

Defeat or defend Russia? The Cologne dilemma facing the Russian émigré left

How the first forum of left-wing emigrants from post-Soviet Russia ended in a split

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The first forum of left-wing emigrants from the former Soviet Union discussed the war in Ukraine, the role of the left, and strategies for political transformation. The event highlighted ideological divisions among leftists regarding Russia's aggression and Ukraine's response.

Participants broadly divided into 'defeatist' currents supporting the full withdrawal of Russian troops from all of Ukraine, and 'defensive' currents that seek to deflect responsibility for Putin's war onto Ukrainians and the 'West.' Alexander Voronkov criticized liberal opposition alliances, asserting that the left should maintain independence and support Ukrainian leftists critical of President Zelensky's government. Dmitri Kovalev and others supported arming Ukraine as an anti-imperialist stance, rejecting calls for conditions, ceasefires or referendums as playing into Russian hands. In contrast, Andrei Sakhnin claimed that a truce on the current frontline without Russian withdrawal would somehow 'prioritize the interests of people over elites on both sides.'

The forum also exposed dilemmas, such as balancing anti-war principles with supporting Ukraine's defense and addressing violations of human rights under the Ukrainian government. Practical workshops on aiding political prisoners and evacuating activists provided constructive outcomes. Ultimately, the forum ended without consensus, producing multiple resolutions and reflecting the deep fractures and challenges facing the post-Soviet left.

Cologne Cathedral is crowded on Saturday. Citizens are rushing to the shops and the railway station, while at the back of the bustling streets, behind the signs of fashionable shops, left-wing emigrants from the former Soviet Union have come together for their first ever forum. On this occasion, fifty activists gathered in a small office, a five-minute walk from the Gothic cathedral. Although not large in scale, the event is impressive for its meaning: for the first time in a hundred years, left-wing emigrants from the former Soviet Union are forced to gather in Europe to unite or divide as before.

The forum was organised by a group of activists from Germany and France, in particular, the emigrant organisation Alliance of the post-Soviet Left (PSL), which consists of people from Russia and Ukraine as well as several well-known left-wing activists in Russia and France. The event was financially supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, affiliated with *Die Linke* (The Left).

Although some left-wing activists declined to participate in the forum, the audience was very diverse. Some of those gathering at the office door are familiar to me, others I see for the first time. One by one, delegates come in, take their seats, the organisers worry about water, procedures and technical details. Finally, everyone is seated, the hall is full of people. The room is cramped, they ask

to open the windows. Someone in the back row jokes: 'It hasn't started yet, but it's already stuffy'. Around half past twelve the hall falls silent. An elderly man in a burgundy-coloured waistcoat comes out to the podium. "Hello, comrades!" he addresses the audience with a strong German accent, and, reading from a piece of paper, continues with a quote from Goethe: "Unfortunately, this is all I can say in Russian. I am a representative of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which helped organise this forum. I am glad to see so many young people here."

He then went on to say that *Die Linke* is very concerned about the war in Ukraine and is also very interested in the democratisation of Russia, but that "a change of power from the outside will not lead to anything good, we need change from within, and initiatives like this can help with that." After reading his statement, he said that he could not stay and that he would learn about the results from the relevant report. After applause, the elder put on his black velvet hat and withdrew.

Immediately afterwards, the politician and scientist Mikhail Lobanov, who has been declared a foreign agent in Russia, addressed the audience. He spoke about the political transformation that the left needs to prepare for and the window of opportunity that will open before it. He also spoke about the problems of the left, which for many years perceived itself as a subculture, drew up its boundaries, and deliberately alienated liberals and the broad masses of activists in general. This is not the way to do things, Lobanov believes.

"The left seeks to create a party because people want an organisation, but somehow things don't work out. People create organisations and are just listed in them. It is not necessary to force the creation of any structures. And now I am against going down the path of party building. We are too different", says the politician.

In his opinion, instead of trying to cram everyone under one banner, it is much more effective to mobilise according to the situation, to unite for a short period of time, to make actions like those that took place in the March 2024 presidential elections, when a number of left-wing influencers called on voters to spoil the ballot paper.

Alexander Voronkov from Novosibirsk, one of the organisers of the forum, a shaven-headed man in a white shirt and a PSL member, came out from the audience. On the wall, just behind his back, appeared a presentation entitled "reclaiming subjectivity". Voronkov mercilessly berated the liberal opposition, saying that the left should become independent rather than seeking friendship with anti-Communist liberals.

"The left is blamed for not co-operating with the liberals. But that's the liberals' fault. They are in need of a leftist agenda. For example, Ekaterina Duntzova* had a leftist program. But why should we be the 'little brother' when we can be the 'big brother'?", says the speaker.

Laughter of approbation erupts in the hall. With a rapid-fire pace, Voronkov goes from point to point in his presentation, ordering "next" for the assistant to switch the slide. In fifteen minutes, he has managed to touch on the opposition, Putin and Ukraine. Putin, according to Alexander, also needs a left-wing agenda, and therefore "wants to be social". Because of that the following, rather curious, distortion is taking place in the social networks: liberal spokespeople are "Putinising the left" and "Bolshevising Putin". Speaking about Ukraine, the speaker said that Ukrainians demand open borders, but it is as if liberals do not hear their voices. According to Voronkov, this is a mistake, and it is necessary to support the Ukrainian leftists, many of whom are in opposition to Zelensky's government.

The third speaker was Aleksei Sakhnin, long known I believe to *Rabkor* readers. Almost all of his speech was devoted to the conflict in Ukraine. In particular, he stated that the powers that be, from the Kremlin to the White House, have already put forward their strategies, which means that the left needs to find its own vision:

"Fighting until victory is a good idea if you're not in the trenches. But if the left is for anything, it's to figure out how to get out of these blood-soaked trenches. The elites can't make peace, or even an

imperialist deal. And people on both sides want a truce more and more," he said.

The series of speeches was rounded off by Andrei Konovalov from Kirovograd Oblast. The blond, finely dressed student at the University of Cologne, greeted the audience on behalf of Ukrainian internationalists, and thanked everyone who supported the people of Ukraine in the fight against Putin's aggression. Konovalov spoke extensively about the interests of southeastern Ukraine and the fact that the interests of the people of Ukraine are increasingly diverging from the interests of the government. He cited cases of mass desertion on both sides as an example.

In addition, he criticised the methods of the Territorial Centres of Recruitment (TCCs) and some Russian opposition members who, in the speaker's opinion, mislead people about the Ukrainian government. In particular, he referred to Ilya Yashin*, who, according to the speaker, is mixing up the interests of the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian government, whose interests are now as far apart as possible.

"Ilya Yashin says that this is a conflict between tyranny and freedom, between progress and obscurantism, death and life. This forms a misconception. President Zelensky is lying. He lied to us before the election and I voted for him, he lied to us on the eve of the invasion, promising kebabs for the May holidays while his friends were leaving the country in a hurry. He lied to us earlier this year about 31,000 military deaths, and he continues to lie to us now, saying that forcing people into war, restricting freedoms, is something useful and necessary."

The message of his speech was that outside observers should "stop supporting Ukraine's right-wing government just because it is waging war". The speaker insisted that it is necessary to "recognise the violation of human rights in Ukraine" and support Ukrainians who are unable to leave the country. In this case, refusing to supply arms to Ukraine could be leverage, Konovalov said. When the time was up, the young man bowed to the hall to applause, and returned to his seat. The positions had been voiced. Now a heated discussion awaited the participants.

Battle of resolutions

While the keynote speakers were speaking, a document entitled "Program of Anti-War Left Emigration" circulated around the room. The program was drawn up by a group of activists from Germany and France, including those associated with the BPL. As it turned out, the organisers had at least two or three such programs, but the forum participants received one, which was apparently the product of collective creativity.

The public was offered a version that condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine and contained the following demands: stop the bloodshed, immediately conclude a ceasefire, investigate war crimes, punish the organisers of forced mobilisation, carry out democratic reforms in Russia, confiscate the property of Putin's accomplices, and so on. The document also declared the right of peoples to self-determination, within the framework of which some kind of referendums should be held in the territories occupied by the Russian Federation with the participation of those who were forced to leave. In order to do this, the authors wrote, troops would have to be withdrawn:

"It is quite obvious that such self-determination cannot take place at gunpoint or under conditions of military occupation. Specific forms and guarantees for the realisation of the democratic rights of the peoples inhabiting the territory of the Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine should be discussed with the participation of the inhabitants themselves and representatives of the international community. A precondition for the realisation of these rights should be the complete genuine demilitarisation of the conflict zone in the broad sense, as well as the withdrawal of troops"

The program presented provoked a strong reaction in the hall and clearly did not suit everyone. At one point, a man with glasses, a Spanish-style beard and a gold earring in his ear, who had been sitting silently by the window, waiting for his turn to speak, took the floor. He jumped up from his chair and, holding the papers in his hands, recited:

"Someone is whispering in Mélenchon's ear: "Let's not send arms to Ukraine. "No! We must demand

sending Ukraine as many weapons as possible, and this is our anti-imperialist demand”

The one who spoke about arms shipments was called Dmitri Kovalev. Between sessions he told me that he represented a small Trotskyist organisation called RCIT (Revolutionary Communist International Tendency) at the Left Emigrants Forum. Its task was to distribute a letter and an alternative resolution, which was called “[Russian Socialists for Peace without Annexations](#)”. The activists distributed the document among those present and also published it online. The text contains nine points that condemn the war, welcome arms deliveries, reject referendums proposed by another group, call for unconditional support for Ukraine and reparations.

“In this climate [of large-scale military conflict - author’s note], a “Forum of Anti-War Left Emigration” is planned to be held in Cologne. Unfortunately, its preparation is not quite democratic, and among its organisers are Russians who intentionally or unintentionally play along with Russian imperialism,” the text reads.

However, stones also flew at European leftists, who traditionally oppose the US and NATO. The authors of the letter criticised them for “consciously or unconsciously becoming allies of Putin’s dictatorship”. Kovalev, who presented the letter at the forum, told Rabkor that the text was drafted by many authors as a response to the “Sakhnin resolution” (a program handed out to participants). According to the interlocutor, the program presented by the forum organisers is ‘monstrous, disgusting and plays into the hands of Russian imperialism’ because it ‘does not contain a clear message that Russia is an aggressor’.

“Our position is very simple. We are not in favour of a war to the last Ukrainian. We want Ukrainians to decide for themselves when to stop the war, and that this decision is not provoked by the fact that they have nothing to fight with. They should have the best weapons and without any conditions, loans and bondage. And they will deal with Zelensky’s regime themselves,’ the activist explained.

Dmitry Kovalev was actively supported by Artem Stasyuk, a native of Kazakhstan, now a resident of Dresden and a member of the Die Linke party. He explained that he had come to the forum to represent an alternative position, and to find out what positions existed among left-wing emigrants. In his opinion, Putin, by attacking Ukraine, opened Pandora’s box and launched other destabilising processes, so the left and the entire international community need to support Ukraine despite all the minuses of the Ukrainian government.

“The key to solving the problem is to stop Russian aggression. If we allow Russia to somehow look like a winner in this war, it undermines international security.”

According to Stasyuk, Russian leftists should oppose their government, and it is not quite correct to make claims against the Ukrainian authorities in the context of war. Ukrainians, the interlocutor says, may have a different opinion, but notes that “we do not see here [at the forum] representatives of the other part of the Ukrainian left, which has functioning organisations in Ukraine.”

For example, “there are no representatives of Sotsialnyi Rukh [Social Movement]. In addition, he complained that representatives of Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAS)** had not come to the forum. “It is unlikely that the groups listed would have supported the idea of referendums”, he said.

According to Alexei Sakhnin, the forum revealed “really existing contradictions”. Thus, the left, which survived the metaphorical shipwreck, now needs to choose its path. Join the Western alliance or formulate an alternative.

Alexander Voronkov, who spoke at the forum with a similar position, decided to respond to the criticism. In his opinion, it is necessary to refuse co-operation with those who “support the war, no matter from which side”. “We have two main enemies—capitalism and the state”, the interlocutor summarised.

“You have been accused of playing along with Putin. What is your response?”, he was asked

“I believe that the continuation of the war is making the situation worse and helping Putin to win. Obviously, the West will not give as much arms as they [Ukrainian authorities] are asking for. If Western politicians wanted to do that they would have done it already. In my opinion, the West’s

strategy is to deliberately wear down Russia and Ukraine in order to weaken the poles of influence in Eastern Europe. How does our position help Putin? We organised a forum against Putin, we put together an organisation, our comrades in France came out demanding that North Korean soldiers not go to the front. Is that support for Putin? I think not. On the contrary, we are trying to turn people away from the Russian regime. We talk about the problems with democracy in Russia, political prisoners, people's survival. We support organisations from Russia that are fighting Putin. And we fight Putin ourselves."

The forum ended in the evening of November 3, when those gathered met for a debriefing. Apart from heated debates about politics, war and revolution, much of the event was taken up by workshops on practical issues (helping political prisoners, evacuating activists), which were very constructive. The discussion on the tactics of the left never found its conclusion and is still ongoing. The forum resulted in two documents, two resolutions, which the participants were invited to sign privately. However, standing at the office door in the evening in a cloud of tobacco smoke, through the arguments to the point of hoarseness, it is easy to see that there are many more positions than two. A kaleidoscope of opinions, instead of a black and white dichotomy.

* recognised as a "foreign agent"

** recognised in the Russian Federation as an undesirable organisation

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P.S.

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