

Schengen visas for Russian nationals: a Russian opposition perspective

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I am co-chair of the Russian civic organisation Democratic Choice (demvybor.ru). The Russian authorities have placed me on their register of ‘foreign agents’. I am writing to you because the EU is discussing and preparing new restrictions on the issuing of Schengen visas to Russian nationals.

In November 2025 the European Commission decided that, as a rule, Russian nationals should no longer be issued multiple-entry visas [1]. In June 2026 eleven Schengen states called for stricter rules, and Sweden’s Minister for Migration, Johan Forssell, said that there should be a possibility ‘to say no to Russian tourists simply because they are Russians’ (‘Vad som behövs är att man skapar en möjlighet att säga nej till ryska turister bara för att de är ryssar’) [3].

On 12 October 2026 Finland’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Elina Valtonen, proposed in a letter to the European Commission that Russian nationals should not be issued tourist visas until the war is over [4]. According to Politico, the Commission is preparing such proposals for January 2027 [5].

I share your goal: to stop Putin’s aggression against Ukraine and to protect Europe. Our organisation stands for democracy, a European path of development for Russia, freedom of speech and an end to Russia’s war against Ukraine.

That is precisely why I ask you not to support such collective visa bans. They punish people who do not and cannot influence the Kremlin’s policies, they do not make Europe any safer, and they sever the ties between Russian society and Europe. The Kremlin, meanwhile, gains yet another argument for its propaganda. Below I set out the facts and research that support this and propose an alternative. Numbers in square brackets refer to the sources, with links, listed at the end of this letter.

In brief

- **Responsibility is individual.** Refusing visas on grounds of nationality is contrary to the Visa Code and to the Commission’s own guidelines. In Koushkaki, the Court of Justice of the EU held that a Schengen visa may be

refused only on grounds set out in the Visa Code that apply to the individual applicant [8]. Nationality is not one of those grounds.

- **Most Russians want peace.** 64% are in favour of negotiations, and 81% would support an immediate end to hostilities [17]. Consistent supporters of the war account for about 14% [19].
- **Sabotage is not committed by tourists.** It is carried out by locally recruited people, including EU and third-country nationals, and by career intelligence officers using other countries' passports [21–24]. Since the start of the full-scale war in 2022 there has not been a single proven case of sabotage committed by a Russian tourist holding a Schengen visa. The only suspicion of this kind, in the Leipzig airport sabotage case, is still under investigation.
- **Russians are themselves victims of the regime.** Almost 5,000 people are being prosecuted in political criminal cases, and 468 sentences for 'high treason' were handed down in 2025 [27]. For many, a visa remains the only route to safety.
- **Isolation plays into the Kremlin's hands.** It confirms the propaganda narrative of 'Russophobia' and reinforces the 'iron curtain' that the Kremlin is building around Russia.
- **A ban would not hurt the Kremlin's economy, but it would hurt the EU.** Travel to Europe accounts for only a small share of the USD 49.7 billion that Russians spent abroad in 2025 [34, 35]. After a ban, this money would stay in Russia or go to Türkiye and the UAE, while the EU would lose visa fees and tourism revenue.

1. Responsibility for crimes is individual

The principle of personal responsibility lies at the heart of the European legal tradition: no one may be held responsible for acts they did not commit. This principle is enshrined in Articles 48–49 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and collective punishment is expressly prohibited by international humanitarian law (Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention). Formally, a visa refusal is not considered a punishment. But when the letter from the eleven countries justifies restrictions by pointing to Russian tourists relaxing on European beaches [3], this is, in substance, punishment on the basis of nationality.

I understand why the sight of Russian tourists at European resorts provokes anger while Ukrainians are dying under bombardment. But a ban will not stop a single

missile or reduce Russia's military budget. It will hit families, students and people fleeing the regime, and it will give the Kremlin further proof of Western 'Russophobia'.

EU visa law is built on the same principle. The list of grounds for refusal in Article 32 of the Visa Code is exhaustive, and in Case C-84/12 Koushkaki (2013) the Court of Justice of the EU confirmed that a visa may be refused only if one of those grounds applies to the individual applicant [8]. In its 2022 guidelines the Commission itself insisted that each Russian applicant be assessed individually and stressed that the EU must remain open to family members of EU citizens, dissidents, independent journalists and civil society representatives [2]. In its decision of 6 November 2025 the Commission again named these categories [1]. The idea of refusing Russian tourists 'simply because they are Russians' runs counter to these documents.

Russian citizens do not choose their government. The European Parliament has deemed illegitimate both the 2024 presidential election (resolution of 25 April 2024, 493 votes in favour) and the State Duma elections of September 2026 (resolution of 8 October 2026, 482 votes in favour) [6]. In neither case were there genuine alternative candidates, free media or independent observers. One cannot acknowledge that Russians are deprived of free choice and at the same time hold them collectively responsible for the decisions of a government they are unable to change.

I am not asking for anyone to be absolved of responsibility. I am asking that decisions on entry depend on what a particular person has done, not on their passport. That is exactly what the Visa Code and the case law of the Court of Justice require.

2. Which Russians travel to Europe

In 2025 Russian nationals lodged about 679,000 applications for short-stay visas with the consulates of Schengen states and were issued about 620,000 visas [11, 12]. In 2019 there were more than 4 million applications [13], which means that the flow has fallen roughly **sixfold**.

The number of visas issued rose by about 10% compared with 2024 [12], but this does not mean that people are travelling more. The multi-year multiple-entry visas that Russians used to obtain are expiring, and hardly any new ones are being issued. In 2022 the Commission recommended that consulates refrain from issuing long-validity multiple-entry visas to Russians [2], and since November 2025 their issuance has effectively stopped [1]. According to the Association of Tour Operators of Russia

(ATOR), the issuance of multiple-entry visas fell by at least 90% in the first quarter of 2026 [14]. Each trip now requires a new visa, so more visas do not mean more trips.

The refusal rate for Russian applicants in 2025 was 6.4%, less than half the global average (14.6%) [11]. This indicates that the consulates themselves regard the risk of Russian applicants breaking the rules as low.

At the end of 2025 about 877,000 Russian nationals held a valid residence permit in the EU [15]. They have parents, children, brothers and sisters in Russia, and a visa is often the only way for their families to see each other. In autumn 2026 the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, presented her report ‘Nowhere to hide’ to the UN Human Rights Council. As Euronews reports in its article on the report, in some EU countries relatives are no longer able to visit Russian opposition figures living there, and families have to meet in other countries [28].

Fewer than **0.5%** of Russia’s population receive visas: about 620,000 visas for 146 million inhabitants. A ban would not affect the majority who watch Russian state television and do not travel to Europe. It would hit first and foremost the part of society that maintains ties with Europe: the families of emigrants, students, academics and people fleeing persecution.

3. Most Russians want peace

Opinion polls do not bear out the widespread belief that Russians are united in support of the war: the majority want peace.

Indicator	Value	Source
In favour of moving to peace negotiations / in favour of continuing military action	64% / 27%	Levada Center, September 2026
Would support a decision by Putin to end military action this very week	81%	Levada Center, September 2026
Would support a troop withdrawal and negotiations without the goals of the ‘special military operation’ having been achieved	42%	Chronicles, October 2025
Consistent supporters of the war	14% (22% in February 2023)	Chronicles, October 2025
If money were short, would prioritise social spending over military spending	47%	Chronicles, October 2025

Chronicles defines consistent supporters of the war as those who simultaneously support the war, prefer military to social spending and would not support a troop withdrawal [19]. That is roughly one in seven. The overwhelming majority would support an end to the war [17].

It is true that 70% of respondents say they support the army, but only 40% ‘definitely’ support it [17]. In a country where people are jailed for speaking out against the war, people do not tell a stranger conducting a survey everything they think. Moreover, most people approached by pollsters decline to take part: in a telephone survey by Russian Field in June 2023, 79% refused [20]. Opponents of the war have more reason to refuse.

Russian society has not rallied around the war: most people are waiting for it to end. EU policy should strengthen these attitudes rather than push people towards the conclusion that Europe sees them as enemies.

4. Sabotage is not committed by tourists

The threat of Russian sabotage in Europe is real and growing. But since the start of the full-scale war in February 2022, open sources do not contain a single proven case of sabotage committed by a Russian tourist holding a Schengen visa. The Commission’s decision of 6 November 2025 mentions sabotage only as general background and refers to ‘potential’ misuse of visas [1]. The international lawyer Gleb Bogush (University of Cologne) writes that there is no public evidence of holders of multiple-entry visas being involved in sabotage [10].

In the known cases, the perpetrators were other people:

- The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) counted 34 Russian acts of sabotage in Europe in 2024. The perpetrators are recruited via Telegram and gaming chats from among local residents, migrants and criminals; CSIS calls them ‘disposable agents’ [21].
- According to Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the blast on the railway line between Warsaw and Lublin in November 2025 was carried out by two Ukrainian nationals working for the Russian intelligence services. They entered Poland from Belarus and returned there afterwards [22].
- Career intelligence officers operate under diplomatic cover or with third-country documents. Mikhail Mikushin, a GRU officer arrested in Norway in 2022, lived there on a Brazilian passport [24].

- One of the alleged organisers of the attempted drone attack on Leipzig airport in August 2026 has been named as Oleg Levushkin, a Latvian citizen who, contrary to Latvian law, also held Russian citizenship: he did not need a Schengen visa. According to the investigative journalist Roman Dobrokhoto, an EU passport is far more convenient for Russian intelligence than a Russian one, because Russian citizens face stricter checks at the border [23]. According to The Guardian, the second suspect in the same case is a Belarusian citizen who also holds a Russian passport. He obtained a tourist visa at the Italian Embassy in Minsk, although he apparently never travelled to Italy itself. Italy's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani, has ordered an inquiry into how the visa was issued [23]. The investigation is ongoing, and guilt has not been proven. But even if the suspicions are confirmed, this would be a failure in the vetting of one applicant, not an argument for banning the hundreds of thousands of Russians who are issued visas every year.

As a rule, it is easier for intelligence services to recruit a perpetrator already inside the EU than to bring their own operative through a consulate, fingerprinting and document checks. Russian applicants are already vetted: their data are stored in the Visa Information System (VIS), and since November 2025 every trip has required a new visa and a new check. A collective ban would create a false sense of security while the recruitment channels remained open. What protects against sabotage is counter-intelligence, countering recruitment on social media, the protection of infrastructure and the individual vetting of applicants.

5. Russians are not accomplices but victims of a dictatorship

Political repression in Russia began long before 2022: the 2012 Bolotnaya Square case, the repressive law on 'foreign agents', the murder of Boris Nemtsov (2015), and the poisoning (2020) and death in prison (2024) of Alexei Navalny. According to OVD-Info, between 2012 and March 2025 more than 5,000 people became defendants in politically motivated criminal cases [26]. The war has turned an authoritarian regime into a repressive dictatorship:

- more than 20,000 detentions for anti-war positions, 11,600 cases of 'discrediting the army' and more than 1,180 defendants in anti-war criminal cases between February 2022 and July 2025 [25];
- 4,968 people are being prosecuted in political criminal cases, 2,178 of them deprived of their liberty; the average sentence has risen from 6 years and 7

months in 2021 to 11 years in 2026 [27];

- 468 sentences for ‘high treason’ in 2025 alone, with not a single acquittal and a median term of 15 years [27];
- 1,262 entries in the register of ‘foreign agents’ and 415 ‘undesirable organisations’; in 2026 Memorial was declared ‘extremist’ and OVD-Info was banned [27].

Repression also reaches those who have left. The number of sentences passed in absentia on emigrants rose from 4 in 2022 to 157 in 2025 [27]. A law adopted in August 2026 introduces 14 types of restrictions for citizens on these registers, including those living abroad, ranging from the freezing of assets to the confiscation of passports. Katzarova calls this ‘civil death’ [28]. According to estimates she cites, around one million men have left Russia to avoid taking part in the war [28]. Even by a cautious estimate made by The Bell in 2024, around 650,000 people who left after the invasion have not returned [16].

For many men, a Schengen visa remains one of the few legal ways to leave before being sent to the front, all the more so because recipients of electronic call-up notices are automatically barred from leaving the country [29]. In Case C-238/19 EZ (2020), the Court of Justice of the EU recognised that a person who evades service in an army that commits war crimes may be entitled to protection [9]. A conscript who has left Russia will no longer become a soldier in the Russian army.

In October 2026 the UN Special Rapporteur Mariana Katzarova criticised the EU’s decision to stop issuing multiple-entry visas to Russians and called for exceptions to be made for human rights defenders, dissidents, conscientious objectors and journalists [28].

The European Parliament itself has called for humanitarian visas to be granted to Russian dissidents and for independent civil society to be supported [6]. A persecuted person can rarely prove to a consul in advance that they are in danger. An ordinary tourist visa often turns out to be their only real protection.

6. Isolation plays into the Kremlin’s hands

The central claim of Kremlin propaganda is this: the West is at war not with Putin, but with Russia and all Russians. The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept names ‘countering the Russophobia campaign’ as a state priority [31]. An entry ban based on nationality confirms this claim more vividly than anything else. It tells a Russian who opposes the war exactly what Russian state television tells them: Europe does not distinguish you from Putin, and you are not welcome there. The European

Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) gives the same warning in a study published in October 2026: when politicians loudly label all Russians as aggressors, this reinforces prejudice, feeds the regime's propaganda and gives committed opponents of the war a sense of global isolation [42].

The Kremlin is not afraid of visa restrictions and uses them in its propaganda. When the EU abandoned multiple-entry visas in November 2025, Leonid Slutsky, chair of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs, declared that Europe had 'punished itself', and Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova called the restrictions a provocation and promised retaliatory measures [32]. Decisions on the war are taken by people who stopped travelling to Europe on tourist visas long ago.

Pressure on ordinary citizens does not change the regime's policies, but it does alienate people from those applying the pressure. Using survey experiments in Russia, Timothy Frye (Columbia University) has shown that sanctions do not rally citizens around the government but do reduce sympathy for the country imposing them [33].

According to the Levada Center, 87% of Russians say that sanctions have not caused them serious problems [18]. They will not notice a visa ban either (fewer than 0.5% of Russia's population receive Schengen visas). It will, however, be noticed by the minority who travel to Europe and have ties with it.

Finally, the Kremlin itself is building a new 'iron curtain'. Some officials and employees of state-owned companies have their foreign-travel passports taken into safekeeping by the FSB or by special departments at their workplace, and staff of the State Duma administration are prohibited from any foreign travel [30].

Since 2024 the authorities have been throttling YouTube, since August 2025 they have been blocking calls on WhatsApp and Telegram, and in 2026 they began throttling Telegram itself [29]. The regime wants its citizens never to see Europe with their own eyes and to know it only from television. A visa ban would do this work for the Kremlin, and free of charge.

7. A ban would not hurt the Kremlin's economy, but it would hurt the EU

According to the Bank of Russia, Russians' spending on trips abroad in 2025 (the 'Travel' item of the balance of payments) amounted to USD 49.7 billion, almost as much as in the record year of 2014 [34, 35]. For an economy under sanctions this is a significant outflow of foreign currency, but only a small part of it goes to Europe. In 2025 Russians travelled abroad 31.5 million times, including 13.4 million times as

tourists, while about 620,000 Schengen visas were issued to them [12, 35]. The largest numbers of tourist trips were to Türkiye (4.6 million) and the UAE (1.7 million) [35].

A visa ban would, if anything, benefit the Kremlin. Part of the money that Russians would have spent in Europe would stay in the country. The authorities are investing precisely in domestic tourism: Putin has named it one of the priorities of the long-term strategy, set the goal of raising the number of domestic trips involving hotel stays to 140 million a year, and instructed that RUB 403 billion be allocated to the national project ‘Tourism and Hospitality Industry’ up to 2030 [36]. Taxes on this spending would flow into the budget that finances the war. The rest would go to Türkiye, the UAE and other countries through which Russia circumvents sanctions.

The EU, on the other hand, would lose a significant revenue stream. Visa fees alone, at EUR 90 for each of 620,000 visas, bring in up to EUR 56 million a year [11, 12]. Even on a modest estimate of EUR 1,000–1,500 per trip, tourists from Russia spend some EUR 0.6–0.9 billion a year in European hotels, restaurants and shops.

8. Human contacts erode dictatorships

The West won the Cold War by combining military deterrence with openness towards Soviet citizens. In January 1958 the United States and the USSR signed their first agreement on exchanges in the cultural, technical and educational fields. Under this agreement and other exchange programmes, some 50,000 Soviet citizens visited the United States between 1958 and 1988: scientists and students, engineers, writers and journalists, Party and government officials, musicians, dancers and athletes [41]. Among the first exchange students at Columbia University was Alexander Yakovlev, who later became the chief ideologist of glasnost and perestroika [41]. The scholar and diplomat Yale Richmond showed how these contacts gradually eroded Soviet ideology [41]. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 enshrined freedom of human contacts as a pan-European principle, and Soviet dissidents relied on it in their struggle for human rights.

Contemporary researchers reach the same conclusions. People educated in democratic countries promote democratisation in their home countries after they return [37]. Exchanges with authoritarian countries spread liberal values, while cancelling exchanges as a punishment for human rights violations undermines the influence of the democracies themselves [38]. Openness to emigration improves democratic institutions in the countries of origin [39]. Personal contact between groups consistently reduces mutual hostility and prejudice [40].

The same patterns can be seen in Russia itself. The ECFR study is based on 14 focus groups conducted by the Levada Center between April and August 2026 in four major Russian cities. The participants included people who had been to the West, some long before the war, others relatively recently. They judge Europe by their own impressions and often say things that run counter to what propaganda instils. According to the authors, such impressions are ‘without exception’ more positive and closer to reality than views drawn from state television [42].

A trip to Europe remains a channel of information that the Kremlin cannot block. People come home and tell their families and colleagues that Europe is not like the picture on television and that nobody there treats them as an enemy. After the war Europe will have to live alongside Russia, and the security of the continent for decades to come depends on whether a pro-European society survives there.

9. Three further arguments

- Exiled media outlets and human rights organisations work with sources, authors and partners inside Russia. A meeting on EU territory is often the only safe way to do this work.
- In its resolution of 3 April 2025 the European Parliament called for easier access to visas, residence permits and documents for Belarusians who have fled the Lukashenka regime [7]. Russians live under the same kind of dictatorship, and the same approach should apply to them.
- Refusals on grounds of nationality undermine the principle of individual assessment on which Schengen rests. The EU is already discussing an amendment to the Visa Code that would allow such restrictions to be imposed swiftly on any third country in the event of a sharp deterioration in relations [4].

10. What I propose

Europe’s security and support for Ukraine are not at odds with openness towards Russian society. Above all, I ask the European Parliament and the European Commission to:

1. Refrain from introducing general bans or quotas on visas on grounds of nationality, and maintain the individual assessment of each applicant, as required by the Visa Code.
2. Maintain the individual approach: decisions on entry should depend solely on the applicant’s own conduct as established during vetting. Step up efforts to

counter the recruitment of saboteurs on social media.

3. Establish a clear and rapid humanitarian visa mechanism for people facing persecution: human rights defenders, journalists, political activists, deserters, people refusing military service, and their family members, as recommended by the European Parliament and the UN Special Rapporteur [6, 28].

In addition, I propose:

- Publishing a risk assessment before any new measures are adopted, showing how many incidents are actually linked to holders of Schengen visas, and discussing the measures with independent Russian organisations and human rights defenders.
- Restoring access to multiple-entry visas for applicants with an impeccable visa history, as well as for students, academics, cultural figures and family members of EU residents.
- Accepting applications from Russians legally resident in third countries (Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Türkiye) without requiring them to return to Russia in order to apply.
- Finding a solution for those whose passports have expired or been confiscated by issuing them with travel documents. The European Parliament proposed a similar approach in its resolution of 25 April 2024 [6]. Since the law of August 2026 allows passports to be confiscated, including from people living abroad, this can no longer be postponed.
- Expanding educational, academic and cultural exchanges with Russian civil society that is independent of the state, including scholarships for at-risk academics and students.

I ask you to take these arguments into account when the Commission's proposals are discussed in January 2027.

I believe that the more Russians are able to see a free Europe with their own eyes, the less power Kremlin propaganda will have, and the closer we will be to the day when Russia ceases to be a threat to its neighbours.

Yours sincerely,

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