The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# For Russians in Exile, Germany's New Intelligence Hotline Is Worth Using

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August 28, 2026

The logo of the German Federal Intelligence Agency. **Hannibal Hanschke / POOL / AFP**

The news that the German special services have opened a special direct line for residents and citizens of Russian, Chinese and Iranian origin fearing transnational repression from their states reminded me of how I myself became acquainted with German counterintelligence.

It's quite an amusing story.

Immediately after moving to Berlin, I received what was practically an official letter inviting me to a meeting at one of the German security agencies.

Moreover, the department whose employees I was being invited to meet was precisely the one responsible for protecting the constitutional order.

This in itself made me smile. The department that imprisoned me in Russia has almost the same name: Service for the Protection of the Constitutional System and the Fight against

Terrorism.

Having arrived at the appointed time, I went into an office where I met about six or seven people.

What immediately surprised me was that these were not at all the traditional stern, grey "bulldog faces" who look at you as if you're definitely guilty. Sitting in front of me were fairly young people, around 30-40, clearly educated and intelligent-looking. They spoke to me quite kindly, asked what risks I saw for myself, whether I was under threat and how I ended up in a Russian prison.

The unexpected feeling for any person who has spent a long time dealing with the Russian law-enforcement system was not even the content of the conversation. These people did not see me as an enemy or a source of new shoulder straps. After the Russian experience, this is also something you have to get used to.

At the end of the conversation, they asked whether I thought I was currently at risk.

I answered that I did not.

"Why?" they asked.

I said: "You know, according to the *ponyatiya*, if a deal has been made concerning a person, his previous sins are wiped clean. Therefore, I think the Kremlin does not yet perceive me as an enemy, as I have been exchanged."

We were talking through an interpreter, who hesitated at this moment. It was clear that the word *ponyatiya* — a term originating in Russian prisons, describing a set of unwritten understandings — was difficult to translate. Or perhaps my interlocutors were struggling with the concept as a whole.

I decided to explain it more simply.

"Have you ever played Mario?"

They nodded and smiled.

"Remember when the hero gets temporary invulnerability powers and starts flashing? Well, in my case, I am still flashing for now."

They laughed, which greatly eased the atmosphere.

The main purpose of that meeting, as far as I understood, was to tell me they would help if I ever felt under threat.

Since then, I have not encountered any situations in which I would have considered such an approach really necessary. But I still have their contact details lying around somewhere.

I do not know whether every Russian who sought refuge in Germany had a meeting like this. Possibly not. But that is precisely why the news about the appearance of an official hotline initially surprised me a little. I already assumed that such mechanisms existed anyway.

In addition to the hotline, Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the BfV, issued a special brochure for people who, on German territory, encounter surveillance, pressure or threats from foreign states. Russia, China and Iran are notorious for carrying out this transnational repression.

The brochure lists different methods of such work. These can be career intelligence service employees operating under diplomatic cover, organizations connected with the state, surveillance and other forms of pressure on journalists and activists. But there is also a much more down-to-earth thing there — so-called gig-economy agents. That is, people who are hired for a simple one-off task with no need for a complex recruitment operation and the years of training that go into preparing a professional spy. Sometimes it is enough to pay someone for surveillance, a photograph, gathering information or another small assignment.

The purpose of the new helpline goes beyond helping the individual, as it has the dual benefit of helping German counterintelligence better understand the transnational networks operating in the country.

In fact, the German authorities are directly talking about the existence and even intensification of such work on the country's territory. That is why the hotline has now been set up.

And here one more point is important. The hotline did not appear by itself.

Just eight days before, the German government approved a serious reform of legislation governing the intelligence services. The foreign intelligence service — the BND — will be granted the ability to store intercepted communications and metadata for longer, as well as to use artificial intelligence to analyse large volumes of information. The BfV domestic intelligence agency is receiving comparable surveillance capabilities. Security services have a reputation for intervening in national affairs, covertly or openly. But German agencies were strictly forbidden from doing this and forced to only observe and collect information. The new Intelligence Services Reform Act is set to finally change that, allowing the security services to step in if ordinary police measures are insufficient.

Germany as a whole is reconsidering its attitude towards espionage, sabotage, foreign interference and attempts to put pressure on people living on its territory. In my view, there are several fairly obvious reasons why this is happening now.

The first is that the scale of emigration has changed.

After 2022, an enormous number of opposition figures, journalists, human-rights defenders, activists, people who helped Ukraine or simply openly opposed the war left Russia for dozens of European cities.

The Russian authorities' attitude towards these people did not change simply because they crossed the border. The tools of repression just went after them. Not long after this hotline was announced, news broke that a former member of the Pussy Riot performance art group said the FSB threatened her in 2023, saying they would kill her family if she refused to inform on dissident artists.

The second reason is that this kind of work has become easier and cheaper.

It is absolutely unnecessary to send a so-called illegal abroad with a 20-year-long cover story. The internet makes it much harder to maintain a false identity. Sabotage and intelligence gathering can be entrusted to a "gig economy" actor already in Europe who might be completely oblivious to the true reason why they have just been offered a small amount of money to follow unusual instructions.

The third reason is that the war sharply changed European countries' attitude toward such malign activity.

The surveillance of a member of Russia's exiled opposition is one thing. But when these gig-economy agents start conducting reconnaissance of military facilities, observing routes for aid to Ukraine and preparing to sabotage them, it stops looking like a collection of separate incidents. Each case adds up to a big problem for the state.

And finally, it seems that the German authorities are finally admitting that they previously simply did not see a significant part of what was happening.

The government acknowledges that the real number of episodes of transnational repression may be substantially greater than what appears in criminal statistics.

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I think it is important in this context for me to address the Russian emigre community directly.

The concerns of the German intelligence services are not groundless. For recruiters, we are fertile ground.

When people flee their country, it is easy for them to become tired, burned out and disappointed. Some people fail to integrate and master the new local language. Some cannot find normal work for years. Many lose the social status they had become accustomed to. In Russia, they were journalists, politicians, teachers and entrepreneurs. But in exile, it suddenly turns out that nobody needs them and they have to start life practically from the beginning.

It is understandable that some people feel resentful, or even envious toward those who have turned out to be more successful in emigration.

Just look at our own community: how quick we are to throw accusations at each other, how often we try to explain our own problems by the fact that someone else received more money, attention or opportunities. Internal conflicts within the opposition have not diminished over recent years, but have only multiplied.

These people who have lost their bearings and hope are vulnerable; there may quite easily be those whom someone will one day approach and listen to very attentively. It is well established that intelligence operatives see a person on the verge of a breakdown as an opportunity. They make them feel understood and validated before directing them to direct their hatred to the country that gave them sanctuary.

Some will be offered money. Some will be offered the hope of returning to Russia with a promise that their previous sins will be forgotten. Others will be fueled by the simple desire to blame other people for their failures. In some cases, this could lead to people directly inside the opposition being compromised.

Russians are by no means the only wave of emigrants to have experienced this. It is an inherent part of life in exile, which the German authorities understand perfectly. And, what is much more unpleasant, the Russian authorities understand it perfectly as well.

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Does all this mean that now it is necessary for us to restrict our contacts, close ourselves inside a circle of old friends and see an FSB agent lurking in every new acquaintance?

Of course not. Isolating ourselves in this way would be doing the work of the Russian intelligence services for them.

But it is still worth observing several simple rules.

First: there is no need to tell new acquaintances personal information — who lives where, who is meeting whom, where someone is planning to go, and so on — without good reason. Often it is not one enormous secret that turns out to be dangerous, but a dozen small things that can then be put together.

Second: practice normal digital hygiene. Enable two-factor authentication, keep devices updated, exercise caution with opening links and files and check who has access to your accounts. These are basic things that people talk about constantly. But be honest: do you personally follow them?

Third, don’t ignore strange events that keep happening. One call, message, or chance meeting most likely means nothing. But if such things begin to repeat, it is worth at least recording the evidence and noting down dates and circumstances. There is no need to conduct an investigation yourself. It is simply better to have the facts if they are ever needed.

Fourth, be careful with your personal information. Your home address, habitual route and information about your family absolutely do not have to be publicly available. When you first meet someone new, it is entirely reasonable to go to a public place and tell someone where you are, especially if you are making yourself vulnerable.

Of course, if a situation becomes an obvious attempt at pressure, a threat, or an offer to help in exchange for information, there is no need to start playing at being an intelligence officer yourself. That is precisely what people who professionally deal with such things exist for.

The meaning of all these rules is not to start suspecting the people around you.

Ordinary hygiene. We lock the door of the flat not because we consider every passer-by a thief.

But I think there is a final, very important psychological barrier to Berlin’s idea.

We Russians grew up in a country where going to law-enforcement agencies, and especially to the intelligence services, is in itself perceived as a risk.

You come for help and do not know whether, as a result, you yourself will become an object of attention.

For many Russians, this reaction is already practically reflexive. Better not to get involved.

My experience with officials in Germany was very different. Other people may have had different experiences, but I'm confident that it's best to check with them if you have any concerns.

You simply have to remember that we are in a difficult situation. We are citizens of a state that unleashed a bloody war on its neighbors, and its opponents at the same time. Russia has shown for over a century that state borders are no obstacles to it persecuting its opponents. It would be naïve to think it wouldn't.

Therefore, the very idea of the German authorities creating a clear direct channel for people who feel threatened seems to me entirely justified.

I wish that none of us ever has to use this telephone. Better still — that it will soon become unnecessary. All I have to say now is to take care of yourselves. The threats are real, but help is there.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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