

# Contemporary Russian-Speaking Art and Culture in Exile

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Parkhomovskaia, Nika; Arefieva, Anastasia; Skokleenko, Ilya

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## Russian-Speaking Theater Outside Russia

Nika Parkhomovskaia (University of Zurich)

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### Abstract:

Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, various important theater makers (directors, actors, set designers, composers, playwrights, critics, producers, and other theater professionals) left the country in protest and/or out of fear of repressions. They were scattered literally all over the globe, but mainly in the countries of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Western and Eastern Europe. Do they continue to make theater and, if so, how do they do it? Does the Russian language remain the main tool of their professional communication and creative interaction? How does the local context affect their theater productions and to what extent are they integrated into this context? This article will try to briefly answer all these questions and outline the problems that arise for the Russian-speaking theater makers who continue to practice theater outside Russia.

The Russian theater became quite politicized in recent years. To some extent, it became a tribune for those who could no longer express their opinions openly without fear of persecution and repression. Russian directors, actors, and other theater professionals had the opportunity to speak directly about what was happening in the country and society (especially if they used in their work the techniques of documentary theater—verbatim, documentary play, etc., had been widespread in Russia since the early 2000s thanks to Moscow-based Theatre.doc), while the audience had the illusion that their opinion was really important and they could somehow change the situation.

Surprisingly, even after 2014, the theater, for all its dependence on the state (in Russia, theaters are mainly subordinate to federal or regional Ministries and Departments of Culture, theater buildings are mostly on the balance sheet of the state, and their employees have official contracts and are in fact technically civil servants), remained an island of freedom and free-thinking. Moreover, in big Russian cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Kazan, and Nizhny Novgorod, a small number of non-state independent theaters survived, most of which had their own audiences and regularly gave performances, including such unconventional ones as site-specific, immersive or forum theater.

When the Russian government launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a number of Russian theater makers openly declared the unacceptability of this war. In particular, Marina Davydova, editor-in-chief of *TEATR* magazine, theater critic, festival curator, and director, created an anti-war petition and wrote about it on her Facebook page, while artistic direc-

tors and general managers of the country's biggest state theaters took the risk of signing an anti-war letter. Naturally, repressions followed almost immediately: an ominous letter "Z" appeared on Davydova's door, and her phone began to be tapped, soon forcing her to leave the country in a hurry, while the majority of those who had signed the aforementioned letter—among them Vladimir Urin, the director of the Bolshoi Theater, and Maria Revyakina, the head of The Golden Mask, the country's main theater award—were gradually suspended from their positions.

When it became clear that repressions against those who opposed the invasion would be swift, leading theater figures began to leave the country *en masse*. Davydova (who has now become the head of the theater program at Salzburg Festival); the infamous Timofey Kulyabin,<sup>1</sup> who actively stages dramatic and musical performances, the most recent of which, "The Queen of Spades" at the National Opera of Lyon, was recognized as one of the best opera performances of the year by the influential *OpernWelt* magazine; the experimental director Maxim Didenko; and Kirill Serebrennikov, the former head of the cult Gogol Center,<sup>2</sup> who spent several years under house arrest for alleged embezzlement, all settled in Germany, where they have developed close professional and personal ties.

Some Russian theater makers simply did not return from their foreign trips, among them director and set-designer Dmitry Krymov, who remained in the United States, where he was staging a new production. Still others, mostly younger and less famous, left for almost complete obscurity, heading to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, or to Georgia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

1 His performance of "Tannhauser" at the Novosibirsk Opera and Ballet Theater in 2014–2015 caused discontent among the Russian Orthodox segment of the audience and was eventually removed from the repertoire.

2 This theater was actually reorganized after February 24, 2022. Some of the theater's actors moved to Germany, where they joined the Thalia Theater ensemble in Hamburg and became the basis of the Berlin-based company Kirill and Friends.

Thanks to the help of the French Institute, a number of theater artists moved to France (chief among them the director Yuri Butusov, who is very popular in Russia), while many of those who had the right to do so by birth (for example, middle-aged directors Marfa Gorvitz, Semyon Alexandrovsky, and Yuri Alesin) repatriated to Israel, where a fairly significant Russian-speaking theater diaspora has formed.

Thus, by the end of summer and the beginning of autumn 2022, the map of “Russian theatrical dispersion” turned out to be more than diverse. The mobilization unofficially announced in September 2022 further increased panic, driving individuals who had not been planning to emigrate at all—mainly young male actors, directors, artists, composers, set designers, and technicians—to leave the country. Some of them, tired of the lack of permanent work and professional prospects, eventually returned to their homeland to continue to engage in theater under conditions of not-yet-total censorship, while others stayed in Central Asia, the South Caucasus or Europe and tried to adapt to the new reality.

Some of those who left after February 2022—whether because they did not know the local language or lacked a network—eventually had to change careers to earn a living. At best, they became stage teachers for children and adults, while at worst they took jobs as waiters and babysitters (although such a scenario was typical of the Russian “White emigration” of the early 20th century, it is quite rare today). Others—mostly those who already had a name and connections abroad or were able to adapt to the realities there as quickly as possible—managed to find jobs within their specialty and started staging plays in theaters around the world, both in Russian and in foreign languages.

Among those who have been particularly successful over the past two and a half years, in addition to the aforementioned figures of the older and middle generation, one can name the playwrights Mikhail Durnenkov, who is actively working in Finland, Estonia, and the United States; Esther Bol (the pseudonym of Asya Voloshina, taken after the outbreak of the full-scale invasion), who is actually banned in Russia for her pro-Ukrainian position but continues to be staged in Estonia, France, and Lithuania; and the once super-popular Russian author Ivan Vyrypaev, who settled in Poland even before the start of the full-scale invasion and after February 2022 created a theater group made up of migrant artists who had fled Ukraine, which opposition theater makers of various origins, especially from Belarus and even Russia, have since joined.

Of the middle-aged and young Russian directors who have already proved themselves in emigration, we should mention director Nikita Betekhtin, who was forced to leave Russia after he began collecting proof of

the “collaboration” of Russian theater figures with the authorities and has since staged several performances in Germany, including an audio walk around Berlin; Sergei Levitsky, who after being literally “squeezed out” of the drama theater in Ulan-Ude, where he had served as artistic director, moved with his family to Kazakhstan, where he continues to stage performances in Russian; and Daria Shamina, who was able to transport almost the entire staff of the St. Petersburg Fulcro Theater to Israel to continue the collective’s professional life in completely different circumstances.

Other Russian theater makers of different generations, who found themselves in very different countries, were also able to continue their work without radically changing their profession. Thus, the founders of the Dialogue dance center for contemporary dance in Kostroma, choreographers Ivan Estegneev and Evgeny Kulagin, create their own dance performances and participate in many of Serebrennikov’s projects, from Hamburg and Berlin to Paris and Vienna. The choreographer Alexander Andriyashkin works with the theme of the displaced body both in Almaty, where he now lives, and in Germany. Visual artist and set-designer Ksenia Peretrukhina continues to create artistic theater spaces and installations in Finland, where she now lives, while social theater specialist and set-designer Ksenia Shachneva in 2024 made her debut in Zurich, where she and the author of this article are working on a play with migrant and amateur actors. In general, theater critics who left Russia did not lose their jobs, as their colleagues and “well-wishers” predicted, but started working as cultural journalists, editors, columnists, dramaturges, and curators.

It is clear that it is still a little easier for directors, producers, and programmers to adapt to the new reality, since they are less tied to their native language (even opposition anti-war playwrights, if they are willing to do so, can continue to write in Russian, because one can always find excellent translators for their texts) than actors, who simply cannot perform if the audience does not understand them. Among the representatives of the main theatrical profession who have adapted to emigration, we should mention the widely known Russian Tatar actress Chulpan Khamatova, who became part of the ensemble of the New Riga Theater and now performs not only in Russian, but also in Latvian; Anatoly Bely, who moved to Israel but tours all over the world with his solo performances; and Serebrennikov’s collaborators—actors Philip Avdeev, Odin Biron, Nikita Kukushkin, Viktoria Miroshnichenko, and Svetlana Mamresheva—who have already become quite visible in the German-speaking theater world.

The question of how local theater changes depending on the quantity of the Russian-speaking theater makers involved, is, of course, crucial here. Theater workers from

Russia should not work only for the Russian-speaking audience, or else they will not really integrate into the local theater context and gradually become a part of it. Of course, it is easier to adapt in countries where there is already a Russian-language theater culture—although in such contexts (primarily Kazakhstan and Armenia), it is not always possible to avoid appropriation and the overly active position of guest artists who “capture” the entire scene. As for European countries, some of them have their own highly developed theater cultures that are so “sealed” that migrant Russian theater artists have no choice but to create something of a ghetto (this is perhaps most true of France and Italy).

Of course, the plans of different theater makers are very diverse. Some plan to return to the “wonderful Rus-

sia of the future,” while others flatly refuse to even think about such a prospect—having tightly closed the door behind them, they suppose themselves to have left Russia forever. Someone is trying to combine projects at home with projects abroad, but it seems less and less possible in principle. Someone cannot fight for too long and goes back, but prefers not to discuss it publicly. In any case, as time goes on, the greater the gap grows between those who create Russian theater in Russia and those who prefer to do so outside of it. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine forces everyone, including theater makers and cultural workers, to “take sides.” It is now obvious that since February 24, 2022, both the Russian theater scene and the entire cultural landscape of Eastern and Western Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus have undergone quite radical changes.

#### *About the Author*

*Nika Parkhomovskaia* is a doctoral candidate at the Slavic Seminar of the University of Zurich. Her doctoral research focuses on contemporary Russian theatre outside Russia in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

## ANALYSIS

# New Russian-Language Cultural Media, Publishing Houses, and Bookstores in Europe

Anastasia Arefieva (Brussels)

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### Abstract

This article reviews the emergent Russian-language cultural media, publishing houses, and bookstores in Europe. Their emergence has been a response to the changes that have occurred in Russia over the past two years. In April 2023, the publishing house Freedom Letters was established. It publishes contemporary Russian-language prose, poetry, and drama, among other genres. Additionally, the book club and publishing house BAbook, initiated by writer and historian Boris Akunin, recently started operations. One of the main new Russian-language media platforms is Radio Sakharov, created by former employees of the Sakharov Center. This online resource includes the podcast “Make a Scene!” which focuses on recent emigration among members of the theater world. Another significant event was the opening of the Babel Books Berlin bookstore in the fall of 2023. What objectives do these and other initiatives set for themselves? What challenges do they face? How do they operate in complex socio-political conditions?

Since February 2022, a large number of new Russian-language cultural initiatives have been created in Europe: cultural media, publishing houses, and offline and online bookstores. What objectives do these initiatives set for themselves? What challenges do they face? How do they operate in complex socio-political conditions? This article provides an overview of the book and media sector, with a focus on projects and materials that analyze current developments in the different art forms.

### Media

One of the main new Russian-language media outlets is Radio Sakharov, a platform created in Germany by employees of the Sakharov Centre, a human rights organization banned in Russia. This online resource combines the functions of a radio (it has a daily live broadcast and program) and an aggregator of podcasts in Russian. Among them is the podcast “Make a Scene!” about political and documentary theatre. It is hosted by

Mikhail Kaluzhsky, who was the author and curator of the theatre program of the Sakharov Centre in Moscow. Recently, within the podcast, a project called “Mapping Russian Theatre in Exile” has appeared, in which the author of the podcast travels to European cities important for Russian-speaking emigration and speaks with those directors, actors, and theatre-makers who left Russia in 2022 and now do theatre in a completely new environment. Many episodes of this podcast are also devoted to contemporary Russian-language drama and its trends.

Another point on the map of new cultural media is Amsterdam. Here, in early 2023, the magazine *Fifth Wave* (referring to the fifth wave of Russian emigration), dedicated to contemporary Russian-language literature and poetry, was launched in co-operation with the Van Oorschot publishing house. Available in both paper and digital formats, it is published in Russian and English. The magazine features poetry, prose, essays, lectures, interviews, art history articles, and memoirs that reflect on what is happening in Russia and the world through the prism of artistic reality.

On the one hand, says its editor-in-chief, Maxim Osipov, publishing is much easier now than it was 50 years ago. “The publishing house is where I am, even if I am on an airplane.” But, he adds, “The political environment is much more complicated. So we understand that if we are declared an undesirable organization in Russia, we will lose Russian authors.”

Another Russian-language magazine about art also appeared in 2023: the European Humanities University in Vilnius started publishing the journal *Draft*. Inside the cover of its first issue are articles by authors from Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Kazakhstan, Germany, and Russia, exploring the theme of protests in Belarusian drama, contemporary Ukrainian performances shown in Germany, and global changes in Russian theatre after February 2022, among others. In the introduction, the editorial board asks itself and its readers the most important questions: Is it worth talking about theatre when the world is embroiled in a global conflict? Why engage in theatre at all if it does not protect anyone from anything? The editors honestly admit that they themselves are at a loss. “The rift continues,” they write. “So we avoid conclusions, we record a dangerous, seismically unstable pattern. We do so for those scientists and artists who will come next and can engage in dispassionate analysis.

### Publishing Houses

An important trend in the Russian-language segment of the book publishing sphere in the last two years has been the emergence of several publishing houses at once. Established in April 2023, the Freedom Letters publish-

ing house is headed by Georgy Urushadze, the former head of the national Russian prize Big Book. It publishes the latest Russian prose, poetry, and drama, as well as human rights, popular science, classical literature, and books for children and teenagers, including books about the experience of living through disasters. One of the main goals of the publishing house is to publish books by those authors who for various reasons cannot publish in Russia, as well as Russian-speaking Ukrainian authors who find it difficult to publish in Ukraine. The books are printed all over the world, including in Russia and Ukraine. The team is likewise scattered around the globe.

Some of the publishing house’s first books were the LGBT novel *Springfield* by Sergey Davydov and a collection of plays by Svetlana Petrychuk, author of the play “Finist the Brave Falcon,” about Russian wives of Syrian terrorists, for which—in July of this year—she and director Yevgeniya Berkovich were sentenced in Russia to six years in prison.

Urushadze says: “The main difficulty now is that free literature has left Russia, but the readers have remained. The sales channels and stores also have remained in Russia, while the existing Russian bookstores abroad are clearly insufficient. All this, of course, makes it difficult to promote books to our audience. Although our publishing house sells books in Russia, we cannot sell anything in large chain shops. At the same time, all our books can be bought in electronic form and about one-fifth of them in paper form (we have already printed tens of thousands of books in Russia). Life has changed dramatically, and this has directly affected the book market and the book business. Our publishing house is a volunteer publishing house, and we produce enormous number of books: in a year and a half, we have published about 180 paper, electronic, and audio books. But it’s also important for potential buyers to know that a book has been published. Usually, bloggers and critics write about it. Very few media outlets in Russia write about our publishing house. But despite all this, we are well known in Russia, because everyone writes about us when the prosecutor’s office once again bans one of our books, when Rospotrebnadzor once again demands that something be removed from our website.”

Another problem that should not be forgotten, says Urushadze, is security. For this reason, names and surnames are sometimes denoted on the cover only with asterisks.

In autumn 2023, another new publishing house and distribution platform for Russian-language books, Vidim Books, was launched in Bratislava. Its founder, literary figure and former co-chairman of the organizing committee of the Enlightener Prize Aleksandr Gavrilov, speaking about the birth of his project, admits:



“Although many people now follow the concept of ‘digital first,’ my colleagues and I realized that paper books are very important to us. A paper book is always an additional cultural statement. Today, a paper book is something like a portable altar. It is much more than just a text, it’s a physical site of culture.”

One of the art books published by this publishing house is called *Status: Free. Portrait of Creative Emigration*. It is a series of essays-interviews by the journalist and writer Sergey Nikolaevich about cultural figures who left Russia or did not return to it after February 2022. Directors Kirill Serebrennikov and Dmitry Krymov; playwright Ivan Vyrypayev; actresses Chulpan Khamatova and Renata Litvinova; and many others share their reflections, pain, and stories about how their lives and professional paths in emigration are shaping up.

Another recent initiative is BAbook bookshop and publishing house, set up by writer and historian Boris Akunin. There, among other things, you can buy books that are banned in the Russian Federation. One of the most important books about culture is a collection of essays by writer Mikhail Shishkin about the Russian literary figures he considers most significant. Shishkin refracts the fates and works of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov through the prism of knowledge about what happened to Russian culture in the 20th and early 21st centuries, asking at the outset “Why is literature needed if it did not save us either from the GULAG or from a special military operation?” and trying to answer this question throughout the book, highlighting the main constants of Russian culture and the Russian mentality.

### Bookstores

Another important event directly related to the shaping of artistic processes in the contemporary Russian-speaking space is the opening of Babel Books Berlin in autumn 2023.

Babel’s shelves feature a unique collection of books on history, art, philosophy, literary studies, and anthropology, as well as books by Russian independent publishers and small-print-run books. The shop makes its own thematic selections, for example, works on decolonization processes or urbanism.

Natalia Smirnova, the founder of Babel Books Berlin, says that people who have recently emigrated to Berlin often come to the shop to buy books that they had at home and could not bring with them (Brut 2024). There is also a noticeable interest in certain topics: people are concerned with the links between history and modernity, with the result that books about Nazism and the Weimar Republic and about emigration are in great demand.

Babel Books Berlin has also become an important “assembly point” for the Russian-speaking pro-democ-

racy community in Europe. Lectures, meetings, and book presentations are held there.

Another Russian-language bookshop, Liberty, has appeared in Lisbon. Its founder, Anna Aleshkovskaya, says that in the course of her work she realized how important it is for people suddenly thrown into a new and unfamiliar world to have a place where they can hear their native language and meet like-minded people (Brut 2024). Both Liberty and Babel Books Berlin have recently launched online shops and ship books almost worldwide.

The new wave of “tamizdat” promotes the development of new initiatives: in mid-September 2024, the Czech capital for the first time hosted the Prague Book Tower, a fair of contemporary Russian literature published outside Russia. Among others, it presented the publishing houses Fresh Verlag (Germany), Hyperbores (Stockholm), and Éditions Tourgueneff (Paris), as well as books published by Echo Publishing House and the Meduza news agency.

### Awards

The rise of book publishing and new Russian-language literature was also the impulse for the creation, in mid-2024, of two new Russian-language literary prizes. The first is Freedom Books, the founders of which include the aforementioned Freedom Letters publishing house, Novaya Gazeta Europe, and the Dozhd TV channel. “I would make the verbs ‘explain’ and ‘support’ the predicates of this season,” says Giorgi Urushadze. “As a reader and as a publisher, I need texts that tell how we got to this life and reflect on the events that are happening.”

The second literary prize is The Gift, established in Switzerland. Its Council of Founders includes writers Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Boris Akunin, Dmitry Bykov, Nobel Prize for Literature winner Svetlana Alexievich, and others. “This is a prize for rethinking the entire experience of literature in Russian, a prize for discovering new approaches to literature and literary life beyond archaic statehood, a prize for everyone who writes and reads in Russian regardless of passport and country of residence,” says its founder, the writer Mikhail Shishkin. The goal of the prize is primarily to support Russian-speaking young authors, for whom access to European publishing houses is practically closed.

### Conclusion

This review and analysis of the book and media field has shown that the main themes of art journals, podcasts about theatre, and books about writers alike are living through historical cataclysm, the experience of life in new conditions, and reflection on the future. This certainly resonates with audiences who are in search of answers to the same questions.

Many published authors are recognized in Russia as foreign agents and even extremists, and the publishing houses as undesirable organizations. All publishers and project authors talk about the security issues facing their employees. But even under such conditions, a special space of Russian-language culture is emerging in

Europe today, both in the classic paper format and in a new digital format not available to previous generations of emigrants. This culture unites those who, for one reason or another, have found themselves on different sides of the border.

#### *About the Author*

Anastasia Arefeva is a Brussels-based independent scholar, theatre art historian and curator, the author of 100+ papers and articles and the forthcoming book *Images of Spain: Dramas of the Golden Age on the Russian Stage*. She is a former senior lecturer in European theatre history at the Russian University of Theatre Art.

#### *Further Reading*

- Sorin Brut. 2024. “Chitayte Tam [Read There].” *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, August 4, 2024. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/08/04/chitayte-tam>.

## ANALYSIS

### Russophone Poetry of Exile: Contemporary Antiwar *Tamizdat*

Ilya Skokleenko (University of Leuven)

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines the role of poetry in depicting and shaping contemporary cultural identity in the post-Soviet region, focusing on the works of poetry published in *Resistance and Opposition Arts Review (ROAR)*. This online journal, launched in April 2022, two months after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale military invasion, serves as a conceptually new modality of publishing, translation, and dissemination of so-called *tamizdat*—dissent literature published abroad. *ROAR* represents a non-institutionalized network of artists, editors, and translators that provides an organic link between today’s post-Soviet intellectuals and the famous Soviet intelligentsia. Drawing on theories of post-Soviet cultural dynamics, the article seeks to situate poetry published in *ROAR* at the intersection of political commentary and literary aesthetics. By examining these aspects, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics surrounding the Russo–Ukrainian War and the role of poetry in expressing dissent and cultural resistance.

“...the concept of ‘antiwar poetry’ loses its meaning because no other poetry is possible right now.”<sup>1</sup>

The Russo–Ukrainian war has provoked a revolution in Russian literature and culture. With 500,000 estimated casualties, 3.7 million internally displaced people, 6.7 million refugees, and 14.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, the Russo–Ukrainian War is now known to be the largest refugee emergency in Europe since the Second World War and one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes of the twenty-first century.

#### **Slavic Exodus**

It is becoming increasingly evident that the Russo–Ukrainian war is, ultimately, a war over language, culture, and identity that will determine the shape of the cultural space in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. With the start of the full-scale military invasion in February 2022, thousands of Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Russian intellectuals, artists, poets, and writers had to flee their homes under threat of politically motivated prosecution or violent death. Many of the Belarusian intellectuals who had fled to Ukraine after the mass protests in Belarus in 2020 were now confronted with the terrors of the war and were

1 Evgenii Nikitin. From an essay in the “Metajournal” Telegram channel: <https://t.me/metajournal/2325>.



compelled to flee further, to Western Europe, Georgia, Armenia or Turkey. Their experiences reflect a sequence of logically interrelated geopolitical events: the annexation of Crimea in 2014; mass protests in Belarus shut down through the Kremlin's intervention in 2020; and the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with Russian missiles being launched at Kyiv from the territory of the Republic of Belarus, less than 200 km away from the Ukrainian capital.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the intensified “repressive turn” in Russian politics forced at least 700,000 Russians to leave the country (Zavadskaya 2023). Many of the Russian intellectuals who were not confronted with the horrors of the warfare directly but who made a conscious decision to abandon their homes are journalists, writers, poets, and artists. Along with some who have gone into internal emigration, having decided to remain in Russia or lacking the opportunity to leave, these intellectuals have been producing essays, poems, and podcasts in which they grapple with the condition of being citizens of a country waging a colonial war against Ukraine (Gessen 2022).

In the context of total censorship and propaganda, present in today's Russia, oppositional internet media—banned by the state but still accessible via VPN—have become a refuge, allowing for relative freedom of speech for Russian writers (TDR 2022, 17). With the help of the internet, Russia can remain a country of literature. Texts have regained their impact: the last time people were writing in Russian so urgently was in the late 1980s, when Soviet citizens were confronted with the terrors of the Stalinist past (Gessen 2022). Today, the number of independent media and antiwar initiatives is on the rise, and many new volumes of poetry are being published—as Russian poetry traditionally remains one of the few places where it is possible to speak about the war. Among these volumes of poetry are the anthology *Doomsday Poetry: Chronicles* (2022), edited by Yuri Leving; *Fifth Wave Magazine*, set up as a collaboration between the Russian exiled writer Maxim Osipov and Van Oorschot Publishers; the Discourse Media project *Poems Against Violence: An Anthology of Anti-Authoritarian Poetry from Pushkin to Foreign Agents*; the anthology *War. Poems 24.02.2022–24.05.2022* (2022), edited by Lyubov Machina; two anthologies of contemporary antiwar poetry—*Witnesses: Chronicles of the Wartime* (2022) and *Witnesses: The Second Book* (2023)—edited by Evgenii Kogan and issued by Babel Publishing House; the Russian-English anthology *Disbelief: 100 Russian Anti-War Poems* (2023), issued by Smokestack Books; and the Russian-French anthology *Non à la guerre!* (2022), compiled by Julija Nemirovskaja and issued by Editions Caractères. In addition, in April 2022, Linor Goralik launched *Resistance and Opposition Arts Review (ROAR)*.

All the other projects are, to different degrees, institutionalized or represent commercial enterprises. *ROAR*, meanwhile, is a non-institutionalized network of dissident artists, translators, editors and intellectuals working on a voluntary basis. According to Kuzmin (2022), it is probably from this project that the principle that has been adopted to a greater or lesser extent by all subsequent initiatives originates: the previous balance of literary reputations and experiences has been nullified by the war. Now, everyone's voice matters; the experience of the new reality must be preserved, and this is in itself a way of confronting it.

### ROAR

*Resistance Opposition Arts Review (ROAR)* is issued online in Russian and Ukrainian and translated into English, French, Italian, Japanese, and Polish. It was launched by Linor Goralik as a response to Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, two months after its beginning. The journal is published bi-monthly and currently comprises 14 issues that are now being archived in the Princeton University Library.

According to Goralik, the main idea behind the journal is to introduce its readers to the artefacts of the contemporary Russophone culture opposing the loyalist and servile official narratives (ROAR 2023).

*ROAR* publishes:

1. **Visual art reflecting on Russia's colonial past and juxtaposing it with Russia's colonial present** (see e.g. <https://www.roar-review.com/54a5df73320a43b6951518ca292551ed?v=5ff162382ba74996b9f9a7bde69e3eee>).
2. **Music and music scores, which become a constant reminder of the tragedy of the war and the crimes of the Russian Government** (see e.g. <https://www.roar-review.com/ROAR-Second-Issue-538e67b430c34ba0996ff757858076d0?p=4acabab042b347edb1540bed322e1b7b&cpm=c> and [https://file.notion.so/f/f/95f125a7-18f9-424c-9518-3d090e0d015b/fc80fce8-95d7-40bd-b760-6e23fb476e96/Роман\\_Столяр.pdf?table=block&id=81182264-eeaa-40db-baca-fd2801d8a68f&spaceId=95f125a7-18f9-424c-9518-3d090e0d015b&expirationTimestamp=1732370400000&signature=-ssPmDAXxbwTIGLhoP9dpBij\\_zWOe1Uo8gPmq-2hDxtQ&downloadName=Роман+Столяр.pdf](https://file.notion.so/f/f/95f125a7-18f9-424c-9518-3d090e0d015b/fc80fce8-95d7-40bd-b760-6e23fb476e96/Роман_Столяр.pdf?table=block&id=81182264-eeaa-40db-baca-fd2801d8a68f&spaceId=95f125a7-18f9-424c-9518-3d090e0d015b&expirationTimestamp=1732370400000&signature=-ssPmDAXxbwTIGLhoP9dpBij_zWOe1Uo8gPmq-2hDxtQ&downloadName=Роман+Столяр.pdf)).
3. **Prose and essays by and about distinguished Russian authors** (see e.g. <https://www.roar-review.com/ROAR-Twelfth-Issue-ca95aa7ec20e4edeb8f62a0f10287aa0> and <https://www.roar-review.com/ROAR-Twelfth-Issue-ca95aa7ec20e4edeb8f62a0f10287aa0#2b3b3a76e9ae4956b15d36f0949e8e6f>).
4. **Poetry** (see e.g. <https://www.roar-review.com/4a6e99754e604f6cb029794c90b37570?v=1bfcc8fbb1b442778cf8ae341828c3e7>).

According to Kukulin (2023), poetry has become crucially important during the current critical period because it is distinguished by two distinctive features:

1. a poem can be written relatively quickly and published easily on social media; and
2. it can be rapidly spread with the help of these social media channels.

Poetry, therefore, can reflect changes in cultural self-consciousness “in real time” and possibly play a role in guiding the direction of such changes (Kukulin 2023, 658).

Being banned in Russia but still accessible through VPN or abroad, *ROAR* works much like a mailbox set up by an underground network during the Cold War. The texts appear to be typed on a typewriter, like the legendary *tamizdat*, writings smuggled among dissidents in the Soviet era (Mandraud 2022).

For more than two years now, *ROAR* has been serving as a refuge for intellectuals unable to speak freely in Russia against the war in Ukraine. The project aims to gather a multitude of voices—poets, writers, artists, essayists, musicians, and performers—expressing dissent from the Putin regime in general and Russia’s colonial war in Ukraine in particular.

One of the reasons we created *ROAR* was to show that there are Russians who oppose the regime and are not afraid to talk about it. We cannot be sure that these voices will be heard. But we believe it is essential that our authors can publish their poetry, music and artwork. (Goralik in Valynets 2022).

Recognizing the dispersed nature of these voices, mostly expressed online on social media, Goralik envisioned *ROAR* as a centralized platform that could be used to amplify the dissident artists’ collective message. The unique feature of *ROAR* is that each of the journal’s collaborators, contributors, editors, translators, and tech support engineers works on a voluntary basis. In so doing, they provide a variety of Russian voices with a unified platform, enabling wider dissemination of their views, bolstering their impact, and potentially reaching new audiences (Goralik in Mandraud 2022). It is precisely this non-institutionalized network of dissident artists, intellectuals, and translators that is of interest to the present investigation, as it provides an organic link between today’s post-Soviet intellectuals and the famous Soviet intelligentsia—highlighting the continuity of the cultural process (c.f. Mandelstam, “The Age”):

*My age, my beast, who will ever  
Look into your eyes  
And with his own blood glue together  
The backbones of two centuries?*

Depiction of the current realities allows culture to survive, while artistic reflection on these experiences allows it to evolve. “I think one of the very important ideas is not just ‘No to War,’ but the idea of individual responsibility for private actions, in a historical context” (Goralik in Valynets 2022).

This feature of *ROAR* becomes even more prominent because the authors publishing in the journal comprise both the older generation of Soviet dissident authors (among them Lev Rubinstein, Vladimir Gandelman, Ian Probst, and Vera Pavlova) and the younger generation of post-Soviet authors dissenting from Putin’s regime (including Aleksandr Skidan, Mikhail Gronas, and Olya Skorlupkina). This makes it possible to consider the poetic community’s response and political attitude to the ongoing war in broader historiographical perspective.

The authors who publish in *ROAR* are enmeshed in the broader international network behind the journal:

1. chief editor Linor Goralik and managing editor Maria Voul reside in Israel;
2. managing editors of the English version Ada Kordon and Tatiana Rudyak in the UK;
3. editors of the English-translated poetry section Michael Antman and Michael Kleber-Diggs in the US;
4. translators including Max Nemtsov and Shashi Martynova in Greece; and
5. other collaborators, among them technical engineers, IT specialists, and designers like Elena Urman and Veta Sbitnikova, in countries as diverse as France and Georgia.

This broad international network exemplifies contemporary *tamizdat* in the Internet era and performs an important function: sharing personal testimonies in the form of artistic expressions and fostering resilience by reflecting on traumatic experiences of the war:

*ROAR* fills a void, an irrepressible desire to ‘do something’. I know that the person who needs *ROAR* the most is me. This project helps me feel less helpless in the face of Russia’s catastrophic war against Ukraine and the terrible repressions taking place in Russia itself. Anything is better than staying behind a screen and ‘dying from the nightmare’ (Goralik in Mandraud 2022).

Most of *ROAR*’s contributors and collaborators share a very similar sentiment.

From the broader sociocultural perspective, *ROAR*, as a form of cultural and political practice, plays a crucial role in the development of the post-Soviet cultural identity in Russia and in exile. Kukulin (2023) points out that today, undermining the normative ways that

the war is discussed in Russian culture has become critically important. Paying specific attention to works of poetry, he notes that the reason for this shift is that the new anti-war poetry overtly calls into question the post-Soviet cultural and political mythology of the Second World War: the narrative of a heroic nation that liberated Europe from Nazism—sacrificing the lives of 27 million people in the process. Now, Russian poets call into question the applicability of this narrative to today's realities and the validity of this heritage: see, for instance, Daria Serenko's "no fashisty eto my" (but the fascists they are us).<sup>2</sup> Contemporary Russian anti-war poetry presents the moral and cultural catastrophe of Russian society as the basis for deconstructing any preconceived identity and scrutinizes the very foundations of all the cultural conventions developed in late Soviet and Russian society. The new antiwar poetry therefore realizes the end of the post-Soviet stage in the development of Russian culture, and it answers the question of how poetry in Russia may be possible after and during the collapse of the post-Soviet cultural order and the collapse of post-Soviet identities (Kukulin 2023, 657–667).

### Conclusions

The current critical period presents a multilayered and internationally relevant research object to study the formation of post-Soviet cultural identity. Investigating poetic narratives embedded within contemporary Russophone anti-war poetry, including the works published in *ROAR*, makes it possible to elucidate the evolving dynamics within today's post-Soviet cultural space.

#### About the Author

Ilya Skokleenko is a doctoral candidate at KU Leuven, funded by an individual fundamental scholarship provided by the Flemish Research Council (FWO). His doctoral research focuses on contemporary Russophone poetry in the context of the Russo–Ukrainian War.

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These dynamics will shape the trajectory of post-Soviet cultural identity in the years to come.

In his recent extensive monograph, Klots (2023) concludes that it has now become evident that Putin's war in Ukraine has brought the Cold War and tamizdat back to reality. If tamizdat as a literary practice and political institution is bound to return, it will no doubt be of a different nature than its Soviet predecessor in the pre-Internet era (Klots 2023, 202). Today, in the digital era, under the influence of war, censorship, and propaganda present in Putin's Russia, we can witness the emergence of a new kind of transnational tamizdat that undermines the official narratives of the Kremlin's propaganda. *ROAR* can be named among the most prominent examples of this contemporary antiwar tamizdat.

*ROAR* facilitates sharing personal testimonies, thereby promoting communication between individuals from diverse backgrounds—Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Western Europeans—and fostering an intercultural dialogue of dissidents. Even under wartime conditions, a space for dialogue, or polylogue, between the Russophone poetry of different nations still exists—however deeply charged with psychological tension it may be (Kukulin 2023, 661). Still, overcoming traumatic experiences of the war might only be possible within a platform for sharing personal testimonies—that is, through a network that arises within a space of shared cultural experiences. After all, sharing personal testimonies in the form of artistic expressions is nothing but a search for a spatially and temporally distant other that allows culture to survive and evolve, and empowers us to preserve human integrity.

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: [laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de](mailto:laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de) • Internet: [www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html](http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html)