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Council of Europe Assembly Approves Candidates for Russian Anti-War Platform

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Activist Vladimir Kara-Murza and Free Russian Foundation President Natalia Arno. **Free Russia Foundation / Facebook**

Europe's leading human rights body on Monday named 15 Russian opposition figures who will take part in a new initiative aimed at engaging exiled Kremlin critics, a move that follows years of calls from anti-war Russians for a unified platform to represent their interests in Europe.

The initiative, known as the Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces, was created in October by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). It is intended to give members of Russia's exiled opposition a formal channel to engage with lawmakers from the council's 46 member states.

Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe and PACE in March 2022, shortly after launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ending more than two decades of membership.

In a statement released Monday, PACE's executive body named 15 participants approved for the platform, including five representatives of Russia's Indigenous peoples and national minorities.

PACE said the initiative aims to "bring about sustainable democratic change in Russia and help achieve a lasting and just peace in Ukraine," while also ensuring accountability for "international crimes committed" by Russian officials.

"This Platform will be a place for this other Russia to speak — clearly, openly and without fear," said Theodoros Rousopoulos, PACE's outgoing president and the platform's chair.

"We will not turn our backs on Russians who defend democracy, human rights and freedom — and who reject this war," Rousopoulos added.

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Those selected to represent the Platform for Dialogue include former political prisoner Vladimir Kara-Murza, exiled businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Pussy Riot founder Nadya Tolokonnikova and Oleg Orlov, a co-chair of the human rights group Memorial, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

Many of the participants face criminal prosecution in Russia.

Notably absent from the list were members of Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), the most prominent Russian opposition group. Russia's Supreme Court designated FBK a terrorist organization in November.

Earlier, Navalny's allies said they would not take part in the PACE initiative, accusing it of lacking transparency, imposing restrictive conditions and favoring certain political groups.

Former FBK member Lyubov Sobol, who now lives in the United States, was included in the list, though she has not been affiliated with the organization since 2021, when it was designated "extremist" in Russia.

"Sobol is usually associated with FBK, and her participation could be seen as a gesture toward possibly establishing contact with the group," an anonymous source told the exiled outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe.

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In order to join the initiative, individuals needed to submit their candidacy to PACE, a process that ended up proving highly contentious in Russia's fragmented opposition, long divided by personal and political rivalries. Preference was given to candidates supported by four opposition groups: the Russian Anti-War Committee, Free Russia Foundation, FBK and the Free Russia Forum.

Roughly 50 people said they planned to apply, though the total number of applicants was

never publicly disclosed.

A major source of disagreement was PACE's eligibility criteria. Candidates were required to publicly oppose what the body described as Russia's "totalitarian and neo-imperial regime," recognize the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, sign the Berlin Declaration and acknowledge war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine.

Some observers have questioned whether the initiative will have any meaningful impact. Several opposition figures told Meduza earlier this month that they believe it is impossible to represent Russian liberal forces effectively from outside the country.

A former opposition politician in Moscow who still lives in Russia, speaking to Meduza, dismissed the PACE initiative outright as "useless bullshit."

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