

*This article has been accepted for publication in Post-Soviet Affairs, published by Taylor & Francis.*

**Protest trajectories in electoral authoritarianism: From Russia’s “For Fair Elections” movement to Alexei Navalny’s presidential campaign**

Jan Matti Dollbaum <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany*

ORCID: [orcid.org/0000-0002-3399-6137](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3399-6137)

Contact of corresponding author: [dollbaum@uni-bremen.de](mailto:dollbaum@uni-bremen.de)

## **Protest trajectories in electoral authoritarianism: From Russia’s “For Fair Elections” movement to Alexei Navalny’s presidential campaign**

Abstract: How do protest movements affect electoral politics in electoral authoritarianism? Related research has usually focused on the immediate effects of protests on regime change, while longer time periods have received less attention. To address this shortcoming, this paper explores the 2017/18 presidential campaign of the Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, asking how it was related to earlier contentious episodes, beginning with the countrywide protest wave of 2011/12. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data sources, I argue that these protests affected different categories of actors differently. While they clearly provided Navalny with a boost in recognizability among the population, they were less important for mobilizing his current followers. At the same time, previous movement experience appears to have been vital for the political socialization of a significant share of Navalny’s core activists. Considered together, the results attest to the importance of studying the long-term trajectories of protest in stable electoral authoritarian contexts.

Keywords: protest trajectories; opposition; electoral authoritarianism; post-Soviet Russia

Word count: 10510

### **Introduction**

On March 26, 2017, tens of thousands of protesters filled the streets in dozens of Russian cities, demanding that Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev react to accusations of corruption voiced by opposition politician Alexei Navalny. They were participating in what was widely regarded as the largest and most widespread demonstrations since the “For Fair Elections” (FFE) movement that swept Russia between December 2011 and fall 2012 following fraudulent parliamentary elections. At the same time, the protesters were, willingly or not, partaking in a central event of Navalny’s carefully orchestrated campaign that aimed (and

failed) at getting him registered as a candidate in the presidential election of 2018. Observers were quick to see in the youthful masses a “new generation” of dissenters without prior political experience and attachments (Albats 2017; RFERL.com 2017). However, the campaign’s protagonist himself was hardly new to politics: Navalny has been involved in political and anti-corruption activism since the early 2000s and is now, despite never holding office, considered the most successful politician of the democratic, non-parliamentary opposition (Gel’man 2015a). Given the claims of novelty, on the one hand, and Navalny’s proven record as a political challenger, on the other hand, the question arises regarding the degree to which Navalny’s campaign of 2017/18 was rooted in longer-term developments.

This question offers an opportunity to develop a research agenda on the relations of movements and electoral politics in electoral authoritarianism more generally. So far, research in this field has focused predominantly on single events, when institutional contention and non-institutional contention have occurred together, often in the context of attempted regime change after fraudulent elections (Beissinger 2007; Tucker 2007; Bunce and Wolchik 2010). What has been neglected is the relation between movements and politics over longer time spans – a relation that has already received much attention in liberal democratic contexts (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018). Such a long-term perspective for studying the relations of extra- and intra-institutional contention is particularly relevant to forms of full electoral authoritarianism that tolerate political contention but restrict it to a degree that all but removes electoral uncertainty, rendering it highly unlikely that single campaigns can affect regime change.

In this study, therefore, I systematically trace the period between 2011 and 2017, during which Navalny advanced from being one of several protest leaders to “the most popular and capable leader of the new generation of the opposition” (Gel’man 2015a, 184). The beginning of the covered period is marked by the FFE protests, an unstructured protest cycle

characterized by ideological rootlessness (Bikbov 2012) that was, on the one hand, a continuation of longer trends (Robertson 2013) but that, on the other hand, was novel in terms of scale and societal resonance (Lasnier 2017a).

Nevertheless, the FFE movement was only the first of several episodes of both new oppositional activity and Navalny's rise as a political challenger. Partly pulled by liberalization of the party registration law and partly pushed by the unexpected mobilizational success of the FFE movement, the non-systemic opposition<sup>1</sup> made several new attempts to participate in institutional politics beginning in 2012, in some of which Navalny was involved. While most of these attempts were "premature" in that they overestimated their electoral chances (Lasnier 2017b),<sup>2</sup> Navalny's performance in the Moscow mayoral elections (see Smyth and Soboleva 2016), in which he unexpectedly won 27% of the official vote and almost forced the Kremlin's candidate into a run-off, stands out as a successful example of the electoral strategy.<sup>3</sup> Others were less successful. In 2015, some liberal forces formed a "Democratic Coalition", which was to compete in four regional elections but, due to various repressive measures, managed to stay in the race only in Kostroma, receiving a meagre 2.3% (Semenov 2017). A year later, in 2016, another coalition with Navalny's participation attempted to enter the general parliamentary elections but was plagued by infighting and collapsed before the elections (Lasnier 2017b). Shortly thereafter, Navalny announced his intention to run for president in the election of March 2018.

Navalny's personal development as a public figure, including his changing discourse over the years from ethno-nationalism to socially inclusive, centre-left populism (Moen-Larsen 2014;

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of post-Soviet Russia, the term "non-systemic opposition" usually denotes the set of oppositional actors who seek fundamental democratic regime change (Gel'man 2015a). It is sometimes contrasted with the parliamentary or systemic opposition, which is often deemed to contribute to upholding the current political order rather than challenging it (White 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Lasnier (2017b) also argues that these attempts at institutional politics undermined alliances with civil society organizations.

<sup>3</sup> Another example is the relative success of a coalition of liberals in the municipal elections in Moscow in 2017.

Lassila 2018), is thus well documented in the literature, and so is the structure of his recent campaign (Dollbaum 2017; Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina 2018). What has not been studied yet is the societal side of the phenomenon of Navalny and the role that previous contentious episodes<sup>4</sup> played in it. In particular, I study three social groups, which are differentiated by their level of involvement in Navalny's recent campaign: the general population; Navalny's social media followers, who publicly supported the campaign by subscribing to social media groups but did not actively engage in campaign work; and his core activists, who operated the campaign on the ground. Accordingly, I pose three research questions:

- (1) *How did Navalny's perception among the general population evolve between the FFE protests and his campaign of 2017/18?*
- (2) *What role did previous contentious episodes play in the mobilization of Navalny's campaign supporters?*
- (3) *What role did experience from previous contentious episodes play in the recruitment of Navalny's core activists?*

I study these questions using a variety of qualitative and quantitative data: representative polls conducted by the independent Levada Center between 2011 and 2017; an original online survey of supporters of Navalny's recent campaign, polled between January and early March 2018 ( $N = 1182$ ); and 23 interviews with paid employees of seven regional campaign offices conducted between September and November 2017. Based on these data, I argue that previous protests and political campaigns were important preconditions of Navalny's 2017/18 campaign. While the social media element of the 2017/18 campaign – most importantly, the “On Vam ne Dimon” video – was essential for attracting new online followers, thus

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<sup>4</sup> I employ the term “contentious episode” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) in a broad understanding to denote episodes of extra-institutional contention, such as protests, and institutional contestation, such as participation in elections.

broadening Navalny's support base, the FFE protests were the most important single episode both for Navalny's emergence as the main non-systemic opposition challenger and for developing a base of capable core activists. However, the campaign was far from being a straightforward institutionalization of the protest wave from five years earlier. Instead, when attempting to understand the origin of Navalny's current campaign, the FFE movement's impact cannot be conceptualized in isolation and instead must be viewed together with the episodes that followed it. Overall, the results thus attest to the importance of studying long-term trajectories of protest in stable authoritarian regimes.

### **Relations of social movements and electoral politics**

Of the various possible outcomes of social movements and protest waves, political outcomes have clearly received the greatest attention (Giugni, Bosi, and Uba 2013). The past decade has seen a proliferation of research on the relations of movements and electoral politics (e.g. Heaney and Rojas 2007; Fisher 2012; Trejo 2014; Hutter and Vliegthart 2016). These relations typically take the form of alliances between movements and parties (Trejo 2014; Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018), but scholars have also demonstrated, for instance, how electoral challengers have successfully adapted mobilizational tactics previously developed by movements (Fisher 2012; McAdam and Tarrow 2010) and how movements have transformed existing parties from within (Heaney and Rojas 2007; Kriesi et al. 2008). Moreover, movements sometimes produce parties themselves (Kitschelt 2006), which transform their goals into permanent political programmes – albeit sometimes at the cost of the moderation of goals and/or the oligarchization of internal structures (Zald and Ash 1966). In this field of research, as in other areas of social movement studies, the focus has been on democratic regimes. Movement parties, for instance, have been studied chiefly in the context of Western (e.g. Milder 2015), Eastern (Pirro and Gattinara 2018) or Southern Europe (Mosca and Quaranta 2017) and democratic Latin America (Anria 2016). Only recently have there

been attempts to systematically include electoral authoritarian contexts when analysing relations between movements and parties (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018).

The research on colour revolutions in post-communist countries is a well-developed exception to this trend. As Beissinger (2007) and Bunce and Wolchik (2010) have argued, these events were characterized by the cross-nationally diffusing, strategic deployment of peaceful, carnivalesque mass rallies and electoral monitoring techniques with the aim of toppling authoritarian incumbents in a combination of “the ballot and the street” (see Trejo 2014).

While it advances the overall research agenda, the literature on coloured revolutions is not helpful in the present undertaking for two reasons: First, these studies usually zoom in on a relatively short period of time, during which institutional contention and non-institutional contention intersect. Second, they focus on hybrid, competitive authoritarian contexts in which regime change is realistically on the opposition’s agenda and where external actors wield significant influence (Levitsky and Way 2010). For both reasons, the studies of colour revolutions have revealed little about the impact of protest movements on “normal” politics in stable electoral authoritarianism. This study, in contrast, attempts to contribute to the research on regimes that generally tolerate political competition but that restrict it to a degree that all but precludes real uncertainty, i.e., regimes that are no longer counted as competitive according to Levitsky and Way’s (2010) conception. Under such conditions, in which single protest or political campaigns can hardly bring about regime change, I argue that it is even more critical to study the long-term trajectories of contentious episodes.

### **Popularity, mobilization, and recruitment**

This article does not examine Navalny as an actor but instead focuses on his 2017/18 campaign from a societal perspective. More precisely, I study three social groups, which differ according to their levels of campaign involvement: the general population, Navalny’s social media supporters, and his campaign activists. Since there exists no integrated analytical

framework for the given research task, the present study is largely exploratory. However, in the following, I briefly sift through the available literature on the three studied aspects to identify contributions that help in structuring the approach to the empirical material.

First, studies of the effect of movements on public opinion (Huff and Kruszewska 2016; Wouters 2018) have usually focused on the public's evaluation of protesters, tactics, or whole movements, rather than leaders. However, the literature still offers some guidance. Protest is known to affect bystanders' attitudes to a great degree through the way in which it is represented in the media (Smidt 2012). At the same time, mass media have the tendency to single out individuals as spokespersons or representatives, even in explicitly leaderless movements (Castells 2012). It follows that previous episodes of Navalny's activity should lead to greater recognition among the public the more that he is personally referred to in the media. However, given the hostile treatment of political challengers in Russian mass media (Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014), it is likely that greater prominence does not coincide with greater relative support.

Second, what is the contribution of previous contentious episodes to the mobilization of Navalny's current supporters? Several structural factors account for the support of protest and political challengers in authoritarianism, such as attitudes (Chaisty and Whitefield 2013), class position (Rosenfeld 2017), socio-demographics, such as age and education, or embeddedness in specific networks (Pellicer and Wegner 2014). The framing perspective provides an explanation of how these facilitating predispositions are activated during a particular contentious episode: if mobilizers strategically bridge their frames to incorporate different aggrieved sections of the population (Benford and Snow 2000), attribute blame, and prescribe a clear course of action (Snow and Benford 1988), swift and large mobilization can be the consequence – as the FFE protests showed in the Russian context. Concerning Navalny's 2017/18 campaign, it remains unclear what drove its societal support. Examining



the reasons for supporters to join the campaign, the relative importance of various factors can be tested: was it mainly the re-mobilization of a supporter group that had accumulated over recent years, or were it the campaign's strategic framing manoeuvres that attracted a new group of followers?

The third aspect examined here concerns the recruitment of core activists who carried out the campaign on the ground. I take as the point of departure the research paradigm of “eventful sociology” (Sewell and McDonald 1996), which has conceptualized individual contentious events as having transformative capacity for movements (McAdam and Sewell 2001) and social structures (Sewell 1996).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, participation in such events can also transform individual lives (Fillieule 2012). Indeed, it is one of the few undisputed findings in the research on movements' biographical outcomes that prior activism drives future engagement. This process occurs through various mechanisms, most of which can be subsumed under forms of social interaction or identity building (Vestergren, Drury, and Chiriac 2017). For instance, protest induces individuals to join protest groups, boosts perceptions of individual and group efficacy (Finkel and Muller 1998), and helps to build a “participation identity” (Smyth 2018), all of which encourage renewed engagement. Moreover, attending protest demonstrations can have various emotional and cognitive effects, ranging “from a simple feeling of belonging to a powerful experience related to an awakening consciousness (for example, with respect to a situation of injustice or oppression)”, contributing to the socializing of attendants into activism (Fillieule 2012, 244; for a broader view see also Goffman 2019).<sup>6</sup> In this vein, the intense conflict often associated with protest (particularly in

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<sup>5</sup> See also the contribution by [anonymized] in this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Goffman (2019) recently applied Emile Durkheim's notion of “gathering times” to various “social occasions”, which are defined as ““a social affair, undertaking, or event, bounded in regard to place and time and typically facilitated by fixed equipment”” (Erving Goffman, 1993, 18, cited in Alice Goffman 2019, 52). Among other mechanisms, she theorizes that the tendency of social occasions to situate attendants in unexpected social interactions has the capacity to “shift people's bonds, habits, thoughts, and plans” (Goffman 2019, 62), sometimes resulting in decisive changes to individual life trajectories.

authoritarian settings) contributes to the development of sharply delineated, shared identities among participants – especially when nurtured by leaders (LeBas 2011). Intense movement participation, moreover, boosts the development of organizational skills, “which empower and inspire [activists] to sustain their involvement in activism” (Van Dyke and Dixon 2013, 197).

What does this mean for the background of Navalny’s core activists? There are two ideal-typical scenarios that define the endpoints of a continuum of the activists’ political socialization. One extreme hypothesizes that Navalny’s campaign is composed solely of experienced activists that have been socialized into activism during various preceding episodes, including the FFE movement. However, given the claims of the campaign’s novelty in the journalistic coverage and its strategy to use protests as a recruitment vehicle (Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina 2018), it is also conceivable that the campaign itself marks the beginning of a socialization process of a new generation of political activists. It is the task of the third part of the empirical analysis to assess where the campaign stands between these two extremes.

### **Data, operationalization, and methods**

The literature suggests that the contentious episodes since the FFE protests might have left imprints on Navalny’s 2017/18 campaign in several regards. Examining the impact of previous episodes on: (1) Navalny’s popularity among the general public; (2) the mobilization of supporters; and (3) the recruitment of activists; I draw from a multitude of data sources.

*Research Question 1: Popularity.* I operationalize popularity as, first, recognition (measured as the share of respondents in representative opinion polls who claim to know Navalny’s name) and, second, electoral support. For this perspective, I rely on representative opinion polls by the Levada Center. To relate the figures to the episodes of Navalny’s activity, I use monthly data on mentions of the name “Alexei Navalny” in the media between April 2011

and February 2018. These data come from the *Integrum* service, which archives full texts from tens of thousands of media sources across the post-Soviet space. In this particular query, federal and regional news agencies, internet newspapers, TV, and radio are included – a total of 2327 sources. I do not differentiate among positive, neutral, and negative coverage because all types should increase name recognition.

*Research Question 2: Mobilization.* I operationalize the importance of earlier contentious episodes to the mobilization of Navalny’s current supporters through the question “What sparked your interest in Alexei Navalny’s campaign?”. The question was part of an online survey conducted between January and early March 2018 in eight regional groups of the social medium VKontakte (VK), which was officially established by the campaign (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ivanovo, Kazan, Tomsk, Vladivostok, Rostov, and Altai Krai).<sup>7</sup> Respondents were recruited through individual invitations that were sent out to randomly selected group members stratified by age and gender (response rate approx. 25%,  $N = 1182$ ). The sample is thus representative of the VK groups for age and gender, but it should not be considered fully representative of Navalny’s supporter base as a whole since the sampling method might have introduced a technology bias, which is likely to result in a youth bias. However, since the campaign operated chiefly through social media and appealed in its appearance to young urbanites (Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina 2018), it is plausible to assume that the survey provides a fairly accurate picture of supporters of this specific campaign (see the appendix for details on the data collection).

*Research Question 3: Recruitment.* For the third question on the significance of experience in earlier protest and political campaigns for the recruitment of Navalny’s core activists, I draw

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<sup>7</sup> Selected regions cover a range of economic conditions (from – according to GRP per capita – relatively well-to-do Sverdlovsk to relatively poor Ivanov oblast, see Rosstat 2018) and political environments (from rather liberal Perm and Yekaterinburg to rather authoritarian Rostov, see Petrov and Titkov 2013). However, I do not claim that the case selection realized strict representativeness of structural conditions.

on 23 structured interviews with paid staff of the presidential campaign conducted between September and November 2017, when the campaign was in full swing. The interviews were recorded in seven major cities in the Urals (Perm, Yekaterinburg), on the Volga (Samara, Saratov, Volgograd), and in the Russian south (Rostov-na-Donu, Krasnodar).<sup>8</sup> In each city, I interviewed the regional office's head (called "coordinator") and between one and three members of staff. Overall, the campaign operated approximately 80 regional offices (Volkov 2017) with 3-4 paid employees per office (Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina 2018). My sample thus covers close to 10% of the general population of both the regional offices and the core team of the regional campaign at one point in time.

### **Who is Navalny? The evolution of popular attitudes**

To investigate the evolution of the general public's view of Navalny, I trace Navalny's popularity as indicated by representative opinion polls in relation to mentions of Navalny in state and independent media. Figure 1 demonstrates, first, that media mentions (grey solid line) are highly unevenly distributed across the studied period. The first spike occurred in December 2011 at the onset of the FFE protests, with numbers starting to decrease by mid-2012, when the protests waned. Next, mentions drastically jumped in July 2013, marking a shorter period of heightened media attention surrounding the Moscow mayoral elections. This period had by far the largest number of mentions, reflecting that Navalny was an official electoral contender so that even state-controlled media would regularly report on him. A third period of increased coverage began in March 2017. At this point, the presidential campaign was already under way for three months, but the spike in media attention was likely triggered by the publication of the film "On Vam ne Dimon" (OVND) on March 2, which was viewed more than 20 million times in the first weeks (Holmes 2018). It projected Navalny's populist

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<sup>8</sup> The reasoning for the selection of VK groups applies also to the selection of regional offices; see the preceding footnote.

message of corrupt and incapable elites (Gel'man 2015a; Lassila 2018) onto Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev and served as a mobilizing device for the first round of street protests on March 26, 2017.

[Figure 1 about here]

Navalny's name recognition is connected to the spikes in media attention but does not develop proportionally. It rose steeply through the period of the FFE protests: In April 2011, only 6% of respondents knew his name, while in June 2012 (the third point of measurement), the share stood at 35%. With fading mentions, the share stabilized, only to jump again around the mayoral elections in Moscow 2013, peaking at 54% in October 2013. The subsequent polls noted a slight decline (although within the margin of error) and increased again after the release of OVND. Of course, these data alone do not allow for making causal claims, but interpreted in context, they suggest that the FFE protests, the Moscow elections of 2013, and OVND were the three most important drivers of Navalny's name recognition among the general public. This effect is likely to be at least partially due to increased media attention during these episodes.

Compared to Navalny's electoral rating among those who claimed to know him, the picture becomes more complex. Evidently, Navalny was viewed most positively in the first poll, with the combined share of "definitely" and "perhaps" amounting to 33%. However, at the time, only six percent of the populace (likely politically interested, perhaps oppositionally minded citizens) knew his name. With rising recognizability among the general public, his relative rating dropped over the years: In February 2017, with name recognition of 47%, it stood at 10%, with more than four fifths responding that they would "rather not" or "definitely not" vote for Navalny. It appears that, although the protests of 2011/12 helped his recognizability, this fact did not coincide with a complementary rise in relative support – hardly surprising given the largely negative reporting on Navalny in the state-controlled media and several

criminal cases opened against him (Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014; Gel'man 2015b).

However, with the release of the film “On Vam ne Dimon”, which, according to Levada, 38% of the population had heard of and 27% trusted completely<sup>9</sup> (Levada 2017), the rating substantially improved to 17% of those who knew his name – this time alongside an increase in Navalny’s name recognition. Nevertheless, 72% still reported that they would “rather not” or “definitely not” vote for Navalny.

In summary, the data suggest that the FFE protests contributed substantially to Navalny’s recognizability but that other episodes (particularly the Moscow mayoral elections of 2013 and his 2017/18 campaign) were crucial as well, adding 20 percentage points after the end of the FFE movement. Moreover, the data show that, unsurprisingly, heightened attention alone does not guarantee a positive image as measured by electoral ratings. Navalny’s latest campaign markedly improved his image, at least in the short term. This achievement is significant in itself, given the restrictive media environment. Nevertheless, convinced supporters remain in the clear minority.

### **Mobilization of supporters**

Next, I examine the answers of 910 social media campaign supporters<sup>10</sup> to the question “What sparked your interest in Alexei Navalny’s campaign?” (figure 2). The answer options, of which only one could be selected, included several potential triggers, such as the film “On Vam ne Dimon”, the protest events of March 26 and June 12, 2017, and street agitation by campaign volunteers. Crucially, the item also included the option “I was already interested in Navalny’s activity before the beginning of the current campaign”. Those who selected the

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<sup>9</sup> An additional 45% of respondents chose the option that the film’s accusations “seem to be true, although it is difficult to assess the credibility of these charges” (Levada 2017).

<sup>10</sup> In the survey, respondents were differentiated by their level of engagement in the campaign. Respondents who claimed to “support the campaign morally” without active involvement were labelled “sympathizers” ( $N = 910$ ), while those who claimed to be actively involved were labelled “activists” ( $N = 264$ ). Here, I restrict the sample to the sympathizers. See the appendix for details.

latter option were then asked to specify the year in which they started following Navalny's activities (figure 3). Combined, the two questions allow for an estimation of the proportion of Navalny's current supporters that were recruited during the current campaign and the role that earlier periods played in the mobilization.

As figure 2 shows, more than two thirds of respondents (72%) chose one of the three most frequent options. Two of these options relate to Navalny's social media presence, with "On Vam ne Dimon" clearly taking the overall lead with more than 35%. This result attests to the mobilizing strength of Navalny's social media strategy, which, judging by these data, was clearly his most valuable asset. Close to a quarter of respondents claimed to have been following Navalny's activities before the beginning of the campaign; conversely, this finding means that a clear majority of supporters were recruited while it was ongoing. The relative growth in explicit support that the campaign brought about is thus much greater than the five to eight additional percentage points in name recognition that can be attributed to it. This finding matches the substantive rise in electoral support in the general population following the publication of OVND and the protest rallies of March 26 (figure 1).

[Figure 2 about here]

The large share of newly mobilized supporters corresponds to the age profiles of respondents. Approximately 17% are less than 18 years of age, 61% are between 18 and 29, and only 22% are older. Congruously, the median age of those who followed Navalny already before the 2017/18 campaign is 29 years old, while that of the newly recruited supporters is 21. The low overall median age in the sample is perhaps partly due to the sampling technique, as discussed above; nevertheless, it appears safe to conclude that Navalny's campaign mobilized a new generation of supporters, while only a minority had been following his political projects earlier.

A closer look at this minority of 209 respondents allows for assessing the role that the FFE protests and later episodes played in sparking their interest in Navalny's work. As figure 3 shows, 2011 represents a clear watershed: 19% indicated that this year was when their interest in Navalny arose. In each subsequent year, about as many or more people became interested than in the years before 2011 combined.

[Figure 3 about here]

I conclude from the online survey data that previous episodes since the FFE protests in 2011/12 did play a role in publicizing the activities of Alexei Navalny, partly matching the tendency recorded in the Levada polls of Navalny's name recognition presented above. At the same time, the FFE protests themselves were merely the first of several occasions that triggered support: a majority of this subsample of 209 respondents (55%) claimed to have become interested in Navalny's projects in 2013 – the year of the Moscow campaign – or later. Moreover, more importantly, the data on the complete sample show those who were mobilized at any time before the current campaign to be in the clear minority. Therefore, in regard to the mobilization of Navalny's supporters, the activities of the current campaign – and particularly the strategically framed social media publications – seem to have played the major part.

### **From protesting to campaigning: recruitment of activists**

The literature on the FFE movement has so far insufficiently addressed its consequences (Lasnier 2017a), but there is at least some evidence of a transformative, socializing effect on first-time protesters. In their studies of post-FFE urban activism in Moscow and St. Petersburg and the surrounding areas, Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva (2014) found that activists founded groups to prolong the collective experience from the FFE protests and only later chose specific social problems to address. In this way, some participants in the larger



protest wave sought to foster local politicization to keep the movement going in a phase of absent mass mobilization (see also Zhuravlev, Yerpyleva, and Savelyeva 2017).

Did previous protest and political projects also matter to socializing the core activists of Navalny's campaign? Further, did the FFE movement play a special role in that process?

These questions call for an empirical strategy that differs from most studies on the socializing effects of activism. Usually, researchers trace a group of respondents through initial engagement and then study their propensity for later activism, compared to a group of respondents without such initial engagement. Studies have been based on either representative polls (Finkel and Muller 1998) or specifically tailored activist samples (McAdam 1989). In contrast, I focus on the time span between two key events in Russia's recent political history (the FFE movement and Navalny's 2017/18 campaign) and attempt to detect continuities and breaking points in this chain of events. Rather than likelihoods of undefined later activism resulting from earlier protest episodes, the present approach allows for assessing the empirical relevance of earlier engagement for a *specific* later episode of high societal significance.

Examining first the evolution of Navalny's support among his core campaigners<sup>11</sup> (columns 3 and 4 in table 1), it is apparent that only a minority – three interviewees – followed Navalny's actions and publications before 2011, while another eight interviewees claimed to have started following him after 2011. This finding underscores the importance of the period of the FFE protest movement for Navalny's popularity, as I have demonstrated for the general population

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<sup>11</sup> A brief note on the socio-demographic composition of the sample: Overall, the core activists appeared to be older than Navalny's supporters, as revealed by the online survey (median<sub>core</sub> = 31 years, median<sub>supporters</sub> = 23 years). This difference even grows when the online survey sample is restricted to the campaign's most active respondents who engaged in campaign activity at least once per week (median<sub>mostactive</sub> = 21). The higher median age among the interviewed paid activists should not obfuscate the great variance in the data: six respondents in the sample were between 19 and 21 years old. Accordingly, the standard deviation is relatively high at 8.6 years (and still 6.7 years after excluding a 54-year-old outlier). However, it shows that those who were chosen to be paid employees of the campaign did not only have greater political experience than the average activists but that most also had greater life experience.

Concerning education, the paid employees resemble the distribution of the online survey: about 80% have higher or incomplete higher education, as is the case among the supporters. The gender balance is, with 18 men out of 23 respondents (approx. 80%), even more skewed toward the male side than it is in the full sample of supporters (69% male).

and part of his social media supporters. However, for several of the interviewees, it was not the protests themselves that sparked their interest but Navalny's call to "vote for any party except United Russia" before the 2011 parliamentary elections (Golosov 2012). This is congruent with the observation that the protests of 2011/12 were not merely a spontaneous eruption but that the organized opposition had made clear strategic preparations before the parliamentary elections, which affected post-electoral mobilization (Robertson 2013; White 2013). With hindsight, the FFE movement thus began *before* the protests, as it did for several of Navalny's core activists.

[Table 1 near here]

Second, only a minority of the interviewed 23 campaigners were complete newcomers to activism. One respondent (male, 20) claimed to have been sensitized to the issue of corruption following an unpleasant encounter with a local bureaucrat, then attended the anti-corruption rally on March 26, 2017, and quickly became deeply involved in the campaign. Another respondent (male, 21) was drawn to the campaign through the film "On Vam ne Dimon" without any prior contact with politics. Predominantly, however, the core activists had previous experiences in political or civic activism. This activism, however, took very different forms. One respondent, for instance, had been active for several years in a local environmental organization and the liberal Yabloko party and hosted a video blog on local environmental concerns. As he put it, the opening of Navalny's office simply introduced another possibility to engage in a city with, overall, few such possibilities. He made it clear that he was

"not exactly a fan of Navalny's. There are even things that I don't like. But I figure that the [political] competition that has been destroyed [by the regime] is much more important than any disagreements" (male, 21).

A staff member from another city, who had been oscillating among political agitation, housing activism, and journalism since 2003, revealed a similarly pragmatic position: "I do

not agree with Navalny on his housing policy, but for now, I forgive him everything because that's secondary" (male, 34).

There are also respondents who were highly engaged in liberal political projects, including those in which Navalny played a role, such as the People's Alliance/Party of Progress,<sup>12</sup> his Moscow mayoral campaign in 2013, and the Democratic Coalitions for the regional elections of 2015 and the federal elections of 2016. For instance, one branch's coordinator claimed to have been active in almost all liberal oppositional campaigns since 2009. He was on the Yabloko team during the regional elections of St. Petersburg in 2011, was part of the re-invigoration of the liberal party RPR-PARNAS in 2012, supported several liberal candidates in regional contests, and campaigned for the Democratic Coalition in the 2015 regional elections in Kostroma. Similarly, all three interviewees from another office had some experience in the Kostroma campaign or in Navalny's Progress Party. In contrast to the pragmatic activists cited above, a different interviewee claimed to be involved in Navalny's projects because of personal support:

"I follow personalities: There is Navalny, who I have followed already for a long time, and I reckon that this person does not abandon or betray – a person who has ideals and pursues them" (male, 34).

Thus, in addition to seasoned activists for whom the campaign was a mere continuation of their activism by other means, for others, their support for Navalny was a major factor driving their engagement.

In summary, complete newcomers are in the clear minority among the interviewed core activists, while previous experience includes a broad range of activity. This finding sets Navalny's staff clearly apart from the respondents in the online survey: Overall, only 36% of the campaign activists in the survey had previous experiences of political or social activism.

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<sup>12</sup> Navalny built up the Progress Party beginning in 2012. It was banned from official registration in 2015 (Roberts 2015).

However, in the online survey, the threshold for activism was much lower since respondents were coded as activists if they claimed to “sometimes help the campaign actively”, regardless of the frequency or intensity of that engagement. When differentiated by the frequency of participation in the campaign, the survey data demonstrate that the higher that the level of engagement was, the higher was the share of those with prior activist experience (see figure A1 in the appendix). The survey and interview data thus provide complementary parts of the same story.

Third, since the data show a substantive impact of the FFE movement in particular, I single out this episode in my treatment of the results. Ten interviewees claimed to have participated in the movement, either as protestors or as electoral observers. However, mere participation hardly says anything about socializing effects. After all, the movement could have been an intermediary period for a seasoned activist who would have participated in the current campaign even without the FFE experience. Therefore, I pay special attention to how interviewees framed their memories of the FFE movement. Borrowing from the insights on the effects of social occasions, and protest participation in particular, on an individual’s life course (Goffman 2019; Fillieule 2012), I devise three criteria, at least one of which must be fulfilled to label a respondent’s FFE experience a personally *defining episode*:

- 1) they call it “a watershed”, a “crucial moment”, etc., in their political biographies;
- 2) participation was their first experience of activism; or
- 3) they were first politicized during this period, e.g., through watching footage of electoral falsification.

Based on these criteria, I conclude that the FFE movement was a *defining episode* for eight respondents. How did they describe their experiences? One activist recalled her time as a first-time electoral observer and protest participant:

“I arrived at the polling station on time [...]; I was well-prepared, had studied all the laws and had attended preparation seminars, but there it was a nightmare. There were no falsifications, but the commission was so ignorant of the laws that they messed everything up. I fought with them – I now understand that I was too emotional – but I achieved that everything was done by protocol. I liked that [...]. [Later, there were] demonstrations in the whole country and here in Perm; this was so amazing! [...] you could see that in Perm there were so many like-minded people, also some famous ones that earlier you only read about, and now they’re standing next to you. Everything was so cool. It was then when I met X, and the movement ‘Perm Observer’ was founded...” [female, 34].

This account is a particularly dense example of the transformative impact that the FFE movement exerted on many participants (see, e.g., the quotations in Gabowitsch 2016). First, the episode at the polling station attests to successful application of newly acquired skills in a morally charged, contentious interaction with the state’s agents, boosting feelings of efficacy and self-esteem. Second, the following demonstrations reassured the activist that she was in good company, supporting the emergence of a collective identity (including, in this case, an element of pride in standing side by side with the city’s activist notables). This pride, third, led to new connections and culminated in the foundation of a new activist group – the Perm Observer (*Permskii Nablyudatel’*).

This history of activist socialization is typical for almost the entire Perm branch of Navalny’s campaign. It was based on several first-time protesters who came to know each other in December 2011 and not only formed the basis of the Perm Observer<sup>13</sup> but also constituted the local branch of Navalny’s People’s Alliance/Progress Party, which coalesced with other local liberals for the local elections in 2016 and organically grew into the core team of Navalny’s 2017/18 campaign.

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<sup>13</sup> This project was broader, however, and activists from the electoral observer organization GOLOS and from other parliamentary opposition parties contributed to it equally.

Among the seven examined regional offices, such a dense and comprehensive common activist history beginning with the FFE protests was the exception rather than the rule.

However, the FFE protests were also defining episodes for activists in other places. The coordinator of another branch described the first of two transformative moments as follows:

“There was this turning point for me, like for many others: 2011/12. I remember very well September 26 [2011], when there was this ‘castling’ [the announcement that Vladimir Putin would again stand for president, while Dmitriy Medvedev would return to be prime minister] [...] this offended me to the depths of my soul” (female, 33).

The second moment occurred when she was an observer for the presidential elections in March 2012. She was forcibly evicted from the polling station before the vote counting began, only to hear the next morning that the official result dramatically differed from her own impression at the polling station. “Then, I clearly realized that, for me, there are two alternatives: international airports [i.e., emigration] or trying to change something. Obviously, I chose the second one”. Both moments are clear examples of moral shocks, “often the first step toward recruitment into social movements, [that] occur when an unexpected event or piece of information raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action” (Jasper 1998, 409), as witnessed by many FFE first-time protesters (Gabowitsch 2016).

In this case, similar to the example from Perm, the respondent’s experiences placed her on a trajectory of continuous engagement. For others, the FFE movement was equally transformative on a cognitive level but did not lead to immediate long-term engagement. For example, the coordinator of another campaign office (male, 39) claimed to have been a business manager throughout his life, having lived and worked detached from politics. In 2010, he accidentally witnessed a protest led by Leonid Volkov, who was then a liberal politician in Yekaterinburg and is today Navalny’s chief strategist. This occasion left him impressed and sparked his political interest; he began following Volkov’s and Navalny’s blogs and had his first experience of political action in the FFE movement as a protestor and

an electoral observer. He then underwent a period of disengagement, but when the campaign start was announced in December 2016, he left his job and applied for the position of coordinator of the local campaign office. This personal trajectory attests to the importance of initializing episodes, even for interrupted activist biographies – so-called “individual abeyance” (Corrigall-Brown 2012, 8).<sup>14</sup>

In summary, we can distinguish three ideal-typical paths that took the core activists into the campaign. First, there are the **newcomers** with virtually no history of prior engagement, who, similar to the majority of supporters, were mobilized by the campaign’s anti-corruption agitation in spring 2017. Second, there are seasoned **activists** with longstanding local experience in various civic, environmental, or political struggles. Some of these respondents were involved in Navalny’s earlier projects, while for others, it was their first encounter with Navalny. What led the latter into the campaign was their desire to continue their previous activism and to effect political change, rather than to support Navalny as such. A third category are those who were brought to political engagement through their experiences in the For Fair Elections movement. I call this type **FFE-mobilized**. To the extent that their experience put them on the track of continuous engagement, this group is a subtype of the second category. To the extent that the campaign remobilized people who had been in individual abeyance since 2012, this category is separate.

In summary, the FFE experience had a profound impact on a substantial share of Navalny’s core activists, critically shaping the political biographies of several staff members. It is noteworthy that four of seven coordinators experienced a *defining episode* during the FFE movement, suggesting that the campaign strategists in their searches for highly capable

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<sup>14</sup> This example also underscores the campaign’s pragmatic approach to recruit cadres with organizational skills, in this case emanating from business, with which the campaign could be effectively executed from the top down – while preserving rootedness in various local struggles by attracting long-term local activists (Dollbaum, Semenov, and Sirotkina 2018).

regional leaders might have (unconsciously) drawn disproportionately from the pool of the FFE-mobilized. At the same time, the overall direct impact of the FFE movement on the socialization of core activists should not be overstated. It is possible that the sample was biased by the Perm office, which consisted almost entirely of FFE-mobilized activists, but which might well be an exception. In two offices (Krasnodar and Volgograd, see table 1), there was not even a single respondent for whom the FFE movement was a *defining episode*. At any rate, the small number of cases calls any conclusions based on numbers alone into question. However, the interviews showed that, when the FFE experience mattered for respondents, it did so in various ways. First, it provided some with “moral shocks” (Jasper 1998), drawing them into activism for the first time in their lives. Second, participation provided initial opportunities to gain organizational skills and make connections with other activists, thus forming an entry point into permanent engagement (Van Dyke and Dixon 2013). Third, it politicized some, who after a period of individual abeyance (Corrigall-Brown 2012) entered political activism at the start of Navalny’s campaign. Moreover, several activists who were not socialized in the FFE movement gained their first experience of activism in one of Navalny’s follow-up projects. Therefore, to the extent that the FFE protests served as the first in a chain of events that consolidated the post-Soviet generation of the Russian democratic opposition (Gel’man 2015a), it also had an indirect impact.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I have asked how previous contentious episodes impact electoral politics in authoritarian regimes that tolerate but severely restrict political engagement. I examined this question by tracing: (1) the evolution of Alexei Navalny’s popularity among the general population; (2) the mobilization of his current campaign supporters; and (3) the recruitment of his campaign activists through the years since the FFE movement of 2011/12. The results point to a differential impact of earlier episodes on the different social groups under study.



First, the protests in 2011/12 appear to have given Navalny a boost in recognizability – indeed more than any other single period of his work. However, where his image among the population is concerned (as measured through his electoral rating), the campaign of 2017/18 and particularly the “On Vam den Dimon” video seem to have had greater positive impacts than any previous activity. Second, previous episodes were only of secondary importance for mobilizing Navalny’s current follower base. Only among a clear minority of survey respondents did earlier episodes trigger interest in Navalny’s activity.

Third, concerning the socialization of core activists, the study revealed most interviewees’ firm basis in previous activism. In particular, there appears to be a clear legacy of the FFE movement. For a substantial number of activists, participation in the movement (or exposure to related information) was essential for motivating them to undertake recurring political action – through moral shocks, through positive experiences of engagement, or through networking and acquisition of skills. Mobilization during this period was thus identified as one of three ideal-typical pathways into Navalny’s campaign (newcomers, seasoned activists, FFE-mobilized). However, the FFE episode was clearly not the only important source of previous experience for seasoned activists. The evolution of political opposition since the FFE movement must thus be considered in its entirety if Navalny’s current campaign is to be fully understood.

What do these results reveal about the relations between movements and electoral politics in the given context and about broader regime dynamics? Navalny’s career as a political entrepreneur, I argue, is intimately tied to the Putin regime’s intricate balance between authoritarian and formally democratic elements, as demonstrated by this study’s findings in three regards. First, despite the ban on personal appearances on state-controlled TV, media reporting has allowed Navalny’s visibility to rise in parallel to his political activities, beginning with the FFE protests. Second, while the pro-government media certainly exploit

their framing advantage to keep his popularity down, that social media can operate relatively freely means that the campaign's central message – systemic elite corruption at the expense of common people – could spread quickly, raise Navalny's popularity, and significantly extend his follower base. Third, the absence of mass repressions against politically active citizens has allowed a core group of committed and experienced activists to socialize and train over the preceding years to become effective operators of his political projects. Incidentally, what is true for his regional activists is also true for himself and his core team of strategists, who have not yet suffered major repressive blows. At the same time, the FFE protests and the Ukrainian revolution legitimized an authoritarian backlash (see Gel'man 2015a, 2015b) that marginalized and further delegitimized Navalny's (ideologically less pragmatic) competitors in the liberal opposition.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the campaign shows that, in this context of stable electoral authoritarianism, many aspects of the transfer from protest movements into politics work similarly to the way in which they do in liberal democracies: gaining visibility through protests and provocative political actions; mobilizing followers with the rapid spread of messages through unregulated, interactive social media; and recruiting committed activists with a rich history of engagement. It appears that these elements are universal elements that characterize the relations between protest and politics more generally – at least in political systems that are not fully repressive. Electoral authoritarian regimes are thus right to be included in the overall research paradigm (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018). More surprising is that, despite Navalny having virtually no chance to end up in the electoral arena (which obviously constitutes the major difference with liberal democratic contexts), he still pushes on. Why does he?

On the one hand, his activities are forcing the regime to become even more overtly authoritarian. From the start, the campaign faced criminal prosecution of activists, great

administrative difficulties, and repression even in places that earlier had been characterized by relatively peaceful relations between state and civil society, such as Perm or Yekaterinburg. Moreover, the attempts to shut down the messenger service Telegram and the recent legislative initiatives to further regulate the online sphere and to curtail “fake news” and expressions of “disrespect” towards the state (Soldatov 2019) clearly speak to this diagnosis. On the other hand, because the regime has allowed Navalny to operate for years, giving him time to adjust his strategy and incrementally refine his media persona, he has become too established and visible to easily remove him at this point. His actions thus both illustrate and actively exploit the inner contradictions of electoral authoritarianism, which, as Schedler remarked, constitute these regimes’ “seeds of subversion” (Schedler 2010, 76).

If this is a deliberate strategy to destabilize the ruling coalition and effect democratic change, it is certainly a risky one: Given the current distribution of forces (and the lack of elite splits), its chances of short-term success are virtually nonexistent. However, while his positioning himself for a post-Putin future is clearly Navalny’s long-term objective, the current strategy not only risks provoking ever-increasing state violence, but it also spurs societal polarization. Whether this outcome can be mitigated by broadening Navalny’s support base – for instance, by integrating social policy demands into his political platform, which he has been actively trying since 2017 – remains to be seen.

### **Acknowledgements:**

The author thanks X for their comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript. The author additionally thanks X and X for their invaluable contribution in the data gathering process.

### **Funding details**

This publication has been produced as part of the ANONYMIZED research project, which is being organized by the ANONYMIZED with financial support from the ANONYMIZED.

## Disclosure Statement:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Tables

Table 1. History of activism of interviewed core activists of Navalny's 2017/18 campaign

Regional office	Number of interviewed staff	Began following AN's activities		Previous activism		For Fair Elections movement	
		<i>Before 2011</i>	<i>2011-2017</i>	<i>In AN's projects<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Any</i>	<i>Took part</i>	<i>Defining episode<sup>2</sup></i>
Krasnodar	3	0	1	0	2	1	0
Perm	4	1	2	3	4	4	3
Rostov	4	0	1	0	4	1	2
Samara	3	0	1	3	3	1	1
Saratov	3	1	1	2	2	0	1
Volgograd	2	0	1	1	1	1	0
Yekaterinburg	4	1	1	0	3	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>

Notes: AN = Alexei Navalny. <sup>1</sup>Navalny's projects are those episodes that he either initiated – such as the People's Alliance/Party of Progress or his 2013 Moscow mayoral campaign – or in which he participated – such as the Democratic Coalition for the regional elections in 2015 and the federal elections of 2016. <sup>2</sup>The FFE movement is counted as a *defining episode* for an individual if: (1) he/she speaks of a “watershed”, etc., for his/her personal history; (2) participation was the first experience of activism; or (3) the FFE episode was the trigger for his/her (re)politicization. Source: author's interviews.