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SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF ALEXEI NAVALNY

STRATEGY AND TACTICS AT THE FEDERAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS

ABSTRACT   The article focuses on the major stages of development of Alexei Navalny's social movement in 2017-2019 at the federal and regional levels. The movement aims to form and mobilize the supporters of Alexei Navalny in the movement's structural elements to carry out opposition activities in large cities. In the long-term, the movement wants their activists to participate in regional and local elections. The movement is developing in the context of slowly growing socio-economic and political dissatisfaction in the country and the government's aim to restrict public expression of concern. The conditions make the movement look for new formats of manifesting people's discontent. The weakness of the movement is Alexei Navalny's non-eligibility to hold the office and absence of Navalny's political party. His image of a "fringe" and "protesting" politician created by the television media prevents him from becoming a respectable and worthy of support politician for the majority of Russians.

Key words: social movement, political opposition in Russia

Russia's opposition politician Alexei Navalny created a wide network of regional organisations in all major Russian cities over the course of 2018. Before that there had not been any political movements in modern Russia (apart from political parties) that could hold continuing protests nationwide. The national scale of the rallies allowed Alexei Navalny to aspire to the image of the only opposition politician standing a chance to challenge the current Putin regime. Navalny's video addresses criticising political and economic elites made the latter to take to the media and post their own video responses. Considering these factors, it would be fair to state that Alexei Navalny's social movement is a powerful political organisation which has a stable structure and long-standing (although not numerous) supporters. The article discusses the aims, resources, and tactics of Alexei Navalny's social movement in 2017-2019. It also examines political institutionalization of the movement and the state response to its actions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

The most comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing a social movement has been offered by Professor Sidney Tarrow. According to him, a social movement is a "collective action which aims to tackle collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities". In other words, a social movement has four empirical properties, namely, collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction.[1] All but a few of these properties were characteristic of Alexei Navalny's movement.

According to the concept of resource mobilization, a social movement begins on the condition that there are economic, political, and organisational opportunities favouring mobilization of existing dissatisfaction among people. The major resource of a movement is its structure which affords to implement the most suitable strategy for achieving set goals.[2] The valuable resources of a movement are its finances, number of supporters and activists, and charismatic leader.

Sidney Tarrow argues that the key factor that determines the scale and timespan of a social movement is the reaction of the political regime with which it meets. If the regime totally ignores or violently suppresses protests, the social movement will exist longer. On the contrary, if there are certain protesters who get suppressed, the social movement starts to lose its dynamics and dissatisfaction stops to escalate.[3]

Taking the abovementioned into consideration, it can be stated that the main actors of the social movement's analysis are its aims; structure; financial, information,

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[1]   S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movement and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 7-8.

[2]   Е.А. Здравомыслова, *Парадигмы западной социологии общественных движений*, Санкт-Петербург 1993, p. 61.

[3]   С. Тэрроу, "Стратегия режима – это самый важный фактор, определяющий размах и длительность протестов", *Свободная мысль*, no. 12 (2011), p. 11.

etc. resources; the type of solidarity expressed by participants; characteristics of public events, and the state reaction.

There can be singled out five stages in Alexei Navalny's movement. The aims and tactics were subject to changes at each of these stages.

- Stage 1 (December 2016 – 12 June 2017). Establishment of a network of offices in large cities, mobilization of citizens to participate in nationwide anti-corruption protests; formation of a support group.
- Stage 2 (June 2017 – December 2017). Transition from anti-corruption rhetoric to the demands for nominating Alexei Navalny for President; offices opened in 81 cities.
- Stage 3 (December 2017 – May 2018). Protest "Voters' Strike"; preparation of observers on the election day; post-election rally ("He is not our tsar").
- Stage 4 (May 2018 – November 2018). Decrease in the number of offices; political actions (organised usually on social media platforms) concerning local issues; organisation of nationwide rallies against increase in the retirement age.
- Stage 5 (November 2018 – spring 2019). Investigation into incomes of the political elite by journalists; launch of "Smart Vote" and "Alexei Navalny's Trade Union" projects.

AIMS OF THE MOVEMENT

In the beginning the supporters of Alexei Navalny did not call themselves a social movement and preferred the name "social campaign". In fact, the movement did not voice their strategic goals, but outlined the tactical one, namely to nominate Alexei Navalny for the presidency, endorsing him as a viable candidate. The future of the movement was to be defined after the presidential election drawing on the level of voter support for Alexei Navalny. On the one hand, the activists could not plan their future by taking such a narrow goal. On the other hand, the chosen motto gave them the opportunity to gather different critics to the existing political regime under the campaign umbrella. Election rules prevented Alexei Navalny from running in the presidential race in March 2018 as he had been convicted of embezzlement from a state timber company in Kirov in 2013 (the Kirovles case) and assigned a five-year suspended sentence. The suspended sentence does not restrict one's travelling across the country or require the person to stop his/her political and social activities. However, it imposes restrictions on standing in an election. On December 25, 2017, the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation denied Navalny's application for President because of the corruption conviction.[4]

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[4]   "Постановление Центральной избирательной комиссии Российской Федерации № 118/973-7 'Об отказе в регистрации группы избирателей, созданной для поддержки самовыдвижения кандидата на должность Президента Российской Федерации Алексея Анатольевича Навального, и его уполномоченных представителей' от 25.12.2017 г.", *Официальный сайт ЦИК РФ*, at <http://www.cikrf.ru/activity/docs/postanovleniya/30868/>, 15 December 2019.

At the third stage the movement pursued the aim to decrease voter turnout rates in the presidential election and prepare observers.[5] According to Alexei Navalny, authorities lose the opportunity to rig a vote when the turnout is low. The law provides for election observation by representatives of contestants, political parties that nominated the contestants, and the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation.[6] This requirement forced activists of the movement to enter into negotiations with branches of the political parties in regions so that they registered activists on their behalf (mostly on behalf of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the political party Yabloko). On the eve of Vladimir Putin's inauguration on May 5, 2018, the rally "He is not our tsar" was held in large Russian cities.

At the beginning of the post-election period (Stage 4) the movement did not have a common goal and focused on organising political actions to draw people's attention to local problems. The movement changed its tactics from staging protests to regular voicing of local problems and setting negative 'agenda' in mass media.

Lastly, we can observe the movement's return to the "elections" rhetoric (Stage 4) by which we mean its tactical striving to participate in primary and secondary elections and their search for the electoral niche. In November 2018, the "Smart Vote" project was launched. Its aim is to support the most viable opposition candidate as defined by the movement on the regional and local elections in order to prevent candidates put up by the United Russia political party from gaining votes.[7] The project "Alexei Navalny's Trade Union" has been carried out since January 2019. It targets public sector employees who represent the electorate of the United Russia party.

THE MOVEMENT'S RESOURCES

Organisation. By the end of the third stage, 81 offices located in cities across Russia joined the public campaign for Alexei Navalny (70 offices were financed by the movement, whereas 11 offices got financing beyond the movement's means). The leader of the movement considers the regional network of offices to be his main achievement. It should be noted that the majority of offices continued their operations after Navalny's election campaign. Today they work as "political centres".[8] Regional offices collected private data of citizens to be able to quickly collect signatures in support of Alexei Navalny which were necessary at the beginning of the registering procedure for a presidential nominee. According to Alexei Navalny's website, 648,000 citizens

[5]   Навальный 20!8, at <https://2018.navalny.com>, 15 December 2019.

[6]   "Федеральный закон № 19-ФЗ 'О выборах Президента Российской Федерации' от 10.01.2003 г.", p. 23.

[7]   *Умное голосование*, at <https://2019.vote>, 15 December 2019.

[8]   И. Родин, "Штабы Навального стали политическими центрами", *Независимая газета*, 9 January 2019, at <http://www.ng.ru/politics/2019-01-09/1_7477_navalny.html>, 15 December 2019.

expressed their support for his candidacy for President.[9] At Stage 4, the number of offices decreased to 46 of which 11 were not funded by the movement itself. The organisational structure in the regions at the beginning of 2019 is defined by increasing media coverage of the movement and their ability to organise nationwide political actions. Its weakness is insufficient number of active members and participants in major cities of Central Russia.

Active members and sympathisers. The majority of participants of the movement in its first stages were young people aged 16-22. For this category of volunteers, there were organised cultural events and entertainment. According to the data published on the Navalny 2018 web portal, 200,000 volunteers joined the activities organised by the movement. At the same time we should not overestimate the politician's popularity across the country. Alexei Navalny's YouTube channel is followed by 2.2 mln users which is 1.5% of the population. Meanwhile, such TV presenters as Vladimir Soloviev and Dmitry Kiselev who host programmes on the main television channels attract 40-50% of Russians.[10] By the end of 2018 the Navalny LIVE channel had reached 6 million viewers (889,000 subscribers) according to the movement's estimates[11] whereas their main channel "Fund against corruption" got 12.7 million views.[12]

Finances. According to Navalny's web portal, 368 million roubles were received in donations during the active phase of protests (December 2016 – May 2018). It is a large sum of money to be raised by a political organisation. For example, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation being the largest opposition party in Parliament got 11 million roubles in donations and raised 96.9 million roubles from membership fees in 2017.[13]

Leader. During active media campaign the movement managed to boost Alexei Navalny's media profile and make his controversial figure more recognisable. He is considered to be a bright and vocal critic of the current political regime by citizens of large cities. The majority of people who live in smaller towns see him as an ambitious and unprincipled agent provocateur who instigates fledgling youth to clash with the government. Alexei Navalny's public speeches attract fairly big audiences of volunteers. However, regional offices often diluted their protesting dynamics and proactive attitude without the direct involvement of Alexei Navalny in their activities. The participants also lost their motivation.

[9]   Навальный 20!8.

[10] Д. Волков, "Не только большие протесты", *Ведомости*, 6 May 2018, at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/05/07/768724-ne-bolshie-protesti>, 15 December 2019.

[11] "Навальный LIVE-2019. Что с женской аудиторией?", *Навальный*, at <https://navalny.com>, 15 December 2019.

[12] "Годовой отчет ФБК – 2018", *ФБК*, at <https://fbk.info/blog/post/495/>, 15 December 2019.

[13] "Сводные финансовые отчеты политических партий за 2017 год", *Центральная избирательная комиссия Российской Федерации*, at <http://cikrf.ru/politparty/finance/svodn_otchet_17.php>, 15 December 2019.

According to the sociological research body Levada Centre, public awareness of Alexei Navalny did not increase after the protests, many of which were unsanctioned, held on June 12, 2017, in Russian cities: 50% of respondents heard about the opposition politician and demonstrations, but only 12% of them considered Alexei Navalny the guardian of the country's interests. 39% of the respondents supported the protesters who turned up on June 12, whereas 37% of those surveyed were against them. The important message that the authorities should draw after the mass detention is that 40% of the respondents justified their actions and believed they fell within their remit (27% of the respondents had the opposite view).[14] According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM), the level of trust for Alexei Navalny fluctuated from 1.1% to 1.4% in 2018-2019, whereas the level of distrust varied from 1.6% to 2.5%.[15]

Allies. Opposition non-parliamentary groups compete with each other for protest voters. The majority of democratic leaders are not ready to wholeheartedly support Alexei Navlny's ambition to become the leader of the opposition. Russian TV presenter Ksenia Sobchak, who declared her presidential bid on October 18, 2017, became his rival for gaining support from protest voters living in cities. In her open letter, the socialite promised to withdraw from the presidential race in favour of Alexei Navalny if he is allowed to run. Alexei Navalny made an attempt to avoid confrontation with his prospective rival in autumn 2017.[16] However, Ksenia Sobchak's proposal to join forces after the election met fierce criticism from the opposition politician who accused his former rival of faking her opposition stance.[17] We believe such an alliance would have split young people living in cities who supported Navalny and met a setback from middle-aged voters who do not trust Ksenia Sobchak.

To sum up, the major resources of Alexei Navalny's movement are a network of offices in large Russian cities and his public profile which create conditions to raise money in donations. The movement has large offices in Moscow and St. Petersburg and a few active support groups in regions. The weaknesses lie in Navalny's conviction that prevents him from participating in the elections, the absence of a political party led by him and limitless potential of the movement to form coalitions.

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[14] "Июньские протесты не добавили Навальному популярности", *Левада-Центр*, 17 July 2017, at <https://www.levada.ru/2017/07/17/iyunskie-protesty-ne-dobavili-navalnomu-populyarnosti/>, 18 December 2019.

[15] "Доверие политикам", *Рейтинги и индексы Всероссийского центра изучения общественного мнения (ВЦИОМ)*, at <https://wciom.ru/news/ratings/doverie_politikam/>, 15 December 2019.

[16] Е. Махаметшина, "Навальный прокомментировал выдвижение Собчак в президенты", *Ведомости*, 26 November 2017, at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/10/26/739569-navalnii-sobchak>, 18 December 2019.

[17] "Дебаты Навального и Собчак", *YouTube*, 18 March 2018, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQeAy2ytMnU>, 15 December 2019.

TACTICS EMPLOYED BY THE REGIONAL BODIES OF THE MOVEMENT (CASE OF THE CENTRAL BLACK EARTH REGION)

Alexei Navalny's movement organised seven nationwide political actions over 2017-2018. During the in-between stages regional offices held local rallies either in support of his nomination for President or in order to draw people's attention to local problems.

The Central Black Earth Region comprises Belgorod Oblast, Voronezh Oblast, Kursk Oblast, Lipetsk Oblast, and Tambov Oblast. In the 1990s, specialists in electoral geography referred the Region as the so-called Red Belt, i.e. a macroregion which expressed stable support for communist candidates and left-wing parties that formed opposition. "This group of regions is characterised by high conservative sentiment which is due to their predominantly rural population and the mindset of a country person".[18] We consider the Central Black Earth Region a model macroregion that has major characteristics of Central Russia.

Participants of the first and the largest rally held on March 26, 2017, demanded an investigation into the accusations made against the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in the film "He Is Not Dimon to You". In many cases, it had not been authorised to hold rallies in city centres, which is why the gatherings were held as unsanctioned or protesters took to hyde parks.[19] For example, participants of the unsanctioned gatherings were detained in Kursk. In Lipetsk, the supporters of Navalny's movement had a peaceful stroll through the park and opted out from carrying placards and shouting slogans. The leader of the rally in Belgorod's hyde park was given a 50-hour community service order for damaging the pavement. The sentence was later revoked by the superior court. The rallies held on June 12 gathered fewer supporters of Alexei Navalny. They continued to demand from authorities an investigation into the corruption allegations against Dmitry Medvedev and insisted on Vladimir Putin's resignation. As the rallies were not sanctioned, there were mass detentions of protesters for breaking the rules of public gatherings and resisting the police in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. The footage from the rallies shows that the protesters deliberately provoked authorities to take firm actions. The approved gatherings in Belgorod, Voronezh, and Kursk were peaceful. The single picket organised in Lipetsk and rallies in Tambov were held without authorization. The areas on the outskirts of Tambov were granted the hyde park status.

In the second half of 2017, regional offices of Alexei Navalny's movement carried out a series of local actions in support of his nomination for President. The majority of these actions were legal and exploited the potential of existing political opportunities.

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[18] Р. Туровский, "Парламентские выборы 1999 г.: региональные особенности", *Полития*, no. 4 (1999), p. 105.

[19] "Кремль на развилке: каковы последствия протестных акций по всей России", *РБК*, 26 March 2017, at <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/03/2017/58d7c6f39a7947448a1a3f45>, 15 December 2019.

They were pickets at which participants erected prefabricated structures and handed out leaflets. Local authorities forbade such pickets on the grounds of their breaching the electoral legislation, because Alexei Navalny had started his electoral campaign before the election date was announced and registration of candidates started. The speed at which Navalny's offices in the macroregion worked varied: Kursk Office operated from August 2017 to March 2018; Stary Oskol Office functioned from September 2017 to March 2018, Voronezh Office was opened in April, Tambov Office started its activities in May, and Lipetsk Office commenced its work in September 2017.

The rallies staged on October 7, 2017, gathered much fewer people than the previous two. About 300 protesters were detained as the rallies had not been sanctioned beforehand. The main demand made by them was to allow Alexei Navalny (who was being held under detention at the time) to run for President in March 2018. 23 people were detained in Lipetsk during the "stroll". The coordinator of Alexei Navalny's office in Tambov was held liable for organising the unsanctioned public event. In October 2017, Alexei Navalny gave speeches in Lipetsk and Tambov.

The public nomination of Alexei Navalny for President was held as a joint event in 20 cities on December 24, 2017. According to his estimates, over 15,000 participated in it.[20] After the Central Election Commission rejected Alexei Navalny's application for the presidential election, his movement started preparing observers on the election day and called for its supporters to boycott the election. On January 28, supporters of Navalny staged a "Voters' Strike". The rallies were not sanctioned by the authorities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. As a result, over 300 people were detained in 16 Russian cities. On August 25, 2018, Alexei Navalny was sentenced to 30 days in prison for organising the event.[21] All in all, Navalny's supporters are losing their dynamism. 100 people gathered on the outskirts of Belgorod and 200 protesters demonstrated outside the city of Tambov. 100 people participated in a rally in the hyde park in Voronezh. The two organisers of the rallies were sentenced to 20 days in prison as a result of the unsanctioned event which was held in Lipetsk out of all the regions in Central Russia.

The final event of the third stage was the protest "He is not our tsar" staged on May 5, 2018. The rally was timed to coincide with the inauguration of Vladimir Putin. The protests were not approved by local authorities in the Central Black Earth Region and that is why they were marked with fines and detentions. Lipetsk was the only town spared arrests. It was authorized to hold rallies on the outskirts of Belgorod and Stary Oskol, but the organisers were still held liable for breaching the law. The protests resulted in the arrests of coordinators (Tambov) and active participants (Voronezh and Kursk). The Kursk office stopped its activities in May, 2018. Since July 2018, information is being published by Belgorod, Voronezh, Lipetsk, and Tambov regions on the integrated Internet platform. The range of topics covered and format are the same for all the regions.

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[20]   Навальный 20!8.

[21]   "Навального арестовали на 30 суток", *РБК*, 27 August 2018, at <https://www.rbc.ru/society/27/08/2018/5b83a57b9a7947543b7aa26f?from=main>, 15 December 2019.

Analysis of the information published on the official websites of Navalny's offices located in the Central Black Earth Region at the fourth stage of the movement's life shows that a series of integrated actions was implemented and newsworthy events were created that drew public attention to the local issues. The following local problems were brought to discussion: the abuses of power over state and municipal procurement; clashes with authorities over keeping trolleybus systems running; unsatisfactory state of the roads; quality of the utility services, and snow removal.

Coordinators of the movement's activities in the regions use the same templates for public information campaigns. They record short fast-paced video addresses or critical video reports, publish pictures of official documents and answers to their requests given by authorities, and create ironical photo collages. The largest public information campaign focused on the problems with utility services in Tambov. The movement monitored glaring facts and offered recommendations on efficient cooperation with local authorities and property management companies. The central topic of the Tambov information campaign was mounting opposition to transfer ownership of the city park to the diocese.

Governors, representatives of regional and local administration, and members of the United Russia political party in all the regions were the target of criticism by the movement. There is a certain pattern of how the movement launches attacks on governors in the Central Black Earth Region. It does not criticise caretaker governors (who are preparing for the election) but create negative information discourse in the run up to the election, including the day before voting.

All the offices operating in the Central Black Earth Region published the names of the members of the regional parliament and State Duma deputies who voted for the pension reform in summer and autumn 2018. In all the regions criticism was directed at the officials who were responsible for cooperation with NGOs or authorization of public events in major cities of the regions. Besides, each office focused on criticising a certain public figure or official.

Like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, the offices co-organised nationwide protests against the pension reform on July 26 and September 9, 2018. Between 100 and 300 people took to the streets in the Central Black Earth Region. The rallies were presented as joint efforts of opposition. They were attended by members of Yabloko and other less famous political parties and groups. However, the common topic did not become a pretext to mobilize forces and carry out joint political events. The Protest Day against the pension reform on September 9, 2018, coincided with the Election Day of 26 heads of Russian regions and deputies of the legislative bodies in 17 Russian regions. The Protest day went unnoticed by politicians and media.

The "Smart Vote" project has been carried out since November 2018. Its aim is to support the most viable opposition candidate as defined by the movement in the regional and local elections in order to prevent candidates put up by the United Russia party from gaining votes.[22] "Alexei Navalny's Trade Union" project was launched on

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[22]   *Умное голосование...*

January 24, 2019. It allows public sector workers to check if their salaries taly with the ones indicated in Putin's May decrees.[23] Both the projects potentially provide activists of the movement with the opportunities to be elected in governing bodies. However, they have not produced any results yet. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the next regional election will be held in September 2019. Secondly, well-known opposition politicians do not strive to join forces with Alexei Navalny and thus undermine the whole idea. The trade union created by Alexei Navalny is not the only organisation that functions as an intermediary between an employee and employer. There are traditional trade unions which are more in demand by public sector workers despite the low rate of public trust than the online trade union of the opposition politician.

All in all, regional offices of Alexei Navalny's movement operating in the Central Black Earth Region lead the offensive information campaign aimed at finding shortcomings and mistakes of officials and members of the United Russia political party. The major actions of the campaign are carried out on the webpages of the regional offices and popular social networks. The materials published on social networks are more aggressive and critical than those posted on the websites of the offices. Alexei Navalny's offices strive to participate in public events that bring local and general issues to people's attention. They are less cautious in criticising regional and local officials. Navalny's offices employ modern means of delivering information in comparison with the ways of publishing materials used by the largest opposition party, i.e. the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The offices record videos at the scene, and publish pictures of official documents and photo collages. Activists of the movement engage their supporters in unauthorised rallies and provoke detentions and fines.

GOVERNMENT REACTION TO THE PROTESTS

While the government's reaction to Alexei Navalny's actions differs depending on the stage, there is a common response tactic in regions. The scale and highly efficient coordination of the first action on March 26, 2017, took the authorities off guard. No planned state actions or detentions were recorded. The police and local authorities changed their tactic after the protest held on June 12, 2017. Firstly, they offered alternative places for holding rallies. Secondly, the police started to detain participants and organisers of the rallies and imposed sanctions on them (fines and compulsory community service). Thirdly, the mobilized opponents of Navalny took to the streets during his public actions.

The protest "He is not our tsar!" broke the rules of public gatherings in the majority of cities and led to the detention of over 1,000 participants.[24] In Moscow, there were

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23   *Профсоюз Навального*, 2019, at <https://union.navalny.com>, 15 December 2019.

24   А. Литой, "Акции против 'царя': избитые, задержанные, несовершеннолетние", *ОВД-Инфо*, 8 May 2018, at <https://ovdinfo.org/articles/2018/05/08/akcii-protiv-carya-izbitye-zaderzhannye-nesovershennoletnie>, 15 December 2019.

clashes between the protesters and people clad in Cossack clothes. It was stated on the official web portal of the Central Cossack Troops (CCT) that CCT cossacks did not join forces with the police and denied any wrongdoings.[25] Lipetsk was the only town in the Central Black Soil Region spared arrests during unsanctioned rallies. In Belgorod and Stary Oskol it was authorized to hold rallies on the outskirts, but the organisers were still held liable for breaching the law. The protests resulted in the arrests of coordinators (Tambov) and active participants (Voronezh and Kursk).

The police in the regions used legitimate force. They raided the offices, detained activists, confiscated propaganda materials in the framework of the campaign on extremism and drug trafficking prevention. Technically, the government's actions were within their remit. There were no political accusations brought against participants of the movement. Law enforcement officials tried to convince activists to disengage from the movement over informal conversations. The stance of the pro-government mass media was to ignore Alexei Navalny and not to give him grounds for becoming a news hero. Local authorities did not generally approve protest actions in hyde parks in city centres and offered protesters alternative places on the outskirts. As long as Alexei Navalny is the principal figure of the movement, he is regularly detained for breaching the law. All in all, he spent three months in prison in 2018.[26]

To conclude, the authorities employ different legitimate measures of restricting public political actions to affect activists of the movement. It is likely that such a reaction pushed Alexei Navalny to reject the idea of public rallies at the fourth stage and focus on information campaigns and preparation of activists for regional and local elections.

FUTURE OF THE MOVEMENT

According to qualitative sociological surveys, Russians are inclined to stand for their rights and interests without breaching the law but respecting the interests of others.[27] At the same time their willingness to participate in mass protests started to decline after reaching its climax in summer and autumn of 2018. The results of the surveys that have been conducted by the Levada Centre over the last three years show that the majority of respondents do not want to participate in rallies for protecting their rights because of low quality of life and their political demands. According to the Levada Centre 80% of respondents expressed such opinion in autumn 2017[28] and 88% in March 2018,

[25]   *Официальный портал Центрального казачьего войска*, 7 May 2018, at <http://vko-ckv.ru/novosti/ofitsialno.html>, 15 December 2019.

[26]   "Итоги-2018", *Навальный*, 2018, at <https://navalny.com>, 15 December 2019.

[27]   М. Дмитриев, С. Белановский, А. Никольская, "Признаки изменения общественных настроений и их возможные последствия", *Комитет гражданских инициатив*, 11 October 2018, at <https://komitetgi.ru/news/news/3902/>, 12 December 2019.

[28]   "Россияне не верят в протесты", *Левада-центр*, 28 September 2017, at <https://www.levada.ru/2017/09/28/rossiyane-ne-veryat-v-protesty/>, 15 December 2019.

respectively.[29] Discussions regarding the pension reform heightened the expectations of protestors with economic demands from 17% (March) to 41% (July) in June-July 2018. Between 8% to 28% of respondents expressed their readiness to participate in rallies.[30] In March 2019, the figures dropped: 34% of respondents expected protests, but only 26% of those surveyed were ready to participate in them.[31] Obviously, the data collected as a result of large-scale surveys shows the emotional state of the respondents and their expectations of the unfolding events, but not their real participation. According to the surveys conducted by the Levada Centre, the respondents chose legal and non-confrontational forms of communicating with authorities, i.e. through voting, writing open letters and signing petitions, and addressing executive organs.[32]

The data analysed by Levada Centre shows that 71% of respondents did not support the protests against Vladimir Putin's inauguration for a fourth term as Russia's President on May 5, 2018.[33] When the pension reform, publicly supported by the President, was being ratified (August-September 2018), rank-and-file citizens failed to get any sound results out of their protest efforts.[34] Against a backdrop of such public mood, it is reasonable that protests became less dynamic and Alexei Navalny launched the "Smart Vote" project. The politician invites people to support the most viable candidate (irrespective of their affections) at regional and local elections in order to prevent candidates put forward by the United Russia political party from gaining votes. The candidate is chosen on the basis of previous election results and on-going sociological surveys. To participate in the project, it is necessary to register on the e-platform.[35] The project website was temporarily blocked by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) because it breached the rules of collecting and processing private data.[36]

The Smart Vote project gives Alexei Navalny the opportunity to foreground the image of the "key opposition leader" in Russia who will join the forces of the opponents of the ruling political elite. However, it is likely that the project will face a number of

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[29]   "Протестный потенциал", *Левада-Центр*, 16 April 2018, at <https://www.levada.ru/2018/04/16/protestnyj-potentsial-7/>, 12 December 2019.

[30]   "Потенциал протеста", *Левада-Центр*, at <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/>, 15 December 2019.

[31]   Протестный, 2019.

[32]   "Большинство россиян отказались митинговать ради изменений к лучшему", *Левада-Центр*, 13 February 2019, at <https://www.levada.ru/2019/02/13/bolshinstvo-rossiyan-otkazalis-mitingovat-radi-izmenenij-k-luchshemu/>, 18 December 2019.

[33]   "Протесты 5-го мая", *Левада-Центр*, 6 June 2018, at <https://www.levada.ru/2018/06/06/protesty-5-go-maya/>, 15 December 2019.

[34]   "Путин объявил о смягчении условий пенсионной реформы", *Ведомости*, 29 August 2018, at <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/articles/2018/08/29/779297-putin-teleobraschenie>, 15 December 2019.

[35]   *Умное голосование...*

[36]   М. Баринов, "Навальный привлечен в качестве третьего лица к иску о блокировке 'Умного голосования'", *Коммерсантъ*, 14 December 2018, at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3832979>, 15 December 2019.

technical and political difficulties. It seems that "Smart Vote" does not target the whole country but is aimed at Moscow and St. Petersburg. The project does not reach out to different social groups supporting Alexei Navalny, but rather robs registered political parties of their voters. As the experience of establishing the Coordinating Council in 2012 showed, opposition groups are not yet ready to deliver coordinated political action. At the same time leaders of United Russia have started to rebrand their political party,[37] which means that they modernise system of selecting candidates and engaging with opposition.

On the other hand, against a backdrop of deteriorating social well-being,[38] people's desire to express their political stance using legitimate and respectable means[39] as well as renewed interest and trust in electoral participation can become a satisfactory form (especially, for the middle-aged citizens) of about political action. As Professor Sidney Tarrow notices, the pattern of opportunities available for political opposition changes slowly and goes unnoticed. When they become obvious, there occurs an avalanche-like increase in contest and protest. The factor that instigates them is elections, because those in power deal with mobilized citizens who have defined their belonging to a larger social group whose views about the political regime are the same.[40]

CONCLUSIONS

Alexei Navalny continues to be a creative politician who has interesting ideas and can challenge the usual rules of the political game. The nationwide movement that he created between 2017-2019 has turned into a significant political organisation with a stable structure and stalwart supporters. Since mid-2018, the offices of the movement have been carrying out information campaigns in large cities aimed to draw people's attention to political issues. This tactic makes it feasible for the movement to voice citizens' dissatisfaction without organising public actions.

On the whole, a social protest has become an indispensable part of the Russian society and its daily routine.[41] Since 2018 experts have been recording mid-term factors

[37]   "XVIII Съезд 'Единой России'", *Официальный сайт партии "Единая Россия"*, 9 December 2018, at <https://er.ru/core/news/subject/145.html>, 12 December 2019.

[38]   "Мониторинг самочувствия регионов: ситуация на июль 2018 г. и её развитие", *Комитет гражданских инициатив*, 19 November 2018, at <https://komitetgi.ru/analytics/3946/>, 14 December 2019; "Эксперты КГИ представили итоги мониторинга социально-экономической и политической напряженности регионов за три года", *Комитет гражданских инициатив*, 20 June 2018, at <https://komitetgi.ru/analytics/3797/>, 15 December 2019.

[39]   "Осенний перелом в сознании россиян: мимолетный всплеск или новая тенденция?", *Фонд "Либеральная миссия"*, 26 December 2018, at <http://www.liberal.ru/articles/7298>, 15 December 2019.

[40]   С. Тэрроу, "Парламентские выборы 1999 г.…", pp. 8-10.

[41]   "Рост протестной активности в России: результаты всероссийского мониторинга 2017-2018 гг.", *Центр экономических и политических реформ*, at <http://cepr.su/2018/11/08/protests-2017-2018/>, 15 December 2019.

that indicate mounting socio-economic and political tensions. According to sociological surveys, concerted actions delivered by authorities decreased motivation of the majority of Russians for participating in protests about politics. Against a backdrop of narrowing opportunities for legitimate public actions, the protest is likely to morph into non-public forms. Moreover, there have been changes in the public mindset which favour public contentious behaviour. At the same time it has been observed that Russians are ready to protest over local issues that are of interest to them.

In the context of revival of some elements of public politics,[42] and victory of the opposition candidates in gubernatorial elections in four Russian regions in September 2018, Alexei Navalny's project Smart Vote can compensate him for his restricted political opportunities.

However, full implementation of the project is not entirely feasible and seems hard to put into practice. There have to be financial and organisational resources as well as readiness of the opposition politicians to compromise in order to monitor elections in 2019. Alexei Navalny's Achilles' heel is his non-eligibility for public office and the absence of a political party. These factors do not allow him to leave the niche of a "protesting" politician and fight for a place in governing bodies. They also deprive him of the opportunity to become a full member of the political opposition.

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[42] Н. Петров, "Политические переменные: с чем столкнется российская власть в 2019 году", *РБК*, 6 January 2019, at <https://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/06/01/2019/5c2491e49a794778e758e398>, 18 December 2019.

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