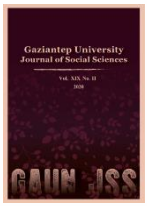

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Araştırma Makalesi ● Research Article

Alexei Navalny and Protests in Russia: Growth of Online Activism Under the Authoritarian System

Aleksey Navalni ve Rusya'daki Protestolar: Otoriter Rejim Altında Çevrimiçi Aktivizmin Gelişmesi

Viktoriia DEMYDOVA[a]*

[a] Asst. Prof. Dr., Istanbul Gelisim University, Political Science and International Relations Department, Istanbul / TURKEY
ORCID: 0000-0001-5447-1033

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ÖZ

Bu makale, muhalif aktivist Aleksey Navalni'nin Ocak 2021'de tutuklanmasının ardından Rusya'da patlak veren protestoların niteliğini problematize etmektedir. Kitlesel eylem yasağı ve COVID-19 pandemisi koşulları altında, mitinglerin kapsamı, bu protestoları 1991'den sonra Rusya tarihindeki en büyük kitlesel eylem haline getirmiştir. Bu makale, bir tür sivil aktivizm olarak mitinglerin doğasını ve Rus rejimini liberalleştirme kapasitesini tartışmayı hedefliyor. Ayrıca bu makale protestolar sırasında dijital medyanın rolünü tartışmayı amaçlıyor. Makale, mitinglerin kapsamının, gençliğe duyulan güvenin, çevrimiçi seferberlik yapısının ve kapsamlı bir şekilde organize edilmiş anatominin, 2000'lerdeki renkli devrimlerde olduğu gibi gelecekte rejim değişikliğine yol açabilecek artan potansiyeli gösterdiğini savunuyor. Aynı zamanda, Rusya'da internetin "egemenleşmesine" bağlı olarak çevrimiçi aktivizmin geliştiğini savunuyor. Bu makale nitel araştırma metodolojisine dayanmaktadır. Veri toplama teknikleri sosyal aktivizm ve çevrimiçi medya üzerine literatür taraması, Rus mevzuatının incelenmesi, sosyal medya içeriğinin analizi ve Ocak olaylarının medyada bulduğu geniş yerin irdelenmesini içeriyor.

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes the nature of the protests that outbroke in Russia following the arrest of the opposition activist Alexei Navalny in January 2021. Under the conditions of mass action ban and COVID-19 pandemic, the scope of the rallies make them the biggest mass action in the history of Russia after 1991. This article seeks to discuss the nature of the rallies as a form of civic activism as well as their capacity to liberalize the Russian regime. Furthermore, this article aims to discuss the role of digital media during the protests. The article argues that the scope of the rallies, reliance on youth, online mobilization structure and thoroughly organized anatomy indicate that they have potential for regime change in future as it could be seen in the case of color revolutions in the 2000s. At the same time, it is argued that in Russia, online activism is growing as a response to "sovereign-ization" of the Internet. This article relies on the qualitative research methodology. Data collection techniques include literature review on social activism and online media, study of Russian legislation, analysis of social media content, and examination of January events' media coverage.

* *Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author*.
e-posta: demydovav@gmail.com

Introduction

Following the arrest of the opposition activist Alexei Navalny in Moscow airport upon his return from rehabilitation in a clinic in Berlin, protests were organized in more than 100 Russian cities and towns. While activists on the streets demanded release of Navalny, online platforms were sharing information on human rights violations in Russia calling citizens to support rallies (Dima_Talisman, 2021). For example, in one of the videos, alleged organizers of the uprisings in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan were sending their greetings and messages of encouragement to Russians implying that the designers of the earlier rallies can target Russia's regime as well. (Gorbal', 2021).

This article seeks to shed light on the nature of protests that occurred on January 23 and 31, 2021 in Russia. The article has two main goals. On the one hand, it aims to discuss the nature of the rallies as a form of civic activism as well as their capacity to liberalize the Russian regime. For that matter, the author analyzes demands and participants of the rallies, organization and mobilization structures as well as the role of the civil society while comparing protests in Russia to the mass rallies in Eurasia, particularly cases of color revolutions, as well as earlier protests in Russia. On the other hand, this article explores the role of digital media in the protests. For that, the author particularly concentrates on the examples and mechanisms of social media used and how they manage to overcome impediments created by the authoritarian government through numerous bans. Correspondingly, the protests of 2021 are approached from the democratization theory perspective, on the one hand, and from the perspective of online activism, on the other hand.

This article answers the question about the nature and potential of the mass protests in Russia as well as the impact of digital activism on opposition's activism. The article argues that the scope of the rallies, reliance on youth, online mobilization structure and thoroughly organized anatomy indicate their growing potential that in the future may lead to regime change as it was the case with color revolutions. In January 2021, the main demand was to free opposition leader followed by the demands of liberalization or change of the regime. They were one-day actions on January 23 and 31. Despite the scope of the protests in Russia, under current conditions they have little capacity to liberalize regime or change Russian leadership immediately due to the weak and unorganized nature of those who do not support the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Also, strong grip on power of Putin who had amended Russian constitution to stay in power till 2036 and support for him among Russians make him invincible even despite the corruption scandal related to Navalny's recent film. Moreover, the author argues that in Russia as a response to the sovereignization of the Internet online activism is growing. Sovereignization of the Internet is defined as "the type and scale of control over online space became more and more like the control exercised over offline space". (Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2021: p.291). Social media as well as digital literacy allow opposition activists bypass the system of bans imposed by Kremlin in order to draw attention of the larger audience to the issues of corruption and power abuse.

This article relies on qualitative methodology. Data collection techniques include analysis of the few groups of sources. Preliminary study included analysis of the empirical works on democracy, activism and online activism followed by the literature review on social activism and online media that is presented in the following section. Then, legislation on measures during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, mass actions in Russia, civil society, media and social media was analyzed. Also, analysis of the social media content (Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, TikTok) was utilized in this article. Finally, this article on the large extent relies on the media coverage of the events.

Literature Review

Literature that is relevant to the case of 2021 protests in Russia and that provides theoretical as well as empirical basis for understanding the nature of Russia's rallies can be categorized as follows. First, the literature on the nature of color revolutions provided a thorough examination of democratization and regime changes in Eurasia in recent decades. Since civic activism seen in January 2021 in Russia was one of the biggest examples of the protests in the country, this article approaches Russian rallies from the democratization perspective as well. This group of sources focus on revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in early 2000s. Later, the cases of Kazakhstan, Armenia and Belarus were added. Here, the main topics include civil society organizations and grassroots activism; policies adopted by the governments in order to curb the rallies; responsiveness of the regime; regime change. Revolutions in Eurasia were approached from the transition theory perspective. Regarding the case of Georgia, the studies by Fairbanks (2004), Mitchell (2006), Tatum (2009) and recent book by Wheatley (2017) deserve mentioning. As for the case of Ukraine, main contributions to the discussion of democracy has been made by Kuzio (2005), Way (2005), Wilson (2005), McFaul (2007), Katchanovski (2008), Kubicek (2009), Kuzio (Ed.) (2013). What makes the case of Ukraine described by Kuzio (2005) particularly valuable for this research is the discussion of the four years of protests that preceded Orange Revolution in 2004. His key argument is that democratic breakthrough on Maidan was possible due to the experience of mass protests that had started with the "Kuchma Get'" (*Kuchma Go Away*) in 2000. Similarly, Lucan Way (2005) also argues about overestimation of the Orange Revolution itself in the literature. In his turn, he calls for the analysis of the Kuchma's regime weakness. The discussion of the factors that led to Orange Revolution is further developed by McFaul (2007), who names four factors resulted in the mass protests in Ukraine. They are: drive of the domestic actors toward democracy; state-to-state engagement between Ukraine and Western actors; technologies and financial support used to expose fraud; and aid to independent media. So, these works examine the factors that opened the way for mass protests in Ukraine in 2004. Ivan Katchanovski (2008) is far from calling events of 2004 a revolution. Rather, he suggests that evolutionary changes were taking place in Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan was evaluated by Marat (2006), Radnitz (2006), Juraev (2008), Lewis (2008). Tudoroiu (2007) published comparative analysis of these three cases emphasizing the factors of failure.

Second, literature on digital activism should be examined. Analysis of the sources on digital activism shows that in cases of color revolutions, if the studies of social media shed light on activism, researchers concentrate mostly on tools and narratives of Kremlin in the case of Russia. Given the important role of digital media in political process, this paper focuses on the impact of Twitter, TikTok and other social media in sharing information, providing a platform for discussion and mobilization of population. Thus, Goldstein (2007) contributed to the discussion of the digital networked technologies during the Orange Revolution. The author touched upon two-step flow theory of communication and the role of humor and satire in 2004. Zuckerman (2007) developed "a cute cat theory" which explains online activism in authoritarian societies. Author argues that tools such as Facebook, Flickr, Blogger, Twitter make the activists more immune to reprisals by governments than if they were using a dedicated activism platform, because shutting down a popular public platform provokes a larger public outcry than shutting down an obscure one (Zuckerman, 2007). Empirical analysis of the specific countries' cases was conducted, among others, by Olga Onuch (2015) who provided comparative analysis between social media and social networks during EuroMaidan in Ukraine. A sociologist Zeynep Tüfekçi (2017) observed the Gezi protests in Turkey and elaborated on popular hashtags that used to coordinate people and set the protest agenda. In this manner,

hashtags gave way to conversations among people in what most of them viewed as an already established network of like-minded citizens. The case of Iran that is not much relevant to Eurasia but is important in understanding the new media is covered by Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides, Kelly & Zuckerman (2010). In their study of Iran, they point out at five levels of new media's impact: individual transformation, regime policies, intergroup relations, collective action and external attention.

Runet or Russian segment of the global network is the focus of the of the recent works by Wijermars (2021), Zherebtsov & Goussev (2021). One of the earliest works on online activism is completed by Lonkila (2008). The author analyzes the role of Runet or Russian internet space, particularly blogs platform Livejournal, in anti-military protests. Gladarev & Lonkila (2012) compares the role of social network sites, namely Facebook in Finland and Vkontakte (*In Contact*) in Russia, in civic activism. Murphy, F. (2017) states that tendencies such as widespread visual political irony, "*slacktivism*" [1] and horizontal communication structures can be considered inevitable difficulties with modern online communication and fundamental limitations of the internet itself as a political tool. Research on Russian internet as a "revolutionary space" is conducted by Toepfl (2011), Popkova (2014) Ermoshina & Musiani (2017), Asmolov & Kolozaridi (2021). Furthermore, Lokot (2018)'s paper finds that Russian opposition activists place a high value on digital, media, and security literacy and that navigating the internet using security tools and protocols such as VPN, two-phase authentication, and encrypted messaging is increasingly seen as the default *modus operandi* for those participating in organized dissent in Russia to mitigate growing state surveillance. Lonkila, Shpakovskaya, & Torchinsky (2021) provide a thorough analysis of political activism in social media with the particular focus on Navalny and Telegram proving the fact that Navalny himself is a significant contribution to online activism. One of the most recent contributions to the discussion of online activism where impact of COVID-19 pandemic is accessed has been made by Sokolov, Palagicheva & Golovin (2020). Their research revealed that the mobilization by unregistered public associations are developing. The growing role of social media in the citizens' life, the training of civic activists in mobilization technologies, the search for new forms of civic activism, as well as the prevalence of protests on a local problem--all together led to an increase in the activity of informal movements.

Having relied on the literature reviewed above, this article approaches 2021 protests in Russia from two perspectives. On the one hand, theory of democratic transition discussed in the following section use social activism as an important indicator of democratization. On the other hand, online activism is seen as a reasonable participation tactic in countries with authoritarian regimes particularly under conditions of extraordinary measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This article contributes to the academic debate by mapping the case of the recent civic activism in Russia within which significant role is played by social media platforms.

Conceptual Framework

As the protests of January 2021 are approached from the democratization theory perspective as well as from the perspective of online activism in this article, democratization is defined as a process through which a political regime becomes democratic. According to Huntington's theory of three waves (1993), former Soviet Union countries signify the third

[1] Activity that uses the internet to support political or social causes in a way that does not need much effort, for example creating or signing online petitions (Cambridge Dictionary).

wave of democracy. One of the features of this wave is the reversion to authoritarianism in some cases, such as in Russia, or the establishment of hybrid regimes combining features of democracy and authoritarianism, such as in Ukraine under Kuchma. The transition in Russia in the early 1990s demonstrated the top-down model since it was implemented by the government. Color revolutions in Eurasia in the early 2000s correspond to the bottom-up model: societal groups are responsible for the grassroots activism that makes pressure on the regime. In this regard, Putnam (1993) argues that "communities with denser horizontal networks of civic association are able to better build the 'norms of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement' that lead to democratization and well-functioning participatory democracies." From this perspective, civic activism in the form of rallies and digital activism may secure faster liberalization or even change of the regime.

As Zuckerman (2007) put it in his "cute cat theory", activism in authoritarian systems is severely limited. Groups and movements are forced into online platforms that allow greater measure of freedom. The concept of online activism refers to "politically motivated movement relying on the Internet" (Vegh et al., 2003, p.71). Advantages of online activism as defined by environmental advocacy groups include easy coordination; absence of registration procedures; high levels of freedom, particularly in non-democratic countries; broad reach; convenience during pandemic; high efficiency of efforts; chances for elderly and handicapped people; further channels of communication; freedom from charge calls; protection from physical violence; and fast fundraising. (Holiday).

Online activism includes but is not limited to posting, debating, and sharing of relevant information online in various social media applications such as social networking. Recent example from Russia could be Alexei Navalny's (2020) release of his phone call to the killer who confessed in poisoning Navalny with Novichok nerve agent in August 2020. Another example would be initiated in Instagram by Riga-based news aggregator Meduza Project's (2021) educative video, *Fight for Values*, in which the meaning and procedures of democracy are explained with reference to Sweden. Also, mobilization and coordination are easier online. Streaming live videos of street protests transmit information about the events (Lonkila et al., 2021, p.139). The video about Putin's palace in Gelendzhik published by Alexei Navalny's team on YouTube on January 19 (Navalny, 2021) and accusing President Putin of corruption also utilized social media "*doxing*" (Lonkila et al., 2021, p.139) finding and publishing private information about an individual—this time the president of Russia—on the Internet. Crowdfunding and crowdsourcing have been used, for example, to collect money to fund Boris Nemtsov's pamphlets about Putin, to support the independent TV channel *Rain* (*Dozhd'*), to raise money for Navalny's anti-corruption project *RosPil*, to pay the fines imposed by the court on the Russian liberal magazine *New Times* and to investigate the downing of Malaysian Airline fight MH17 in July 2014 over the territory of Donbas. Mails which were sent by anonymous source in December 2020 and which revealed the financial and administrative resources of Putin's son in law Kirill Shamalov (Anin et al., 2020) represent the example of *leaktivism* (e.g., wikileaks) (Lonkila et al., 2021, p.139). Still other forms of online activism include, among others, hashtag activism (raising awareness of an issue across various social media platforms; e.g., the #metoo movement, #Navalny2018, #FreeNavalny) and hacking and distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks (Lonkila et al., 2021, p.139).

Who Is Mr. Navalny?

Alexei Navalny is a famous Russian blogger, opposition activist and corruption fighter. Navalny founded the Anti-Corruption Fund, which unites the following subsidiary projects. Smart Voting project's (*Umnoe Golosovanie)* goal was to consolidate the votes of those who oppose United Russia—the party in power led by President Putin. *RosPil* project's goal was to

reveal abuse in public procurements. Other projects included Navalny's Trade Union; *RosZhKH* (to file complaints about various shortcomings in the work of housing and communal services); *RosYama* (literally 'Russian Hole', service for complaints about pits and other defects in the road surface); *RosVybory* (organization of observation of the 2012 presidential elections). Finally, 'Good Machine of Truth' disseminated information about abuse and corruption in the government. Navalny is the author of two popular YouTube channels: *Alexey Navalny* and *Navalny LIVE*. Navalny became a runner-off in the 2013 mayoral elections in Moscow with 27.24% of the vote, losing to incumbent mayor Sergei Sobyanin. Since November 2013, he has headed the Central Council of the political party *Russia of the Future*. During 2018 presidential race Central Electoral Commission refused to register him as a candidate due to an outstanding conviction in the 'Kirovles case'. (Navalny 20!8).

Alexei Navalny returned to Russia from Berlin on January 17 and immediately was imprisoned for 30 days. In Berlin, Navalny had been receiving a treatment after his poisoning in August 2020. Following Navalny's arrest, his 2-hour investigative film about President Putin's palace in South Russian resort city of Gelendzhik was released (Navalny, 2021). Within 3 days, only YouTube registered 59 million views. Movie exposed corrupted luxurious life that Russian president had created within 20 years of being in power due to the numerous illegal schemes rooted deeply in the shaky 1990s.

January 2021 Protests

Protests of Navalny's supporters swept down on more than 100 cities and towns on Saturday, January 23, making this action the biggest after 1991. As stated in Moscow city mayor's decree, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mass actions ban in the Russian capital had already been extended on 10 December (V Moskve na dva mesjaca, 2020). Correspondingly, the applications of Navalny's supporters as to mass actions planned for Saturday had been rejected. It means that all protests are illegal and people violate Russian law. Additionally, Russian government had prepared thoroughly to the rallies: numerous arrests, ban on mass actions, penalties and pressure on social media were to prevent opposition activists from gathering. Nevertheless, according to different estimations, approximately 15 thousand people came to Pushkinskaya Square in Moscow despite the risks of COVID-19 virus or legal case.

Scope and Demands

The main demand of the protesters is expressed in the slogan "Free Navalny". Protesters also demanded freedom, change and resignation of Putin (Regiony Rossii, 2021). Unlike protests in Belarus or color revolutions, rallies lasted for one day only. Protests on January 31 were not very crowded even compared to those of January 23. The following estimations of the protests are provided by the research centers. According to Levada Center's survey (2021a), citizens were driven to the streets by their dissatisfaction with the president and government that is no longer a marginal point of view. If immediately after the annexation of Crimea 'Putin's super-majority' constituted 86%, now it became 60-65%. One third of the population or even more are those dissatisfied with the situation and do not support the authorities by default. However, as sociologist Volkov (Levada Center, 2021a) puts it, discontented citizens remain fragmented and disoriented in many ways. At the same time, supporters of the government - with its own help - remain mobilized, go to elections, vote for amendments, for candidates from the government in Duma or governor elections.

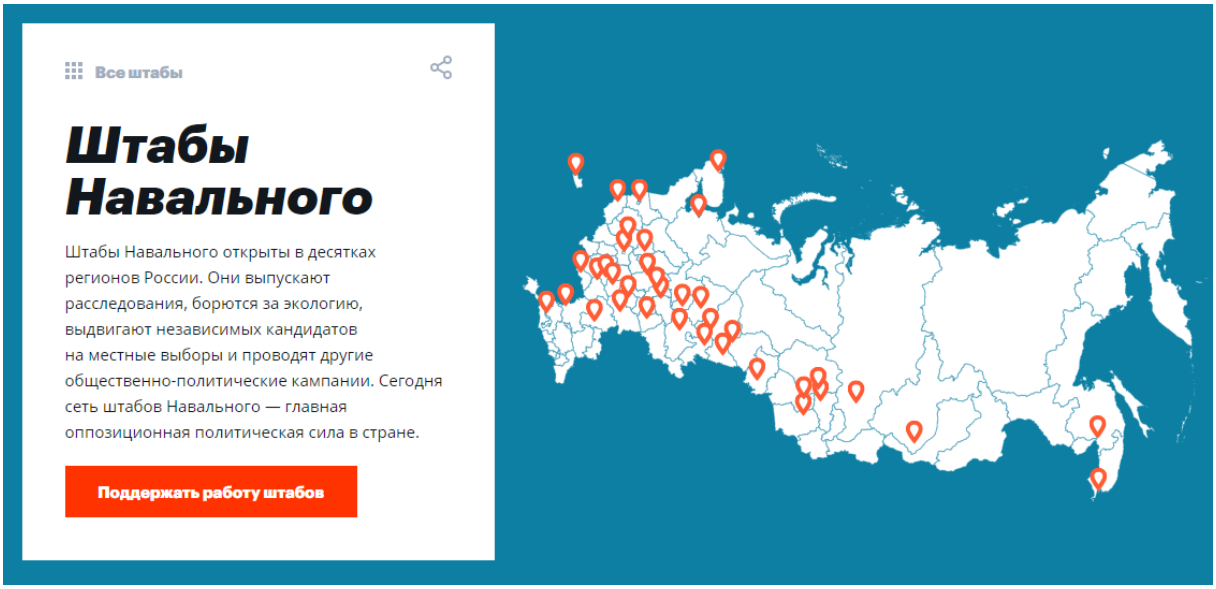
In terms of their geography, the actions on January 23 resembled the anti-corruption protests of 2017 that splashed after the release of *He's Not Dimon for You* film. The number of cities in which the rallies were held grew noticeably and exceeded a hundred. However, the number of participants in the most crowded actions did not increase. In Moscow, about 15-

20,000 people took to the streets. About the same number of people had joined uncoordinated actions in support of unregistered candidates in Moscow City Duma elections in July 2019 (Levada Center, 2021b). Sociologists also note that the topic of combating corruption has already faded into the background. For those who follow Navalny, he is interesting primarily as a politician who represents a political alternative to the current regime (Levada Center, 2021a).

Organization

2021 rallies in Russia were coordinated through the network of headquarters in Russian cities. According to the official web page of the coordinating center, headquarters exist in 37 Russian cities and towns. All headquarters have web page and active pages in social networks (Shtaby Navalnogo, n.d.). A headquarter is chaired by the coordinator whose personal email is provided on the web page. Ivan Zhdanov and Leonid Volkov are two of the most well-known chairmen of the headquarters. Donations can be made online. Given financial resources of Navalny himself one can expect the growth of this network that may have potential to topple down Russian regime.

Table 1. Geography of the headquarters in Russia. Source: https://shtab.navalny.com/



Role of Civil Society Organizations

Comparison to earlier protest actions in Eurasia helps to reveal the nature of rallies in Russia. While 2013 the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine are characterized as grassroots activism, the Orange Revolution of 2004 and 2021 rallies for Navalny are rather organized action. This brings further research to the issue of civil society. In Orange Revolution, civil society organizations could be noticed. The biggest example would be PORA! (*It's Time!)* that acted in Ukraine in late 2004 and early 2005. In 2013, many new NGOs, particularly nationalist, emerged in Ukraine. The Orange Revolution and protests of November 2013 also facilitated the development of civil society Ukraine. However, in Russia the impact and activism of the NGOs is limited. Provisions of the 2006 NGO Law, specifically impediments in registration and limitations on financing, have reduced the number of active NGOs in the sector and excluded foreign donors (Crotty et al., 2014). The 2006 law that was Kremlin's response to the color revolutions demands obligatory registration as well as providing reports about their activities complemented by the fiscal reports. Foreign NGOs' offices in Russia were to register their branches in Russia as Russian public policy associations. (Russia's NGO Law, 2006).

Furthermore, in Ukraine civil society is weak (Bilan & Bilan, 2011; Shapovalova, 2019). This weakness can be explained by insufficient amount of property and financial resources; suspension of the financial support for community initiatives in Ukraine by international donors; the part of the middle class in Ukrainian society is too small (10%), this significantly restricts the social basis for the development of civil society; the reduction of democratic reforms and European integration policy by Yanukovych's government (Bilan & Bilan, 2011, pp. 84 - 85). Russian civil society, in its turn, appears to be dominated by groups funded and thus controlled by the state (Crotty et al., 2014). Western donors are excluded, therefore Western experience of democratic activism cannot be imported to Russia as it was in 2004 in Ukraine, for instance. Furthermore, Russian civil society is conservative and reactionary, therefore its potential for democratic revolution is restrained.

Role of Social Media in Online Activism

Under the authoritarian regimes such as regime of Putin, social media allow greater measure of freedom for civic activism. Additionally, COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult for people to organize mass actions offline. Therefore, 2021 protests should also be approached from the perspective of online activism. Online activism of Navalny is defined as *communicative* that implies "primarily to human-to-human interactions: exchanging information and raising awareness of societal problems and issues among people" (Lonkila et al., 2021, p. 142). Another form of communicative activism includes mobilizing and organizing people to act either on- or offline—for example, to sign an e-petition or to participate in a street protest. Social networks have proved their usefulness for this type of activism. (Lonkila et al., 2021, p. 139)

According to earlier research, Navalny's online activism is conducted and coordinated by his professional social media team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation on several platforms such as his blog (https://navalny.com/) Facebook, VKontakte, Twitter, Odnoklassniki, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube. A unique feature of Navalny's online presence is a series of exchanges of YouTube videos with the Russian political elite. Navalny's 2019 campaign "*umnoe golosovanie"* ("smart voting") targeted the 2019 Moscow city council elections and some regional elections. In a YouTube video Navalny instructed Russians how to pull votes from the United Russian candidates (Lonkila et al., 2021, p.143).

Disorder in TikTok

In January 2021, parallel to the street protests online activism with the specific impact of social media was growing. Significant work was done through TikTok—the social network known for short video content produced by teenagers and youth. Videos with the calls to join rallies were titled "disorder in TikTok" ("*bespredel v TikToke"*). Numerous videos in which young people tear their Russian passports, drop photos of President Putin from the walls to substitute them with the photos of Navalny spread around the Web (Beshenaja Devochka, 2021). One of the videos exhibited a law student who was analyzing Navalny's arrest upon his arrival from Berlin according to the human rights checklist from her textbook. The message was that violations of the human rights in Russia are enormous and textbooks teach nothing. In total, videos with hashtag #FreeNavalny were viewed 682.5 million times in TikTok only. This hashtag contained videos calling for support, instructing people about necessary preparations and measures to be done in case of detainment or a search.

TikTok was used extensively to cover protests and civil movements in 2020. Publications under the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in support of the anti-racist movement in the United States and abroad were gaining activity. CNN called TikTok a '#BlackLivesMatter activism hub' (Janfaza, 2020) as young users of the app raised awareness of systematic racism

and promoted equality messages through their videos. #BlackLivesMatter now has over 24 billion views and millions of thematic videos. 425 million views have accumulated in the hashtag #ЖывеБеларусь (*Long Live Belarus*), under which users publish information about peaceful protests and consecrate the course of actions that have been going on since summer 2020 in different cities of Belarus (Mejkap, tancy i lagerja, 2021). TikTok's main feature is its "For You" page which is constantly providing new videos from creators the user does not necessarily follow and often has not interacted with. According to Harvard Political Review, this structure makes TikTok a more grassroots platform since all creators of the content have a chance to be on the "For You" page. The minimal expectation of superficial film quality (unlike YouTube or Instagram) gives TikTok the communicational advantages of video while retaining the focus on content over aesthetics (like Twitter) to create a form of social media that is closer to real life than its competitors (Keselj, 2020).

While TikTok is a platform for opposition activism in Russia, authorities also used TikTok for framing the protests as organized violence against children. Few days before the January 23 protests, several TikTok videos were instructing young people how to get prepared for mass actions. Manual included recommendations to avoid laces in order not to be strangulated or hoods in order to avoid drugs to be thrown inside. This segment appears to be Kremlin's securitization narrative about risks of the rallies: they may lead to violence and death of youth. The message here is the following: in order to be safe, people should stay at home. The threat is disguised under the mask of care.

Appeal to Young Audience

From Navalny's reliance on TikTok one can conclude that the Russian youth is the target audience of Navalny. This is supported by the findings of Lonkila et al. (2021) mentioned below as well as of other sociological surveys. Young people's ability to use online media and social networks as well as their addiction to social networks especially during the lockdown period explain their activism and responsiveness to the information. According to Lonkila (2021), law signed by Putin on December 28, 2018 proves that for Kremlin, youth is a potential driving force of the opposition rallies and it needs to be impeded. Following the 2018 street rallies, the law envisaged fines as well as 15 days of imprisonments for the organizers of unsanctioned mass actions with participants under 18 years of age. (Lonkila et al., 2021, p.143).

The appeal to young audience through online media during the 2021 protests can also be compared to the appeals to the Ukrainian youth during 2019 Zelensky's election campaign in Ukraine (Demydova, 2020) when actor and showman Zelensky relied on YouTube and Instagram. Even before the election campaign even started, *95 Kvartal* team issued TV series *The Servant of the People* in which young teacher criticizes corruption and plans to bring the Ukrainian youth back to the country. Zelensky's film can hardly be treated as online activism, but rather should be approached as a form of political humor and satire. Both examples confirm that political campaign and social activism have moved into new spaces. While the goal to attract young audience is similar in both cases the implications of these differ. In Russia, the main reason of the increase in digital space activism is that it allows greater freedom of expression and debate.

Political Humor

As for humor and satire, Russia and Ukraine can also be compared. Navalny's film *Palace for Putin* provoked the splash of the internet memes about the Russian President. TikTok appeared to be a particularly useful platform in this regard: short videos with music and memes spread the Web. One of the most popular of them is a meme about the medical mud storage allegedly revealed by Navalny's team in the palace. Another popular topic for memes is the

aqua disco in the palace. (Igra v "Sims", 2021). Finally, special attention in the memes about Navalny's poisoning was paid to the underwear where Novichok nerve agent was spread. (Navalny's Underwear Poisoning, 2020). Similarly, in 2004 the anti-Yanukovych meme campaign "Happy Eggs" became popular. (Kjuka, 2015). Ukrainian activists in their memes emphasized exaggerated and melodramatic behavior of the future President who fell into the hands of his bodyguards after someone from the crowd threw an egg at him. These memes and the subsequently created games and even a cartoon show all dealt with the personal behavior and emphasized the lack of integrity in the image of Yanukovych. At the same time, Russian memes deal with the corruption issue and therefore point to a societal problem that can affect the rating of Putin. Various videos and clips spreading on Instagram and YouTube seek to draw attention to the absurdity of the enormously abundant lifestyle of Putin who allegedly has a golden toilet brush. At the same time, the pension age in Russia was being increased and the people were fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. Furthermore, Putin's palace is compared to Yanukovych's residence in Mezhigor'e that the ex-president abandoned in 2014 and was turned into a museum shortly thereafter. (Sailor.pirate, 2021). Commentators sadly conclude that Yanukovych lost to his colleague Putin in their wealth race. In a nutshell, it could be argued that social media provides suitable platforms for political humor. Political humor and satire, in their turn, open new hybrid spaces where new channels are available for opinion makers and leaders. (Goldstein, 2007, pp. 6-7). While political stakes are lower in those spaces, participants have chance to master the skills that are crucial for democratic political participation and at the same time decrease tension of the crisis related to revolution or pandemic.

Findings of this research support the evidence provided by Lokot (2018) about the necessity to use online means in order to avoid growing surveillance of the state whose measures of *sovereignization* or control of digital space (Asmolov & Kolozaridi, 2021, p.291, with the reference to Nocetti, 2015) promote digital, media, and security literacy and increasingly default to using security tools and protocols in their daily online work (Lokot, 2018, p.344). Control of authorities lead also to the *fragmentization* or *balkanization* (Ermoshina & Musiani, 2017) of the Internet—meaning emerging new divisions due to various factors, such as technology, commerce, politics, nationalism, religion, and divergent national interests. In the case of protests in Russia, the Russian society was cracked down shortly before the rallies.

Youth as a Driving Force of Online Activism

Russians appeared to be divided in their attitudes towards the protests. On the one hand, protesters' groups were dominated by young people, among whom Alexei Navalny is popular. People of 25-35 years old took to the streets in Russian cities. It is in the youth environment that the authority of Alexei Navalny is especially high: here, he is one of the three most popular Russian politicians after Vladimir Putin and along with Vladimir Zhirinovsky (Levada Center, 2021b). For young Russians, Navalny has become The Man of 2020 on a par with the president, and his poisoning is the main event of the year after the COVID-19 pandemic and amendments to the Constitution (Levada Center, 2021b; 2020d). Participation of the young people make *Free Navalny* protests similar to the protests in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine in the early 2000s that led to regime changes and swayed these countries away from Russia's sphere of influence. However, in the case of Serbia they were led by the organization called *Otpor* (literally, "Resistance"), in Georgia it was *Khmara* ("Enough") and in Ukraine it was *Pora* ("It's Time") and *Maidan* ("Square"). During protests in Moscow and other Russian cities, activists were coordinated by Navalny's foundation and social media rather than by NGOs.

Online platforms that are used by Navalny and his team addresses the young audience.

As of July 2020, a survey by the Levada Center revealed that 42% of young Russians spend between 3 to 5 hours per day in the Internet. At the same time, 39% of young Russians reported that every day they spend more than 6 hours in the Internet. (Levada Center, 2020a). Furthermore, the trust to social media as a source of information is growing: in June 2014, only 21% of Russians reported social media a trustworthy source of information about domestic and international developments, whereas in August 2020, this share grew by 18% and social media became the second after the TV as a source of reliable news (Levada Center, 2020b). As for the age groups, young people use social networks 5-6 times more than older generations. (Levada Center, 2020c). Along with the low interest in politics (60% of young Russians reported their interest in politics), the Russian youth is disapproving authoritarian policies the most. (Rossijskoe «pokolenie Z»). Also, regarding civic activism, youth is more active in big cities rather than in the periphery: 45% of young Russians in big cities work in NGOs, while only 25% of youth in provinces do the same (Levada Center, 2020c).

From the perspective of social activism as a column of democracy, Russian anti-Putin activists lack organization, i.e. an institutional network of grassroots activism. Taking into consideration the findings of Sokolov et al. (2020) about the positive impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mobilization by unregistered public associations due to the growing role of social media in the citizens' life, this research confirms the fact that Russians are mobilized through online mobilization technologies. The government excluded foreign agents from Russian civil society through a number of laws while local agents remained pro-governmental. The anti-Putin layer of Russian society have yet to reach a critical level; it is still in the minority although steadily growing. While citizens are aware of the absence of communication between the state and people, they demand the release of Navalny, first of all. From this perspective, formulation of new goals may take time as even Navalny himself fights corruption rather than the Putin leadership *per se.*

Anti-Protests Groups in Russian Society

On the wake of the 2021 rallies, pro-Putin and conservative groups opposed protests. One of the main influencers in this camp is the Kremlin's trumpet journalist Vladimir Solovyov who in his political talk show accused opposition activists of urging 'children' to participate in the protests (Solovyov, 2021). Members of this group under given circumstances of age and political attitudes are positioning themselves as "parents": they tend to see anti-Putin rallies as an attempt of Navalny to use "thoughtless children as a cannon fodder" (Nashi deti, 2021) at the absence of real supporters and numerous media outlets played a crucial role in the securitization of the protests. At least, in their perception of the situation Navalny does not have followers. Concentrating on the participation of school children in these protests, they neglect other age groups among the participants of the rallies. Correspondingly, their voices of dissatisfaction can and will be treated as a desire to stop illegal use of "children" for political goals; to prevent imprisonment of the under-aged according to the regulations that prohibit mass rallies; or to avoid victims during rallies. Therefore, due to the wide societal resonance these "parents" have chances to obtain lots of supporters in the Russian family-oriented society. The idea of democracy and human rights have little chances to be noticed since the topic of children is brought forward. Thus, rallies are no longer a clash between supporters of Putin and liberal opposition, but rather a clash between those who supposedly try to use children for political goals and conscious citizens protecting their offspring.

Their opposition to the rallies can be explained by the might of the Russian state's propaganda and framing efforts that compare rallies to the revolution in Ukraine: in 2017, Putin compared anti-corruption protests to the Arab Spring and the EuroMaidan in Ukraine. The latter, according to Putin, caused coup in Kyiv and drove that country into chaos (Putin sravnil

rossijskie, 2017). Lukashenko also compared protests to the actions in Belarus predicting that they "will sway Russia" ("Vyroslo nepuganoe pokolenie", 2021). Consequently, Russians perceive EuroMaidan in Ukraine as a "violent coup" organized by "nationalists" and supported by the "West that is trying to pull Ukraine into their sphere of political interests" (Levada Center, 2014).

To conclude, scope, reliance on youth, online mobilization structures and imposed organizational system make protests in Russia similar to the color revolutions: in the future, they may end up in regime change as well. However, the main goal of protesters in Russia is to support and release Navalny rather than to achieve liberalization or a regime change. Color revolutions in Eurasia or rallies in Belarus were responses to supposed electoral frauds and in the cases of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, ended up with changes of governments. Rallies in Russia appeared to be short. However, their connection with the events in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan are still emphasized: TikTok videos contain greetings from allegedly protest activists in abovementioned countries (Gorbal', 2021). These greetings from the allegedly leading figures of earlier attempts at color revolutions may work against Russian protesters. This is supportive of Kremlin's framing attempts: majority of Russians are terrified by the events in Ukraine, so any sort of regime change would be associated with loss of territory, war and crises followed by the election of a comedian as president as it has been the case in Ukraine.

Measures Adopted by Kremlin

In many cities, the actions ended with the violent dispersal of the protesters. Levada Center with reference to the human rights project OVD-info reports 3711 detainees. This is twice as much as in the anti-corruption campaigns of 2017 and the highest figure for the entire lifetime of the project. However, in Moscow, the number of detainees turned out to be only slightly more than the indicators of July 2019 (Levada Center, 2021b).

Considering the upcoming 2021 Duma elections, Russian authorities had prepared for the rallies long before. Following the 2018 rallies, a law on involvement of the under-aged into the mass protests entered into force. The law envisaged up to 15 day of imprisonment and fine equal to 500 thousand rubs for the organizers (Gosduma vvela nakazanie, 2018). In December 2020, Vladimir Putin amended the Law on Information to oblige the owners of social networks to block information that, among other things, contains calls for mass riots or inclines minors "to commit illegal actions." At the same time, the deputies adopted amendments to the Administrative Code, allowing them to fine social networks for failing to take measures to remove any kind of illegal information (Foht, 2021).

Roskomnadzor[2] that controls Russian media announced that social networks that agitated under-aged people to participate in mass rallies would be punished. Besides, Prosecutor General's Office in Moscow has sent warning to Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Google and Mail-Group. According to them, the information about calls to participate in unsanctioned rallies must not be spread. Again, no differentiation between the age of the target audience members is provided. Rather the emphasis is on the need to act according to the law in order not to be penalized or even imprisoned. And the law is clear on this matter. In consonance with the package of amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation adopted in January 2020, hooliganism, slander, blockade of the roads and spying for foreign agencies are criminal cases and presume up to 7 years of imprisonment. Obviously, given these legal limitations,

[2] Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media in Russia

participants of the mass rallies have high chances of acquiring a criminal record that will impede their further education and career.

Parents in various regions - in the Urals, St. Petersburg, Volgograd, Kaluga Region - received warnings from departments and schools before the rallies in various forms. On the eve of the rallies, the Ministry of Education published in social networks a request addressing parents not to take part in walks on January 23, but instead to watch "favorite movies" with their children or "cook a meal with all family members" (Foht, 2021).

Limited Capacity of Navalny and Putin's Grip on Power

While Alexei Navalny is the inspirer of the rallies as the opposition leader and an anti-corruption fighter, today his capacity to organize and lead people is severely limited. On the one hand, he is still imprisoned. Nevertheless, a victim image due to his poisoning and imprisonment may work well during the 2024 electoral campaign. Authoritarian measures of the government go further into the digital sphere severely decreasing freedom of the online platforms too. Measures adopted against Trump allow Russia to use rhetoric on double standards in case of criticisms coming from the West. Finally, Navalny's liberal stance on certain matters can also be questioned. For instance, his interviews on Crimea's annexation reveal his actual support of Russia's actions in Ukraine. At the same time, during the referendum on constitutional changes Navalny was not active, so this decreased the chances of opposition for success.

Under given circumstances, if he decides to act as opposition leader, he will have to erase the traces of the neo-conservative ideology imposed by Kremlin and propaganda that targeted the West, its instabilities, moral decay and hegemonic approach to international relations. It means Navalny has to persuade a significant portion of Putin's supporters. For this, he needs to provide an ideology that can substitute the existing conservative one based on patriotism and Orthodox Christianity that challenges the Western liberal paradigm.

Popularity and Support of Putin: How to Explain?

According to Levada Center's survey, in May 2020, supporters of Putin constituted 59% of the Russian voters and in November 2020, they increased by 6%. While Putin's approval rating dropped in the first months of pandemic, the share of those dissatisfied with the authorities grow as well, as it was demonstrated above. Support for Putin can be explained by many factors. Firstly, high prices on energy sources maintain Russian economy that depends on oil and gas exports since mid-2000s. In people's minds, this "economic miracle" is being associated with the policies of the Putin leadership. As Malinova (2020) shows, Putin and his team frame the 1990s as a period of a weak state and disorder in order to legitimize their rule. Moreover, the anti-Western and anti-liberal conservative stance of Putin is perceived a bulwark that defended traditional Russian values against the moral and spiritual decay of the West. In fact, Putin "made Russia great again" and improved its image in international relations when he intervened militarily in Georgia, Ukraine or Syria. He also protects Russian-speakers, particularly in Ukraine. He returned what Russians consider to be their soil – Crimea – in 2014 and saved it from the supposedly "nationalist coup" in Kyiv. Russian propaganda concentrates rather more on foreign affairs than on domestic issues, therefore Russians lack critical approach to domestic politics. At the same time, the success of Russia's political process – stability and wellbeing of the Russian citizens – exist due to the presence of the "Other" – war and crisis in Ukraine – in Kremlin's discourses. Additionally, the amendments made to the Russian constitution in 2020 that mentioned victory of the USSR in the World War II, God, social state or anti-LGBT definitions of family as a union of man and woman well demonstrates that the Russian president purports to protect Russia's supposed values and history as well as to

contribute to the peace and friendship among the nations. Finally, social payments to the families with children enhances a positive image of the government as it purports to preserve new generations and to stimulate demographic growth.

Conclusion

The Russian society may well be moving towards revolution comparable to the revolutions in other Eurasian states in recent decades. Although January 2021 protests were short and did not have a goal to liberalize or change the political regime in Russia, they may open a way for further unrest in the country given the scope of authoritarian measures Kremlin has adopted. Especially, arrests and violence used against the peaceful protesters may jeopardize situation in a similar way it happened in 2013 in Kyiv. The above analysis shows that Putin's grip on power is strong, therefore, any possible regime change in Russia would rather be slow and turbulent. At the same time, the article illustrates that Russian authorities are worried about Navalny and his supporters as well as about possible unrest that may destabilize the country before the 2021 parliamentary elections. Navalny's 32-month sentence announced on February 2 proves that Kremlin is trying to avoid any possible sources of unrest. Navalny's capacity to organize and lead people, however, is severely limited. Besides, his liberal stance on certain matters can also be questioned. What is worse, opposition in Russia is weak and dispersed, lacks organizational network while youth is active only in the big cities.

Finally, Putin has lots of supporters: despite the shrink in GDP provoked by economic sanctions imposed by the West, Putin's limited appearance on public during the COVID-19 pandemic, authoritarian amendments to the constitution as well as the corruption exposed by Navalny's film, the rate of support for him is steadily growing. Numerous social payments to families with children in 2020 as well as propaganda warning Russians about economic and political crises as possible consequences as it happened in Ukraine contributed to this. Nevertheless, a counter tendency is also recorded. Parallel to street rallies, an online insurgency is growing. While Russia is not the only example, as the literature review section proves, the case of Russia is particularly important in terms of research on social activism in authoritarian societies. Digital activism in Russia relies on youth as advanced users of the Internet. During the January 2021 protests, particular role in sharing information about protests and mobilizing support for Navalny belonged to TikTok among different types of social media. Technical features of this social medium such as short and low-quality videos that can appear randomly as a suggestion made it a useful tool for activists. The role of humor in political activism is growing as well. In 2021, Russian opposition activists used memes and video content to expose the absurdity of Putin's luxurious life during the pandemic. Although online platforms are not the only factors behind the mobilization of Russian protesters and organization of the protests, they have undoubtedly proved useful in drawing attention of Russians to the issue, spreading information, involving youth and setting agenda.

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