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## Against Putin and Corruption, for Navalny and the “Revolution”?

*The Dynamics of Framing and Mobilization in the Russian Political Protests of 2017–18*

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**ABSTRACT** This article seeks to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of the nationwide protests that appeared in Russia as a result of the large-scale political campaigns of 2017–18. On the basis of an original database devoted to six protests, organized in this period by different anti-systemic opposition leaders and organizations, the study explores the turnout and geographic scope of these events and the repertoire of frames that were used to mobilize the protesters. The analysis contrasts three types of frames (an anti-corruption protest frame, election campaign event frame, and anti-systemic protest frame) and demonstrates that appropriate framing was a necessary condition of successful protest mobilization. In combination with other factors, such as the quality of protest organization and the impact of repressive actions of the authorities, the changes of protest frames contributed to the protests’ turnout dynamics. Alexei Navalny, the most popular anti-systemic leader, succeeded in organizing the initial mobilization by framing it as an anti-corruption protest, but then, under increasing repression, the opposition failed to convert this dissent into a longer-term campaign with broader electoral or anti-systemic frames.

**KEYWORDS** Russia, protest, protest slogans, protest symbols, protest turnout

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After the large wave of political protests hit Russia in 2011–12, a range of studies devoted to various aspects of Russian popular dissent dynamics appeared. These aspects include the reasons that prompt Russians to take to the streets (e.g., Lankina, 2014; Rosenberg, 2017; Chaisty & Whitefield, 2013; Lankina & Skovoroda, 2017), the role of protest leaders (Smyth & Soboleva, 2016; Clément, 2013), the demographic (Rosenfeld, 2017) and geographic determinants of the protests in Russia (e.g., Dmitriev, 2015; Lankina & Voznaya, 2015), and the sources of their demobilization (e.g., Lasnier, 2017, 2018; Lankina, 2015; Murphy, 2017). In contrast, the more recent waves of protests have been explored much less. However, considering that since 2011–12 Russia’s political regime has changed significantly, swinging from the “soft” Putinism of the Medvedev era toward the post-Crimean “hard” Putinism, these protests merit the attention of researchers. In general, in “hard” Putinism the opportunities for citizens to participate in collective

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forms of political activity have become even more limited because the legal regulations concerning protest activity have become stricter (RBC, 2017) and the severity of repressive measures against protesters and their leaders has grown (Gel'man, 2015). Additionally, the level of political protest activity and its agenda have undergone a series of changes. After the increase in nationwide political protest activity from December 2011 to May 2012, with slogans decrying electoral fraud in the parliamentary (2011) and presidential elections (2012), there was, in general, less such activity between 2013 and 2016, despite a number of brief resurgences, for example, those triggered by the adoption of the “anti-Magnitsky” law,<sup>1</sup> the war in Ukraine, and the assassination of liberal opposition politician Boris Nemtsov (Svoboda, 2014; *Lenta.ru*, 2015).

The Russian protests of the pre-electoral period of 2017–18, organized by three leaders of the anti-systemic opposition<sup>2</sup> (Alexei Navalny, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Viacheslav Maltsev), stand out against this general background of suppressed political dissent and contrast with the growing oppressiveness of the political regime. Even though several other prominent protest campaigns hit Russia in the following years, the wave of 2017–18 is especially interesting subject matter for research that can provide some insights regarding the dynamics of Russian politics. In particular, these protests are important due to their especially large turnout, broad geographic scale, and nationwide political agenda. Another important feature of these protests is that they all happened in roughly the same time period and thus, in many respects, share the same context. This common background provides an opportunity to better highlight the factors that contributed to the differences between them. So, in this study, we are exploring these protest events in order to provide an explanation of the dynamics of the turnout that is inherent in the nationwide Russian political protests.

We hypothesize that appropriate protest framing was a necessary condition of successful protest mobilization and seek to understand which type of frames (an *anti-corruption protest* frame, *election campaign event* frame, or *anti-systemic protest* frame) were the most effective in mobilizing the protests. To answer this question, we quantitatively describe the dynamics of protest turnout in the nationwide political demonstrations of 2017–18 and relate them to a number of mobilizing conditions, especially focusing on the dynamics of the protest frames while also considering other factors such as the quality of protest organization and the impact of the de-mobilizing repressive

1. The law in Russia that defines sanctions against US citizens involved in “violations of the human rights and freedoms of Russian citizens.” It was signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin on 28 December 2012 and took effect on 1 January 2013. The law creates a list of citizens who are banned from entering Russia, and also allows the government to freeze their assets and investments. It also bans citizens of the United States from adopting children from Russia. The law is described as a response to the Magnitsky Act in the United States, which places sanctions on Russian officials who were involved in a tax scandal exposed by Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky against Russian officials (TASS, 2014).

2. The term *anti-systemic opposition* is used in the text to refer to the political leaders and organizations that actively work to change the existing regime. In Russia, such political actors are often forced to act outside the system of representative institutions because the regime makes it difficult for them to function legally, for example, by refusing to register the candidates in the elections or to give legal status to political parties (Tatarkova, 2013, p. 132; Bolshakov, 2012).

actions of government. Accordingly, the theoretical concepts that are central to our analysis are generally drawn from the literature on social movement framing. In particular, we assume that the ability of protest leaders to propose appropriate protest frames is crucial for effective protest mobilization.

Our analysis mainly leverages our own original aggregated dataset, which traces the turnout and the discourse of the major nationwide political protests that took place in Russia in 2017–18. We also use a number of additional sources, both original and secondary, in order to account for various other conditions (those beyond the factor of framing) that were relevant to the protest dynamics studied. On the basis of all of these data, we argue that the protest leaders failed to convert the rising dissent that was framed as anti-corruption protests into longer-term action with persistent turnout and a broader electoral or anti-systemic agenda.

The article consists of seven sections. In the first, we provide an overview of existing theories that discuss framing as one of the factors of protest mobilization. The second section presents the methodology and data behind our study. In the third section, the dynamics of the protest events are analyzed in terms of turnout and geographic scope, while the fourth and the fifth focus on how different frames informed the protests. In the sixth section, we explore various other conditions that have contributed to the dynamics of the nationwide Russian political protests. Finally, in the seventh section we conclude our analysis and discuss our findings.

## FRAMING AS AN ASPECT OF PROTEST MOBILIZATION

Our approach to understanding the dynamics behind the street protests is based on the assumption that mass protest mobilizations usually cannot be explained by one single cause, but rather are determined by a particular constellation of various structural and agentive factors (see Lichbach, 1994; McAdam et al., 2003; Opp, 2009). We also assume that the dynamics of protest mobilization are rarely completely dissociated from the ideational conditions that inform these protests. For this reason, one of the central categories of our analysis is the category of framing. This theoretical concept helps us to grasp some of the essential ideational conditions that contributed to the mobilization and demobilization in the dynamics of the protests analyzed.

*Frame* is an extremely broad concept that generally refers to the patterns of interpretation that provide human beings with a background understanding of events, enabling people to answer the question “What is it that’s going on here?” (Goffman, 1986, p. 8). Correspondingly, *framing* refers to the ways in which social actors define what is going on in a particular situation. In social movement studies, *frames* are specified as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614; see also McAdam, 1988; Tarrow, 1998).

The meanings that objects or events have for social actors are generally formed through interpretive processes that arise in the course of interaction between people, and there are moments in social life in which the existing structures of meaning seem especially fragile, contestable, and open to transformation. So, it is at such moments that

“social movements seem especially likely to flourish as agents of interpretation” (Snow et al., 2018, p. 392). The question, however, is whether opposition leaders fighting against the system are able to take advantage of such circumstances that allow the meanings and narratives imposed by the system to be redefined. Moreover, in the studies of social movements the concept of frame is often related to the notion of *frame alignment* (Ketelaars et al., 2014; Snow et al., 1986). This theory holds that for people to participate in a social movement event, their frames, or beliefs regarding the issue at stake, must be in line with the mobilizing message of the organizers: “frame alignment is a necessary condition for movement participation, whatever its nature or intensity” (Snow et al., 1986, p. 464).

In general, protest mobilization can be theoretically divided into two different types, namely *consensus mobilization* (convincing) and *action mobilization* (activation) (Klandermans, 1984, 2013). Correspondingly, the choice of frames can depend on the type of mobilization that is sought by a particular social movement organization in a particular situation. Furthermore, framing can be divided into three core framing tasks: *diagnostic* (which focuses on defining the problem), *prognostic* (which focuses on how this problem can be solved), and *motivational* framing (concerned with justifying the means, for example, protests, to achieve the goal) (Benford & Snow, 2000). Notably, the essence of the diagnostic task is not only the indication of specific grievances (corruption, lack of political competition, the unjustness of the entire political system), which give rise to anger and frustration (Gamson, 2013), but also the attribution of blame (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). In contrast, prognostic framing “involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 616). Finally, motivational framing consists in urging people to act in concert in a particular way in order to affect change.

An adequate explanation of the problem, its causes, and suggested solutions is not sufficient or even necessary for a frame to be an effective mobilizing factor. It must also resonate with the demands and grievances of the audience (Johnston & Noakes, 2005). Such demands are often related to threats that work as triggers of collective action (Almeida, 2003; Andrews & Seguin, 2015; Dodson, 2016; Einwohner & Maher, 2011; Inclán, 2009; Johnson & Frickel, 2011; Maher, 2010; Almeida, 2018). In particular, four types of structural threat give rise to a wide variety of social movements. These are problems related to economics, public health/environmental decline, erosion of rights, and state repression (Almeida, 2018). As Pinard (2011) rightly points out in his extensive theoretical work on grievances, “threats can greatly increase the sense of grievances, as when the anticipation of increased hardships accompanies current ones” (p. 17). Therefore, the task of protest leaders and activists who seek to mobilize the protests is to skillfully diagnose the threats arising from the current situation and to outline possible negative scenarios of the status quo.

Researchers who deal with the concept of frame alignment emphasize in this respect the role of individual protest leaders. For a successful protest mobilization, the leaders should be able to quickly change and adapt frames to specific conditions, as well as skillfully connect them with the current goals of the movement they represent. “Frame

alignment processes encompass the strategic efforts of social movement actors and organizations to link their interests and goals with those of prospective adherents and resource providers so that they will contribute in some fashion to movement campaigns and activities” (Snow et al., 2018, p. 400). Thus, the effectiveness of achieving specific goals results not only from whether the specific content formulated by the leader coincides with the beliefs of the recipients of the message, but also from the overall context of the leader’s actions aimed at reaching people with his or her message, showing them new meanings of events.

With the growing role of the internet as a mobilization tool, theories about the diminishing importance of leaders in organizing and framing protests are becoming widespread. According to Castells (2012, p. 229), the internet would create “the conditions for a form of shared practice that allows a leaderless movement to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand,” so, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012, p. 753) argue, there would appear a new type of “connective action,” in which personal action frames can be shared with large audiences through a wide range of personal communication technologies. This would enable large numbers of people to act together using the organizational resources provided by communication technologies without relying on more stable social movement organizations. At the same time, however, many studies show that even though such formal organizations can in fact be almost absent in some cases of mass protests, strategizing and leadership are still key to protest framing and mobilization. In particular, “connective leaders” (Della Ratta & Valeriani, 2012) are still important as they help “to connect people and information” (see also Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Melucci, 1996; Snow, Soule & Kriesi, 2004).

Thus, even though the discussion about which actors frame the protests continues, there is a broadly accepted assumption that any mass protests do require some shared frames in order to occur and succeed. In other words, people who take to the streets have to have some more or less common understanding of why and how they protest. In our study we focus on reconstructing such protest frames. Furthermore, we also discuss who the actors and organizations are that seem to most significantly inform the frames in the cases we analyze.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Studying mass protests in Russia is a difficult task due to the lack of independent sources that are able and willing to provide reliable information about the number of people taking part in the rallies. Moreover, it is often difficult to estimate the protest potential and to identify the key frames because of the “unauthorized” status of many demonstrations, with the participants not being able to properly assemble in one place and to overtly articulate their claims and demands without the risk of prosecution. Keeping all of these limitations in mind, in this study we attempt to make sense of varied, often fragmented, data available concerning the nationwide Russian protests of 2017–18.

Most of the protests that are analyzed in our study are those organized by the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. On 2 March 2017, Navalny published a YouTube

documentary about Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's alleged corruption. It was this film, released under the title *He Is Not Dimon to You*, that became the main trigger of the large wave of protests in numerous Russian cities that started later that month, on 26 March 2017, and was followed by an even larger wave on 12 June 2017. Navalny further organized a number of other events as a part of his massive presidential campaign in 2017. He visited dozens of Russian cities, opening campaign offices throughout. After his candidacy was forbidden by the authorities, he called for an electoral boycott. Navalny's presidential campaign, the "Electoral Strike" that he called for, as well as the series of repressive measures against him (Current Time, 2018) contributed to two other protests that took place on 7 October 2017 and 28 January 2018.

Even though Navalny, the most popular anti-systemic leader with the broadest regional network, obviously played a crucial role in the protests of 2017–18, his team was not the only organizing center of the street opposition. Another important actor that attempted to catalyze the anti-Putin protests was former Russian "oligarch" Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was forced out of Russia in 2013 after spending 10 years in prison on politically motivated charges. In 2017 the Open Russia platform, which is sponsored by Khodorkovsky, launched a campaign of petitions against Vladimir Putin's participation in the 2018 presidential elections. The main slogan of the initiative was *Nadoel*, which is Russian for "Fed Up" or "Enough." The campaign organizers planned to collect petitions and to bring them to Vladimir Putin's public reception offices during a mass event that was scheduled for 29 April 2017. The protest did happen, even though three days before Open Russia had been banned as an "undesirable organization."<sup>3</sup>

One more initiative of the Russian opposition that was also visible in the protest wave of 2017–18 was the *Artpodgotovka* ("Fire Preparation") movement, led by nationalist politician Viacheslav Maltsev. Maltsev promised his supporters that on 5 November 2017, on a Guy Fawkes Night coinciding with the centennial celebration of the October Revolution, a new revolution would break out throughout Russia that would lead to a regime change. And so he called on his supporters to take to the streets that day and remain there until the government resigned from their positions. In June 2017, *Artpodgotovka* was banned as an extremist organization, and numerous activists and supporters of Maltsev were detained for their involvement in the movement (Khodorkovsky, 2017b). The leader of the protest himself was forced to leave Russia several months before the date of the "Revolution," although some of his supporters did take to the streets on the designated date.

In our analysis, we study the protest events that were initiated by all three of these organizers: Alexei Navalny, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Viacheslav Maltsev. We do so in order to be able to explore how the protest campaigns that were all generally anti-Kremlin and shared roughly the same timeframe were nevertheless different when it

3. See HRW (2016) for more details on "undesirable foreign organizations."

came to the effectiveness of protest mobilization, as well as protest framing, organization, and leadership. So, overall, our analysis focuses on six protests:

- 26 March 2017 (*He Is Not Dimon to You*, organized by Alexei Navalny)
- 29 April 2017 (*Fed Up*, organized by Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia)
- 12 June 2017 (*We Demand Answers*, organized by Alexei Navalny)
- 7 October 2017 (Alexei Navalny's presidential campaign rallies)
- 5 November 2017 (*05.11.2017 Revolution*, organized by Viacheslav Maltsev's Artpodgotovka)
- 28 January 2018 (*Electoral Strike*, organized by Alexei Navalny)

These cases can hardly be seen as representative examples of all of the protest events in contemporary Russia in general, although they are quite illustrative when it comes to large protest campaigns with a nationwide political agenda. In fact, these six protests are the only major nationwide political protests that took place in Russia in the pre-electoral period of 2017–18. Other types of campaigns, such as economic, social, and environmental protests, as well as local and regional protest campaigns, are not analyzed in this article, and our findings cannot be expected to be applicable to protests of these kinds.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, we cannot be certain that our findings are entirely valid for protest dynamics in smaller cities, due to the fact that our dataset of protest discourse was limited to large regional capitals.

Our study was primarily based on this quantitative data, although due to the fact that our dataset was limited to only six cases, a large- $N$  effect-of-cause statistical analysis was not possible, so we generally opted for a cause-of-effect approach. In particular, we leveraged descriptive and comparative tools to explore adequate protest framing as a necessary condition that contributed to the rise in protest turnout and to identify which protest frames were especially effective in mobilizing participants.

Our study of the protest frames was primarily based on the analysis of the protesters' discourse, with the original dataset collected from the photo reports of Russia's most cited mass media, both pro-Kremlin (e.g., RIA Novosti and Interfax) and liberal (e.g., Meduza and *Novaia Gazeta*). All of the photos from the protests studied were analyzed so that all of the visual means, used by the protesters to express their dissent, are transcribed and thematically coded with an open list of topics. The analysis was semiotically multimodal (Kress, 2010), as it was not only the verbal text of banners and posters that was transcribed, but various other visual media (poster illustrations, badges, balloons, body painting, dust writing, clothes, flags, masks, ribbons, stickers and other objects, and street performances) were also included in the database. In total, the database that was used in the study included more than 620 unique (not mass-printed)<sup>5</sup> visual

4. In fact, the very prominent and persistent protest campaign of 2020 in Khabarovsk seems to differ quite drastically from the nationwide protests under investigation (Rosenberg, 2020).

5. Non-unique (mass-printed and mass-produced) items were also collected, but they were put into a separate database (Supplement 2) of items and were not analyzed quantitatively.

items for 36 protests in 14 cities (Supplement 1).<sup>6</sup> After these data were collected, we performed a descriptive statistical analysis of the unique protest items in order to identify which words and visual signs (symbols), as well as which topics, were the most frequent in the multimodal discourse of each of the campaigns studied. (The only exception was the case of the “Revolution” of 5 November 2017, for which data regarding slogans and symbols were not collected due to insufficient photo reports in the media, so we were forced to use alternative data sources (e.g., Artpodgotovka, 2017; Khodorkovsky, 2017b) to reconstruct the frame of that campaign).

Importantly, we did not consider the words, symbols, and topics themselves as “frames,” but rather interpreted their constellations in order to inductively construct several distinct types of protest frames and used the word, topic, and symbol frequencies to identify which type was dominant in each of the cases analyzed. In particular, we distinguished between the following three types of frames (with each of them corresponding to a particular type of answer to the question “What is it that’s going on here?”):

- the frame of *anti-corruption protest* (people react to particular facts of corruption and demand a reaction from the authorities)
- the frame of *election campaign event* (people express support or disapproval for a particular candidate)
- the frame of *anti-systemic protest* (people deny the legitimacy of the authorities, reject the regime in general, its leaders, or institutions)

Next, in order to track how the turnout of the protests changed from one campaign to another, we collected two types of data about each campaign: (1) the number of cities in which the protests took place and (2) the number of participants that took part in the protests in different cities. Data regarding the geography of the protests and the turnout of the protesters<sup>7</sup> were collected on the basis of NGO reports (OVD-Info, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c), media reports (Meduza, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e, 2018; Iunanov, 2018) and interviews with Alexei Navalny’s co-workers in Moscow (personal communication, 18 April 2018) and Saint Petersburg (personal communication, 9 February

6. Our database contains information about the unique visual items that were used by the Russian protesters in the demonstrations of 26 March 2017, 29 April 2017, 12 June 2017, 7 October 2017, and 28 January 2018. All of the items are coded from photo reports of TASS, RIA Novosti, Interfax, RBC, Gazeta.ru, Life.ru, Lenta.ru, Fontanka.ru, Kp.ru, Dni.ru, Meduza.io, M24.ru, Utro.ru, Izvestiia (including iz.ru), *Kommersant* (including kommersant.ru), *Vedomosti* (including vedomosti.ru), *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* (including rg.ru), and *Novaia Gazeta* (including novayagazeta.ru). The list of media is based on the ratings of Medialogia (one of the leading Russian mass media monitoring companies) and included the nationwide Russian information agencies, newspapers and news websites that were the most cited in 2017 (MLG, 2017). The analysis covered all the regional administrative centers that on 26 March and 12 June 2017 hosted protests with more than 2,000 participants or more than 0.2% of the population protesting and for which there were photo reports in the mass media sources analyzed. These cities are Cheliabinsk, Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Perm’, Saint Petersburg, Samara, Tomsk, Ufa, Vladivostok, and Ekaterinburg.

7. See Supplement 3.

2018), as well as with Mikhail Khodorkovsky's representatives (personal communication, 18 January 2018).

In addition to the sources described above, we collected qualitative data in order to triangulate our analysis and to provide a better understanding of the conditions contributing to the mobilization and demobilization of the protests. In particular, we studied the protests of 26 March and 12 June 2017 in Moscow as participant observers in order to be able to provide an element of triangulation to our research by analyzing the frames of those events through observation. Additionally, we interviewed Alexei Navalny's co-workers in his campaign headquarters in Moscow (personal communication, 18 April 2018) and Saint Petersburg (personal communication, 9 February 2018). In these interviews we asked our respondents about how the Navalny-led protests were organized and how impactful the de-mobilizing repressive actions of the regime were. We also interviewed the chairman of the Open Russia movement Andrei Pivovarov (personal communication, 12 February 2018), discussing the reasons for the Fed Up campaign being weaker in comparison to Navalny's protests. Moreover, we used the Levada Center's polling data (e.g., Volkov, 2018; Levinson, 2018) and summaries of interviews with young people<sup>8</sup> who took part in the protests in March and April 2017 (Boruisak, 2018). Furthermore, we conducted expert interviews with political scientists who study the Russian opposition and protest movements (V. Gel'man [personal communication, 5 February 2018] and A. Titkov [personal communication, 12 April 2018]), focusing our questions on the effectiveness of different protest frames and, in particular, on the potential of positive and negative mobilization.<sup>9</sup>

## THE DYNAMICS OF PROTEST MOBILIZATION

Our analysis showed that the six demonstrations organized by Navalny, Khodorkovsky, and Maltsev differed substantially in terms of the numbers of participants and geographic scope (Figures 1 and 2). The largest of the protest events were the initial ones organized by Alexei Navalny and his associates. In particular, more than 30,000 (according to other sources, more than 90,000) people took to the streets on 26 March after Navalny published his anti-Medvedev video. In 73 cities (including Moscow and Saint Petersburg) the local administrations did not authorize a protest to be organized, in 21 the protests were allowed, and in 7 the legal status of the demonstrations was not clear (Navalny, 2017a). Despite this, 99 cities took part in the demonstrations on 26 March (Figure 2).

The protests of 12 June 2017, which were once again organized by Navalny's team, saw an increase in the number of protesters with tens of thousands of people taking part (the estimates vary between 50,000 and 99,000) (OVD Info, 2017a). The scope of the protests also increased as the demonstrations took place in 154 cities, even though in more than 18 cities (including Moscow and Saint Petersburg) the local governments did

8. People between the ages of 18 and 29 made up around half of the protesters (*Economist*, 2017).

9. Positive mobilization meaning that the main goal is to support a specific initiative, idea, action, or leader; negative mobilization meaning opposition to a specific initiative, reform, political practice, or actions of a politician.

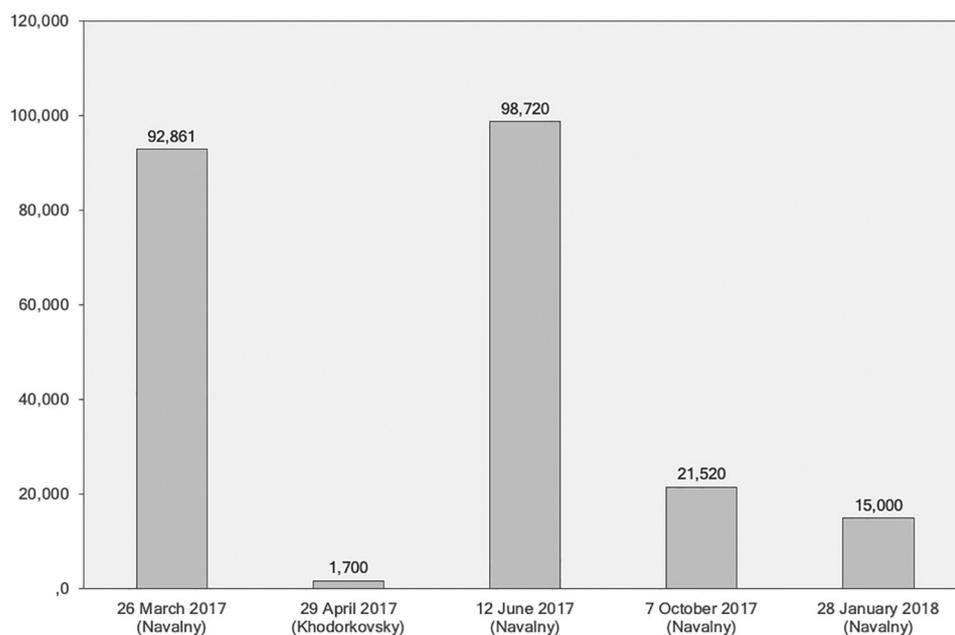


FIGURE 1. Total number of protesters (maximal estimate) by date.

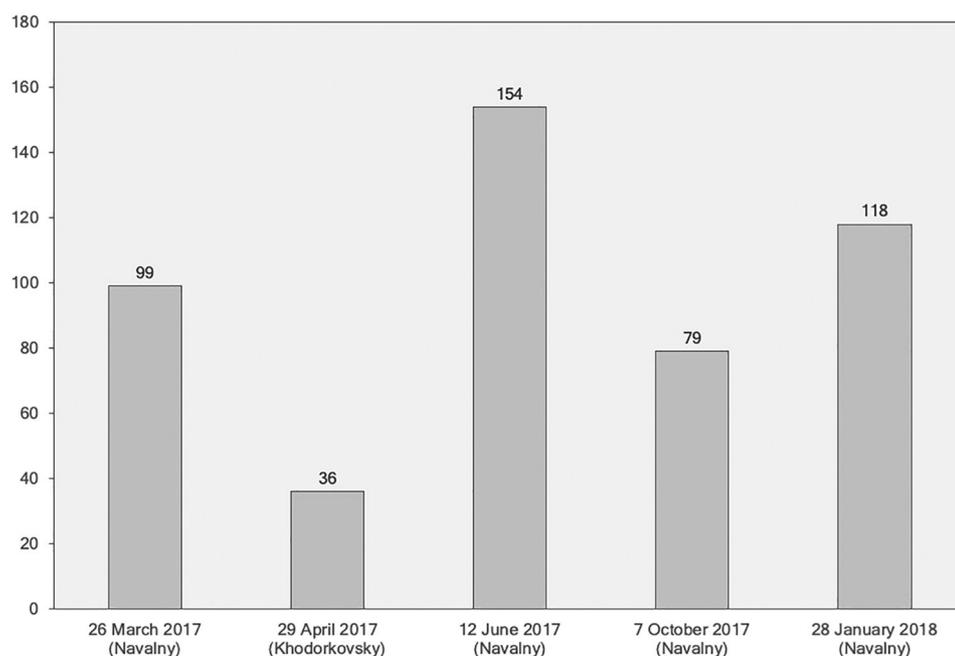


FIGURE 2. The number of cities hosting protests by date.

not authorize the rallies (OVD-Info, 2017a). Our analysis of the proportion of Russians who took part in both protests, those of March and June, reveals that in the majority of cities the number of participants tended to increase. Furthermore, the June 2017 protests

set a record for territorial coverage. In addition, the geography of the protests (see Supplement 3) shows that it was not only Moscow and Saint Petersburg that joined the protests of March and June 2017. Six cities with a population of less than 100,000 inhabitants participated in the protest of 26 March, and in the protest campaign of 12 June there were 46 such cities (including 6 with a population of less than 20,000). In some towns, however, the protests of 12 June were held only nominally, with a very small number of protesters.

Importantly, the number of cities in which the protests took place in March and June considerably exceeded the number of cities in which Alexei Navalny's election campaign offices had been opened (Volkov, 2017). That is, the protest mobilization triggered by Navalny went far beyond his organizational infrastructure. This also means that without the institutional support of his formal network of supporters, Navalny was able to mobilize people from various parts of Russia via his online campaigning. However, it is important to note that there were hardly any cities in which the proportion of the population that took part in the protests exceeded 0.5% (see Supplement 3).

In contrast, as far as Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Open Russia team (personal communication, 18 January 2018) is concerned, their Fed Up initiative of 29 April 2017 managed to mobilize only 1,700 people. The geographic scope of the campaign was also more limited, as the Fed Up events only took place in 36 cities.<sup>10</sup> Even less successful was Viacheslav Maltsev's "Revolution" of 5 November 2017. The very design of this campaign as well as the repressive actions taken by the authorities against it make it difficult to even produce any consistent statistics concerning the number of participants and cities hosting the Artpodgotovka protests. The only reliable figures that are available are the numbers of people detained. On the basis of these reports, we suppose that Maltsev's protest took place mostly in the largest cities. In particular, there are reports of attempted protests in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Rostov-on-Don, Perm', Krasnodar, and Saratov, but their actual turnout cannot be reconstructed.

Thus, in general, Navalny's initial protests of March and June were the most numerous and the most geographically extensive demonstrations of the six cases analyzed. However, in autumn and winter the situation changed significantly for Navalny as well. In the Navalny-led rallies of 7 October 2017, the number of participants was smaller than on 12 June 2017. According to Meduza and OVD-Info, on that day up to 21,520 people took part in the protest in 79 Russian cities. The largest protests in Moscow and Saint Petersburg brought together 3,000 and 10,000 people, respectively. Furthermore, the cities in which the protests took place were mostly the same cities where Navalny's campaign offices were located at that time. On the one hand, this dependence shows that Navalny's regional campaign offices with their online and offline activism were effective

10. The Fed Up protests of 29 April 2017 mostly took place only in large cities with more than a million inhabitants and just a few smaller cities (Kirov, Kaliningrad, Tula, Lipetsk, Kemerovo, Tiumen, Izhevsk, and Novokuznetsk). Furthermore, in all the cities except for Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the number of participants was rarely more than 90.

in mobilizing the protesters. On the other hand, it also demonstrates that at this stage the scope of the mobilization was mostly restricted to core supporters.

The next protest organized by Navalny's team took place on 28 January 2018. Various sources suggest that between 4,700 (Meduza, 2018) and 15,000 (Navalny's co-workers, personal communication, 9 February 2018) people in 118 cities (including 20% of cities where the event was not authorized by the local government) participated. And so, even though the number of cities joining the protest was higher than in the demonstrations of 7 October, the overall number of participants was still significantly lower than in March and June.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, during both the protests of 7 October 2017 and 28 January 2018, the core of the protests was mostly restricted to large cities and even in some cities with over a million inhabitants the number of participants did not exceed 500.<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely the decline in the protest turnout in the case of the Navalny-led protests in autumn and winter of 2017–18, as well the failure of Maltsev's and Khodorkovsky's initiatives, that makes the analysis of these six cases interesting. In particular, the data show that although the protests of March and June 2017 mobilized large numbers of people, this short-term expression of dissent did not translate into turnout at other mass protests.

## PROTEST FRAME DYNAMICS

In this study we hypothesize that appropriate protest framing is one of the conditions of protest mobilization and seek to identify which frames are more effective in mobilizing protesters. In order to achieve this goal, we identified which frames were dominant for each of the protest events by performing a quantitative content analysis of the messages that were extracted from the set of visual (both verbal and pictorial) protest items. As previously mentioned, in order to make sense of the differences and dynamics that we observed comparing various protest events, we distinguished between three types of frame (an *anti-corruption protest* frame, *election campaign event* frame, and *anti-systemic protest* frame). Sometimes the protest events in fact activate not just one frame, but a combination of them, although we attempted to identify which frame was dominant in each case.

We began our study with an analysis of all of the verbal items used by protesters in all five events (Maltsev's "Revolution" was excluded at this stage due to a lack of data). This analysis showed that, in general, the words<sup>13</sup> that appeared in the written slogans most frequently were *Dimon*, *money* (*den'gi*), *corruption* (*korrupsiia* / *korrupsionnyi* / *korrupsioner*), *response* / *answer* (*otvet* / *otvetit'* / *otvechat'*), *thief* / *theft* (*vor*, *vorovat'*, *vorovstvo*,

11. In this respect, our data, which are based on Meduza (2017b) for the protests in June and *Vedomosti* (2018) and Navalny LIVE (2018) for the Electoral Strike, turn out to differ from the estimates of Semenov and Popkova (2020). These authors state that the number of cities participating in the Electoral Strike coincided with the number of cities participating in the protest in June, but we were unable to find any other sources to support this claim.

12. These are the cities of Novosibirsk and Samara.

13. Lemmatization was performed based on Zalizniak (1977) and Ó Duibhín (2017). No stop-words were used in the analysis, although we exclude all the conjunctions, particles, pronouns, and prepositions from the lists and figures provided in the article.

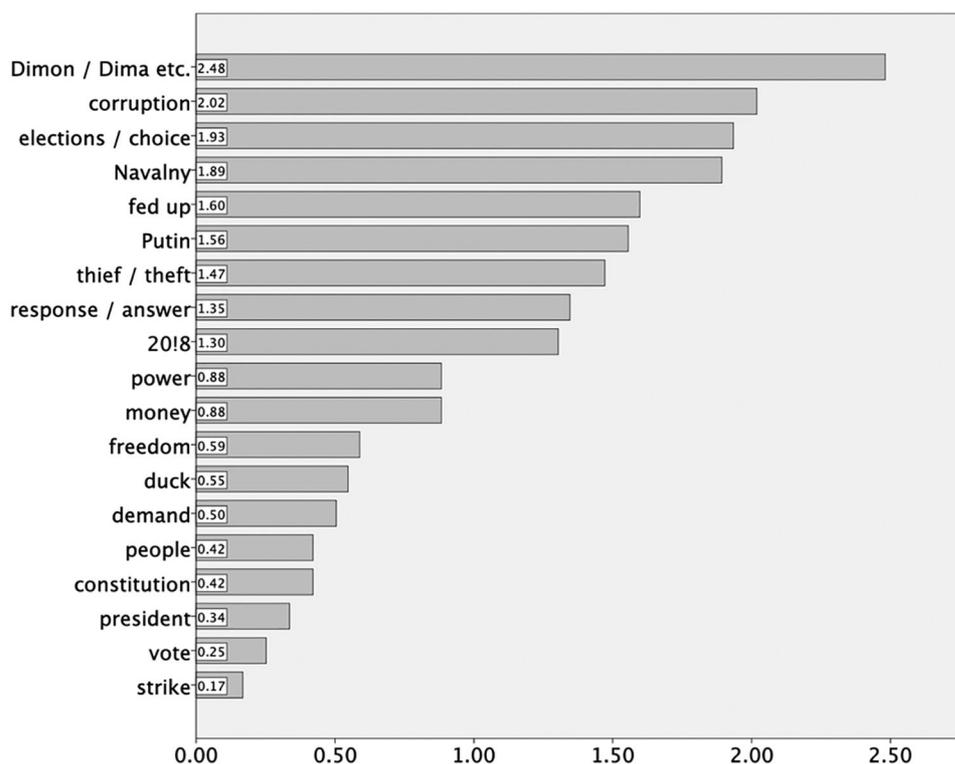


FIGURE 3. The words used most frequently in written slogans (percentage of all word tokens).

etc.), *duck* (*utochka*), *fed up* (*nadoedat'*), *Putin*, *demand* (*trebovat'*), *Navalny*, *elections / choice* (*vybor / vybory*), *freedom* (*svoboda*), *constitution* (*konstitutsiia*), *power* (*vlast'*), *people* (*narod*), *president* (*prezident*), *vote* (*golosovat'*) and *strike* (*zabastovka*). “2018,” which was a symbol of Navalny’s presidential campaign, was also one of the devices that were used most often (Figures 3 and 4).

*Dimon* (and other pet forms of the name *Dmitry*) were used to refer to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and to allude to the documentary *He Is Not Dimon to You*. This clearly shows that the wave of anti-Kremlin protests was not only triggered by Navalny’s film, but also diagnostically and prognostically framed in reference to that particular scandal and commonly understood as an *anti-corruption protest*. Tellingly, four of the ten most frequent words refer to the theme of corruption, as the word *theft* (*vorovstvo*) is commonly used in Russian as an alternative word for corruption and the word *response* was mostly used in co-texts such as “We demand responses [to allegations of corruption]” (“Trebuem otvetov”), “Call Medvedev to account” (literally: “Call Medvedev to response” – “Medvedeva k otvetu”).

At the same time, the words *elections* and *vote* in Figure 3 show that another frame that was central to the protests analyzed was that of an *election campaign event*. There are in fact two other words on the list that allude specifically to this topic by referring to Alexei Navalny personally (“Navalny”) and to his presidential campaign (“2018”).

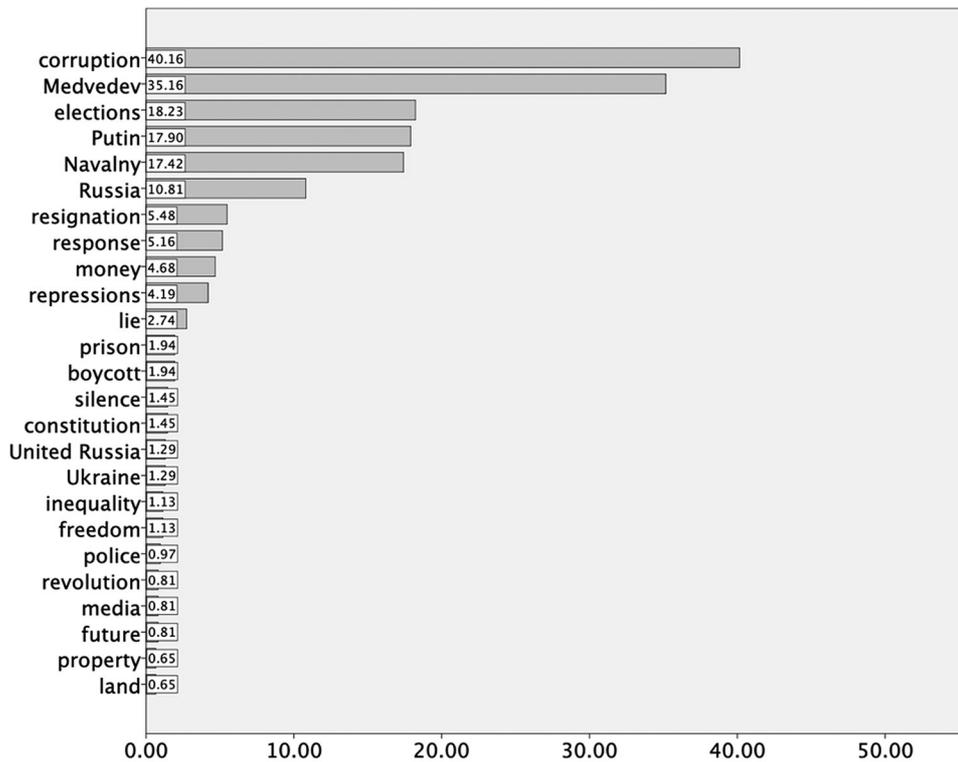


FIGURE 4. The most frequent topics in visual protest items (percentage of all items).

Finally, there is also the word *strike*, which refers to the electoral boycott that Navalny called for after the authorities refused to register him as a presidential candidate. This verbal token can be interpreted as an indication of the frame of *anti-systemic protest*.

As to the repertoire of the protest messages that were based on nonverbal visual semiotic resources, one can see in them the indicators of the same three types of frame (Figure 5). The most frequently used sign vehicle was the image of a duck, which is an indicator of the *anti-corruption protest* frame, referring to Navalny's investigative anti-corruption YouTube video about Medvedev, who, according to the film, owns a villa in Plyos (in Ivanovo oblast) including a huge pond with a duck house in the middle. One more reference to the film *He Is Not Dimon to You* that became one of the protest symbols is a pair of sneakers, as it was sneakers purchased online by Dmitry Medvedev that allowed Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation to trace the prime minister's secret assets.

Brilliant green dye, a common antiseptic used in post-Soviet states, became another symbol actively used by the protesters. This emerged after Alexei Navalny was attacked by pro-Kremlin mercenary hooligans, who splashed brilliant green in his face. The attack occurred on 27 April 2017, so in the rallies of 12 June the protesters painted their faces green as a symbol of overall solidarity with the opposition leader, as well as his *electoral* support. Furthermore, yellow tape, which also appears among the most frequent protest

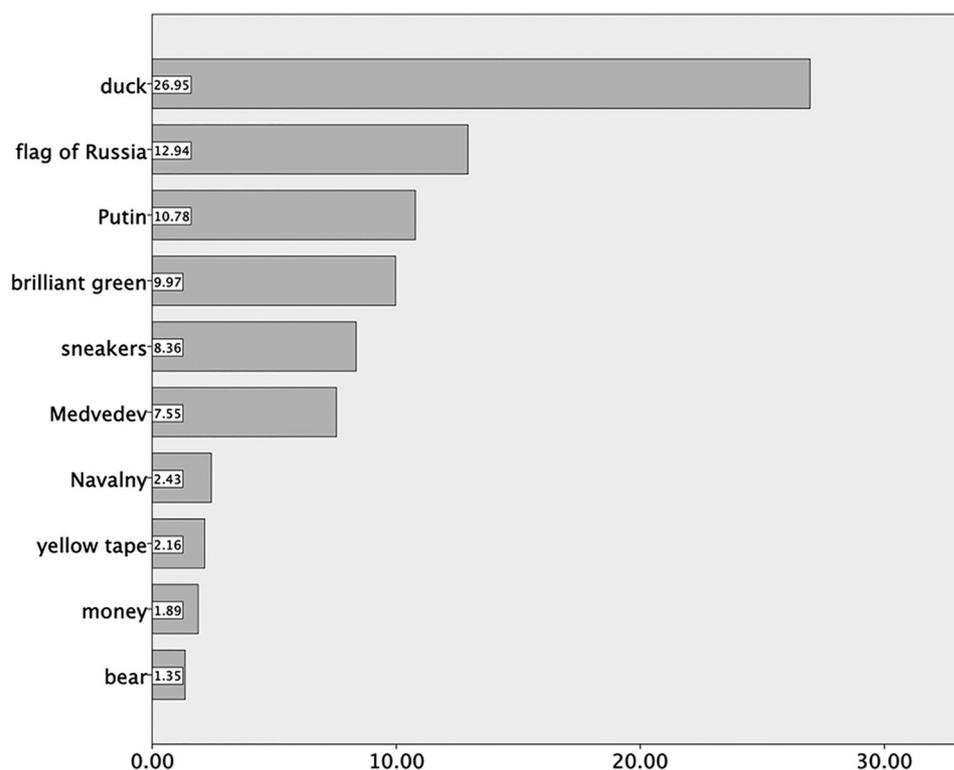


FIGURE 5. The most frequent pictorial elements used in protest items (percentage of all pictorial items).

symbols, can be interpreted as another manifestation of the *election campaign event* frame, as it was used as the primary nonverbal sign of the Fed Up event organized by Khodorovsky's Open Russia. Finally, the images of Putin can be seen as both indications of the *election campaign event* frame, as well as the *anti-systemic protest* frame.

It is also noteworthy that the use of Russian flags was not very common in protest events before Navalny called his supporters to use the flags in their rallies. For example, in the protest campaign of 2011–12 Russian flags were not often seen. (The first large opposition demonstration in Russia's recent history in which Russian flags were used as the main symbol was the 2014 protest against the war in Ukraine, in which people marched with both Ukrainian and Russian flags.)

In general, our analysis of the protest slogans and symbols demonstrates that Alexei Navalny played an especially important role in providing the frames for the wave of protest analyzed. While this effect of Navalny's campaigns is very noticeable in our data, the influence of other organizations of the Russian opposition was almost indistinguishable in the popular repertoire of slogans and symbols. Even though the flags and mass-printed banners of Yabloko, PARNAS, Artpodgotovka, Open Russia and other parties and initiatives can be seen in some of these demonstrations (*Novaia Gazeta*, 2017; *Kommersant*, 2017; *Vedomosti*, 2017; *Snob*, 2017), there are almost no traces of their

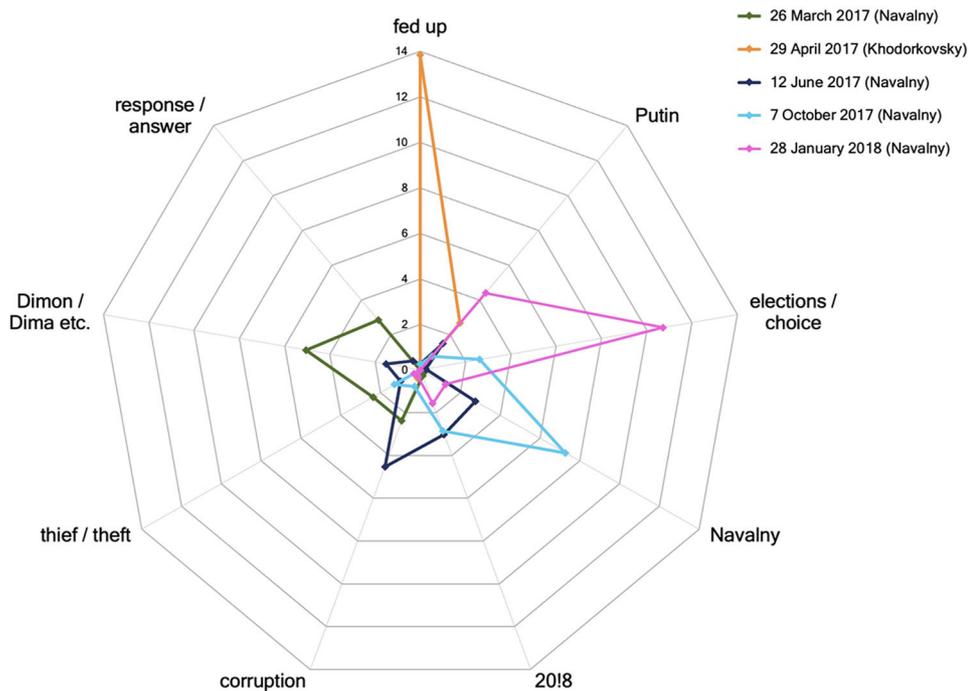


FIGURE 6. The most frequent words in slogans (percentage of all word tokens of each event).

symbols and slogans on the handwritten posters and banners that were made by ordinary participants in the protests. The only popular symbol of the protest that was not promoted by Navalny was the yellow tape, which was one of the symbols of Open Russia’s Fed Up campaign. However, its use, as well as the use of the slogan “Fed up,” was almost entirely limited to initiatives organized by Khodorkovsky’s team. For example, in Figure 6 we can see that the Open Russia demonstration of 29 April 2017 was nearly the only event in which “Fed up” was used and hardly anyone used this slogan on their hand-written banners in other events, even though the anti-Putin agenda was one of the central themes of other protests as well.

A rather similar situation can be observed in the case of Viacheslav Maltsev’s campaign. Even though Maltsev’s 05.11.2015 protest was not the only event in which people appeared with Artpodgotovka flags and banners (e.g., *Novaia Gazeta*, 2017), there were almost no signs that this symbolic repertoire had been accepted by ordinary protesters at large. Furthermore, due to massive repressions against Artpodgotovka, we have virtually no data about the exact slogans and symbols used by Maltsev’s supporters on 5 November 2017. However, we can still reconstruct the main frame intended for that event on the basis of Maltsev’s statements—the protest that he tried to organize was clearly framed as an *anti-systemic protest* (“revolution”) against Putin’s rule (e.g., Artpodgotovka, 2017).

So, as we have shown above, *anti-corruption protest*, *election campaign event*, and *anti-systemic protest* frames were the three dominant types of frame for the wave of protest studied. It is important, however, to also explore how these three frames were combined,

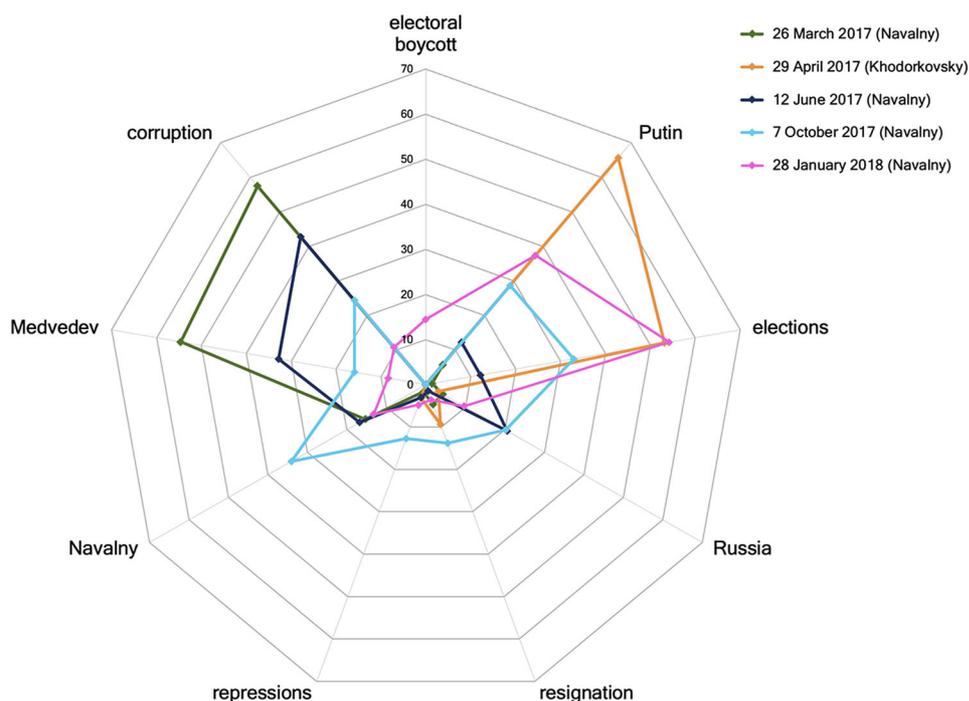


FIGURE 7. The most frequent topics in verbal and pictorial texts of the protest items (percentage of all visual items of each event).

how the campaigns switched from one frame to another, and how protester turnout evolved accordingly. In particular, Figures 6 and 7 show that the first event of Navalny's protest campaign (26 March 2017) focused almost entirely on the topic of corruption, but in the demonstrations of 12 June 2017 the frame began to shift and Navalny's presidential ambitions emerged as a secondary focus. This trend grew even stronger with the protests of 7 October 2017. As Figure 6 shows, the most frequently used word in those protests was the name Alexei Navalny, who was arrested three days before the event. So, even though the date of the demonstration was intended to frame it as an anti-Putin event, the main thematic focus ultimately shifted to the demand that Navalny be released from arrest. As to the topic of corruption, it was also peripheral to that event.

Regarding the last series of demonstrations, which took place on 28 January 2018, we can see that anti-Putin rhetoric was the dominant feature. They were also the events that focused most on the electoral agenda. This shift from pro-Navalny framing to anti-Putin and anti-election framing happened mostly due to the fact that it was at that moment that the authorities refused to register Navalny as a presidential candidate and Navalny attempted to reframe his electoral campaign as an anti-systemic boycott campaign. Similarly, Open Russia's protest of 29 April 2017 was also heavily dominated by anti-Putin rhetoric.

Thus, we can see that the frames that the protesters used varied significantly from one event to another. In particular, the two Navalny-led protests of March and June 2017

were predominantly framed as *anti-corruption protests*, diagnostically targeted against Dmitry Medvedev's alleged corruption and prognostically focused on demands for a reaction to these allegations. The only difference between these two was that in the protest of 12 June 2017, the topic of Putin running for reelection emerged as an additional aspect of diagnostic framing. Thus, the June 2017 protest combined the two frame types, the dominant frame still being that of *anti-corruption protest* with the *election campaign event* frame playing a secondary role.

In the following Navalny-led event, which was the protest of 7 October 2017, one can also see a combination of these two frame types, but in different proportions. On the one hand, this event was primarily focused on the electoral agenda, framed around the demands contesting Putin's reelection and advocating Navalny's presidency. On the other hand, however, the protesters still also partially leveraged anti-Medvedev rhetoric with demands against corruption. Finally, the demonstrations of 28 January 2018 were framed in a more focused way as *anti-systemic protests*. In particular, they were positioned as events to support the electoral boycott as a protest against Putin being reelected and Navalny not being permitted to register as a candidate.

In contrast to the Navalny-led campaigns, Open Russia's event of 29 April 2017 was from the very beginning exclusively framed as an *election campaign event*. Notably, its central message was the demand for Putin not to run for reelection.

Thus, in the cases we studied, the *anti-corruption protests* motivated people to take to the streets with an explicit diagnostic knowledge of the facts of alleged corruption and a more or less clear prognostic understanding of the desired solution (e.g., resignation of the corrupt officials and their prosecution). In contrast, in the *election campaign events*, the overall diagnostic understanding consisted in a broad dissatisfaction with the lack of electoral competition, as well as in an overall attribution of blame to a particular undesired candidate. The diagnostic framing of *election campaign events* varied, with the suggested solution implying either the incumbent not run for reelection at all, or opposition leaders be elected to the presidency (or at least be registered as candidates). The motivational framing of *election campaign events* also manifested in various forms, such as petitioning against the incumbent taking part in the elections, rallying to show support or disapproval of particular candidates, and, of course, voting for (or against) them. Finally, the framing of the *anti-systemic protests* implied a diagnostic understanding of the illegitimacy of state institutions and motivational framing implying either mass demonstrations against the regime or refusal to take part in voting. The prognostic aspect of *anti-systemic protest* frames was quite vague.

## UPS AND DOWNS OF PROTEST FRAMING AND MOBILIZATION

If we relate our analysis of the protest turnout to our findings concerning the framing dynamics, we can see that the largest nationwide political protests of 2017–18 were mostly framed as *anti-corruption protests*, whereas the protests that were framed differently had a significantly lower turnout. On this basis, our study suggests that appropriate

framing of the protests is one condition of their effective mobilization (in terms of both the overall turnout at the protests and their geography). These dynamics can be interpreted as the result of the protest leaders' failed attempt to convert one protest frame into another.

As a response to the theoretical considerations provided at the beginning of this article, our study suggests that, in the case of the successful initial mobilization of the Russian protests of 2017, the protest leader played a crucial role in organizing the demonstrations, as he provided an *anti-corruption protest* frame that effectively worked as a mobilizing factor. Notably, in the protests of March and June 2017 Alexei Navalny succeeded in showing corruption as a threat, associating it with the problem of poverty in Russia (e.g., Navalny, 2017b). (Dmitry Medvedev's notorious phrase in Crimea "There just isn't any money now. When we find money, we'll make the [pension] adjustment. You hang in there. Best wishes! Cheers! Take care!" [Svoboda, 2016] made him an especially good target in this respect. Tellingly, many people explicitly referred to this phrase in their posters; this is why "money" turned out to be among the most frequent words in our dataset [Figure 3].) Furthermore, Navalny put effort into explicitly framing these demonstrations not as actions intended to support him, but as protests against the prime minister's corruption (Navalny, 2017b). Ultimately, this turned out to be an effective framing, as it resulted in massive mobilization and noticeably informed the discourse of the protesters.

In contrast, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Viacheslav Maltsev were much less successful in finding appropriate frames to mobilize the protesters. In particular, Khodorkovsky's Open Russia explicitly framed its Fed Up campaign as an *elections campaign event* (Khodorkovsky, 2017a), whereas Maltsev's "Revolution" was positioned as an *anti-systemic protest* (Artpodgotovka, 2017). Importantly, in both cases, the protest leaders and organizers intended to aggregate broad anti-Putin sentiment without any concrete prompts or relating their actions to any particular trigger events, and likewise failed to mobilize massive support.

In a similar fashion, the anti-Putin and pro-Navalny demonstrations of October 2017 and January 2018, also framed as *election campaign events* or *anti-systemic protests*, received a smaller turnout than the anti-corruption demonstrations of March and June 2017. In particular, in the protest of October 2017, which was organized rather hastily by Navalny's team after Navalny himself had been arrested, the central message was that Putin's most important opponent in the elections was being persecuted (Navalny, 2017c). As it turned out, similarly to Open Russia's Fed Up campaign, the electoral frame failed to work as an especially effective mobilizer. Furthermore, Navalny's arrest did not manifest as a particularly noticeable mobilizing trigger event. The turnout at the protests was still rather significant, but not especially large in comparison to the demonstrations in March and June. The same pattern can be seen in the case of the "Electoral Strike" demonstration of January 2018, which was framed as an *anti-systemic protest* reaction to Navalny being banned from taking part in elections (Navalny, 2017d).

## OTHER (DE-)MOBILIZING CONDITIONS BEHIND THE PROTEST DYNAMICS OF 2017-18

As mentioned above, the uneven and overall declining dynamics of turnout at the protests in the period after the initial massive mobilization of March and June 2017 can be described as protest leaders' unsuccessful attempt to reframe the massive anti-Medvedev events, which emerged as an *anti-corruption protest*, as anti-Putin and pro-Navalny *election campaign events*, and as *anti-systemic protests*. At the same time, however, the decline in turnout cannot only be attributed to the different mobilizing potentials of the frames used, but rather involves a number of other conditions. Notably, additional conditions that also contributed to the turnout dynamics of the protests are related to the protest leaders' mobilizing and organizing efforts on the one hand, and the regime's repressive demobilizing efforts on the other.

So, first, an important condition that has to be discussed in order to understand the initial mobilizing dynamics of these protests is the overall quality of their organization and leadership. In general, none of the street protests studied in this article was a completely bottom-up campaign, as all of them were organized by a particular leader or his closest associates. Thus, the quality of the organization of the protest events significantly depended on the leaders' popularity, as well as on their ability to use the potential prompts for protest that are available in a particular situation, to formulate and to propagate viral slogans, to reach the widest possible audience for their message, and to create a strong network of contacts and loyal associates.

Even though, in general, none of the three anti-systemic leaders (Khodorkovsky, Maltsev, and Navalny) had a broad base of support in society at the time, Navalny had been systematically and intensively building his position not only as a politician but also as an activist fighting corruption for at least a decade. He had been doing so by creating organizational structures such as the Anti-Corruption Foundation and the network of regional headquarters, running two dynamically developing channels on YouTube, maintaining a constant presence on social media, and attempting to participate in elections (personally in 2013 and in a coalition with the PARNAS party in 2015).

When Navalny simultaneously intensified the number of online messages to the public and began to organize live meetings with people in many regions of Russia, Maltsev and Khodorkovsky were not in Russia and thus spent the most intense period of preparation for their protests and the protests themselves operating outside of the country. The entire context of the actions of Navalny and his associates should be taken into consideration, because this could possibly be one of the reasons why the level of mobilization at each protest by Navalny was higher than that of the other leaders.

Furthermore, on the basis of our analysis of protest slogans and pictorial messages, we can suggest that even though Alexei Navalny and his team failed to convert sporadic anti-corruption dissent into longer-term electoral support, this structure can still be considered the most effective at mobilizing the protesters and articulating their demands. In contrast, the protests that were organized by other opposition leaders turned out to be much less successful, as there was hardly any noticeable mass reception of their repertoire

of slogans and images. Thus, even though we argue that the frames of the protests do matter, we do not imply that appropriate framing is in itself sufficient for effective mobilization. For example, due to their poorer organization and leadership, Khodorkovsky's or Maltsev's campaigns would not have necessarily succeeded in mobilizing more people if they had simply adopted Navalny-style anti-corruption frames.

Second, when it comes to the decline in the turnout at nationwide Russian political protests after the peak of protest activity in March and June 2017, one must obviously also take into account the regime's demobilizing efforts. In particular, we have to consider a series of repressive measures taken by the authorities against the opposition. As Andrei Pivovarov, the chairman of the Open Russia movement suggests (personal communication, 12 February 2018), it was precisely the wide-scale repression against Open Russia several days before the beginning of the Fed Up campaign that largely undermined Open Russia's mobilizing potential. Similarly, Viacheslav Maltsev's Artpodgotovka failed to mobilize supporters effectively after the leaders and participants of the movement were severely repressed.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the repression factor was relevant not only to the cases of Open Russia and Artpodgotovka. The decline in the turnout at Navalny's protests of late 2017 and 2018, which was shown by our data, was probably also, at least partially, the result of repression. In particular, as far as Navalny's protests are concerned, on 26 March between 1,600 and 1,800 people were detained during the protest (including about 1,000 detained in Moscow) (Sonnaia & Vikulova, 2017); on 12 June, 1,769 people were detained in 31 cities (866 were detained in Moscow); and on 7 October, 290 people were detained in 26 cities in Russia (including 2 in Moscow and 68 in Saint Petersburg) (OVD-Info, 2017b).

Importantly, there was a difference in the immediate reaction of the Kremlin to the Navalny-led protests before and after October 2017. The police halted mass arrests during the demonstrations and instead focused on repressive measures aimed at the very nucleus of the protest movement, that is, the organizers of the protests, the regional coordinators, and Navalny's co-workers (personal communication, 9 February 2018). As our results suggest, this strategy may have been effective, as we do observe a decline in turnout at protests after October 2017.

Interestingly, the increase in turnout at the protest in June 2017 can also be attributed not only to the opposition's but also to the regime's efforts. The rise can be explained at least partially by the intensification of frustration caused by both the lack of government response to the information provided in the film and the repression of participants in the March 2017 protests (e.g., Borusiak, 2018; Dollbaum, 2019).

14. The repression against Artpodgotovka was the most severe and massive in comparison to that against Navalny's and Khodorkovsky's supporters. In fact, due to the wide-scale repressive measures (SOVA, 2017), it is actually difficult to even estimate the mobilizing potential of Maltsev's organizational structures and his "revolutionary" framing. Since the locations of the protests of the "Revolution" of 5 November were not stated, it is difficult to even roughly estimate the number of participants who did in fact take to the streets on the designated day.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summing up our analysis of the dynamics of nationwide political protests in Russia in the pre-electoral season of 2017–18 (Table 1), we suggest that the dynamics of the protest mobilization that can be observed in this period can be attributed to a constellation of conditions, one of which is the framing of protests. Other important factors are the organizing efforts of the leaders and repressive actions of the authorities. Even the most popular leader of the protest, while subjected to increasing repression, failed to convert the rise in anti-corruption protests into a longer-term campaign with broader electoral or anti-systemic frames.

In particular, our study of the protest campaigns promoted by three different anti-systemic opposition leaders (Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Viacheslav Maltsev, and Alexei Navalny) showed that, in comparison to other protest organizers, Navalny and his organizations were the most successful in politically instrumentalizing and preserving the relatively high levels of mobilization with anti-corruption slogans. Through his online and offline campaigning, Navalny, as the most popular leader of the anti-systemic opposition, succeeded in initiating and effectively promoting the protests of March and June 2017, which were framed as anti-corruption demonstrations. These protests mobilized numerous protesters in many Russian cities. However, this mobilization did not translate into turnout at other protest events, including those led by Navalny, which were framed differently, as election campaign events or anti-systemic protests.<sup>15</sup>

In this respect, our findings are consistent with the results of other studies on Russian protest dynamics, both quantitative and qualitative. In particular, the opinion poll data provided by Latov (2018, pp. 68–69) suggest that the reasons for possible mass protests in Russia are, from the most to least likely, as follows: 29% of Russians are ready to defend economic and social civil rights, 27% would oppose violations of the law by local authorities and law-enforcement bodies, 17% would protest in defense of democratic rights and freedom (freedom of expression, to assemble, to march, etc.), while only 7% would support opposition parties and movements. Threats to economic and social civic rights are also regarded as a significant trigger of protests (Almeida, 2018). Moreover, our conclusions correspond to Lyubov Borusiak's interview-based evidence, which indicated that even though young protesters in Russia name Alexei Navalny as the only opposition leader in contemporary Russia who is capable of organizing a mass protest and mobilizing people to take to the streets, at no stage do the respondents mention their willingness to support Alexei Navalny personally as the reason why they took part in the protests (Borusiak, 2018).<sup>16</sup>

15. Unstable turnout of Navalny's protests does not mean that he is unable to gain lasting support. The significant base of collaborators that he managed to build during the 2017–18 election campaign and maintain after the elections proves that he can gather many supporters around him who are able to take part in the actions he organizes. The recognition of Navalny's name in June 2017 also increased by 8 percentage points compared to February 2017 (Levada, 2017).

16. In the context of Navalny's ability to involve people in his own projects, it is also worth mentioning the study by Smyth and Soboleva (2016, p. 360), which draws attention to some young people's motive for involvement in the political campaign of the opposition activist in 2013. As they emphasized themselves, they were not interested in ideological considerations, but rather in the possibility of gaining experience in a well-organized team using new technologies and original strategies and working on a well-thought-out project resembling campaigns from mature democracies.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Protests

Date	26 March 2017	29 April 2017	12 June 2017	7 October 2017	5 November 2017	28 January 2018
Title	He Is Not Dimon to You	Fed Up	We Demand Answers	[Navalny's presidential campaign rallies]	Revolution	Electoral Strike
Leader	Navalny	Khodorkovsky	Navalny	Navalny	Maltsev	Navalny
Key topics	Corruption, Medvedev	Putin, Elections	Corruption, Medvedev	Elections, Navalny, Putin	[Revolution, Putin]	Elections, Putin
Key frame	Anti-corruption protest	Election campaign event	Anti-corruption protest	Election campaign event	Anti-systemic protest	Anti-systemic protest
Number of participants	32,359-92,861	1,700	49,661-98,720	2,560-21,520	[No data]	4,700-15,000
Number of cities	99	36	154	79	[No data]	118
Number of cities with unauthorized protests	73	Around 30	18	[No data]	All	Around 23
Protesters detained	1,666-1,805	156	1,769	321	448	371
Repressions against leaders	Leader detained during protest	Leader remains in exile	Leader detained before protest	Leader detained before protest	Leader forced to emigrate before protest	Leader detained during protest

Sources: Main sources used in the table are Meduza (2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e, 2018), Navalny (2017a), Yunanov (2018), Volkov (2017), OVD-Info (2017a, 2017b), and personal communication with Khodorkovsky's representatives, 18 January 2018. Key topics and frames are identified based on the analysis of data from Supplements 1 and 2. For the protests of 5 November 2017, key topics are reconstructed on the basis of Vyacheslav Maltsev's statements (Atpodgotovka, 2017; Meduza, 2017d; Khodorkovsky, 2017b).

Some previous studies of the 2017 nationwide political protests also emphasized Navalny's contribution, discussing the large mobilization effect of his campaign (Dollbaum & Semenov, 2021) and his role in boosting young people's motivation (Borusiak, 2018), as well as his ability to use online instruments (Zherebtsov & Goussev, 2018; Kazun & Semykina, 2019; Nechai & Goncharov, 2017) and overcome political apathy by organizing "top-down movement with grass-roots effects" (Dollbaum, Semenov & Sirotkina, 2018, p. 618). Our research allows this perspective to be deepened by comparing Navalny's influence to the contributions of other leaders and movements. On the basis of our analysis, we can argue that the personal popularity of opposition leaders is one of the key ingredients of mass protest in the case of Russia. Even though we demonstrate the importance of protest framing, it is also evident from our data that protests that are led by a more popular leader tend to have a consistently larger turnout. In particular, in 2017–18, Navalny, who mobilized the biggest protests, was the most popular leader of the anti-systemic Russian opposition (Levada, 2020; Gel'man, 2015, p. 184; Dollbaum, 2020) and enjoyed broader support than Khodorkovsky and Maltsev. He was supposedly able to achieve this comparatively high popularity due to active online campaigning, as well as the successful creation of offline organizations and networks of supporters (Nechai & Goncharov, 2017). Furthermore, he had a relatively successful electoral background, in terms of being the author of the famous slogan "vote for anyone except 'United Russia'" in the elections of 2011 and showing impressive results in the 2013 Moscow mayoral elections.

In contemporary literature on protest movements in general, as well as protests in Russia (e.g., Ganz, 2010; Ganz & McKenna, 2018; Clément, 2008), it is often emphasized that the protest leader's personal impact is quite significant for the emergence and progress of such movements. In this context, our study provides some evidence showing the nuances that are inherent in this respect in nationwide Russian political protests. In particular, our analysis suggests that for such campaigns the leader's personal contribution to mobilizing protesters is a necessary factor, but not an entirely sufficient one. We clearly observe that Navalny does seem more effective in comparison to other protest leaders, but at the same time his effectiveness is limited to specific frames and topics. Thus, in many respects, our findings regarding the limitations of Navalny's mobilizing potential resonate with the theories of so-called negative mobilization and negative identity, specifically concerning contemporary Russian society (Gudkov, 2004, Gudkov, 2010; Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2014).

At the same time, our research suggests that not all semiotic forms that use negative identification ensure mobilization. In particular, such evidence is provided by the low turnout at the Fed Up campaign and Maltsev's "Revolution," as well as by the fact that, according to our data, ordinary protesters' discourse was receptive almost exclusively to the topics and symbols that were transmitted from Navalny's structures. As emphasized in Nikiporets-Takigawa (2014, p. 254), in order to be mobilizing, the diagnostic framing of the protest should provide a clear articulation of a social problem and be shared by the majority of the participants. Although problems, grievances, and triggers are everywhere, they are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for a protest to erupt (Ruijgrok, 2017).

Dissatisfaction and frustration with the lack of response to *concrete* corruption allegations and the repression after the March 2017 demonstrations increased mobilization in the June 2017 protests that were framed in a similar way. In contrast, Khodorkovsky's and Maltsev's mobilization efforts, made in the same year, were not very productive (even in comparison to the less successful Navalny-led mobilization of October 2017). One explanation for this difference may be that Khodorkovsky's<sup>17</sup> and Maltsev's campaigns also built on negative but more *abstract* diagnostic frames. Moreover, their slogans focused almost exclusively on anti-Putin rhetoric. In this respect, they are similar to Navalny's rallies of 28 January 2018, which were also much less successful.

Our analysis also contributes to the studies of various factors of social movement demobilization. As Sawyers and Meyer (1999) argued, "movement decline is an interactive process with activists making choices in response to changes in political opportunity" (p. 193). Correspondingly, in the cases we studied, we observed how the decline in protest mobilization emerged as a result of protest leaders and participants reacting to changing media agenda, electoral dynamics, and increasing repressive measures. Speaking about the repressive measures in particular, our study also provides evidence of the effectiveness of the "divide and rule" repressive strategy described by Karstedt-Henke (1980, pp. 217–220). This strategy implies that the authorities opt to repress the most radical activists in order to demobilize the moderate wing.

Ultimately, even though the factor of protest framing, as well as the factors of leadership and repression, are probably not sufficient to fully explain the dynamics of the Russian protests, we suggest that these factors are necessary parts of the complex set of conditions which are sufficient for such an explanation. Moreover, speaking more generally, there can be, in principle, other possible constellations of factors that can lead to massive protests. Our analysis suggests, however, that appropriate protest framing should at least be considered an "INUS condition" (Mackie, 1965, p. 246; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012, pp. 19–25, 41–50; Jackson, 2011, p. 110) of successful protest mobilizations; that is, it is an Insufficient but Necessary part of a condition which is itself Unnecessary but Sufficient.

Our analysis also shows that even in the increasingly oppressive political regime of contemporary Russia, civil society is able to actively express dissent in some forms and even create well-functioning independent organizational and mobilizational structures both online and offline. However, in the political conditions of "hard" Putinism, these structures are generally effective only when it comes to sporadically mobilizing massive demonstrations, especially if these are framed as anti-corruption protests and triggered by specific prompts in the media. Active citizens turn out to be ready to follow a strong leader in the anti-corruption protests, but are much less willing to be involved in massive electoral campaign events or a vague anti-systemic struggle.

17. Another plausible explanation for the low turnout of Open Russia's campaigns was suggested by Vladimir Gel'man (personal communication, 5 February 2018), who believes that it was the syndrome of aversion to an action masterminded outside Russia, in the West, that may have played a role in the failure of the protest organized by Khodorkovsky and his foundation.

In this study, we have not explored the protests that took place in Russia after 2018, but we suggest that our findings are partially transferable to later nationwide protest campaigns as well. In particular, our findings help to better explain the protest organizers' actions behind the protests of January 2021, when Navalny's team attempted to boost the protest activity by releasing the documentary *Putin's Palace*, immediately after Navalny had returned to Russia and been arrested. Thus, the organizers were able to effectively combine pro-Navalny and anti-systemic protest frames with the frame of anti-corruption protest. Moreover, the decline in protest turnout in April 2021 in comparison to January 2021 (Foht et al., 2021; BBC, 2021) can be at least partially attributed to the fading of the anti-corruption protest frame, as the pro-Navalny frame became dominant after he had been sentenced to prison, with the brutal repression against the protesters and Navalny-led organizations obviously being another contributing factor. ■

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