

FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Resilience Under Pressure

I. President's Note

In February 2024, Alexei Navalny died in a penal colony above the Arctic Circle. In August, Vladimir Kara-Murza walked out of one. The year between these events showed both the cost of opposing the Kremlin, as well as what coordinated pressure can still win back.

The war against Ukraine continued and repression inside Russia deepened. The harder problem was attention. As competing crises pulled it elsewhere, the risk grew that political imprisonment, accountability, and Russia's democratic future would fall down the agenda at the moment they mattered most.

Through the year, Free Russia Foundation held to three priorities: keeping political repression in Russia visible and actionable, producing analysis that informs policy, and sustaining the people and networks who will shape Russia's future.

The August release of political prisoners, Kara-Murza among them, showed what coordinated international pressure can still achieve. More than 1400 remain imprisoned. Their cases define the system we are confronting.

The year also brought a structural shift. As the geopolitical landscape changed, European governments moved to the center of the response to Russia, and our work followed, deepening engagement with European institutions while holding close coordination with partners in Washington. One objective ran through all of it: that Russia's democratic actors stay visible, supported, and connected to the decisions being made about their country.

This is work that rewards persistence. The Washington Dialogue in June and the Berlin march in November showed Russian democratic forces in exile moving past survival toward the foundations of a future transition.

Natalia Arno
President & Founder



NATALIA ARNO
PRESIDENT & FOUNDER

II. A Voice Returned: Vladimir Kara-Murza



VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA
VICE PRESIDENT,
FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION

Last year, I was writing letters from a prison cell. Today, I am writing these lines in freedom. Putin's regime does everything in its power to make political prisoners disappear. They are isolated, silenced, and removed from view. What I saw instead was sustained international pressure at work. Names were raised in parliaments, discussed in international institutions, and defended by people who understood that these cases are central to the future of Russia.

My release, and the release of others, was the result of coordinated international pressure. It reflected a clear position: that political imprisonment cannot be normalized. I am deeply grateful for those efforts.

At the same time, it is important to remember: my release was one case among many. According to human rights organizations, more than 1400 political prisoners are currently held in Russia. Since February 2022, tens of thousands have been detained for opposing the war, with many facing criminal prosecution. These are people prosecuted for speaking up, for writing, for refusing to accept what they know to be wrong. Their cases must remain visible, as a matter of human rights, and a measure of political reality inside the country.

It is often said that we cannot know what Russian society thinks under these conditions. It is true that in a country where people are punished for speaking, public opinion cannot be freely measured. But the existence of political prisoners tells us something important. Even under conditions of severe repression, people continue to express dissent, despite being aware of the consequences.

That fact alone challenges the narrative that Russian society is uniform in its views or passive in the face of state policy. The Kremlin has long sought to present its policies as the will of the nation. This is a deliberate distortion. There is a clear distinction between the Russian state and Russian society, and it is essential that this distinction be maintained in international policy. Many of those who have taken a stand are now in exile. They remain part of Russia's political life, even if they are physically outside the country.

The question before us now is not only how to respond to the current moment, but how to prepare for what comes after. The future of European security, stability,

and peace is closely tied to the future of Russia. A democratic Russia remains the most durable foundation for that future. This outcome will depend on whether those who continue to stand for it are supported, protected, and able to remain part of the political life of their country, even from exile.

Vladimir Kara-Murza
Vice President, Free Russia Foundation

III. 2024 in Context: Repression at Home, Reconstitution Abroad

In 2024, repression inside Russia widened. The state used legal instruments, surveillance, and political prosecution to suppress dissent and shrink civic space, while political imprisonment anchored the entire system, setting the boundaries of what could be said and done. Independent media remained shut down or forced underground, and civil society organizations faced mounting limits on their ability to operate. The expanding reach of domestic repression was also reflected in the criminalization of LGBTQ organizations and ethnic rights groups, which had previously operated in more ambiguous legal territory.



The murder of Alexei Navalny in February was a defining moment for Russian civil society. His death in a penal colony was both a personal loss and a political signal that the Kremlin would eliminate its most prominent opponents without restraint.

For exiled activists, the impact was immediate, and FRF surged psychosocial services across its network to stabilize a community in acute crisis.

Russian presidential elections in March and the Unified Voting Days in September posed a different challenge. Rather than cede those moments to the Kremlin's performance of legitimacy, exiled civil

society came together and organized. The Noon Against Putin campaign mobilized Russians inside the country and abroad to turn the electoral moment into an act of coordinated dissent.

Two developments defined the domestic discourse inside Russia: the Ukrainian incursion into the Kursk region and a sharp rise in food prices.

Both cut against the long-standing implicit contract that had underwritten public acquiescence to Putin's rule, economic stability and physical security in exchange for citizens' political passivity. Their erosion opened new pressure points within Russian society, with implications for public tolerance of the war.

These dynamics unfolded alongside a continued tightening of the legal environment. Amendments to «foreign agent» legislation extended its reach to individual journalists and previously apolitical actors, while further restrictions on online content and public assembly narrowed the space for independent expression. The threat of transnational repression also intensified, with documented cases of Kremlin-linked actors targeting exiled Russians across Europe and Central Asia.

By 2024, the removal of independent actors from public life had become systemic, and exile became the primary operating environment. Across Europe and neighboring regions, Russian civil society rebuilt itself with deliberate intent, despite conditions of legal uncertainty and limited mobility, establishing new organizations, registering media outlets, building coalitions, and maintaining direct programmatic connections to audiences inside Russia. FRF's own footprint shifted with the conditions: it scaled down its presence in Georgia and Estonia, where the environment no longer supported activist growth, and opened new resource centers in Warsaw and Paris, where diaspora communities were larger and more receptive. A new relocation support activity was established to assist exiles facing acute transnational repression risks, providing emergency legal assistance and housing to those most exposed.

IN RESPONSE, FRF SUSTAINED AND EXPANDED ITS WORK ACROSS THREE PILLARS:

I.
INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY
AND ACCOUNTABILITY

II.
STRATEGIC ANALYSIS AND
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

III.
CIVIL SOCIETY
INFRASTRUCTURE



By the end of 2024, that work had helped build something more durable: a transnational foundation able to sustain activity and stay connected to audiences inside Russia.

CIVIL SOCIETY INFRASTRUCTURE



40,000+

exiled activists and **200** organizations supported across FRF resource centers in 2024

1,890+

training sessions conducted for **29,900+** participants

5,000+

legal, financial, and psychosocial consultations

7

resource centers and advocacy offices operational across Europe

CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAMMING

139

fellows supported across three cohorts

362

anti-war and pro-democracy projects executed by fellows

23.3 MILLION

cumulative audience reached by fellow projects and campaigns

8

accelerator programs conducted training of **119** civil society leaders

66

community building and advocacy campaigns executed engaging **16,000+** activists, reaching **1.1 million** people

59

exiles relocated under transnational repression protection

263

Reforum publications reaching more than **11 million people**

ADVOCACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

3 PACE

resolutions influenced: 2540, 2541, and 2542

NEARLY 100

civil society leaders convened at the Washington Dialogue

100+

media appearances



IV. Pillar I: International Advocacy and Accountability

In 2024, Free Russia Foundation worked to ensure that political repression in Russia remained central to the transatlantic policy agenda.

Sustaining that attention was a principal challenge of the year, as competing global priorities and visible fatigue threatened to push repression and accountability down the agenda. The U.S. elections in November reshaped the information landscape, disrupting the Kremlin narrative that cast Russia as a moral counterweight to a declining West, even as they sharpened the question of whether European governments were ready to lead the response to Moscow. FRF's advocacy answered that question with a single argument, emphasized in capital after capital: regional stability depends on Russia's trajectory, and that trajectory depends on whether its democratic actors survive in exile.

The August 1 prisoner exchange, negotiated by the U.S. and German governments, freed Vladimir Kara-Murza, Ilya Yashin, Oleg Orlov, Ksenia Fadeeva, Lilia Chanyшева, and others, and showed what sustained, coordinated pressure can achieve. It also underscored the scale of what remains: more than 1400 political prisoners are still held in Russia today, and since February 2022, tens of thousands have been detained, with over a thousand of them prosecuted for opposing the war or civic activity.



Within hours of his release, Kara-Murza committed to FRF's work, with a clear purpose: to synchronize the global anti-war and pro-democracy efforts of Russian civil society. It proved a profound force multiplier, for the program and for the prospects of democracy in Russia. His courage has commanded sustained Western media attention, informing millions of viewers about the realities of the war in Ukraine and the plight of Russian civil society, and countering the Kremlin disinformation that still shapes European narratives on Russia. His access to the top echelons of transatlantic leadership has moved pressing questions about Russian civil society, in exile and inside Russia, onto the policy agenda. These capabilities were deployed quickly, through the infrastructure, communities, and networks that FRF had spent years building.

High-Level Transatlantic Engagement and Institutional Impact

In the weeks after his release, across August and September, Vladimir Kara-Murza met with heads of state and government across the alliance, including President Joe Biden, Chancellor Olaf Scholz, President Emmanuel Macron, Prime Minister Keir Starmer, as well as Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Prime Minister Petteri Orpo. In each meeting, he pressed the same case: that Western governments persist in intervening on behalf of political prisoners and pursue new exchanges where lives are at risk, that support for Ukraine hold firm, and that policy preserve a clear line between Putin's regime and Russian society. Between them, Vladimir Kara-Murza and his wife, Evgenia Kara-Murza, held more than twenty high-level meetings in those months alone, with heads of state, foreign ministers, parliamentarians, and the leaders of international organizations.



Engagement with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) contributed to the unanimous adoption of three resolutions in 2024: 2540 on Alexei Navalny's death and the need to counter Putin's regime, 2541 on the arbitrary detention of Vladimir Kara-Murza and the persecution of anti-war protesters, and 2542 on sanctions against those on the Kara-Murza list. Evgenia Kara-Murza addressed the Assembly's spring plenary on April 17; Vladimir addressed it again in early October in Strasbourg, meeting President Theodoros Rousopoulos, Secretary-General Alain Berset, and rapporteurs Eerik Niiles Kross and Emanuelis Zingeris, and over the year he testified before its Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights.

The engagement reached across Europe's institutions. In October, the Kara-Murzias met President Macron in Paris, along with National Assembly deputies and the Minister for European Affairs, advancing a proposal to seat Russian democratic representatives within the European Political Community. Ilya Yashin carried the case for systematic prisoner exchanges and a broad amnesty to the OSCE's Warsaw Human Dimension Conference, detailing the cases of Alexei Gorinov, Igor Baryshnikov, and Maria Ponomarenko. Evgenia Kara-Murza pressed for the creation of hostage affairs offices in democratic governments, raising it with Polish President Duda and Foreign Minister Sikorski and before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Dutch Parliament, and she carried FRF's case to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and a United Nations event in Geneva convened by Special Rapporteur Mariana Katzarova. In Prague, participation in the Forum 2000 conference and meetings with

Czech President Petr Pavel and Senate President Miloš Vystrčil reinforced coordination with European partners.

In North America, FRF co-convened the Washington Dialogue in June with the U.S. Institute of Peace, the U.S. Russia Foundation, and the National Endowment for Democracy, bringing nearly 120 exiled civil society leaders from 23 organizations into structured engagement with U.S. policymakers, including a session on political prisoners at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In Canada, meetings with Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly and NATO officials at the Halifax International Security Forum brought these issues into broader security discussions.

Recognition, Media, and Public Engagement

International recognition in 2024 expanded FRF's ability to play a meaningful role in policy and public platforms. Vladimir Kara-Murza received the Bruno Kreisky Prize for Human Rights and the John McCain Prize for Leadership in Public Service, and in June both Vladimir and Evgenia Kara-Murza received the National Endowment for Democracy's Democracy Service Medals. Each served as an opportunity to engage decision-makers and reinforce advocacy priorities.

FRF contributed to more than 100 media appearances in 2024 with interviews across The New York Times, BBC, CNN, and The Washington Post, and major European outlets. These appearances sustained visibility for political prisoners and ensured continued coverage of repression inside Russia. Public engagement also included lectures and discussions at academic institutions, reaching hundreds of students and researchers and contributing to longer-term awareness of democratic challenges in the region.



Strengthening Policy Responses

In parallel with advocacy and outreach, FRF supported efforts to strengthen institutional responses to politically motivated detention. This included advancing proposals for dedicated mechanisms within democratic governments to address hostage-taking and political imprisonment, as well as contributing to coordinated international initiatives such as the Raoul Wallenberg Centre's "Magnitsky Month," which focuses on building sustained pressure around specific cases. In the United Kingdom, discussions with Members of Parliament Tom Tugendhat and Alicia Kearns advanced the use of Magnitsky sanctions against officials responsible for repression. Throughout this work, FRF held to the distinction between the Russian state and Russian society, a principle with direct implications for sanctions, mobility, and

support to civil society in exile.

FRF also expanded structured dialogue between European policymakers and representatives of Russian civil society, strengthening the integration of field-based insight into policy discussions.



In November 2024, FRF contributed to the Berlin anti-war march led by Vladimir Kara-Murza, Ilya Yashin, and Yulia Navalnaya. The march drew thousands from across the diaspora, resulting in the largest coordinated demonstration by Russian civil society in exile to date. The release of political prisoners in August had given the movement a unifying center, and the march drew in people who had never demonstrated before, presenting a cohesive front around three demands: withdrawal from Ukraine, accountability for war crimes, and the release of political prisoners.

These efforts kept Russian political imprisonment on the agenda of the institutions that set transatlantic policy, from PACE to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, at a moment when competing priorities made that far from inevitable.



V. Pillar II: Strategic Analysis and Policy Recommendations



Producing Policy-Relevant Analysis on Russia and the Region

In 2024, Free Russia Foundation strengthened its role as a source of decision-ready analysis on Russia's internal dynamics, its external influence, and the implications for European and transatlantic security.

The year's events set the research agenda: Navalny's death, the March election, the August exchange, the Kursk incursion, and the U.S. election each generated immediate demand for field-grounded analysis.

FRF's work concentrated in four areas: political repression and political prisoners; foreign information manipulation and influence operations; sanctions and economic pressure; and the trajectories of political change in Russia.

Analysis That Reached Decision-Makers

FRF's economic and sanctions analysis, led by Vladimir Milov, moved directly into government deliberations. Milov's Russian Economy and Sanctions Briefs tracked the narrowing of the Kremlin's fiscal room, and he briefed the Swedish Ministry of Finance, the Council of the European Union's working party on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and a closed sanctions roundtable convened by the Center for International Private Enterprise. On the information front, FRF also supported investigations into the Kremlin's infiltration and cooptation of European elites and its interference in European elections.

These outputs reached policymakers through institutional briefings, public events, and media, and they fed FRF's own advocacy: research on sanctions circumvention, influence operations, and the legal architecture of repression supplied the evidence behind engagements with congressional offices, European Parliament staff, and institutional partners.

Developing the Next Generation of Analysts

Through its fellowship program, FRF supported 139 fellows across three cohorts, selected through a competitive process which received more than 700 applications. Fellows received structured guidance on research design, analysis, and policy implications, and produced work aligned with FRF's think-tank priorities on disinformation, electoral manipulation, and the internal politics of Russia and its neighbors. The program expanded FRF's analytical capacity while keeping emerging expertise tied to live policy questions.

Bridging Analysis and Policy

A central objective of FRF's research work in 2024 was to ensure that analysis feeds directly into policy processes across both sides of the Atlantic. Research outputs informed:

- Briefings for U.S. congressional and European parliamentary stakeholders
- The Washington Dialogue in June 2024, where FRF's analytical work on Russian civil society, sanctions, and foreign influence provided the substantive foundation for structured engagement with U.S. policymakers
- The framing of PACE Resolutions 2540, 2541, and 2542, adopted in 2024
- Advocacy efforts on sanctions, political prisoners, and foreign influence



In an increasingly crowded and contested information environment, FRF maintained a clear focus across all activities, producing analysis that helps policymakers leverage FRF's unique insider understanding of how the Russian system operates and how it can be effectively addressed.

VI. Pillar III: Infrastructure for Civil Society

Sustaining Democratic Capacity in Exile

In 2024, Free Russia Foundation strengthened its role as core support infrastructure for Russian civil society in exile, operating across nine locations in Europe. As repression inside Russia has forced independent actors outward, sustaining these communities has become essential to preserving the human capital, institutional continuity, and civic networks required for future democratic change. In this way, FRF serves as the backbone of pro-democracy and anti-war actors in exile.

Reforum Spaces and Direct Civil Society Support

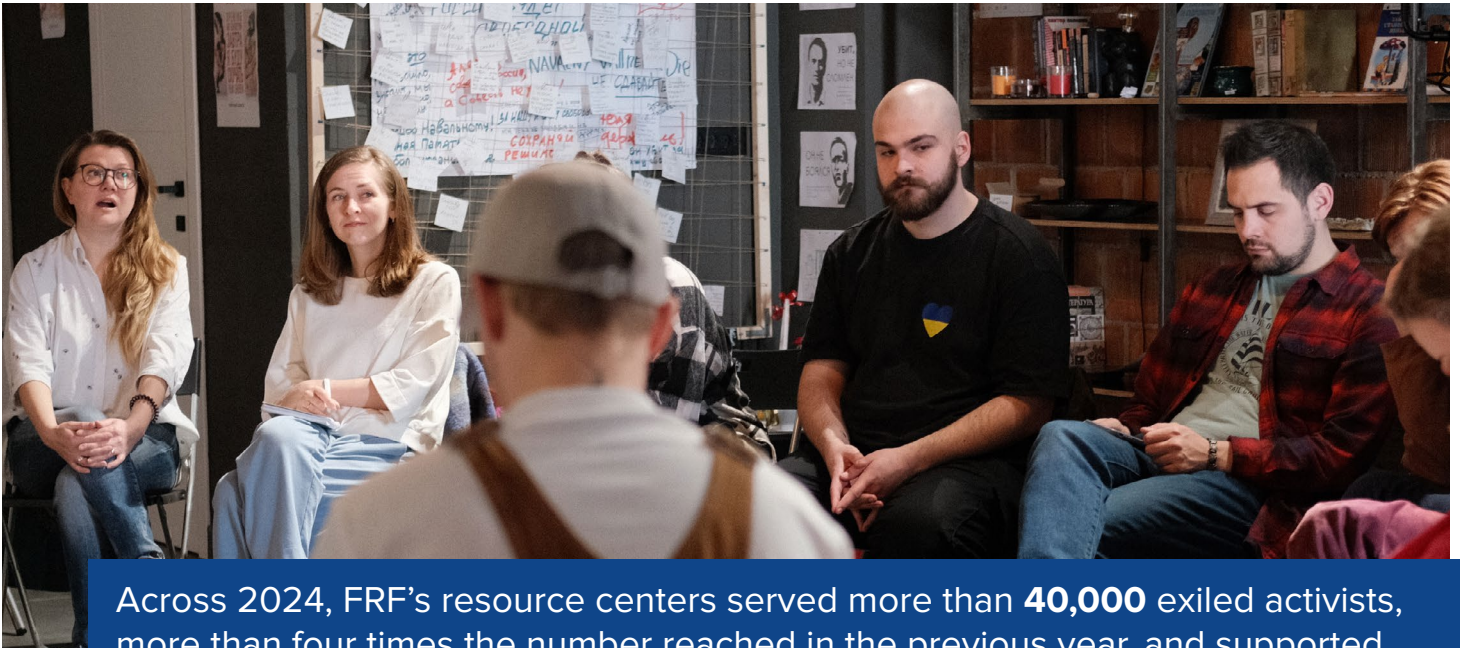
Free Russia Foundation's network of Reforum Spaces was established in the spring of 2022 as a direct response to the wave of forced emigration from Russia, with the goal of creating a support infrastructure for those who left their home countries due to war and repression. By the end of 2024, the network spanned seven resource centers in Berlin, Vilnius, Paris, Tbilisi, Tallinn, Warsaw, Budva, with an advocacy office in Brussels. Each space offered free coworking, event venues, a media studio, and a hub for activists, functioning as a safe haven for anti-war and pro-democracy initiatives and helping hundreds of people adapt and continue their work in new conditions.



FRF's programming evolved with conditions on the ground: FRF scaled down its presence in Georgia and Estonia, where the environment no longer supported activist growth. New centers opened in Warsaw and Paris, where diaspora communities were larger and more receptive to programming.

Through its Reforum Spaces and the Reforum Help service, FRF delivered integrated legal, financial, and psychosocial support to individuals navigating exile conditions.





Across 2024, FRF's resource centers served more than **40,000** exiled activists, more than four times the number reached in the previous year, and supported some **200** organizations.

Reform Spaces The Centers provided **5,052 consultations** by accountants, immigration lawyers, and psychosocial health professionals. When Navalny was murdered in February, the centers received more than **200 emergency requests** for psychosocial support and stabilized **740** exiles through round-the-clock counseling. Legal and financial consultations exceeded **5,000 cases**, addressing both immediate needs and working toward longer-term resilience. FRF also relocated **59** exiles facing acute transnational repression risks, providing **49** with legal support and **32** with emergency housing following relocation.

Building Networks and Community

FRF invested in maintaining connectivity and coordination across exile communities. Reform Spaces functioned as critical hubs for collaboration and peer exchange across key European cities, helping reduce fragmentation and strengthen sustained professional networks. Centers emerged as regional centers of gravity, extending FRF's reach into underserved diaspora communities across Turkey, Central Asia, the Balkans, and Western and Southern Europe, incorporating key diasporas into one interconnected ecosystem.

Throughout 2024, FRF hosted community gatherings and convenings across multiple countries, with large-scale events alongside ongoing workshops and working-level exchanges. FRF conducted more than 1,890 training sessions for over 29,000 participants covering topics including organization registration, audience growth inside Russia, project execution in exile, securing new funding sources, and maintaining physical, digital, and psychosocial health.

Seven accelerator programs drew more than **400 applications** and trained more than **100 civil society leaders** across Tbilisi, Budva, Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, Vilnius, and Madrid, with **25 microgrants** awarded to the strongest projects.

FRF supported **139** fellows across three cohorts in 2024, whose **362 anti-war and pro-democracy projects** and campaigns reached a cumulative audience of more than **23 million people**.



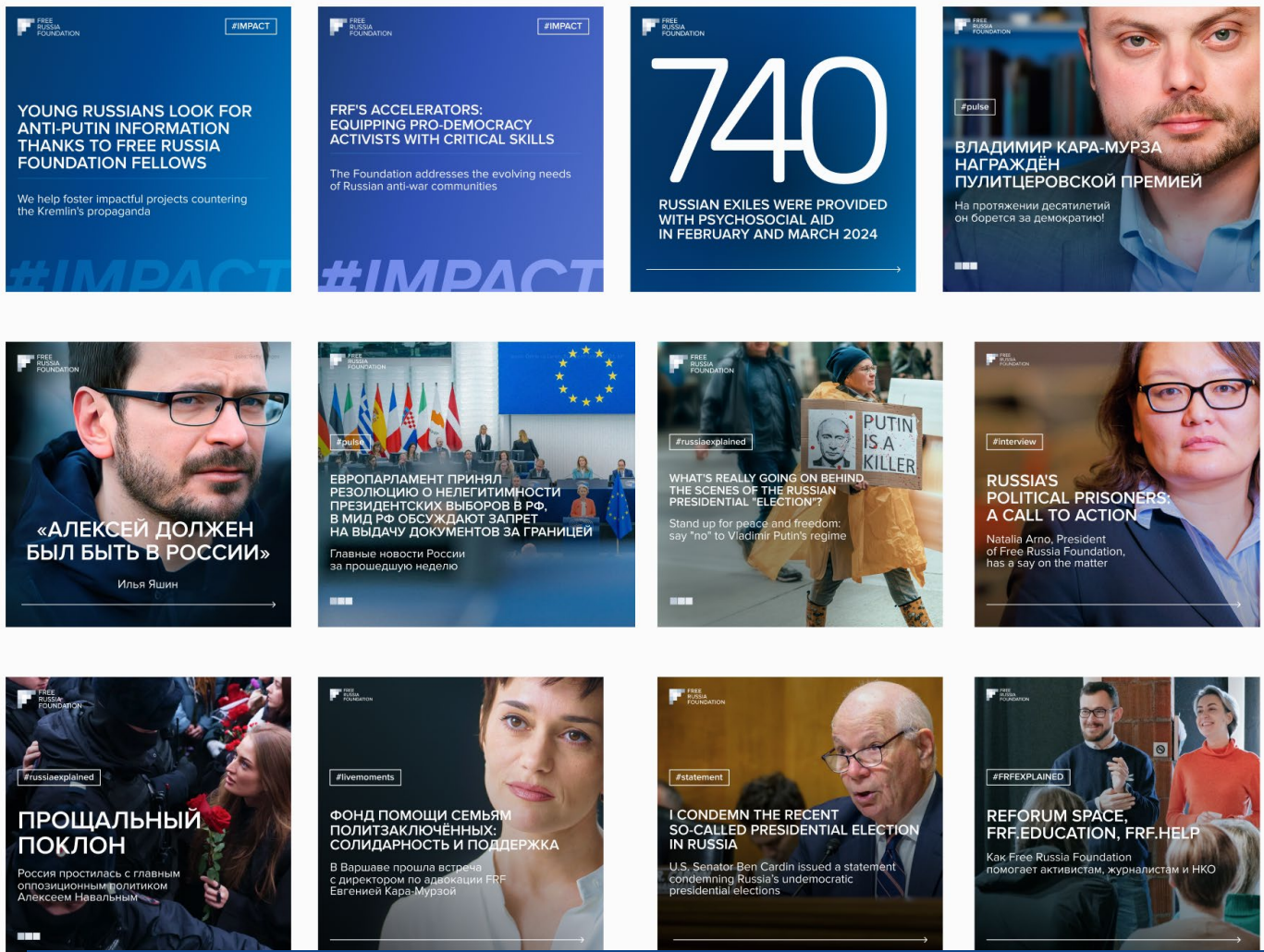
Reaching Audiences Inside Russia

This infrastructure directly enabled continued civic engagement with audiences inside Russia. Despite censorship and legal risk, FRF and its partners maintained distributed communication strategies, with campaigns reaching more than **30 million people inside the country**. More than **950 activists** were involved in the design process and **over 6,000 participants** contributed to implementation across **17 campaigns**. FRF's Reform activity produced **263 publications** reaching **more than 12 million people**, over twenty times the program's annual target of **500,000**.

Several FRF public initiatives served as a critical bridge between exiled and in-country communities. The Noon Against Putin campaign mobilized both Russians inside the country and in exile during the March presidential elections, leveraging the electoral moment as a coordinated act of civic dissent and an opportunity to reclaim political agency. The Berlin march in November drew thousands of diaspora participants and was the largest coordinated public demonstration by Russian civil society in exile to date. The "Return of the Names" commemoration featured readings across 43 countries and 132 locations, and was watched by nearly 13,000 people, many from inside Russia. The event reinforced connections between exiled communities and in-country audiences bringing them together in shared remembrance.

Linking Civil Society to Policy and Advocacy

This work remained closely integrated with FRF's advocacy and research efforts. Civil society actors engaged through Reformum contributed to policy discussions in Washington and Brussels, analytical outputs, and public advocacy on political prisoners and democratic resilience. The continued production of Russian-language content preserved credibility with domestic audiences and sustained a trusted channel of engagement.



By the end of 2024, these combined efforts had contributed to a more coordinated and durable civic ecosystem in exile, capable of sustaining activity, preserving leadership, and remaining meaningfully connected to the society it seeks to influence.

VII. Conclusion: What 2024 Made Possible

In 2024, repression inside Russia intensified and the space for independent civic activity narrowed further. At the same time, democratic actors continued to operate, reorganizing across borders and adapting to a more constrained and complex environment.

Across all three pillars, Free Russia Foundation focused on preserving what remains essential for long-term change. Advocacy efforts kept political prisoners on the transatlantic agenda and tied their cases to the region's security. Research and analysis provided clarity in an increasingly contested information environment, helping policymakers better understand the dynamics shaping Russia and the broader region. Investments in civil society infrastructure enabled displaced actors to continue their work, maintain networks, and remain connected to audiences inside Russia.

The release of political prisoners in 2024 demonstrated the impact of sustained, coordinated pressure. It also underscored the scale of the challenge that remains. Authoritarian systems continue to adapt, using repression, legal instruments, and information control to consolidate power and shape public perception.

The preservation of civic capacity, institutional knowledge, and credible voices is a necessary precondition for any future democratic opening. Free Russia Foundation's work is grounded in this understanding. When conditions shift, the decisive factor will be whether the people, networks, and ideas required for change were sustained in the years when progress was least visible and most necessary.

Washington, DC
April 2026