary agenda that rises to the occasion of using PACE as a platform.

According to Gudkov, if set up, the delegation would offer 'expertise on sanctions, Russia's domestic policy, elite divisions, and its post-Putin future.' Another key task, he said, would be to amplify Russian-speaking independent media and bloggers in exile, while also strengthening pro-democratic voices in Russian-speaking diasporas through cultural events and other initiatives.

Schulmann highlighted two additional priorities: defending the rights of anti-war Russians 'outside Russia and at odds with the regime in Moscow,' and advancing efforts to release political prisoners.

While each of these aspects is a vital piece of the puzzle, it's the capacity to project a grander vision — an *'Apollo mission,'* a positive counter-narrative to the Kremlin, and a compelling case for Europe's sovereign values — that could prove to be a true game-changer. Without it, all efforts risk feeling a bit like a Rolls-Royce Phantom sputtering on a run-of-the-mill engine.

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With all these factors in mind, the path to the ultimate goal is far from certain. Gudkov believed the process was in its final stretch. 'But this is Europe. It's a democracy, there are different opinions and standpoints. I hope we manage to convince the majority,' he said.

If the delegation is eventually set up, this will be an important but largely symbolic step. The Assembly — although a human rights watchdog — is not a parliament in the traditional sense. Its resolutions are advisory in nature, and securing a seat at the table does not confer legislative power.

Still, such a move would send a clear message. Being accepted as delegates to PACE would lend greater validation to Russian anti-war voices in Europe. But fine feathers alone don't make fine birds. Ultimately, the quest is not merely to obtain status, but to rise above personal ambition, offer strategic vision, and speak with one voice — if, or when, the opportunity presents itself.



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